

"THE PARABLE OF THE FATHER AND HIS TWO SONS"

**I. Introduction**

- A. As we saw in last week's sermon, Jesus told this three-part parable in order to explain why he was welcoming the tax collectors and sinners who were coming to listen to him.
1. In the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, the emphasis is upon Christ's initiative in seeking lost souls and bringing them to a saving knowledge of himself.
  2. The reason why Jesus received even the most scandalous of sinners when they came to hear him was because he came into the world to save sinners.
  3. He did not come to save people who think that they have no need of being saved.
  4. He came to rescue those who have gotten themselves hopelessly lost by their willful rebellion against God.
- B. Today we come to the third part of the parable that Jesus sets forth in this chapter, the passage that is typically referred to as the parable of the prodigal son.
1. The term "prodigal" refers to the way the younger son squandered his wealth in reckless living when he went off to a far country.
  2. While the younger son's prodigality certainly is a central feature of this parable, so is the older son's response to the father's welcome of the prodigal.
  3. For this reason, it might be better to call this the parable of the father and his two sons.

4. As we study this text today, we will consider what it teaches us about the nature and misery of sin, the extravagance of God's grace, and the rejection of God's grace.

## II. The Nature and Misery of Sin

- A. Jesus begins the parable by telling us that the younger of the two sons went to his father and demanded that he give him his share of the inheritance.
  1. In that culture, this would amount to one-third of the father's estate, with the other two-thirds going to the firstborn son.
  2. Now, an estate was not usually divided and distributed among the heirs until after the father's death.
  3. Yet this young man, who was probably only in his late teens since he was not yet married, wants to be given his share right then and there.
  4. In making such a demand, he was essentially telling his father that he wished that he was dead.
  5. We can imagine the kinds of thoughts that would lead a young man to act this way.
  6. He felt cramped and confined living in his parents' household.
  7. He wanted to strike out on his own and see what the world has to offer.
  8. He wanted to go someplace far away so he could be free from his father's watchful eye.
- B. Of course, there is nothing wrong with children looking forward to the day when they can move out from under their parents' roof and live independently.

1. It is entirely natural for them to feel this way.
  2. It is what we want for our children.
  3. But we want them to move toward independence in the right way.
  4. We want them to do it respectfully and responsibly, and we want them to continue walking in the ways of the Lord.
  5. This was not at all what the young man in this parable was doing.
  6. He was showing great disrespect to his father, who is shown later in the parable to have been a remarkably kind and generous man.
  7. After the son received his share of the inheritance, he was utterly irresponsible with it.
  8. And the life he lived in that far country was exceedingly wicked in the eyes of the Lord.
  9. There are many parents who have seen their children do things very similar to this, and it breaks their hearts.
  10. This sad picture portrays all of us in our fallen condition.
  11. We have renounced God, the One who is the source of all life and goodness.
  12. We have struck out on our own and lived the kind of life that we deem best rather than the kind of life to which God calls us.
- C. When the younger son arrived in the far country, he lived a profligate, immoral life, squandering all of his wealth.
1. Then, just when all his resources were used up, the land was struck with famine.

2. God's providence caused the circumstances to conspire to make his situation even worse.
  3. The young man was so desperate that he had to take whatever work he could find, and as it turned out this meant hiring himself out to take care of pigs.
  4. This would have been a disgraceful line of work for a Jew because under the Mosaic law pigs were categorized as unclean.
  5. To make matters worse, he was not even being paid enough to feed himself adequately, and this caused him to long to fill his empty belly with the food that he was feeding to those pigs.
  6. This is a picture of the misery of our fallen condition.
  7. Sin pays lousy wages.
  8. It makes us liable to all the miseries of this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell forever.
- D. In the parable, the Lord worked through the prodigal's circumstances to open his eyes to see his true condition.
1. This is what needs to happen before a sinner can be reconciled to God.
  2. We have to become conscious of the misery of our fallen estate before we can receive God's grace in Christ.
  3. We need to get a sense of the sinfulness of our sin, realizing that we have offended a holy God.
  4. People who think that they are healthy will not see any need to go to a doctor.
  5. In one way or another, the Lord has to open our eyes and convince us of our sin and misery.

6. In the parable, this is depicted by the prodigal coming to the realization that his father's hired servants are in a far better condition than he is in.
7. While he knows that he has absolutely no claim on his father and that he cannot even expect his father to treat him as a son, he decides to cast himself on his father's mercy.
8. This is exactly what happens when a sinner is brought to faith in Christ.
9. We see that we have no claim on God.
10. We know that we have nothing to offer God that would in any way put him in our debt.
11. We simply cast ourselves on God's mercy, embracing Jesus Christ as he is freely offered to us in the gospel.

### III. The Extravagance of God's Grace

- A. This brings us to the second part of the parable, where we see the extravagance of God's grace.
  1. Jesus says that while the prodigal was still a long way from home, his father, who was carefully scanning the horizon in hopes that he would see his son, ran out to meet him.
  2. This detail is significant, because it was considered undignified in that culture for an older man to run.
  3. When the father reached his son he embraced him and kissed him, even though the son was probably filthy and smelly.
  4. When the boy started his speech about no longer being worthy to be called his father's son, the father cut him short and had him clothed in the best robe, had a ring put on his finger, and had shoes put on his feet.

