The Tale of Two Sons, Part 4
Luke 15:25-28
42-204

Normally on a Sunday when we celebrate the Lord's birth, I redirect myself away from whatever series we're doing and give a special Christmas message, but there are many who prevailed upon me to continue our unfolding story of the parable of Luke 15. And so that's what we're going to do this morning. Turn in your Bible to the 15th chapter. There's one complaint already. I regret that. I hope there aren't very many more. But for those of you who are guests with us today, you'll accept my apologies. We...We go verse-by-verse through the Word of God and we are in the middle of such a compelling and dramatic story that we would find it very difficult to put it off for a couple of weeks. We'd lose so much ground. And so Luke 15 is our text and back to the story that Jesus told, the parable starting in verse 11 and running to the end of the chapter. And with our message this morning and next Sunday morning we will bring this story to a conclusion.

It is a simple story. Jesus told it on one occasion but for us it's taken about five or six to get it done. And that's because we have to fill in so many cultural gaps and we have to learn how people at the time thought and responded in order to capture the meaning of it. It's been so very, very rich. It is known as the story of the prodigal son, but it is really a story about three people who are identified at the beginning in verse 11. Jesus said, "A certain man had two sons." It is the tale of two sons and a loving father and in a sense it is the story of salvation. It is the story of why God came into the world, why He was born in Bethlehem, why He entered humanity. He came to bring us salvation. He came to bring us forgiveness. He came to bring us reconciliation. In the end, He came to bring us joy and to bring Himself joy.

So many of the songs that are sung at Christmas celebrate joy, the joy of salvation; not only our joy in salvation, but the joy of God; not only the joy of being reconciled but the joy of being the Reconciler. As much joy as we experience on earth because of our salvation in Christ, there is far greater joy around the throne of God in heaven as God Himself rejoices over the salvation of sinners. That is the theme of this whole chapter. And in fact there are three stories in the chapter. You probably know the first one is about a shepherd who lost a sheep and found it and had a celebration. The celebration is indicated in verse 7, "Joy in heaven over one sinner who repents." The second story is about a woman who lost a very valuable coin and found it. Called her friends to rejoice and “in the same way,” says verse 10, “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

When the angel said on that Christmas morning to the shepherds, "Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy," it was exactly so. Joy not only for sinners saved, but joy for a saving God. All of heaven celebrates the salvation of one sinner. And I ended our message last week by saying God is not waiting for the end of sin and suffering in the world to start the party in heaven. God is not waiting for some great event in which a million people are saved or 100 thousand or ten thousand or 1,000, or even 100. Heaven celebrates one sinner who is recovered, one sinner who is saved. And as sinners

are saved day after day after day, as the redemptive purposes of God go on in the world, the joy never ends, the joy of heaven never ceases. Heaven's joy, as this whole series tells us, is found in recovering the lost. We rejoice in our salvation through Christ and He rejoices and God rejoices and the Holy Spirit rejoices and the angels rejoice and all the glorified saints around the throne rejoice. And so we sing at Christmas, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come." He came to bring salvation, to bring joy to us, and joy to the angels, and most importantly, joy to Himself. The salvation provided in the gift of Jesus Christ produces the joy of God, and that's what this story is about. It's illustrated in a shepherd's joy when he finds his sheep, a woman's joy when she finds a coin, and a father's joy when a wayward son comes home.

Verses 11 to 32, probably the most familiar of Jesus' stories, the story of the prodigal son. Everybody knows a little bit about that story, but it really is not the story of the prodigal son. That's just one third of it. It's about a prodigal son, a loving father and a very dutiful son. A younger son who lives openly in wickedness and immorality and disregard for all conventional thinking, all moral standards, doing only what he wants to do when he wants to do it, the way he wants to do it, and pays the consequences. It's also about an older son who's very devout apparently to his father, stays home, does everything that he's supposed to do, does it the way his father wants him to do it, fits into the conventional expectations of the religious community around him, performs admirably. One would be classically the bad son, and the other would be the good son. And in the middle, touching both lives profoundly is this amazing figure of the loving father.

