

The Tale of Two Sons, Part 2

Scripture: Luke 15:17-21

Code: 42-202

If you will, take your Bible and turn to the fifteenth chapter of Luke. And I confess to you that my heart and mind is overflowing with things I want to say to you and I'm doing the best that I possibly can to restrain myself from saying everything to treat you in a reasonable fashion. But this is such a rich chapter, as we have come to find out already. Luke chapter 15, we've entitled the contents of the entire chapter, "Heaven's Joy," subtitled, "Recovering the lost." And this is part six in our look at this great chapter. And we are looking at the third of three stories, three parables that our Lord tells here. The first one about a shepherd finding a lost sheep, the second about a woman finding a lost coin and the third about a loving father and two sons, familiarly known as The Prodigal Son, but this story has much more than that.

In fact, this whole chapter and this story is about the joy of God. We do not usually think of God as joyful. We think of God as restrained. We think of God as serene. We think of God as almost without emotion. We think of Him as gracious because the Bible tells us that, and merciful. We think of Him as well as severe and angry with sinners and preparing judgment and executing wrath. It's very hard for us to understand God as exuberantly glad. And yet that is exactly the way He is portrayed here.

Earlier in our study of Luke, you remember, in chapter 10, it told us that Jesus was rejoicing greatly. And the word that is used there means to be overjoyed. And what was it that brought Jesus such joy? It was the return of the 70 who had been out preaching the gospel, and when they came back and reported the wonderful things that happened in the preaching of the gospel, Jesus was over the top with joy. That's consistent with what we learn in this chapter. In the first story, God is the shepherd who finds the sheep and brings the sheep home and calls on everyone to rejoice. Verse 7 says there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance. And in the second story when the woman finds the coin, she calls together her friends to rejoice and in the same way, verse 10 says, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. Heaven's joy is based on repenting sinners. One sinner who repents brings joy to God and all who surround Him in glory.

The third story is the story of a son, first of all, a profligate son, a prodigal, wasteful son who came back and consequently brought his father joy...profound joy, exuberant joy, joy that called for celebration. Heaven's joy is continually over repenting sinners.

On the opposite side of that, however, were the religious leaders of Israel. The Pharisees and the scribes, the scribes were the scholars who supported Pharisaic legalism with their research. But the Pharisees and the scribes knew nothing of God's joy over repenting sinners. They never wanted to be anywhere near the category of sinners. They felt that they would be somehow polluted and made impure if they came into contact with them at all. They kept their distance. In fact, they basically only associated with each other in a sort of self-imposed isolation to maintain the delusion of their own holiness. And they could not comprehend the fact that Jesus associated with sinners, the worst, the most publicly scorned and outcast and unsynagogued of people. And to them this was proof that He was not of God, but that rather He was of Satan because He associated with the people who were known to be a part of the kingdom of darkness. For this one who associated with the lowest of the low and the most wicked to claim to be God and to claim to be the Messiah of Israel was nothing short of an outrageous blasphemy. And so they set out with their mantra to convince the population at every point they could that Jesus did what He did by the power of Satan as evidenced by His association continually with sinners. It is such an accusation that sets the stage for the stories that Jesus tells in this fifteenth chapter. If you go back to verses 1 and 2, all the tax collectors who were hated by the Jews because they had purchased their tax franchises from the Romans, were working for the Romans, extorting taxes from their own people, a level of betrayal that was beyond comprehension for most Jews. All the tax collectors and the rest of those in the category of sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him, both the Pharisees and scribes began to grumble saying, "This man receives sinners, He hosts them and He eats with them." This is evidence on their side that indeed their accusation that He's of Satan has to be true because He spends His time with Satan's people. He is therefore a false Messiah. The fever pitch continues to escalate. They do a good job of spreading their accusation against Jesus. It ultimately mounts into a storm of hatred that screams for His blood and ends in His murder...murdered as a false Messiah.

