A Tale of Two Sons (2006 Resolved Conference)
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Session 2

This is a highlight of my year and a highlight of ministry opportunity for me, and I am a man under orders to share with you the Word of God. That's a divine mandate and I am also under another mandate from Rick to open the Word of God to something I've been preaching on for the last five weeks or more, and that is the familiar story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. The text before us is like so many texts, a very familiar text, and yet there are so many unfamiliar elements to us and that's the genius of our Lord as a teacher.

Anybody who knows this story knows the story that we call the story of the Prodigal Son. You might be interested to know that it has been considered by some people, no less than Charles Dickens, the greatest short-story ever written; also by Ralph Waldo Emerson, the greatest short story ever written. Now that makes you think about what am I missing, is there something there that I haven't seen? And there really is.

To get us into the story a little bit, I just want to remind you of some of Jonathan Edwards' resolutions, if I may. Resolution number one that Jonathan Edwards made was, "I am resolved to do whatsoever I think most to the glory of God." Resolution number four, "Resolved never to do any manner of thing whether in soul or body, less or more, but what tends to the glory of God."

Resolution number twenty-three, "Resolve frequently to take some deliberate action for the glory of God, or if I find it not to be for God's glory to refute it as a breach of number four." Number twenty-seven, "Resolve never willfully to omit anything unless the omission is for the glory of God and frequently to examine my omissions."

I think we know Jonathan Edwards enough to know he was consumed with the glory of God. And Edwards also understood that God's joy is connected to His glory. God rejoices when He is glorified. "He infinitely values," says Edwards, "His own glory and finds infinite joy in that glory."

Amazing thoughts. Edwards also understood that God's joy is greatest where His glory is greatest. And in human history, that is in the work of the salvation of sinners. "God has," writes Edwards, "greatly glorified Himself in the work of creation and providence. All his works praise Him and His glory shines brightly from them all. But as some stars differ from others in glory, so the glory of God

shines brighter in some of his works than in others. And amongst all these is the work of redemption, is like the sun in His strength. The glory of the author is abundantly is the most resplendent in this work of redemption. God's glory is greatest in redemption, and therefore God's joy is greatest in redemption." Further, Edwards said, "Christ has done greater things than to create the world. What greater thing? To obtain His bride and the joy of His marriage to her." Edwards said that God's single end in redemption is His own happiness and joy.

And I might add, the more sinful the sinner has been, the more joyful God is in his salvation. To live your life to the glory of God and the joy of God, you must be involved in the work of redemption. That's what this story is really all about. Let's look at it.

Background a little bit--verse 35 of chapter 14. Jesus says at the end, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." This is a call on the part of our Lord to those who are willing to listen to His message, His message of Kingdom salvation. And just who was listening? Chapter 15, verse 1, "Now all the tax gatherers and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him." It was the outcast, it was the scum, it was the riff-raff, it was the low lives who listened, believingly, penitently, and savingly. And really these are two categories that are used sort of in a general way to describe the worst of the worst.

Tax collectors were the lowest people socially, religiously in the life of Israel. Why? Because Rome occupied Israel and Rome sold tax franchises. Greedy Jews who didn't care at all about their own people, who had no religious passions whatsoever and could somehow benefit from pagan, idolatrous, Gentile occupation bought those tax franchises and strong-armed people out of their money, taking what Rome required and everything else they could get. It became a way to operate a criminal operation. They were sort of the Israeli Mafia. They were surrounded by thugs, people who could extract the money out of people to fill their coffers. They were unsynagogued, they were disassociated from society. They were put out of families. They were considered to be outside the purposes of God. They were the traitors of all traitors, hated by the people.

