

The Tale of Two Sons, Part 3

Scripture: Luke 15:22-24

Code: 42-203

We are studying together the fifteenth chapter of the gospel of Luke, Luke's record of the life of the Lord Jesus Christ, one of the four records, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Luke is a very careful historian and there are elements of his gospel that are unique to him and the fifteenth chapter is one of them. Luke chapter 15, in this chapter Jesus tells three stories, three parables that are indelibly impressed upon our minds by now, wonderfully rich and important for us to learn.

We are looking at the third and final of these three parables which is very familiar to most people, it's called the story of the prodigal son. I have taken the liberty to break with tradition a little bit and to retitle it, "A Tale of Two Sons, and a Loving Father," because it's much more than just a story about one son, it's a story about both sons and particularly a story about their loving father.

As we come back to the fifteenth chapter of Luke, I just want to say to you that Jesus told this third story obviously in one setting. And that's really the way the story should be told. But unfortunately we are two-thousand years removed from this culture. We are two-thousand years removed from the attitudes, conventional thinking, the common understanding, conscious and subconscious, of the people who heard Him tell the story. And so we are unable because we don't think the way they think to grasp its depth of meaning initially. And so I'm here week by week to sort of fill in the blanks and to help you to think the way people thought at that time so you can extract the meaning from it. The upside is that in the end you're going to understand the story. The downside is it's going to take a while. And I hate to have a week in between each segment, that's almost like cruel and unusual punishment. But maybe down the way, and I apologize for that, maybe down the way there will be a time when I'll take a few hours, you know, who knows, maybe some Sunday evening or something and just retell the whole story in one setting for those of you who maybe have found it difficult to piece it all together.

One other apology, and that is the fact that I have to review a little bit each time because I don't want to bring somebody into the story who hasn't been here. It is possible that someone doesn't come every week, I can't conceive of such behavior, but I've heard of it and so in deference to that kind of behavior which may or may not exist in this church, I feel the need to fill in what has gone before.

Now by way of introduction, our Lord Jesus was, of course, the master of story tellers, unequalled with profound connections to spiritual truth, divine truth. And Jesus' stories in their essence were conveying supernatural information. They were conveying divine revelation. Even though they have a

spiritual intent, they are real stories. Even though they deal with the Kingdom of heaven, the Kingdom of God, the realm of the divine, they are natural stories that relate to all of us and to common human experience. Jesus was a realist, that's for sure. And I might say as a footnote, I am a realist. I like things that are real. I have very little interest in fantasy worlds of any kind. I have very little interest, almost no interest at all in art that isn't real. I like music that is consistent with the laws of music. I'm a realist and I think I learned that from Jesus. Jesus never made up stories about worlds that didn't exist. Now I don't want to argue or debate the genius of J.R. Tolkien or C.S. Lewis and the kinds of fanciful worlds that create and within those fanciful worlds there are spiritual implications. But I'm simply saying Jesus was a realist, He never made up any stories about worlds that didn't exist. He never had any stories that contained alien beings. He never had stories with talking animals or creatures with supernatural powers. He never told stories about life and conflict in some other place in some other time and some other dimension of existence. All His stories were about real people in real places in real life in common experiences that everybody at His time in the world and His place would fully understand. In fact, there are no other world fantasies in the Bible except for visions are spiritual where God occasionally revealed His truth through some spiritual vision. All the stories told in the Bible, all the record of illustrations that are given by Jesus and other teachers in the Bible are always true to fact and true to natural experience.

It is perhaps important to note that false religions are almost all born out of myth and fantasy. Teachers of Scripture and Jesus Himself only speak of a real world. The Bible then is a real world book, stories about life, stories about people, things you can get a handle on and understand because they're part of your own experience. Even when Jesus told stories to hide things, and sometimes He did. Sometimes His stories were intended to become riddles that never were solved. Sometimes His stories were intended to conceal. And when He did that He was by doing that pronouncing a judgment on His audience. He was saying that your unbelief and your indifference to the truth has reached a point where I'm not going to explain this to you anymore. And He would speak a story and they would not know what it meant and He would not tell them. And then later He would explain it to His disciples. But even then, even when He was endeavoring to conceal, the story was comprehensible. The story was clear. The story was simple. It could be easily understood and it was normal and natural and real and consistent with their experience every day. They just didn't know the meaning of it unless He explained it. And when He didn't explain it, it was a kind of judgment on them.