But our Lord explains why He associates with sinners in this chapter. And He does it in these three stories. And the reason He does it is because this is a true and pure reflection of what brings God joy. The joy of God is found in the recovery of lost sinners, as we read in verse 7 and verse 10 and as we see illustrated so dramatically in the third story which ends with a massive celebration over a lost son who is home.

Now as we look at this third story, it demands careful attention. I...I feel like I'm giving you a lot but cheating you at the same time because I can't get it all in. This is so rich and so deep. And on the surface a lot of it is lost to us because we live in the western world two-thousand years later and this is back in the time of Jesus in a Middle Eastern village and we don't have the unconscious sensibilities, the cultural insights and the attitudes that were a part of everybody's life and didn't need explanation. So if you wonder why it only takes a little while to read it but so long to explain it, it's the difficulty of filling in the blanks.

The story divides itself into three parts that overlap. The first part is about the younger son. The second part is about the father. The third part is about the older son. It is dramatic and climactic as we go along. Each of those parts overlaps. As we're looking at the younger son, it overlaps into the father. As we're looking at the father, it overlaps into the older son. And so we're trying to sort it out and yet let it flow.

We looked last time at the first part, verses 11 to 16, about the younger son. And we divided that into two parts, a shameless request, verse 11. He said, "A man had two sons," from the beginning it is a tale of two sons. "The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them." This was an outrageous, shameless request, tantamount to wishing your father was dead because it was customary, it was acceptable only for a son to receive his inheritance after the death of his father. The son is therefore saying, "I wish you were dead, I want what is mine. I want it now." This is shameless in its request. And it allowed him to perpetrate not only a shameless request, but a shameless rebellion. "Not many days later, after he had received his part of the estate, the younger son gathered everything together," that means he turned it all into cash, "went on a journey into a distant country. There he squandered his estate with loose living." Later in the story it is said that he engaged himself with harlots among other things. He squandered his estate with loose living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country. He began to be impoverished. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating and no one was giving anything to him.

A shameless request leads to a shameless rebellion. And all of that, as I told you, pictures the irreligious, rebellious, immoral sinner, the very kind of person that Jesus was associating with. The people who are treated badly by the culture, who were scorned and made outcasts by the society, they were as bad as bad can be. This young man demonstrates someone who's gone as low as you can go, all the way to the bottom in a Gentile country, living in an outrageous and immoral way, ending up not only taking care of pigs but eating with pigs, becoming one of them. This is as bad as it gets. And he ends up destitute and helpless.

Now at this point, the father reenters the story...the father reenters in the mind of the son, first of all. And we go from a shameless request and a shameless rebellion to a shameful repentance. We see that in verse 17 as we begin to talk about the father. Verse 17, "But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's...'" Stop there just long enough to say all of a sudden his father comes to mind. I'm sure he had done everything he could to make sure he kept his father out of mind while he was indulging himself. But now left with nothing, destitute, in a famine, dying of hunger, he comes to his senses...he comes to himself. He has a conversation with himself. And what he says in his soliloquy is, "How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger?" And this is where repentance really begins, it begins with an accurate assessment of your condition. It's really important for the profligate sinner, for the prodigal, for the wasteful irreligious

outcast to come to an honest assessment of his own situation or her own situation. He knows he is in a situation for which he has no resources to get out. He knows he is dying of hunger and no one will give him anything and he's losing the battle with the pigs for what they can eat. It's the end. And all repentance begins with an honest assessment of one's condition of destitution, helplessness, no resources, and impending death.

And so, he thinks about his father and how many of his father's hired men have more than enough bread while he's dying of hunger. Now that says a lot about the father. This is where we start to learn about the father. Let me tell you a little bit about what it was to be a hired man, a *misthos*. A hired man was a day laborer. Sometimes you see them around, don't you, standing on a corner waiting for somebody to come along and give them a job that day even today in our society and all around the world and all through history. They are at the lowest level. They are basically the poor, the poor who are willing to work who need to work. And everybody who was poor in these days in biblical times had to work. Day workers hoped somebody would come along and hire them. They were, for the most part, unskilled although some of them may have developed some skilled craft that they would be hired to do. But for the most part, they were just unskilled workers who were available to help in the harvest or to do something that was temporary and therefore earn a little money to survive.