Now it is important in understanding this story — we've been telling you this — to understand that these people were highly sensitive to the idea of honor and shame. You did everything in your life basically in order to sustain your own honor, or to achieve your own honor, because that's what was so important. It was very, very important to be an honorable person. It was a works/righteousness system. You earned your way into favor with God by being good and being religious and being moral and toeing the mark and walking the line and dotting all your I's and crossing all your T's in terms of the standard for behavior in the community. Very important that you maintained your honor that way and that you were respectable and honorable and that you didn't do anything to shame yourself. The Pharisees, who believed themselves to be honorable... They were the leaders of Jewish religion. They believed they were the architects of what honor was and they also were the definers of what shame was. They had concluded that Jesus was a shameful, false Messiah, that He was in fact not of God at all, but of Satan. They said the worst about Him that could be said. They said He did what He did by the power of Satan. And for their evidence, they said look at the kind of people He hangs around. We see at the beginning of the 15th chapter another occasion where all the tax gatherers and the sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. He attracted the worst remnant or element of the society, the outcasts, the flotsam and the jetsam, the scum, the nobodies, the lowlifes, those who had been excommunicated from the synagogue, socially untouchable; people that the Pharisees wouldn't go near lest their supposed purity be somehow polluted. In fact, that was their criticism, wasn't it, in verse 2, about Jesus? "This man receives sinners and eats with them." Anybody who socializes with sinners betrays that he belongs there. And so as they are of Satan, so must He be of Satan.

Well, Jesus needs to defend Himself. He needs to defend Himself that He is not of Satan, He is of God. And so He's telling them three stories to demonstrate this. He is among them because they're lost like the sheep the shepherd had to go and find. He is among them because they're lost like the coin the woman had to go and find. He is among them because they're lost like the sinful, prodigal son that the father receives and embraces because he was lost and now he's found. Do they not

understand the heart of God? No they don't. Don't they understand that heaven's joy is not in the self-righteous ninety-nine sinners who think they need no repentance? Don't they understand that God's joy is found in the salvation of sinners? How far from God they are. They don't know God at all, these Pharisees and scribes who criticize and malign Jesus. And these stories are intended to make that clear.

The third story is really the main one and I won't go through all of it. You know the story. But everything in it is a shameful thing as the Pharisees sort of sit back and listen to Jesus — they're the audience — telling the story. It's a head shaker and an eye roller from the beginning. Oh! It's one outrageous thing after another that violates all their conventional sensibilities.

First of all, the younger son makes a shameful request. He asks for his estate now. Well you didn't get it in that culture until your father died. This is tantamount to saying, "You're in my way. I wish you were dead. Since you're not dead, act like you're dead. Give me what's mine." Shameful, unthinkable in that culture of high honor for of all people the father of a family. And then the father acts in a shameful way with a shameful response. He gives him what he asks. What father would do that? A father should slap him across the face and punish him, tell him, "Absolutely not. I will not be so dishonored." But a shameful request is followed by a shameful response. The father gives him what he wants. This is the request of the sinner to be as free as he can be from God, as free as he wants to be to fulfill his desires and his lusts. And you now what? God gives the sinner just that freedom. You can take your sin as far as you want. You can take it as deep as you want, as high and as wide as you want. You can go into every nook and corner that you choose to go into. You have that freedom.

And so he does. The shameful request and the shameful response is followed by a shameful rebellion. We know the story in verses 13 to 16. The son goes away into a far country, leaves Israel, as it were, goes into a forbidden, Gentile land, unclean; so unclean that a Jew coming back would shake Gentile dirt off his clothes so he didn't bring it into the land of Israel. He ends up trying to eat the food of pigs, the unclean animal, working for a Gentile for no pay but just the right to fight the pigs for the...the carob pods that they're eating. It is a rebellion that hits rock bottom. He wastes his substance, involving himself with prostitutes and whatever other wasteful things he can do, runs completely out of a fortune which his father gave him which he turned into cash as fast as he could at a discount sale. And now he's got his cash, he wastes it and it's gone and then a famine hits and he has no resources and he ends up with the pigs.

