The Loving Father

Luke 15:17-24
91-2

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If you will, take your Bible and turn to the 15th 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.

Now as we look at this story, it demands careful attention. 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 2,000 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 11-16, 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 misthios. 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 19:13 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 to remember 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 6:00, and then some at 9:00, and some at 12:00, and some at 3:00, took them out and they didn't negotiate at all what their wage would be, remember that? The ones who came at 6:00, 9:00, 12:00, 3:00 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. 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. 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. It's very, very embarrassing, very shameful, but he says, "I'm going to do it." And listen to how severe he is about his own self-indictment. "I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight." "Against heaven" is actually eis ton 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 liked 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, 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. It 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 splagchnizomai, 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 dramōn, 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,” kataphileō repeatedly, 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.

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 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.”

No father would act like that because, you know, 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 stolēn tēn prōtēn, 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, "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, because 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. You 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 worst. 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 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, and 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 10,000 people get saved in some stadium somewhere. No. The party starts when how many sinners repent? One. 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 embedded in this great story, we thank You for it. We 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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