Now you would assume that if there was any group of people that Jesus would want to pronounce a judgment on, it would be the Pharisees and the scribes. They were the religious architects of the populous religion of Israel at the time of Jesus. They were the power people in terms of religion. They had the influence because they plied their religious system through the local synagogues of which there were many in every town and village. And they had pretty much captured the people and captured them to their form of legalism, that you work your way to salvation and you work your way to God by your good deeds, your morality and your devotion to religious ceremony and ritual. They saw Jesus as the enemy because Jesus came preaching forgiveness by grace. They saw Jesus as a

threat to their system. And so they went on a massive campaign to discredit Jesus throughout the land of Israel and the basic bottom line slogan of their campaign was, "He does what He does by the power of Satan." That was their mantra. And that is what they tried to convince the people was true concerning Jesus. He was not of God as He claimed. He was really of the devil. And one of the proofs that He was of the Devil was He hung around with all the people who were outcasts, all the people who were tax collectors, bought tax franchises so they could extort money out of their own people, that kind of traitor was the lowest of the low. And the people who were tax collectors gathered around Him and so did the general category of riff-raff comes under the word sinners. They were outcasts. They had been put out of the synagogue and they were dispossessed of any participation in social life. And because Jesus spent so much time with tax collectors and sinners, this to them was evidence that He was of Satan because He was always hanging around Satan's people. And so that's what they told everybody. There was a sense in which they liked to see Jesus in that setting because then they had more grist for their little propaganda mill. And that's how chapter 15 begins, doesn't it? All the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near to Jesus to listen to Him and so the Pharisees and scribes who are watching say this man receives sinners and eats with them.

There it is, folks. He's satanic, look at Him, He's with Satan's people, that's who He spends His time with. That was their indictment of Jesus that launched this chapter. From verse 3 on clear to verse 32 He answers this charge and He answers it in a most profound and powerful and rich way. If I could sum up His answer, take it sort of out of the parable form, it might go like this, this would be what His answer is in conceptual language. "Gentlemen, I understand you're accusing Me of eating with sinners, with the *hamartolos*, the lowlifes. You are correct. That is exactly what I do and I do not merely allow them to eat with Me, I do not only invite them but like a good shepherd searching for a lost sheep," parable number one, "or like a good woman looking for a lost coin," parable number two, "or like a good father running through the village to welcome a lost son, I go out with costly love seeking these sinners whom you so despise. In fact, I am ready to pay any price to win them and to bring them home to eat with Me, to live with Me, and I will celebrate their homecoming." Now that's conceptually His answer.

But He doesn't give them that, He gives them stories that are unforgettable in which this becomes crystal clear. The whole point of it is this, God is interested in recovering lost sinners and you're not. How far from God are you? The whole of history, the whole of human history since the Fall is about recovering lost sinners, that's God's chief business. That's His highest joy. That's why in verse 7 after the little story about the man who found a lost sheep, it says there's more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than 99 who don't. And in verse 10, there's joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Don't you get it? How far are you from God? I am in the business of doing God's work because God's work is recovering lost sinners which causes all of heaven to celebrate. They were absolutely dead wrong. They said, "Look, He hangs around those lost sinners, proves He's satanic." He says, "I hang around those lost sinners because I am divine and I am doing the work of God and the work of God is to recover lost sinners."

Well the third story is really the main story, the first two are just kind of preludes. The spiritual implications in this third story are just amazing, profound. And that's why we have to fill in so much because we don't think like a first-century Pharisee or scribe. We don't even think like a first-century common peasant villager, which is the setting for the story. We would miss so much, you would just get the bare bones, kind of the bare structure without understanding some of the experiences, some of the nuances, some of the attitudes, some of the conscious and subconscious elements of their thinking. But when you understand that, and that's why I'm trying to fill it in, and I apologize for kind of going back over it, but that's the only way we can stay in the flow of the story, but when you understand all these nuances, then the story just takes on a life that it never would have otherwise. All of a sudden you really see what salvation is in this story because in this story, talk about theology, in this story we see sin, unworthiness, repentance, incarnation, atonement, forgiveness, reconciliation, love, peace, sonship, blessing and above all we see saving grace. You would expect in a story about salvation or a presentation of salvation to have all of those components, and they're all here...they're all here. And that's what we've been looking at for the last several weeks.

Let's catch up on the story, beginning in verse 11. "A man had two sons," they're the three participants right there, a man and two sons. It's not a story about a prodigal son, it's a story about a man and two sons. That's pretty clear from the beginning. One of the sons is younger, and the other is older, obviously. And the father is the central character. The story starts out looking at the younger son, ends up looking at the older son and all of it overlaps in this incredible story. They all interact with each other and yet each is very, very clearly defined.