Now he remembers that his father paid them more than enough. That is to say he remembered that the hired men had more than enough bread which is to say their father was...what?...generous. He remembered that his father gave them more than they generally needed to survive. His father was loving, his father was good, his father was kind, his father was generous. You see, hired men were even protected by the Old Testament law. Leviticus chapter 19 verse 13 says the wages of a hired man are not to remain with you all night until morning. If you hire somebody to do work and he eats on the basis of that work and that money sustains him and his family, you have to pay him the day he does the work.

Well the father was a man who not only did what the Old Testament law said, but he did more. This comes into the mind of the son and it's very important that his father is not a hard man, his father is not an indifferent man. His father is kind and generous and good and he knows his father well enough to know that he's a merciful man, that he's a generous man and that he is a forgiving man. He has all of that knowledge because that has been revealed to him in the revelation of his father which he had when he was in the home. He doesn't know anybody else like that. He doesn't know anywhere to turn to. And somebody might say, "Well wait a minute, I mean, he would expect that his father having been so totally disgraced and dishonored in the village by such a request from such an ungrateful and profligate son would have been in shame and embarrassed and dishonored to the point where you wouldn't want to go back to him at all. But he knows his father better than that, he knows his father is not vengeful. He knows his father is merciful and generous.

Now hired men were not slaves. Slaves lived in the family. They weren't necessarily paid wages, typically they were just supported. They were part of the household. So if you were a slave, you worked in a family, they gave you your food and your lodging and took care of all of your needs and maybe there was a little pocket money for discretionary things. Hired men were lower than that. They had nobody continually caring for them. They were out on their own at the lowest of the low. But they received wages and those wages, believe me, were given at the discretion of the man who hired them. Do you remember when Jesus told the story about going into the marketplace in the gospel of Matthew to find some people to come and work in the harvest? Then they first found some at six o'clock, and then some at nine, and some at twelve and some at three, took them out and they didn't negotiate at all what their wage would be, remember that? The ones who came at six, nine, twelve, three all received...what?...one denarius, the same wage, and that was due to the generosity of the man. They were not in a position to negotiate. Day workers weren't. They took what they could get to survive. But this was a generous father. All the people who heard Him tell the story would have processed all of that which I have to fill in for you. But he's ready to go back to this man that he knows to be merciful and generous and compassionate and kind. He is ready now because he doesn't have an alternative. There's nowhere left to go. All he can do is humble himself, face his shame, admit his terrible sin and disgrace. Go back and try to be treated with the same kind of mercy and compassion and kindness that he knows his father treats poor people. And maybe...maybe if he can work long enough, he can earn back what he lost and make restitution back to the family and then have a reconciliation with his father.

He's thinking the way the people in Israel thought because that's the way Jesus wants him to think. They would have all understood this. They would have all said, "Yep, boy, if he's truly repentant he'll go back, he'll go back to his father, he'll confess, he'll repent, he'll be humbled, he'll be humiliated, he'll be scorned, he'll be shamed and that's just and that's fair and that's right because of what he's done to his father. Very severe in an honor/shame culture, very important to protect the honor of the old man. That's what he needs to do and he needs to go back and then he needs to receive from that father mercy and forgiveness based on work that he does. He needs to do restitution. So they would have been with him in this story up to now. They would have been horrified at what the young man did. They would have seen him as an absolute outcast. And if there was any hope for coming back, he would have to come back, receive mercy and forgiveness and do the work to earn back his reconciliation.