The shameful rebellion is followed by a legitimate, shameful repentance. He feels badly in verses 17 and 19. He says, "Look, I have nowhere to turn, I'm going to die. I'm hungry. My father pays the people who are day laborers who work for him and he pays them more than they need," which is to say he's kind, he's generous, he's a good man “and I know my father and I know he's compassionate, and I know he loves me and I know if I go back he'll be willing to accept me on some terms. So I,” he says, will go back, verse 18, “to my father and I'll say, "Father, I sinned against heaven," that is another way of saying my sins have piled as high as heaven. This is a full confession, holds back nothing. "And I'm telling you I have sinned as high as heaven, you know it. I've done it right in your face. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." This is the stuff of real repentance. Comes to his senses, evaluates his sin, evaluates where it's taken him, evaluates that he has no resource within himself to change it. I'll go back, I trust my father. He will accept me on some terms. I'll offer to work for him as a hired man. Not a household servant, that would be too much, not a son, that would be way too much, I don’t worthy...I'm not worthy of it. But I'll earn my

living day wage, the lowest person on the social-economic ladder. That was the Jewish view of repentance. You feel sorry, you go to God and you say, "OK, God, what do I need to do?" And God says, "Well, you're going to have to make restitution. You're going to have to work it all off. And if you work long enough and you're faithful and you do your religious duty and you do your righteous works and you're moral and you're good, then maybe down the road somewhere when you've brought it all back and you can completely restore what you've wasted, we'll have potential reconciliation. But you've got to do it to the end." That's the way they viewed repentance.

Salvation in the legalistic system of Judaism and in any other legalistic system in the world — and all religions are a form of works/salvation except true Christianity, they're all the same — good people go to heaven, people who are religious who do good things. If you do them long enough and well enough, that's going to be how you get to God. And he had that conventional kind of thinking in the story, Jesus makes him a Jew subject to Jewish thinking and so he says I'm going to go back and earn my way into the favor of my father. I'm going to earn my salvation. I'm going to do whatever it takes for as long as it takes to get my way back into my father's house and into his treasures and into his heaven. And so he comes back.

Now remember, the Pharisees are listening to all this and they're saying, "This whole thing is a big story of shame, a shameful request, a shameful response, a shameful rebellion, a shameful repentance." He's going to come back, "Ah, now the father's going to do something honorable." But the father gives the son a shameful reception. Amazing, verse 20, He gets up, comes to his father. He arrives in stinking garments that smell like a pig. He has nothing at all, he's destitute, absolutely bankrupt, absolutely nothing. His father seems him a long way off which indicates the father's actually been waiting for him, hoping for him, suffering in silence in his absence, loving him even while he's gone. The father sees him, feels compassion for him and ran. He runs right through town, which a nobleman in the Middle East do not do. That is unacceptable, shameful behavior. First of all, you don't let your legs be shown in public. And we went into that in detail. But he runs, and he runs through town to get to the boy before the boy gets to town because when he arrives in town, the whole community is going to heap scorn and disdain and mockery on him because that's what they're supposed to do. That's part of his penalty for the way he behaved toward his father. The father takes the shame that should belong to the son. He does a scandalous and shameful thing, runs through town before the son ever gets there, saves him from the shame, throws his arms around him, kisses him all over the head, which is tantamount to saying, "You're a son and I receive you as a son. All is forgiven, all is past. Trusting in me and coming, repenting of your sin, is all I ask." And all that can come out of the boy's mouth in verse 21 is, "I've sinned against heaven and in your sight. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son." And he drops the part about being your hired man because that's irrelevant now. He has been reconciled. And here is the glory of salvation, folks. God forgives the one who asks and who repents without any works, with nothing to commend him in his filthy, rotten, stinking rags as a beggar who possesses nothing and who can earn nothing. This is gracious salvation.

But to the Pharisees, it was ridiculous. They didn't understand grace at all. All they understood was you earn your way in. This was outrageous, shameful, shocking. This father just continues to do dishonorable things. Nobody would do that. When the son comes back, you don't see him for a few days. You make him sit in town and take the scorn for a few days. And finally you might give him an audience and all you're going to say is, "This is what it's going to take, you do this, you do it for this many years and you give me everything you earn and we'll see if you can ever earn back the part of the estate that you wasted. And if you do, then we'll be reconciled." That's what they would expect.

That's what was honorable. That's what he deserved. That's what he should get. That's not what the father gave him. The father's reception was a shameful thing in their minds.