Now one of the dominant elements of the culture of the first century in Israel was the shame/honor perspective. Above everything, you did what you could do to maintain honor. There was a conventional kind of code of honor. There was a conventional kind of wisdom. There was a conventional attitude. There was an expected kind of conduct that related to honor and shame. At all costs you avoided anything that would bring shame upon you, so you always endeavored to act within the conventions and the expectations of the culture...and they had a very, very highly developed and sophisticated moral code. And I'm not just talking about theology or their view of Scripture, I'm just talking about all the implications of their religion had developed into a very sophisticated moral code of conduct. And people wanted to live within those confines so that they would be viewed with honor and not with shame. You avoided shame at any cost and you pursued honor at all costs. This is central to ancient Middle Eastern life. And by the way, it is still a part of the Middle East even today. Any violation of the cultural norm was deemed shameful. That was the worst thing that could ever happen to somebody.

So I've kind of constructed the story around the concept of shame and honor. In fact, each of the points so far has contained the word "shame" because as it starts out, it's a very shameful story. And you can be sure that as this story unfolds, there's just one electrifying shock after another that hits

these Pharisees and scribes. They are the architects of the honor/shame culture. They have the highest and most sensitive attitudes toward this and so whenever their sensibilities are assaulted, they're going to roll their legalistic eyes and shake their legalistic heads in incredulity at the conduct that Jesus describes.

It all begins with the younger son, making a shame, shameful request. He comes to his father, verse 12, he says, "Give me the share of the estate that falls to me. Give me my half of this estate." He is a product of his father but he has no relationship to his father at all...none. Father brought him into being, that's it. He has no relationship to him beyond that because the only way that the Jew listening to this story would understand that kind of a request would be the son is saying, "Father, you need to be dead." Cause nobody gets the inheritance in that situation until the father is dead, since you're not dying, could you just act like you're dead? Get out of my way, get out of my life, give me what's mine. He wants to eliminate any of his father's influence, control, scrutiny, restraint, requirements, disciplines, expectations, even knowledge. I don't want anything to do with you, I wish you were dead, just give me what's mine. He is thoroughly thankless, selfish, has no concern for his father's honor, and that would be the first gasp.

What son would ever do that? First of all the Ten Commandments are clear, Honor your father and your mother if you want to live a long life. I mean, that's like suicide. What son would do that? That's the first shock. And why is he asking? He's impatient, he wants his estate, he wants to turn it into cash fast, which Jesus says he does in the story down in verse 13, "He gathered everything together" is a Greek phrase meaning he turned it into cash and which means he sold short, dumped it just to get the cash because he was in a hurry to sin. He wanted to sin every way he could, every desire to be fulfilled, every lust pandered to. He wanted to be as far away from his father, away from scrutiny where nobody knew him, where nobody judged him, where nobody disciplined him. Give me my estate, I'll turn it into cash and I'll go do what I want to do without having to answer to you or anybody else that knows me. This is an outrageous request, blatant, shameful dishonor of the father.

In the Middle Eastern culture, the father would be expected to slap him across the face, say, "You insolent child." The father would display public anger in order to maintain his own honor. The father would then act disciplinary toward his son, doing something to discipline that kind of attitude. And then the father would refuse to give him what he so shamefully requests.

There's a footnote. The people listening to this story would be saying, "By the way, where is the older brother here?" Because in that culture the older brother, the one who had the right to inherit the estate, the one who really stood alongside the father, he had one great responsibility in the family and in the culture, and that was to protect the honor of his father. Where is he? And also, as a responsible older brother, to do something about protecting the well-being of his brother. And what we find out here is he couldn't care less about his brother's well-being and he couldn't care less about his father's honor because he isn't even there. But in the minds of the audience, they would be saying, "Where's

the older brother? Hey, the story's got to bring the older brother in, the older brother has a responsibility, where is he?" The older brother was to be the mediator. The older brother was to be the reconciler. The older brother was to be the protector of his father's honor and hopefully of his brother's well-being. The only conclusion is, the older brother has no love for his brother, the older brother has no love for his father.