Well, he's ready. He's broken. He's alone. He's sad. He's penitent. He has nowhere to go. And he believes in his father. This is a picture of one whose repentance leads to salvation because, you see, not only repentance here but faith in his father. He trusts in his father's goodness, compassion, generosity and mercy. Repentance is linked to faith. He knows the kind of man his father is and in spite of the horrible way he has blasphemed his father, dishonored his father, shamed his father, the horrible way he has treated his father, the terrible way he has lived his life, coming to the very bottom he knows his father is a forgiving man and penitently he trusts to go back and receive forgiveness

and do whatever works he needs to do to make restitution and be reconciled.

So verse 18, "I'm not just going to stay here and die, I will get up and go to my father and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Here's my plan, make me one of your hired men.'" That's all good. They would...all the Pharisees and scribes would say that's it, that's exactly what he needs to do, that's sensible thinking, boy. He came to his senses, he had a little dialogue with himself, he had a soliloquy, he understood, he had nowhere to go but home. He understood something about the goodness of the father. He's ready to place himself on the mercy of the father having repented of his sins. He's going to go back and he's going to do what he needs to do by making himself a hired man at the lowest point on the totem pole in terms of socially, no intimacy with the father, not even a slave in the house let alone a son. He has no right to the home, no right to deplete the family resources any further. He's just going to work when they want to invest some money in something that's going to bring a dividend like anybody else will work. He's ready.

His sensible thinking then moves his will. This is how repentance works. First of all the sinner comes to himself, comes to his senses, begins to really look and assess where he is and where he's headed to the inevitable death and destruction and eternal damnation. The sinner says I can't keep going this direction, there's only one to whom I can turn, that's the Father whom I have flaunted and dishonored. I have to go back to Him. I have to go back bearing my shame and full responsibility for my sin. I have to cast myself on His mercy, forgiveness and love. And I have to tell Him that I'm willing to work to do whatever I need to do to earn my way back. Everybody would have understood that.

It's very humbling...very, very embarrassing, very shameful, but he says I'm going to do it. And listen to how severe he...he is about his own self-indictment. "I have sinned against heaven and in your sight." Against heaven is actually *eis tu ouranon*. I have sinned into heaven. And it may well be that what he means by that is my sins pile up as high as heaven. This may be a reflection of Ezra 9:6, "O, my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to Thee, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads and our guilt has grown even to the heavens." He's not holding anything back. He's genuinely penitent. He is denying himself fully. This is the stuff of real repentance. He is saying, "My life has been a total disaster. I am facing death and there's no one to blame but myself. I rebelled, I disobeyed, I wasted my life, I dishonored my father. My sins rise to the very presence of God they stack so high." This is true repentance, holding back nothing, no excuses, no blame anywhere but himself. And so true penitence matched with true trust in a father's love and forgiveness starts the sinner back.

He has to go back to save himself from his sin. Empty, alienated, headed for eternal destruction, every sinner whoever repents starts with powerful conviction of his own or her own condition, destitute, empty, headed for eternal death. Every sinner who comes back takes full responsibility for that sin and sees it as an offense that rises as high as heaven. Every sinner who comes back sets his

course or her course toward God to come back. And the Jews would have understood that when you come back, God will accept you if you do the work. He had no rights, forfeited them all when he took his part of the estate and liquidated it and squandered it, no rights, no worthiness. There never will be a son again, at least that's his view, I'm no longer worthy to be called your son, just make me a hired man. Just give me a job and over all the years that it takes I'm going to work to earn back everything I lost. I have no rights, he says, I have no privileges, I lay no claim, I don't ever expect you to receive me on my terms. Remember now, he's dead, they had a ceremony when he left, a funeral. That's why he's referred to twice by the father as my son who was dead. I don't expect to live in the home. I don't expect to be a slave. I don't even expect a relationship with you, father, I just want to work and I'll earn my way back. Make me as one of your hired men.