And the shameful reception goes into a shameful reconciliation in verse 22. The father not only takes him back as a son, but he gives him full privileges. Bring the best robe. Put a ring on his hand, sandals on his feet. What is the robe? Honor, this is the most important garment in the family owned by the father, worn by the father at the most prestigious events the family ever conducted or was engaged in. Give him all the family honor that is possible to give him. Then take the signet ring which you used to stamp official documents which gives him freedom to act and authoritatively to act on behalf of the family with all the family resources. And then put shoes on his feet. Servants are barefoot, hired men are barefoot, but masters and rulers and sons wear shoes. Give him full sonship. Give him full power of that sonship, full authority, and full honor. This is a picture of salvation. When the sinner comes bankrupt with absolutely nothing, casts himself on his father's mercy, says, "I've wasted everything, my sin is as high as the heaven. I've sinned against God, I've sinned against you. I can offer you nothing. I'm willing to work." Then the father embraces him in love and says, "You don't need to work, I give you full sonship with all rights and privileges, all honors, all authority. That's salvation.

Why does the father do that? Because it gives him joy. In verse 23, what the Pharisees would see is a shameful celebration, "Bring the fattened calf, kill it, let's eat and be merry." The Father's joy, the heavenly Father's joy is found in the sinner who comes home and repents and is forgiven. This is the joy of God. Verse 24 says it, "This son of mine was dead." You remember, I told you when he left they had a funeral for him, he was out of the family. But he's come to life, he was lost, he's been found, and they began to be merry.

This is the third party in this chapter. There was a party when the sheep was found. There was a party when the coin was found. And there's a huge celebration when the son that was lost is found. That's the whole point. What makes heaven rejoice is the salvation of sinners and that's why God sent His Son into the world. The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost, not just for the joy of the sinner, not just for the joy of Christ, but for the joy of God, and the joy of the Holy Spirit, the whole Kingdom of God, says Paul the apostle, is joy. And when we get to heaven it's going to be one long, everlasting celebration.

Now that gets us up to speed. And at this point, the third character enters the scene, the older son. Verse 25, it's going to take us two weeks to dig into this because it's really interesting. Now most people say the older son, oh yeah, he was the Christian. Yeah, he was the...he was the believer who was at home doing what he should. That's not true. No, that's not true at all. The older son, fascinating what Jesus does here, the older son... Now you've got to understand, you're the Pharisees and the scribes, the legalists, you're sitting there listening to the story, everything everybody has done up to now is shameful, everything. You're just waiting for somebody to do what you perceive as the right thing. The son did shameful things when he treated his father... The father shamefully gave him what he asked for and shamefully took him back and shamefully lavished love on him and shamefully forgave him and made him a son without any works and shamed himself again by giving him all honor, all authority, all power, all leadership; and then shamed himself further by calling the whole community to come together and celebrate a massive feast over this wonderful reconciliation. I mean, the whole thing is shameful. Now here comes somebody who will do something that the Pharisees think is the honorable thing to do. This is our boy. This is our guy.

Verse 25, "And in..." By the way, meeting him, they meet themselves. This is their guy. This is they. "His older son was in the field." Now he's been out in the field working that day as much as landowners work, sitting under a shade tree making sure everybody else does what they need to, overseeing is what they do. In fact, noblemen in the Middle East didn't usually work. That was somehow beneath their dignity at a certain point. But anyway, he was out in the field. What strikes me is that the father hasn't told him anything. The father certainly hasn't been looking for him. The father hasn't sent a messenger out to the field wherever he was to say, "Hey, hey, hey, your brother's back and we're going to have a party, come on in, greet your brother, embrace your brother, rejoice with me and help me get this party off the ground," because, look, he was the number one, primary party planner in the family. That was the job of the firstborn son. He had the responsibility to carry off all the events of the family, particularly those that were designed to be in honor of the family. And the party was in honor of the family, not so much the son who came back, but the father who took him back, reconciled him. And, the whole village game together to give honor to such a loving, gracious, merciful, forgiving, reconciling father, but nobody bothered to tell him.

The father doesn't go to him. Why not? Wouldn't you listening to the story? You say, "Why didn't somebody go get him and bring him back?" The answer is he has no relationship to the father. The father knows he has no interest in his brother, he proved that at the beginning of the story when he didn't try to stop his brother from doing what was terrible. He had no interest in his father, proved that by not intervening between his brother and his father to stop his brother from such a dishonorable act toward his father. In fact, he took his part of the inheritance gladly, never defending his father's honor. He has no relationship to anybody in the family. Being out in the field is sort of a metaphor for where he was in terms of that family. The younger son was in a far country, this guy's in a far field. But the symbolism there is they're both way off from the father. They both come home but to very different receptions.