The shameless request, the shameful request leads to a shameless rebellion. He takes what is his, verse 13, turns it into cash. Goes on a journey to a distant country, a Gentile land which, of course, was a horrible thing to do. He squanders his complete estate with loose living and later on it says with harlots, prostitutes. Literally waste the whole thing. That's where the word prodigal comes from, it means waste. And when he spent everything, verse 14, a severe famine occurred. His fault he spent the money, not his fault the famine came, but that's life. Bad timing, he would say...bad timing. So there his condition is as bad as it can be, he's as low as you can go. He's as bad as it gets. You can't get worse than this. In the mind of a Pharisee, to dishonor your father was at the head of the list and then to turn your estate into cash, which was a stupid economic move, would show how foolish you really were, and then to go take it and just spend it on immoral living wastefully with nothing to show for it, shows the depth of this sin. And then to reach the level where you've exhausted all of it and have nowhere to turn, now it gets even worse. He hires himself out in verse 15, he glues himself is what it means in the Greek. He glues himself to some Gentile citizen in the country which probably meant he hung on the guy until the guy had to get rid of him so told him to go into a field and feed pigs. Well for a Jew to feed pigs, pretty serious fall, unclean animals. And when he gets out there to feed the pigs, nobody gives him anything so whatever he expected the man to give him for feeding the pigs, the man didn't give him. So what's he finally ending up doing? It says, "He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods the swine were eating." He gets in the crush of the pigs trying to eat the slop to survive. At this point, you talk about the eyes rolling?: This is as bad as it gets. This is as bad as it can possibly be. He is defiled morally. He is defiled economically. He is defiled socially. He is defiled relationally. This is the collapse of a whole life. He's not on skid row, he's through the skid, he's at the bottom.

This leads from a shameful request and a shameful rebellion to a shameful repentance, verse 20...or verse 17, "He came to his senses." That's good, that's where repentance always starts, when you start thinking clearly about what your situation is. He came to his senses, disastrous deadly condition, nowhere to go, has no hope, has no resources. He's dying. So he starts to think about his father. "How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread and I'm dying here with hunger?" Now this tells us a little about the father.

Hired men were the lowest on the social structure. They were day laborers. You had land owners and then you had servants who were basically employed in the household, they were part of the family. They lived there, they were cared for, fed, housed, all their needs were met. And then you had the hired people who just showed up in the city square in the morning and hoped somebody hired them.

If they didn't work, they didn't eat. They were the low. They were the poor. He says about his father that even hired men have more than enough bread, which says his father was generous, he paid more than they needed. He took good care of them which tells us about the generosity of his father. He knows his father to be generous. He knows him to be kind even with the poor. Here I am and I'm dying with hunger. He confesses the true plight that he is in, he's at the bottom. "I will get up and go to my father, say to him, Father, I've sinned against heaven and in your sight, I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me one of your hired men." Ah, for the first time the Pharisees and scribes are saying, "That's what he needs to do." They would affirm this, yes sir, because in their shame/honor culture the only way you can get your honor back was to go back and work for restitution. So you come to your senses, you say, "Wow, made horrible mistakes, I'm in this terrible mess, I'm going to go back, I'm going to plead to my father whom I know to be a good man because he overpays even the hired people so they have more than enough bread. I'm going to go back and I'm going to work and I'm going to work as long as it takes to earn back the whole estate that I have lost. And then when I've repaid my father everything, then my father will reconcile with me." And that was a true Jewish rabbinic understanding of repentance. Repentance was a process by which you earned back what you had lost and you gained the right to be reconciled by your work.

He was ready. He was ready. And then in verse 20 we moved from a shameful repentance to a shameful reception. When he comes back, instead of his father protecting his honor, instead of the father saying, "Whoa, wait a minute, whew...you say my son's in town? Let him sit there for five days. My son who shamed me, my son who dishonored me, dishonored himself, dishonored God who piled his sins as high as heaven, this wretched boy, you say he's there, you say he smells like pigs? You say he stinks like hogs? You say he's sitting there in rags? Let him sin, let him sit and think about what he did while I work out a plan of restitution, how he can earn it back and be reconciled." That's what they expected the father to say. They were ready for that. The father's going to protect his honor. The father eventually after a few days is going to kick the door open and say, "You can now bring him in." And he's going to keep him at arm's length and he's going to rebuke him severely and he's going to punish him and he's going to tell him what his required restitution is and he's going to tell him how much he'll pay him and how long it's going to take to earn it before he can ever come back to the house. He can't be a servant in the house. He can't be a son in the house. But he can be a hired man, work there day in and day out until he earns it all back. And if he's faithful to the end, he can be reconciled. That's what they would expect.

And here comes the real jolt, verse 20, the shameful reception. "So he got up, came to his father. While he was still a long way off," he hasn't even gotten to town yet. "His father saw him, felt compassion for him, ran, embraced him and kissed him."

