

Christ's Restoring Love with the Lawless and the Self-Righteous Son

Galatians 5:22; Luke 15:18-24

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Rev. Greg L. Price

Some only think of God as being severe, angry, and fierce, as one who at the slightest error or misstep is very easily moved to a fiery indignation, but not so easily moved to love and compassion. Some think of the Lord as one who reigns high above in heaven and is altogether unconcerned and completely indifferent to the struggles, conflicts, and heart-cries of His poor, needy creatures. So many have never truly heard a faithful presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, wherein the everlasting love of God is wondrously revealed in pouring out His just wrath and condemnation upon His only begotten Son that ungodly sinners who trust alone in Christ alone might be freely forgiven and imputed the righteousness of Christ. Even professing Christians at times walk daily dreading the wrath of God, and having little or no experience of the love of God and intimate communion with this God of love. Our God, who has revealed Himself in the pages of Holy Scripture, is indeed a holy God who cannot approve of sin and who does judge the wicked and the rebellious, but let no one ever think that He will be severe, harsh, or disinterested even in the chief of sinners who casts himself/herself at His feet, pleading for His mercy and forgiveness through faith alone in Christ alone.

Dear ones, we can only grow in our love for God and others (with *agape* love) as we know and experience the love of Christ in our own lives. Without it, we are nothing—our profession of faith is a lie. The fruit of the Spirit is love—this is the DNA of Christ implanted in the soul of every Christian at his/her regeneration. If we know and experience the severity of God more than we know and experience the love of God, we will be severe and harsh toward others. However, if we know and experience the love of God, that love will melt our proud and self-righteous hearts and will purify our self-centered and pleasure-seeking thoughts, words, and deeds to freely and sacrificially serve our Lord Jesus and our neighbor.

There is perhaps not a more sublime expression of that everlasting and powerful love of the Lord portrayed in one of Christ's parables than is found in what we know as the Parable of the Prodigal Son—which is actually the Parable of the Two Sons: The Lawless Son and the Self-Righteous Son. Let us consider the following main points: (1) The Father's Love and the Lawless Son; and (2) The Father's Love and the Self-Righteous Son.

I. The Father's Love and the Lawless Son (Luke 15:18-24).

A. The context of this parable is given to us in Luke 15:1-2. Thus, we find these two groups of people represented by Christ in the two sons of this loving Father: (1) The younger, lawless son represents the publicans (i.e. tax collectors) and the sinners; (2) The older, self-righteous son represents the Pharisees and the scribes. In the two previous parables (the Parable of the Lost Coin and the Parable of the Lost Sheep), the emphasis falls upon the love of God in seeking out lost souls from among those lost in Israel ("the lost sheep of the house of Israel" Matthew 10:6; Matthew 15:24). For you see, both groups (whether the publicans/sinners, or whether the Pharisees/scribes) were viewed by Christ as being in some sense related to God's covenanted, circumcised people, Israel (whether backslidden and lawless, or self-righteous and legalistic—they were all in a general sense Israelites—God's covenant people). This is further confirmed by what Jesus teaches in Matthew 21:28 where the Lord gives to the chief priests and religious leaders a parable about two sons. The first son is lawless but repents, and the second son is lawful by profession but disobeys and does not repent. Who are these two sons according to Christ? Read Matthew 21:31-32 (the first son represents the publicans and harlots, while the second son represents the Jewish religious leaders). That I believe is an important point of clarification to understand as this parable is unfolded before us by the Holy Spirit.

B. We see from this parable that the younger son approached his father one day with an unwarranted, unthankful, and disrespectful demand: "Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me" (Luke 15:12). Now there was no obligation for this father in that society to dispense a son's inheritance until the father's death. But he gave his son over to his rebellious, selfish demand and desire (just as God gave Israel in the wilderness over to their evil demands for meat, though He had already given them "angels' food" that fell from heaven, Psalm 78:25,29,30). Soon after obtaining his portion of the inheritance, the younger son journeyed to a far country to get far away from the loving bonds of a good father. The younger son wanted the benefits and inheritance of a loving father, but did not want the bonds, the oversight, the responsibility, the obedience, or the honor due unto his loving father. He wanted his "freedom" to pursue his own dreams, his own ambitions, his own friends, and his own "happiness" without accountability to his loving father. This is not freedom, but bondage. What was the result?