So he's out in the field. The day ends. It says he came and approached the house. And since he hadn't up to that point heard anything, it must have been an indication it was a pretty big estate. This father has a great estate where someone can actually be far enough away you don't even know when a huge celebration involving hundreds of people is going on at your house, which is a way to indicate the greatness of the kingdom of God. But he comes back and he approaches the house. And he says, "He heard music and dancing." Now again, everything up to this point has been shameful. Shameful request by a younger son, granted in a perceived shameful reply by the father, the son acts in a shameful rebellion, ends up making a shameful repentance, the father gives him what they perceive as a shameful reception, reconciliation and a big rejoicing celebration... It's all just against what all of them believe to be right. They're drawn into the story now. They've been making critical judgments all the way along. Jesus was a master at this. He pulled his audience right into the story. They had to make ethical judgments all the way. Simple story, understandable, ethical elements of the story, they sit in the position of making the ethical judgments. There they are, the experts on honor and shame, having been surprised and shocked and outraged by the conduct of everybody, they are about to find somebody they like who turns out to be them. It's brilliant stuff, brilliant stuff. They understand nothing of divine grace, they resent divine grace. They don't understand the loving heart of God. They don't understand His mercy and tenderness, compassion, forgiveness and desire to reconcile with sinners. They know nothing of that. That's why they don't understand why Jesus, God in human flesh, spends His time with sinners. This is the one guy that makes sense to them. They resent the unholy son. They see him as the opposite of their own self-righteous selves and they think the father is some kind of a fool for shaming himself in the way he treats this sinful son.

But finally they have somebody they can identify with, somebody who knows what honor is. And he comes to approach the house, not having been included in anything at all. The father knows that. He knows he has no interest in him. He knows he has no concern for his joy. He knows he doesn't care about his younger brother. He knows that. He has no love for his father, no desire to honor his father, no respect for his father, no interest in what pleases his father. He has no compassion on his father's grieving heart for the wayward son. He doesn't care at all about his brother. He's a Pharisee, he is a Pharisee. He pretends to stay in the father's house, to be dutiful, to do what the father says, to hang around, to get what he wants, to get approval and affirmation and wealth and land and community prestige. He wants to appear religious. On the outside he upholds all the conventional modes of external honor. So, he comes and he hears the music and the dancing, the *sumphōnias* and the *choros*, from which we get “symphony” and “chorus.” It's a party. There's music and in those days the men danced in a circle, men only, and there was clapping and singing. There would be instruments included in the music. In fact, *sumphōnias* is originally a double pipe, but it also, in some Arabic translations, is used to refer to voices together. So voices, instruments, dancing, the whole thing is going on. It's a celebration. The fattened calf has been killed. What they did was not filet it, but they chopped it up into slabs of meat and they would cook it in chunks in the bread ovens. And they would start the party in a very imprecise way. Life was not nearly as by the clock as it is today. The day was over, the work was over, the announcement would go out, come, killing the fattened calf. The son is home and people would begin to come when they arrived and they would come and they would eat and the meat would continue to be cooked. And it would be continually cooked for hours and the singing and the celebrating would go on into the night as the ebb and flow of this wonderful celebration took place. Well it's already on its way. It's already full-blown when the older son arrives; and again, an indication that he probably came a long way, indicating the greatness of the father's estate. He is stunned. He is shocked. He is surprised. He is confused. But mostly he is suspicious, because legalists are always suspicious, particularly of joyful people.

And by the way, something this big wasn't ever planned in a day. This was planned by months and months and months of preparation, and not without him as the center of it. He is, after all, the owner of the land, because the estate has already been divided, though he doesn't take possession of his part until his father's death, it is already assigned to him. These are his resources. This is then his calf and all the rest of the things that are going on are using the things that actually belong to him and he hasn't even been consulted. Here's the biggest event that the village has ever known, the biggest event the family's ever known and he doesn't even know anything about it. He doesn't even know it's happening, until he shows up. This too is another outrageous act on the part of the father who just continues to do shameful things in their minds. It's an insult.