You know, there's real faith here in God and there's real repentance. This is the real stuff. And those Pharisees and Sadducees at this point would be applauding. They would be...Yeah, this is right, that's what he's got to do. Up to now they're generally affirming the story. They didn't like the story at the beginning because dishonoring the father was distasteful to them. They were horrified when the young man left and conducted his life in that way. And even more horrified when he ended up with pigs who were considered, of course, utterly unclean. But since then, they liked the idea that he came to his senses, they like the idea that he's coming back. And they know there's no instant reconciliation, that's not how it's done. He's penitent and he trusts his father but he's going to have to earn his way back. That's pure Pharisaic theology, along with every other religion in the world. He comes back and says I'll take my punishment, I'll take the exclusion from fellowship in the family. I'll take the distance from my father. I'll endure the humiliation of lowly work. I'll take the pain of hard labor for years to restore what I lost. I'll work my way back until I can be reconciled.

Oh he's filled with remorse for the past. He's filled with pain in the present. And he's looking forward to even more pain in the future as he works for years to earn his way back. Everybody would get it because that was the way they thought it had to be done. All the glitter is off the gold in the far country now, right? All the free wheeling lifestyle has turned to a terrible crushing bondage. All the dreams are nightmares, all the pleasure is pain, all the fun is sorrow, all the self-fulfillment is self-deprivation. The party is over for good. The laughs are silenced, the friends are gone. It's as bad as it can get and he's about to die. There's nowhere to go.

Well this is not say that every sinner who repents gets this bad. That's not the point. Not every sinner does get that bad. Not every sinner is that wretched. Not every sinner spends his money on harlots. That's not the point. The point is we want to know what this father is going to do to a sinner who is as bad as it can get because if he acts in grace toward the one who is as bad as possible, then there's hope for those who aren't. But the case has to be extreme to make the point. He's ready to humbly come to his father. He's ready to confess his sin without excuse. He's ready to do whatever work he needs to do to come back.

He reminds me of that person in the story Jesus told in Matthew 18 who, you remember, embezzled money and said to the ruler, "Let me work and I'll earn it all back?" That was the typical way. That's the typical religious way. You get into God's family by your works. His thoughts were of a dishonored father and he felt back. His thoughts were on the horror of his own sin and he felt bad. And he was willing to do whatever he was told to do to make restitution. Boy, that...there's some real genuine repentance in that, no terms.

And so, shameful repentance, that comes to the fourth point in the flow, a shameful reception...a shameful reception. And that in itself may seem a little bit startling to you but you'll see in a moment. A shameless request, a shameless rebellion, and then a shameful repentance and a shameful reception, this is amazing, this is paradoxical and this is shocking. Verse 20, "So he got up, came to his father, but while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him." At this point, if the Pharisees and scribes were standing on anything, they fell off. This is way beyond their sensibilities. In fact, this is a shameful reception by their assessment.

It starts out simply by saying he got up and came to his father. The son, the sinner, ready to face the shame he deserves. He wants restoration, he wants a new start. He needs his father. He needs his father's resources. His father can give him life instead of death. He has hope in the goodness and kindness and forgiveness of his father. He's truly penitent. He doesn't even want to be a slave, he'll work as a hired man to be paid to earn his way back. He doesn't want anything he doesn't deserve. And he will work to earn it.

That's pretty much how people feel. That's how the Jews felt. And the Pharisees and scribes listening to Jesus, along with anybody else at that time who heard this story would say, "Yeah, that's right." And you know what? When he does come to his father they would know what the father would do. First of all, the father would not be available. He had been dishonored. His respect had been tarnished in the community. He had been shamed by such an outrageous and rebellious son, and he had brought shame upon himself in some ways by even allowing him to do that. And here comes the son with another outrageous request after he has already cost a great portion of the family its fortune and the father his honor. So the Jews would expect this, they would expect, and this would be what would be done in the Middle East then and perhaps even today in some places, the father would refuse to meet him. The father would make him sit outside the gate of the home somewhere in that village for days in public view. Nobody would take him in so that the whole town could heap scorn on him, so that the whole town could bring the retribution upon his head that he deserved for the way he dishonored his father. Scorn and abuse and slander against him and people mocking him and perhaps even spitting on him. And the son would expect it. He would expect it, he knew it could come and he would sit there and take it. The Pharisees and scribes would expect that he had to be justifiably shamed before everybody as part of the retribution for the shame he had brought upon his

father.