1. The younger son lost his inheritance by "riotous living" (literally, by wasteful living) according to Luke 15:13. How he wasted his inheritance, we are not told (whether by constant parties, whether by buying friends with expensive gifts, whether by foolish investments, or whether by simply living beyond his means). His inheritance was gone, his friends deserted him, and he was all alone, far away from home.

2. As if that was not devastating enough, a great famine arose in that land, so that he began to experience what he had never experienced before: hunger, deprivation, need of lodging, and clothing. The only job he could find was through a citizen of that country who sent the wasteful son out to feed the swine, but apparently provided no food for him, no clothing, or no safe place to sleep (Luke 15:14-16). His life was there among the swine (which to the Jews was the epitome of disgrace and shame). He had lost everything. But it is at such destitute points that our hearts are turned in faith and repentance to the Lord.

3. It was at that point that he was suddenly awakened to his unthankful, disrespectful, and rebellious heart. He called to mind how loving and good his father was to even the servants of the household in providing for all of their needs, and yet here he was perishing from hunger (Luke 15:17). His heart was changed to behold the love and goodness of his father (which he had so wickedly despised), to confess his sin, and to humble himself with a repentant heart to serve as a mere servant within the household (Luke 15:18-19). All sinners must come to the Father with such a humble expression of their own unworthiness.

C. At this point, the believing and repentant son was moved beyond mere profession or mere resolution to obedient action: "And he arose, and came to his father" (Luke 15:20). If any of you within the sound of my voice have long been saying, "I will come to Christ"; or "I am resolved and determined by God's grace to see that besetting sin overcome"; leave off resolving, get up, and let you resolve turn to going to Christ with your need (stop procrastination). So he began the long trek home. Leaving his father's house was so easy—his inheritance with him, and abundance of food, clothing, and shelter. But what a different sight was this young, believing, humbled, repentant, and obedient son as he trudged slowly back home without food, clothing, and shelter. And oh, the stench of this young man, who had sought out his own life apart from the loving commandments and oversight of his good father. What the world, the flesh, and the devil will do to those who flee from the loving care and constraints of a kind Heavenly Father, whose very nature is love for those who are loved from everlasting to everlasting! The world, the flesh, and the devil tempt and tantalize with great promises of fame, fortune, and friends, but their promises are vain, empty lies.

1. As if the father had been looking and waiting in loving expectation for his son's return home, the father first sees the son afar off in the distance (Luke 15:20). Rather than the son surprising a disinterested, uncaring father who hasn't given a second thought to his son since he left, the father has been earnestly, lovingly waiting for the return of his dear son. The son surely deserved the disinterested apathy of his father (and far worse), but let us open our hearts to see with the eyes of faith the love of the father that awaited the son who had shown such disrespect, such dishonor, such unthankfulness, and such rebellion. For,

dear ones, that is the nature of *agape* love (as we have learned)—it is not bestowed upon the deserving, but the undeserving, in order that none of us might glory in ourselves, but only and always glory in the Lord and in the cross of Jesus Christ.

2. But the loving father not only saw the son from a distance, waiting for the son to reach him, but rather filled with compassion and pity for his son ran as quickly as his feet could carry him, falling on his son's neck, embracing his son, and kissing him (not once, but as the verb implies, kissing him greatly, kissing him much, kissing him fervently, Luke 7:38,45). Dear ones, God will run with love and kisses to you, where you can only limp along to Him or even crawl on hands and feet to Him (due to the effects of sin upon you). Here is a picture of the most holy God falling upon the neck of a guilty sinner. With ceaseless kissing and loving affection for this rebel son who has wasted all that the father gave him, and in spite of his grotesque appearance, and his hideous odor, the father is overwhelmed with compassion for his son (Lamentation 3:22). Here, dear ones, is no pretense of a love for a nameless, faceless person, just to make a headline for himself (as did the Pharisees in giving alms to the poor). In the parable, no one saw this act of unsurpassing love except the son himself, who could barely get out of his mouth the words of confession he had resolved to utter unto his father (due to the constant kissing of the father). If the father had struck his son, kicked his son, or spat upon his son, he would have done far less than his son justly deserved, but he out of an infinite ocean of love kept kissing his son.