What? This is ridiculous, this is absolutely bizarre. This guy has had enough dishonor, has enough shame heaped upon him by his son, now he's heaping shame upon himself by the way he treats the son. This is completely non-conventional...completely unexpected...absolutely shocking. For one

moment there they thought the story might make sense. Who is this? What kind of father does this? What kind of father empties himself of all remaining honor? What kind of father condescends?

His father had been sitting in his house with a private heartache, with a private love, private pain, private suffering, waiting for the boy to come home. That's why he was looking. And all of a sudden it becomes public pain, and public suffering, and public love as he sees him afar off and goes running through town. You remember what I told you last week? Middle Eastern noblemen don't run anywhere, it's beneath their dignity and also, as you well know, and I read you a whole lot of material on it, you don't run because if you do you pull your robe up and you have to show your legs and that is shameful.

Why is he running? Cause he knows when the son reaches the town, he knows what the town is going to do. They're going to heap scorn on him, they're going to mock him. They're going to ridicule him. They're going to taunt him. And they would be expected to do that, it's just and it's fair. And he's got to sit there for days and take it. But instead, the father wants to protect him from ever being taunted, ever being mocked, ever being rebuked, he runs through, takes the shame that they would heap on him for doing that so that he can catch the son before he ever reaches the gate and embrace him in his arms and reconcile with him and walk into town, having reconciled the son. The father then condescends to take the shame the son deserves. He bears in his own body the shame of the son.

Wow. That's exactly what the gospel is. The sinner comes back, he's got a plan...I'll work it off...I'll work it off...I'll work it off. He's ready to face the shame. He's ready to face the older brother. He's ready to face the father. He's ready to face the village and all the scorn and the rebuke. And God comes rushing down, God in Christ, reconciling the sinner, runs the gauntlet, takes the shame, takes the rebuke, takes the taunt, take the mockery. They spit on Him. They abused Him. They beat Him. They crucified Him. He goes through, as it were, the dusty world in order to embrace that son and save him from the shame he really deserves. That's the gospel. And the son sees in the action of the father, look at it, he felt compassion for him. He ran. He embraced him. And then he kept kissing him repeatedly on the forehead, on the cheek, on the side of the mouth, as Middle Eastern men do. Loving lavish affection to the penitent, this is the incarnation, folks. This is God in Christ embracing the sinner having borne his shame and He pours out love upon him. Complete forgiveness. Complete reconciliation. And the son says in verse 21, "I've sinned against heaven and in your sight, I'm no longer worthy to be called your son." But what he doesn't say is, "Make me one of your hired men," because he knows he doesn't have to work off anything, it's all just been given to him by grace, right? That would be an insult. That would be a blasphemy of his father's affection. And he now realizes it's not about the money, it's not about the estate, it's about the relationship. It wasn't the money that broke my father's heart, it was the rejection. And a broken relationship can't be fixed with money. A broken relationship can only be fixed when the offended person is willing to be reconciled. And God, the offended person, who is continually offended by the sinner is willing to be reconciled. And if the sinner will come and trust Him and ask for mercy, and come with a repentant heart, God will reconcile

on the spot at that moment with the sinner apart from works by pure grace. The son is stunned by the suffering love of the Father. The son has to be stunned by the fact that the father has come down and borne his shame in his place. He is stunned by the momentary immediate forgiveness and the mercy of his father.

If you think in the story the son would be stunned, just look at the Pharisees and the scribes shaking their heads saying, "What in the world is this?" Because they don't get it. The father is God and the son is the sinner, and this is what God does. He runs to redeem penitent sinners who come to Him for mercy. And Jesus explaining exactly why He spends His time with those people. It is God in Christ bearing our shame to protect us from Himself. It was the father who came and poured out his love and said the terms of reconciliation have been met. What are they? You came, you repented, you asked for mercy. Salvation by grace alone apart from works.

A shameless request, shameless rebellion, a shameful repentance, and a shameful reception by that father in their minds, led to a shameless reconciliation. Let's come to verse 22. This is the last little section about the father. "The father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe, put it on him, put a ring on his hand, sandals on his feet,' we'll stop there for a minute.