And when the father did let him in after a certain period of time, it would be a very cool reception and he would be required to bow low and kiss the father's feet. Then the father would tell him with a measure of indifference what works he would have to do and for how long he would have to work to demonstrate that his repentance was real. And if he did work as long as he needed to and did all the reparations and all the restitution and paid back in full what he owed, then he could be reconciled and only then. All the rabbis taught that. All the rabbis taught that repentance was work a man does to earn God's favor when he feels sorry for his sin. That's what repentance was, you feel sorry for your sin, you want to be restored to God so you do work and by that work you gain favor with God by making restitution. Everybody knew that was the way it was done. And the village would even after they had heaped scorn on him for long enough would let him work there with a measure of dignity.

But that is not what happened. In fact, what happened could only be described as shameful, shameful. What happened while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him and ran and embraced him and kissed him. Now I just got to take that apart a little bit. While he was still a long way off...hadn't reached the entrance to the village, down some dusty road way out of town...a long way off, his father sees him which is an indication of the father seeking, isn't it? Everybody would know that. The father looking. They would assume he had been looking a lot very often, that he knew the kind of life that his son was headed toward would end up the way it ended and that he hoped that he would survive it so that he could come back and the father bearing a private pain and a suffering love all alone in his own heart looking, and looking and looking and looking.

It's daylight, has to be daylight in the story because he sees him a long way off, which means the town is full of people, the town is crowded, the town is busy. It's a hubbub, it's bustling with women and children and older people and everybody who's not out in the field. That means it's a busy place. And the father is looking and looking.

Why? Very simple, he wants to reach his son before his son reaches the village. He not only wants to initiate the reconciliation as the shepherd did when he found the sheep and the woman when she found the coin, but he wants not just to initiate the reconciliation, listen, he wants to get to his son before his son gets to the village. Why? He wants to protect him from the shame. He wants to protect him from the scorn and the abuse and the slander. He wants to bear the shame, take the abuse. He's willing to have the people say, "What's he doing? This man who has been dishonored now dishonors himself by embracing this wretched boy." But he wants to protect the son from the scorn, the slander, the taunting which was expected, which was just, which was part of the culture, which was expected.

How does he do it? How does he protect the boy? He sees him, it says, when he's still a long way off from the village, it says he felt compassion. Not just compassion for his past sin, not just compassion for his present filth, and he was in rags and smelled like a pig, but compassion for what he was about

to experience. And the word compassion is *splanchnizomai*, comes from a root that means your intestines, or your bowel or your abdomen. He felt a sick feeling in his stomach when he saw the boy and knew he was headed toward this unleashing of scorn. And so it says he ran.

Now I've got to tell you something, folks, Middle Eastern noblemen don't run. That's just basic. The word running here literally it says, "And running," is *dramn*, it is the Greek word that is a technical word for racing in a stadium. He sprinted, is what he did. It's almost as if he's impatient, he can't get there fast enough. This word doesn't indicate a trot or a shuffle, or a middle-aged scoot. He sprinted. And this is beneath his dignity, folks. O my, if you only knew. I'll tell you. Kenneth Bailey has made a study of life in the Middle East, having lived there for many, many years, collected material which is rich in its understanding in the Middle East. He writes this, "One of the main reasons why Middle Easterners of rank do not run is that traditionally they all have worn long robes. This is true of both men and women. No one can run in a long robe without taking it up into his or her hands. When this occurs the legs are exposed which is considered humiliating. Clearly...he writes...exposure of the legs was considered shameful. The robes themselves reached to the ground to make sure this didn't happen. A quaint ruling for the Sabbath states that if a bird crawls under your robes on the Sabbath, you may not catch it." Now there's a problem. "Because you might have to expose your leg to do that." So it says, "The suggested alternative is to sit very quietly and wait for sundown so no one can see and then seize the bird. Further, on the Sabbath you could smooth out your robe to make it look nice but you couldn't lift it up. If your robe did not reach the ground, and you didn't have a longer one for the Sabbath, you had to take the hem of it out so that it touched the ground. Also, no one should jump or take long strides. One foot should be on the ground at all times. The reason for this last ruling is to assure that no part of the leg is ever exposed. Rabbi Hisda while walking between thorns and thistles would lift up his garments to keep them from being torn and he had to offer his followers a defense of this unacceptable exposure of his legs."