3. The humbled son (not gloating in his love or in his goodness, but basking in the undeserved love of his father for him) confesses his sin and his unworthiness to be called his son any longer (Luke 15:21). Yes, the son was unworthy of such love, but his father calls for his son to be attired and fed that which was befitting a son rather than a servant (Luke 15:22-24). He had sold his birthright for a bowl of soup (to satisfy the lusts and desires of his flesh), but he has believed in the love and goodness of his father, he has returned home, and has confessed and repented of his grievous sin, and the loving father has rejoiced to run to him, to welcome him with open arms, to shower him with kisses, and to give him the tokens of sonship (Zephaniah 3:17). Think of the eternal God singing, and remember that it is because a lawless sinner has returned to Him that He sings. God rejoices in the return of the prodigal, even one who has wasted all that God gave him.

4. Is this the working concept that you have of the love of God? Or are you overwhelmed by a slavish fear of God?

a. Perhaps you are listening or watching and you have been baptized, perhaps you have been raised in a Christian home, perhaps you have even professed faith in Christ and were admitted as a member into Christ's Church, and yet you have chased your dreams in the world, journeying farther and farther from the Lord (in your heart, in your ambitions, in your friends, in your love, and in your obedience)? You have taken the gifts and abilities God has given to you to be used for his glory, and you have rather chosen to spend them merely upon your own dreams and ambitions (maybe even giving lip-service to the Lord, but having little to no desire for the loving care and constraints of Christ and His commandments over your life). I say to you, dear ones, if you have not yet found the world, the flesh, and the devil to be cruel citizens and masters, who care not for you (except when you play their melody, sing their songs, and dance with their friends), you will find this parable to be so true in your life.

b. The question this parable asks of all lawless sons and daughters (like the Jewish publicans and sinners in Christ's time) who were raised within God's family and among God's people as covenant children: Will you come to your senses and see the misery you have chosen for yourself by pursuing your own selfish dreams and ambitions and indulging the lusts of the flesh, and rather turn in faith to a loving Father and a reconciling Savior, who will receive you (even with nothing to commend yourself at all), and bestow upon you all of the wondrous tokens of sonship (chief being the garments of righteousness, the seal of the Holy Spirit, the shoes of walking in loving obedience to God's commandments, and blessed communion with Christ now and for all eternity)?

c. Of course, even if you were not raised in a Christian family, or have never been baptized, or have never made a profession of faith, or have never been a member of Christ's Church, if you are a sinner, you need no other qualification to come to this loving Father than the fact that you are a poor, miserable sinner who needs the forgiveness of God, the righteousness of Christ, and everlasting life. Come, all of you, for God the Father, with everlasting love, will receive you (who trust alone in Christ alone) and will never cast you out of His house (John 6:37).

d. Dear struggling Christian, do you not need to see, understand, and experience this love of the Father for you when you miserably fail Him, fall into that same awful besetting sin, drift away from Christ as your first love, or feel overwhelmed by the trials of this life that you even despair of life itself? Will you sooner come in humility and sincere repentance to a Father, who anxiously awaits your return, so that He can shower you with His kisses of everlasting love and receive you back into His feast of fellowship? Or will you sooner come in humility and sincere repentance to a Father, who has forgotten you, who only waits to beat you, to criticize you, to berate you, and to make you a mere servant (rather than a son or daughter) in His household?

e. What kind of a father/mother are you to your children? Do they find hearts and arms opened wide to receive them when they fall and humbly confess their sin, or rather hearts and arms closed from an unloving, unforgiving father/mother? And should this be any different in our love for one another as brethren or with our neighbor? God help us to see (with eyes of faith) the love of God in receiving broken, lawless, sinners, who fall upon the mercy of God in Christ Jesus, so that we might go forth and manifest that love (as the DNA of Christ and as the fruit of the Holy Spirit to others).