And here again the eyes roll. The father has no shame. He did a shameful run and now he's shamelessly heaps blessing on this reconciled son. They wouldn't understand this at all, just absolutely mind boggling that a father wouldn't be more protective of his own honor. He gives him three things, a robe, a ring, and sandals. They all understood the implications of that. All of them did. They would have expected that he would say to him at best, "Look, okay, I want to forgive you, maybe it's not going to take a lifetime of work, but I want to watch you for a year or two years and see what's going on in your life and see if you've really repented and if you really mean that you want a restored relationship." But there's none of that. There is this immediacy. The father says to his slaves, and the picture would be this, the father comes out of the house, comes running down the dusty street in town and along behind him are the servants who are running to figure out where he's going and why he's running the way he is. And they know he shouldn't be doing that, but they're coming along because they're his servants from his household. And finally he reaches the son, he embraces his stinking garments and he kisses him all over the place. And he turns to the servants who by then are huffing and puffing along with him. And he says, "Quickly, *tachu*, immediately, hastily, speedily with no delay, get that best robe."

Humph...no father would act like that because, you know, every...every nobleman had a best robe. I mean, you've got one, you know, when you're going to go to the fancy place, maybe you pull the old tux out or whatever the super suit is that you wear for special occasions, big occasions. You ladies all have a special garment that you wear for special occasions. If you don't, you go buy one because the occasion calls for it. Well the families in those days had a special robe and it was the robe that was the most beautiful robe, the most finely crafted. In fact, it says actually that in the Greek. I mean, it

even calls it a *stole tain(?) proton*, which means the first ranking garment, the first ranking *stolen*, stole, robe. And he puts it on him. And then he puts a ring on his hand. They would all understand that. That would again be mind boggling because a ring was a signet ring and it had on the ring the family crest or seal so that when you stamped your ring into the melted wax on a document, it was an authentication of that document and it had authority. Wherever you stamped that then you were bound by that. And the hired men went barefoot and servants went barefoot and only masters and sons wore shoes, sandals. They understand what he's saying. This is the full honor of sonship. He's giving him honor by putting this robe on him.

By the way, the robe belonged to the father, it was the robe that belonged to the most prominent member of the family to wear in the most prominent setting at the most prominent event. The father is about to call for the greatest celebration that's ever occurred in that family and in that village and he's giving away the garment that he would normally wear. This is a way of saying to the son, "Everything I have is yours." This is a token of saying, "The best that I have is yours. The best of everything I have is yours," as symbolized in the robe. It's even more than that, you now have become fully restored as a son. It's as if the king passes his robe to the prince, another self-emptying act by the father, clothing the son in his own glorious garment. No father would ever do that. Again, this father just seems not to be at all concerned about his own honor. But see, they don't understand that God's honor comes in his loving grace and forgiveness. All they know about is His works and Law. He came in stinking, he came in rags, he came unclean and nobody was ever going to see him that way again. That's the picture. He came with nothing. He didn't come with a suitcase. He came in his own stinking clothing. He had barely been able to arrive. He had nothing. That's how the sinner comes. That's how we all came cause God justifies the ungodly, Romans 4:5 says, those with nothing, those who are just wretched and nothing else.

And this is precisely the kind of thing Jesus is doing with these sinners. This is the kind of thing, this is the very thing the Pharisees and scribes refuse to see as the activity of God. They refuse to see it as the work of God. But it is the work of God. It's the work of God to give everything He has to the penitent sinner immediately, not after some time gap but immediately.

And then the father in doing this practices what is called historically, it's an old word, usufruct. You may have heard it if you ever worked in the financial world. Usufruct is a term used to speak of the right to exercise control over property that's been irrevocably given to the older son. Even though the father has already irrevocably given that part of the estate to the older son who's still in the home, the father can apply the right of usufruct to use that at his own discretion since he is still the patriarch of the family. He has authority to do that. And so essentially what he does is lay claim to all that belongs potentially to the older son and say it's all yours. And they would be saying, "What in...how could you reward this kid for the way he behaved and tapped the stuff that belongs to the guy who stayed home?" This again is just beyond their comprehension. But that's exactly what the father says. That older son would have worn that robe. That older son probably would have worn that robe first at his

wedding cause that's when that robe would come out. That was the single greatest event that could happen in a family, the wedding of the older son. He would have worn it but now the younger brother has it. That older son should have been able to act in behalf of his father by having his father's ring and therefore being able to sign all the documents authentically that related to the possession of the family. This doesn't make any sense. He don't reward somebody who does that. You reward this guy who stayed home, right? Wrong.