And so, he arrives. "And when he approached the house he heard music and dancing," and then it should say, "And he rushed in to his father and said, 'Father, what's all the joy about?'" But he doesn't do that. If he loved his father, he would have rushed into the house and said, "What's going on? What's going on?" And his father would have said, "Your brother's home," and he would have embraced his father and rejoiced with tears because he knew his father loved his brother. He knew he had ached in his heart as long as he was gone, and he knew he had gone out to look for him day after day, even though he didn't know he was back. No one had told him yet. Whatever made his father rejoice would make him rejoice if he loved his father. But he has no love for his father at all. He has a love for himself. It's all about him and his property and his reputation and his prestige.

So in verse 26 it says, "He summoned one of the servants." Servant actually is *paidiōn* here and it's

from *pais* in the Greek, which means a young boy. All the family servants would be inside. They would be taking care of all the guests. As I said, 100 to 200 guests wouldn't be unusual to eat a fattened calf. Not everybody ate a huge 16-ounce piece. And the fact is they didn't eat a lot of meat except on special occasions and then not a lot. But on the outside there were young boys and what this tells us...a little bit about that Middle Eastern culture, the adults would all be inside, they would all be in the house having...in the courtyard of the house having this great celebration at some point, and out on the fringes would be the kids that didn't get to come, but they were sort of the perimeter celebrators, you know? The fringe participants, the young boys would all hang out on the edges because this is a huge event. And this would be the first group that he would meet as he comes in and the first ones he runs into after he hears all this are these young boys. So, verse 26, "He began inquiring what these things might be." This is shocking. What in the world? I go to work. It's a day like any other day. I go out there to sit under the tree and make sure everybody's does what they're supposed to. I come in and you've got the biggest celebration ever. What is going on? And why wasn't I consulted? And how is it that I don't know about this?

And he says to him, verse 27, "Oh, your brother has come." Uh oh, that should have filled his heart with joy. That should have been enough that after that was said he rushed in because he knew how his brother's life had started out when he left. He must have been so anxious and excited to find out how that whole thing had ended up. He knew his father's heart had been broken when his brother left. He knew how he regularly looked for him and longed for him. If he loved his father at that point, he would have immediately run in. But it really was his fear that his brother would come back. "Your brother has come and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound." His worst fears, his brother came back, oh, and his father what? Received him.

This outrageous conduct is more than this older brother can bear. Look at the phrase "safe and sound," that's a funny thing, isn't it? An Old English colloquialism that seems to last in our modern translations; it's actually *hugiainō* in the Greek from which we get hygiene and it basically means wholeness, well-being. But in the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament, that word is almost always connected to *shalom* which means what? Peace. That's really what he's saying. It's not that he's not physically hurt. It's not limited to that. He's received him back in peace. This is not just good health, this is *shalom*. This is peace of a full reconciliation between a father and son. It isn't his son came back and the father told him to sit at the edge of town for a week and think about what he had done until he gained a right to talk to his father and then he'd give him the things he needed to do to earn back his reconciliation. Not that. The father received him and he received him in *shalom*. He's made peace, shalom forever. That's why there's a party. There wouldn't be a party if he had come back and had to work for the next twenty years. This...this is the worst possible scenario because now the father is using his resources on this party. The son has already depleted the whole family treasury by taking his half, selling cheaply and leaving, which meant that that whole thing couldn't grow so that the older son when the father did die would have more. Now he's back depleting more of our family resources. And the foolish father is using those resources on him. The son is the favored guest at the banquet but the banquet is really in honor of the father. The town is there to celebrate a father who's that merciful and gracious and kind and loving and reconciling. You see, that's the picture of heaven's joy. And a legalist who thinks you earn your way to heaven doesn't understand that God's joy is found in justifying the ungodly, that God's joy is found in forgiving the sinner who is bankrupt and has nothing. The older son... That's why his worst fears have come true. His brother's back, his father has embraced him, this is outrageous. And for the first time in the story the Pharisees are saying, "Yep, that's exactly the right attitude, that's exactly what he should feel. He should be outraged. We are outraged. This whole story is just one outrage after another."

And so he can't be a part of a shameful event. His son has shamed himself. His father has continually shamed himself. He's gotten the whole community involved in this shameful celebration. And he's not going to be a part of it, verse 28, "He became angry and was not willing to go in."