In another tractate, ancient tractate, Abba Hilkiah lifts his robes to avoid thorns while walking in the country. He is asked to explain these mysterious acts which are bewildering to us. Outer robes themselves are called *mekebeduth*, meaning that which brings me honor. Honor was connected to the robe. Priests making the sacrifices were not allowed to lift their long robes to keep them out of the blood on the pavement, for fear their legs would be exposed.

Listen, this is so much a part of Middle Eastern culture that in Arabic versions of the Bible, the New Testament, there is just an utter unwillingness to have this father run. In some Syriac versions, translations, the father runs. But in the Arabic, the older Arabic translations say he went, he presented himself, he hastened and he hurried. They just can't put down what the word says which is run. For a thousand years of Arabic translations of this account, a wide range of such phrases were employed, almost as if there was a conspiracy to avoid the humiliating truth of the text that the father ran. The explanation for all of this is simple, the tradition itself identified the father as God and running in public is too humiliating to attribute to a person who symbolizes God.

Finally, in 1860 in what's called the Van Dyck Arabic Bible, the father runs. The worksheets, however, of the translators are still available and the first worksheets indicate they put, "He hurried" only in the last worksheet did they take it, "He ran."

What is God running for? Why does He bring shame and scorn on Himself for exposing Himself? It's just shocking. The reason, the Father runs taking the shame to protect the son from taking the shame. He takes the scorn and the mockery and the slander so that his son doesn't have to bear it. And then when he finally gets there, even more shockingly, he embraced him, literally fell on his neck, just collapsed in a massive hug, buried his head on the neck of his son, stinking and dirty and ragged as he was. And now we know that the father has been suffering silently for the whole time he's been gone. He's been suffering quietly, loving that boy while he was gone and now that quiet silent suffering love has become publicly displayed as he runs through the street bringing shame on himself to embrace his son and spare him from shame. Everybody now knows how much that father loves that son. So much that he takes his shame, that he empties himself of any pride, of any rights, of any honor and in a self-emptying display of love brings shame on himself in order to throw his arms around that returning sinner and protect him from being shamed by anyone else. By the time the boy walked into the village, he was a fully reconciled son.

I cannot tell you what shock would go through the listeners. And if that's not enough, it says, "And he kissed him," *kata phileorepeatedly...repeatedly* on the corner of the lips, on the cheek, anywhere. This is amazing. You want to know how eager God is to receive a sinner? He will run through the dirt and bear the shame, He will embrace the sinner with all His strength and plant kisses all over the sinner's head. Some people think that God is a reluctant Savior. No, He's not. This is the kiss of affection repeated and repeated. He's ready to kiss his Father's feet, but His Father is kissing his head. This is a gesture in the culture of acceptance, friendship, love, forgiveness, restoration, reconciliation, all the above. And all of that before the son says one word. What does he have to say? He's there, that's enough to indicate his faith in the father and his repentance. He came knowing he had to cast himself on the father's mercy and he came knowing he had to be ready to bear the shame. And he came.

This is radical stuff, folks...radical, totally unorthodox. Hence, absolutely unexpected, and this is where the story has its huge surprise. The father condescends, humbles himself out of this deep love for this son, comes all the way down from his house to the dirt of the village, runs through bearing the scorn and the shame, throws his arms around the penitent believing sinner who is coming to him in his filthy unclean rags, that father is doing exactly what Jesus did...exactly what He did. He came down into our village to run the gauntlet and bear the shame and the slander and the mockery to throw His arms around us and kiss us and reconcile with us.