5. Then he instructed his servants to bring the fattened calf, which was reserved for special occasions, so that they could have a feast to celebrate the return of the prodigal.
  6. In taking these actions, the father made it clear that he was fully restoring his son to his place in the family.
  7. The son who had been as good as dead was alive again.
  8. The one who had been lost was now found.
- B. This is not at all what Jesus's hearers would have expected Jesus to say at this point in the parable.
1. If they were telling the parable, the father would have stood right where he was as soon as he caught sight of the returning prodigal.
  2. As he watched his son stagger towards him, he would have thought something like this: 'So now he comes back. Look at him. He disgusts me. Just wait until he asks me for anything now. Oh, I'll put him in his place.'
  3. When his weak and starving son finally reached him, the father would have made him deliver the entire speech that he had rehearsed, and then he would have said something like, 'Is that all you have to say for yourself?'
  4. Then he would have berated the boy for what he had done, telling him that he got exactly what he deserved.
  5. And then, perhaps, he would have accepted the boy back as a servant, but only after making it very clear what this new arrangement was going to look like.
  6. This was the way the scribes and Pharisees thought God responds to sinners who cry out to him for mercy.

7. They thought that God's forgiveness had to be earned in one way or another.
  8. There had to be some form of penance so that the person could prove himself to be worthy of God's grace.
  9. But Jesus's parable confronts that mindset by showing the extravagant nature of God's grace to undeserving sinners.
  10. We cannot do anything to make ourselves worthy of God's grace.
  11. As Thomas Brooks explains, "God hath nowhere in the Scripture required any worthiness in the creature before believing in Christ... none ever received Christ, embraced Christ, and obtained mercy and pardon from Christ, but unworthy souls... if the soul will keep off from Christ till it be worthy, it will never close with Christ... God will count none worthy, nor call none worthy, nor carry it towards none as worthy, but believers, who are made worthy by the worthiness of Christ's person, righteousness, satisfaction, and intercession." [*Precious Remedies against Satan's Devices*, 222, 223-224]
  12. In Christ, God pours out his amazing goodness and love upon those who deserve nothing but severity, those who have no reason to expect anything but condemnation from him.
  13. Though in our fallen estate we were children of wrath, through faith in Christ the Lord grants us the privilege of being called sons of God, sons who have an eternal inheritance in his blessed kingdom.
- C. We need to remember that the reception that the father extends to the prodigal is not just a picture of God's reception of us at the time of our conversion.
1. It is also a picture of how God receives us whenever we confess our sins and look to him for mercy.
  2. The Lord never looks upon one of his children with thoughts like these: 'Here he comes, confessing that same old sin again. He's so

pathetic. I'm getting really tired of this. He better clean up his act soon.'

3. No, our heavenly Father welcomes us with open arms when we look to him for mercy.
4. While it is certainly true that it displeases him when we sin, our sin never causes him to stop loving us.
5. Don't let your sin keep you distant from God.
6. Don't tell yourself that you need to clean up your act before you can come back to God.
7. You can never make yourself worthy of God's grace.
8. The only thing you can do is keep laying hold of his extravagant grace by faith.

#### IV. The Rejection of God's Grace

- A. This brings us to the third part of the parable, where the emphasis is upon the rejection of God's grace.
  1. When the older brother approaches the house from the fields, he perceives that a celebration is going on.
  2. But instead of entering the house to take part in the festivities, he calls one of the servants and asks him what is going on.
  3. When he is told that the return of his younger brother is the cause for the celebration, he is furious and he refuses to take part in it.
  4. As he explains when his father tries to urge him to come in, he is offended that his brother is being received back home in this manner.



5. What kind of a message was it sending to throw a party in this situation?
  6. Wasn't this making light of the scandalous things that his brother had done?
  7. While his father may have welcomed the prodigal back, the older brother is not about to do so.
  8. He doesn't even refer to him as his brother, referring to him instead as "this son of yours."
- B. As the father speaks with his older son about this, the son says something that reveals his heart attitude.
1. He says, "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!"
  2. Not only does he begrudge the grace that his father is extending to the prodigal, he also implies that his own faithful service to his father gives him a claim on him.
  3. In other words, he has a works-oriented way of thinking about his relationship with his father.
  4. He thinks that his father owes him something.
  5. He thinks this way in spite of the fact that, as his father points out, everything that his father possesses has always been available to him.
  6. This interchange demonstrates that, while the older son was outwardly with his father, he was inwardly estranged from him.

7. The older son's mindset represents the mindset of the scribes and Pharisees.
  8. They thought that God owed them his favor because of their meticulousness in keeping his law.
  9. They were self-righteous.
  10. This explains why they took such great offense to the welcome that Jesus was extending to sinners.
  11. They saw how this undermined their claim to have merited God's favor by their works.
  12. They realized that if God extends his grace to people who aren't worthy of it, then their claim to be worthy is actually worthless before God.
- C. As we reflect upon this, we also need to consider the significance of the older brother's refusal to come into the house to celebrate.
1. The celebration is a symbol of the joys of heaven.
  2. The older brother's refusal to enter the house tells us that those who will not come into God's kingdom on the terms that God sets forth in the gospel have no share in the kingdom.
  3. Nobody deserves God's grace.
  4. Those who think they deserve it cannot receive it.
  5. Those who insist that they are worthy of it are rejecting it.

## V. Conclusion

- A. This passage testifies to the remarkable kindness that the Lord extends to rebellious sinners.

- B. Think about the patience that God extends to you.
- C. Think of how he endures your repeated sins and failures.
- D. Think of how he is always ready to be gracious to you when you call upon him for mercy.
- E. Apart from Christ, it would be a fearful thing for us to fall into the hands of the living God.
- F. But through Christ, we can truly say, “in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” (Psa 16:11 ESV)