Of course not! And that's the answer to the original issue, isn't it? The Pharisees said, "Look, you receive and eat with sinners. You have a banquet with sinners. How can you do that?" They didn't understand that God's joy and hence God in Christ, Christ's joy, was in receiving repentant sinners, prodigals, profligates, the immoral; the outcasts. But for a legalist, that's outrageous conduct, absolutely outrageous. But what you see is he had no love for his brother. He didn't rejoice in his brother coming back, anymore than he cared when his brother left. He had no love for his father. He didn't rejoice with his father anymore than he defended his father at the beginning when his father was hearing the request from his younger son. This is no believer. This is no Christian. This is a typical, religious hypocrite standing on the outside condemning the gracious work of salvation. He's angry. That's the only emotion he feels. And you know what? The Pharisees and scribes think it's right, and they're saying, "Yeah, we're angry too, we'd be angry too. We'd feel exactly the same way. This is absolutely unacceptable conduct."

Legalists don't believe in grace. They don't understand unmerited favor. They don't understand free forgiveness. They don't understand the removal of punishment. They don't understand somebody else bearing their shame, taking their scorn. They don't get that. And he will not go in. And so here is a public display of private hatred. He'd probably done a better job of hiding his hatred than that in the past. He probably had the community believing that he was very respectful of his father, honored his father, maybe even cared for his father. And he stuck around the house. He...He did whatever his father wanted him to do. And everybody probably thought he had some love for his father. But here his real attitude comes out. He cannot enter into this joy because he has no love for God and he has no love for the sinners God is recovering. This is religious hypocrisy. It's still in the world today, it's everywhere. They're all over the place. People who look like they hang around the house of God but they don't know the heart of God. They're trying to earn their way to heaven, which is the greatest deception that Satan has ever invented and it is the characteristic of every false religion on the planet. When salvation comes only to those that are spiritually bankrupt, destitute, impoverished and fall on their faces as beggars before a God they trust will be willing to forgive them, and repent of their sins, and then they receive His lavish love and all that comes with it. But legalists don't like that. How can you do that? How can you just do that when he didn't deserve it? It's all about what you deserve and what you earn and what you gain and how good you are.

So the older son has the perfect opportunity, if he chose to, to honor his father. But the truth is, he's a rebel. He's not an outward rebel, he's an inward one and they're worse. He's a secret sinner. He feels all the same lusts that his brother felt, but he hides them because legalism never changes your flesh. He feels the same lusts, the same longings, the same desires, but he caps them and never fulfills them because he has a stronger desire for prestige and honor and to gain his father's estate and to be well thought of. And so he's driven by pride more than he's driven by baser things. But the base things are still there. And now all of a sudden we know that he hates his father and hates his brother. We know that he's indifferent to the recovery of his brother and indifferent to the compassion of his father. He can't rejoice with either one. And that's exactly the way the Pharisees were.

When you think about a hypocrite, you have to think a little more deeply than the surface. Hypocrites stay near the house of God. They hang around. They're religious. They're moral. They have no

relationship to God. They have no desire to honor Him. They have no interest in His honor or heaven's joy. It's all about their own self-promotion, thinking somehow they can earn their way into the goodwill of people and even God. The truth is, they're completely alienated from God. No part of what God does like the son in the field, not even consulted about the things that move the heart of God. Religious hypocrites do what's expected on the outside. They follow the external religious and moral patterns. But inside they're just filled with secret sins. Jesus said about them, on the outside they're painted white, inside they stink and they're full of dead men's bones, like rotting corpses. Under the surface they are filled with bitterness, hatred, jealousy, anger, lust. And then as I said, the older son is likely in real life envying the prodigal. The prodigal gets to do what he would never do, but desires secretly to do. He would hate seeing his brother live it up in the very sins that he openly condemns but inwardly desires.

He's like all hypocrites; sad, morose, melancholy, empty, unfulfilled, hiding his heart under the burden of a superficial religion. And he feels like he earned his praise. He earns his position. He earns his reward. He earns his honor by his rigorous, painful, loveless obedience, performing the duties while capping his secret sin. Well the truth is, the hypocrite is lost and more profoundly lost because he spent his whole life convincing everybody he's good and it's a long ways from there to admitting you're really wretched. Whereas if you're like the prodigal and you have made it clear that you're wretched, it's a short step to admit it. Self-righteous hypocrites hate the idea of salvation by grace alone. They hate the idea of full forgiveness for repentant sinners. They will not come to that party. They will not celebrate. Hypocrites are more deadly to any religious environment because they set a tone for the kind of conduct that kills spiritually and eternally.