II. God's Love and the Self-Righteous Son (Luke 15:25-32).

A. As we draw to the close of this parable, the Lord Jesus is not quite finished teaching the extent of God's love. Just as the younger son represents the lawless among God's people Israel (the publicans and the sinners), so the elder son represents the self-righteous among God's people Israel (the Pharisees and the scribes). When these self-righteous religious leaders saw the publicans and sinners coming to hear the gospel from the lips of Christ, we read that they "murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them" (Luke 15:1-2). The pride of these religious leaders who trusted in their own works to make themselves acceptable before a holy God is vividly portrayed by Christ in another parable (Luke 18:9).

B. It so happens that the elder son had been working in the fields, and as he came close to home, he heard the joyful music and dancing of those invited to the feast of love, thankfulness, and communion (Luke 15:25). He asked one of the servants the meaning of this feast, to which he explains that his brother has returned and has been received by his father, and a feast of joy is being celebrated (Luke 15:26-27). His father came out and sought to reason with his son, but to no avail (Luke 15:28). The elder brother was angry and would not go in to join in this joyful celebration. He acted as though the father's joy over the return of a lawless son deprived him in some way of his own joy. Rather than rejoicing with those who were rejoicing (and even rejoicing in heaven), he was angry at their joy, because no one had thrown him such a joyful celebration for his many years of work and service in his father's house (Luke 15:29-30). You see, this elder son regarded the father's joy over the return of his lawless son from a mere perspective of merit (the younger did not deserve such a celebration, but I do deserve it). The elder son despised the love, mercy, and grace of his father toward his younger son (the elder brother could not even call him, "my brother", but only "thy son" Luke 15:30). How many fallen brethren and sinners have been turned away rather than helped by such a proud, self-righteous heart!

C. Now come the closing words of the father in which he discounts the elder brother's idea of

merit as being the only cause of rejoicing, and rather explains that all that the son should ever have would be only on the ground of the father's love and grace ("Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine" Luke 15:31). "Look not to your own worthiness, to your own works of righteousness, as the ground of your blessing, but look to my joy and delight in graciously bestowing the inheritance of sons upon those who find in me their all in all. Am I not worth far more than a fatted calf and friends you might invite to a party? You do not see that you are as dependent upon me for all that you have as your brother." There are in these words of the father, an implicit invitation to come and join the feast of joy, thankfulness, and salvation of the Lord. But sadly, there is no indication that he was humbled, broken, or contrite over his more aggravated sin of self-righteousness (Matthew 21:31). In the estimation of the elder brother, whatever was freely bestowed by the father upon the younger son was taken away from himself; but, dear ones, in the household of God one has not less of God's undeserved love, because another sinner enjoys the kisses of our Father; all is possessed by each, for all things are our in Christ Jesus (1 Corinthians 3:21-23).

D. But whether a lawless one or a self-righteous one enters into the joy of the loving father, there should be rejoicing, not murmuring, not criticizing, not envying with bitter hatred the joyful celebration of one who knows he/she is a sinner and comes in faith alone to Christ alone with all their stinking robes of sin, rebellion, and self-righteousness, and is clothed in the robe of Christ's imputed righteousness, given the sealing of the Spirit of adoption, fitted with shoes to walk in God's loving commandments, and ushered into a feast of communion with our Heavenly Father, a feast of continual thanksgiving, and a feast of everlasting love.

Dear ones, will you come to this loving Father today regardless of your need? Will you believe that when you come to Him, you will find Him running to you, throwing His arms around you, and kissing you with one kiss after another? Or will you be angry at the love of God shown to others, far less deserving than yourselves, and walk away from the invitations of the Father to enjoy Him and His feast of love?

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