Quickly, without hesitation, not even a blink, put the robe on him, nobody will ever see him in rags again. And by the way, he doesn't say to the younger son, "Why don't you go home and take a bath. After hugging you I come to the conclusion that this is a great necessity." He doesn't say that. He treats him like a prince. He says, look what he says to his slaves, "You get the robe and put it on him, you take him, you clean him, treat him like a king, treat him like a prince. You put the ring on his hand. You put the sandals on his feet." It's like royalty. And, of course, again this is just beyond imagination. The message is clear, full reconciliation, full rights, privileges, authority, honor, respect, responsibility as a son.

The whole crowd would just be stunned with incredulity. This is just completely opposite the way they thought. And then not only are you giving him the robe which essentially gives him the honor in the family, but you're giving him the ring which gives him the authority to act with regard to all that the family possesses, all the assets of the family, all the treasures of the family, all the possessions of the family can be moved around by whoever has the stamp. Wow. He has authority to act in behalf of his father. He has authority to act in the place of his father. He has authority to dispense all the family resources.

There's no waiting period here. There's no test period. There's no reentry time. There's no limit on the privileges. This is full-blown sonship at the highest level. And it comes swiftly. All of this should have gone to the older son. Sandals on his feet, a sign that he's the master now, he's not a hired man, he's not even a slave, he's the master. He has authority. He has honor. He has responsibility. He has respect. He is a fully-vested son who can act in the place of his father and who has a right to access all the family treasures. Wow.

What's the message here? Grace, triumphs over sin at its worse. The story isn't saying that every sinner reaches the level he did, but when sinners do, grace still triumphs. This is a completely new idea, you have to understand, right? Completely new idea...undeserved forgiveness, undeserved sonship, undeserved salvation, undeserved honor, respect, responsibility, fully vested son without any restitution, without any works. This kind of lavish love, this kind of grace bestowed upon a penitent trusting sinner is a bizarre idea in a legalistic mind.

And then the attention focuses from the son to the father. And there is a shameless rejoicing, verse 23. The father holds nothing back, he knows no shame. He calls for a party to end all parties. "Bring

the fattened calf, kill it, let's eat and celebrate for this son of mine was dead, has come to life again. He was lost and has been found. And they began to celebrate."

Every family that had animals, if they were a noble family like this one obviously, and had some means, would have a special calf in that day would fatten. The word fatten, by the way, in English...the Greek equivalent in the original text is the word for corn or grain. This is grain-fed veal. This is prime veal. And they kept that calf around for such a thing as the wedding of the older brother or some very significant dignitary who came, some monumental event which would call for a massive mega feast. This was it...this was it. This is...this is the biggest event that has ever happened in the history of the family or the village from the perspective of the father. This is it. And here we have the picture of heaven, don't we, rejoicing...just one lost sinner comes home and God puts on a mega feast. Bring that fattened calf, that corn-fed prime veal, kill it. And all that butchery would go on getting ready for dinner later that evening. The animal had been long before selected, fed, cared for, kept for this special occasion. Meat, by the way, was rarely eaten in the Middle East in Jesus' day, very rarely eaten. Only on special occasions did you eat meat at all and only on very, very special occasions did you eat the fattened calf. But this was a celebration to end all, "Let us eat and celebrate...let us eat and be merry." There was a fool earlier in the gospel of Luke, remember, who said he just wanted to eat, drink and be merry and his soul was required that night of him. He was a fool. He celebrated his own possessions. If you're going to celebrate, celebrate the redemptive work of God. That's a legitimate celebration.

By the way, a calf like this could feed up to 200 people. And it should, because everybody in the village would be there. It would be an insult to the villagers to have a whole calf and not invite everybody. And it had to be eaten at one sitting. They didn't preserve those things. Everybody come on and join the party. That's back to verse 6 when the sheep was brought home on the shoulders of the shepherd, he called his friends and neighbors and said, "Rejoice with me, I found my sheep." And in verse 9, when the lady found the coin, she called her friends and neighbors, "Rejoice with me, I found the coin." And the father when he found the son, "Rejoice with me, I found my son." Verse 24 he says, "The son of mine was dead." You remember, I told you, when the son left they would have had...what?...a funeral. It was as if he was dead. He had wished his father dead and so they treated him as if he were dead. The one that was dead has come to life. Who brought him to life? Who gave him his life back? Did he earn it back? No. His father gave it back with all the rights and privileges. He was lost but who made him to be found? Who embraced him and kissed him and made him fully a son? His father did, they began to celebrate.