You don't need to repent. You're good. The ninety-nine, back in verse 7, so-called righteous persons who don't need to repent, and as long as you don't need to repent like the prodigal, you can't be saved. You can't enter the kingdom of God. Jesus came to save sinners, self-confessed, repenting sinners. Repentance is the key to everything. This son, he has no interest in that. He has no knowledge of God, no love for Him, and no love for sinners.

Really there are two kinds of sinners in the world, the religious ones and the irreligious, the moral and the immoral, those that hang around the things of God and try to keep the law, and those that run as far as they can and live in wild, wasteful, immoral living. But the Father is there for both. Whatever kind of sinner you are, Jesus came into this world, born into this world in order to live and to die and to provide salvation for both kinds of sinners and all those in the mix in between.

Well the story isn't over. There's one final scene, when the father goes out to confront the older son. And at this point, the ending is so shocking you don't want to miss it next Sunday. Join me in prayer.

It's an incredible thing, Father, to dig into these great truths. How such a simple story can have such profound meaning. Oh Lord, how we thank You for sending Jesus Christ into this world for that great event which we celebrate today on this lovely Christmas day. And may it be a day when our thoughts are toward Christ, the Savior, born into the world, born that He might die for us, born that He might run the gauntlet for us, bear our shame, our scorn, bear our punishment, to throw His arms around us and kiss us and reconcile us as sons. We pray, God for the...the prodigals who are here, the younger sons who haven't yet come to their senses, who haven't yet realized that they're in a foreign land and they're bankrupt spiritually and they're bankrupt morally and they're left with nothing but to crowd in with the pigs to eat the scraps when they could come to You, to a loving, forgiving, reconciling Father who has everything they need and more and who waits to put a robe of honor and

a ring of authority and shoes of power and responsibility on their feet and start another heavenly celebration for their homecoming.

I pray for those, Father, who might be hearing me now who are out in that far country, having wasted their lives and I pray, oh God, that You would prompt them to come now to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to come in the name of Christ to a God who forgives completely, and instantly lavishly pours out on the sinner eternal blessing. Shalom forever, full sonship.

And, Lord, also I'm sure there are some of those older brothers here this morning who have been religious and dutiful and moral and gone to church and kept the law and done all the little religious duties that their prescribed religion required and they kind of feel like they're on the upside of more good than bad and...and they just think it's all kind of adding up to their benefit and they're going to earn their way back. They're going to be one of Your hired men and they're going to go out there and they're going to work and they're going to be good and religious and in the end you're going to give them reconciliation because they earned it.

Father, may...may they see themselves in the Pharisee, may they see how horrible it is and how distant such an attitude is from You. They don't know Your heart. They don't know what pleases You. They don't know that You wait to forgive sinners when they repent and believe in You, apart from anything they do. There are religious sinners who need to come to the celebration, come and repent and have You throw Your arms around them and kiss them. We pray, Lord, that You would work Your work in the heart of all who have not yet returned to the Father's house. May they know He's waiting if you come in the name of His Son, seeking forgiveness and salvation, He gives it with all the rights and privileges. This is the glory of the Christmas gift in Christ.

Father, we thank You that You sent Your Son to be our Savior, Jehovah saves, Jesus, to give His life for us. We thank You that it is because of His sacrifice and His bearing of shame, because He was willing to take the just, the right punishment for our acts of dishonor and rebellion we have acceptance now with You in His name. We celebrate this Christmas the gift of Christ, not as a babe in a manger only, but as a Man dying on the cross. He came, He was laid most likely in a wooden manger and at the end He was nailed to a wooden cross and therein is the great reality of the incarnation that is at the heart of the redemption that You desire because it brings You eternal joy. We rejoice with You, Father, and we can't wait till the heavenly party, until we're there to celebrate with all the hosts of glory. Until then may we be faithful to proclaim the message of Your forgiveness in Christ's name. Amen.

Have a blessed Christmas.

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