The shock is all this happened without any...what?...works. That's the shock. It was all grace as the next verse makes clear. "The son understood it and the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned

against heaven," or up to the heaven, "and in Your sight I am no longer worthy to be called your son." End of speech. But he left something out. What did he leave out? Go back to verse 19, he left out the last one, "Make me as one of your hired men." Why? Because there's no need for works. He's just received grace. This is the jolt. The father is so eager, he receives and embraces and reconciles with the son before the son can say anything. But when he does speak, he leaves out the works part, full repentance, full faith and no works. Why? Because he's already been received as a son. He's already been forgiven. He's already received mercy. He's already been reconciled. His repentance is real. His faith is true. And his father responds with complete forgiveness and reconciliation. Now he knows I don't have to work my way back, he embraced me, he kissed me, he took my shame.

Beloved, that's all the sinner ever has to do is come penitently, trusting in God. And the Savior runs to the sinner asking nothing, throwing His arms of love, mercy and grace around the sinner, kissing him repeatedly because that is the joy of God. The son starts out and so do the listeners with a Jewish understanding of repentance and faith and works. And the son ends up and so do we with a divine understanding of repentance and faith and grace. He's ready to suffer for his sins. He feels it's right. But it's not necessary, doesn't belong. The father has come down from the honored place in the mansion, he's come down the dusty streets in humiliation, he's borne the shame to forgive, embrace, restore and protect his beloved son. The son offers no plan for work, that would be an insult to grace...an insult to love,...an insult to the shame the father bore. He has just seen grace in its fullness, and so have we. He knows he's accepted with full love, he's accepted as a son, no conversation about a hired hand. He will gladly become a son to this loving, forgiving father and leave his future in his father's hands.

That points, folks, to the experience that each of us has had who are believers. There was a day when we came to the Father and He ran to embrace us. We aren't worthy of that as bad as we were, as bad as this boy was, there was no limitation, hesitation, hesitance at all on the Father's part to give full reconciliation. The Father is waiting for some of you and there's nothing you can do but confess your desperation, nothing you can do but confess your sinfulness, your unworthiness and cast yourself on the grace and the mercy and the forgiveness of a loving God who has come down from His throne on high to this dusty village and has run the gauntlet on the cross to throw His arms around you to protect you from shame and to give you sonship. This is an exuberant God. This is a God who is lavish in His love and lavish in His embrace and His kisses. And as we're going to see next time, He's so filled with joy that He throws a party for this one penitent sinner. Let's pray together.

What can we say? This is to us, our Father, in some ways a presentation that changes how we think of You. We think of You as austere, and serene and sometimes even severe, though calculatingly gracious. And now we find out that You're over the top with joy, that You're exuberant, that You're glad, that You're happy, that You're thrilled, that You're overjoyed when a sinner comes, that You are so eager that You're looking and looking and then when you get a glimpse of a penitent sinner, You

run to bear the shame, protect the returning sinner. Then You lavish him with love and affection and reconciliation. And then You start the party, the heavenly celebration, the ring, the seal, the robe, fattened calf, the singing. Heaven's joy in the repentance of one sinner, so magnificently pictured for us here. How grateful are we that heaven has had that joy over us? O how we thank You because You are the seeker, we would not be found had You not sought us. We thank You for salvation. We thank You that we have become a part of heaven's joy. We know there are some who as yet have not come to their senses, not had that soliloquy that honestly evaluates where they are, and not had their will moved to go back to the one they have rebelled against, seek for mercy with a penitent heart. Father, we pray that You'll move on those hearts and whatever the inner may be thinking about, what he has to do or she has to do to make it right. May they know that just coming with repentant faith they will find that You will run to them, smother them in loving grace and never will there be anything that they must do to earn that reconciliation. This is pure grace and pure glory for you with joy and gratitude, we pray in Your name. Amen.

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