This is not so much the celebration of the son. This is the celebration of the father. The feast honors the father. It honors the father for what he has done. It is the father who gave him back his life. It is the father who made him a son. It is the father who restored him to blessing by merciful forgiveness and gracious love. And the whole village comes to rejoice with this shameless father who celebrates his own grace and his own mercy. This father has exhibited unheard of kindness, unheard of

goodness, sacrificial love, sacrificial grace. The son who was dead, literally the Greek says, is up and alive. The one who was lost is found. The son has new life, new status and new attitude. He has for the first time a real relationship with a loving, forgiving father who has made him heir of everything he possesses to whom he has been reconciled and to whom he will eagerly give his love, his service in response. The son entrusts his life to the father and the father entrusts his resources to the son. The son is finally home. He's in the father's house. He's in the family. He has full access to all the riches of the father. And he joins with everyone in celebrating the greatness of this event.

I love it, it says at the end of verse 24, "They began to be merry." Because this party never ends. That's what heaven's all about. It's the endless celebration of the grace of a loving Father to penitent, believing sinners. That's what eternity is. Heaven's joy will never end when a sinner comes home.

In conclusion, what are the lessons? I don't spell them all out to you because I think you can figure them out as we go. But just a few reminders. God receives the penitent sinner who comes repenting and believing. "Him that comes to Me I'll never cast out." There is mercy with Him. There's a throne of grace where we can go and obtain mercy. God gives forgiving grace that is lavish. God replaces the filthy stinking rags of the sinner with His own robe of righteousness. As the prophet Isaiah said, "He covers us with a robe of righteousness." God gives the child of His love forgiveness, honor, authority, respect, responsibility, full access to all His treasures and the full right to represent Him. We come bringing to the people around us the treasures of God as His ambassadors. God is almost impatient in His desire to give. He runs to embrace. He runs to kiss. Quickly put the robe, quickly give him the ring, quickly get the shoes. He wants all that He has to be given to the repentant sinner and He wants to start the party immediately and call all who live in heaven to come around and celebrate Him as the reconciling Father who welcomes a penitent son. God treats the sinner as if he was royalty, making him an heir and a joint-heir with Jesus Christ. And God holds a heavenly celebration for every wretched sinner who comes to Him and it never, ever ends.

Listen, in conclusion, God rejoices not because the world's problem of sin have been solved. Heaven is not up there saying, "Well, we'd like to have a party up here but so much is going on that's not good, we can't really start the party until things get a lot better than they are now." They're not up there saying, "There's so much suffering in the world, there's so much trauma, there's so much pain, there's so much disappointment, it's such a troubled world. Wow, we'd like to have a party but we just can't get on the upside of this whole problem." No, and God doesn't hold off the party for some big event when ten-thousand people get saved in some stadium somewhere. No. The party starts when how many sinners repent? One. And every time...and every time and the party for every sinner never ends because it's a party in honor of God, not the sinner. And the more and more, day in and day out as the Lord saves people, the party is extended and extended and enriched and enriched and the angels and the redeemed saints are praising God for being such a gracious and reconciling Father.

And I guess the question to ask us is...what contribution do we make to the party? First of all, if you're not a Christian, this is a time to receive the love of the Father who waits for you to return. But for those of us who are Christians, are we pursuing the joy of God by doing everything we can to take this glorious gospel of forgiveness to the people we meet? Some people never understand this. And they're religious people who don't get it. The Pharisees hated the idea that the Father treated a sinner this way. And we're going to see their reaction next time. Let's pray together.

Father, if this is such powerful truth imbedded in this great story, we thank You for it, thank You for how enriching it is to us and what it tells us is about You. We love You. We love You more when we know these things. We see You in a fresh way. It's so incarnational. It's so real. It's life. Thanks for telling us this story not in a fantasy, not in some mystical other world, not with things which we can't identify which doubly removes us from understanding, but in simple ways that we can grasp. Thank You for being the God You are. We praise You. We shall praise You forever and ever and ever in Your presence in heaven. We'll be there at the party, celebrating such a reconciling God who is in the end honored by being willing to bear shame. And isn't that always the way? None of us will ever be honored by You until we have confronted the shame of our sin.

Father, thanks for a great morning and a wonderful time of worship. We are overjoyed as we think about the fact that it was the birth of Christ when You first left Your home and came down to the dusty road, to the village where we live, this world, and You took the shame, You ran the gauntlet, You soiled Yourself, as it were, with the dust of this world's suffering in order that You can embrace us and through Your cross take our shame and make us Your sons. It all began for us here at Bethlehem. No wonder we celebrate, no wonder we rejoice. May our joy be true and real as we express our love to You. We thank You. Amen.

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