And then there's the term "sinners," which just collects the thugs that went along with the tax collectors, as well as all the lowlife criminals and prostitutes that occupied the base level of immoral activity in Israel. These are the kind of people of whom the rabbis said, "Let not anyone associate with such people, not even to bring them near to the Law of God." But they were the ones who came to Jesus. They were the ones who heard and listened. Verse 2 says, "And both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, or murmur saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'"

These are the self-appointed elite. These are the religious leaders of Israel. They had plied their legalistic religion through the local synagogues and so they really had the ears of the people. They were in every town, every village, in every neighborhood, through the synagogue. They really owned the synagogue layout and that's what dominated the life of Israel. They were self-righteous, they believed that you earned your way into God's kingdom by being moral on the outside, fulfilling all the

ceremonies that were required of you. They were the “in” people. They were the pure and the holy, far too pure and too holy to be polluted by any association with sinners. And when they saw Jesus associating with sinners, they drew one single conclusion: He is satanic because He hangs around Satan’s people. These people who were self-appointed, religious, holy people, who looked down on Jesus, and this was a malicious attitude they had toward Him in which they assigned Him a place with Satan in the kingdom of darkness. They said He does what He does by the power of Satan.

This sets up the scene. Jesus is doing the work of God, which is the redemption of sinners. That’s what glorifies God; that’s what gives God joy. They see it as the work of Satan. That’s how far from God they were. You can’t get more far from God than that--that’s 180. His response to their self-righteous anti-evangelism was to unmask them as very far from God, very distant from God, knowing nothing of His glory and nothing of His joy.

He explains what He’s doing in three stories. The first one, verses 3 through 7, is a story about a man who finds a lost sheep. It’s a rhetorical question; I won’t read it. But the end of the story is verse 7--a man goes, he finds the sheep, he rejoices with his friends because a sheep has value; verse 7, “I tell you in the same way, they’ll be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” Heaven rejoices over one sinner’s repentance.

They didn’t get it. This was the work of God that brought Him joy. Tells a second story about a woman who lost a coin. Again, that has value; she finds the coin; she calls her lady friends together: “Rejoice with me,” verse 9; I found the coin. The application, verse 10, “In the same way I tell you there’s joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” The point is, you are so far from God; you don’t get it. God’s joy is found in the salvation of one sinner. That generates joy in heaven. God is not waiting for ten thousand sinners to start the party. He’s not waiting for a thousand, or a hundred, or ten. The celebration in heaven goes on over one sinner who repents. This is the point of the whole chapter, the joy of God.

Now we come to the story. I want you to look at with me, verse 11. But I need to tell you just a couple of things. This is a different culture. This is Middle Eastern village peasant life, okay? Different culture, Middle Eastern village peasant life. We don’t know about that. No Middle Eastern village had this kind of music, or anything close. Very different life. But for us to understand the story, we’ve got to begin to think the way they thought. And simply, you just need one thing, and that is this. They were dominated by a shame-honor paradigm. Everything related back to what was honorable and what was shameful. And they had a very, very clear, almost subconscious understanding of shame and honor. This is huge to them. You did what brought you honor; you never did what brought you shame. And by the way, if that was true in Middle Eastern life, it was particularly true among the Pharisees and the scribes. Scribes, by the way, were the textual experts that informed the religion of the Pharisees. They worked hand in hand, but they both believed the same things. And shame and honor were big stuff. They’re always big stuff to hypocrites. And you have to understand this. The story

Jesus tells is bizarre, unbelievable, incomprehensible, wild, whacky, ridiculous story of non-stop shame that nobody could understand. Everything Jesus talks about in this story is counter to their intuitive thinking. It is against the grain of their society. They do not function this way; they do not think this way. The level of outrage just continues to escalate. This is a head shaker and an eye roller. The Pharisees must have been going, “Whoa!” This was just way over the top because everything was so shameful--shocking stuff from start to finish.

Let’s begin--a shameful request, verse 11. By the way, it’s not a story about a son; it’s about a certain man who had two sons. So it’s three characters: a father and two sons. The younger of them said to his father, “Father”--that’s very respectful, by the way--“give me the share of the estate that falls to me.” And at this point they would step back. What? That’s unthinkable. The younger son is asking the father for his share of an inheritance; he’s out of rank. There’s a pecking order. If he’s younger, somebody’s older. This is not only out of rank, this is disrespectful, this is selfish. You get the estate when the father dies. This is like saying, “Father, I wish you were dead. You’re in the way. I want what’s mine and I want it now and I’m tired of waiting.” He sees the father as an impediment, as a restraint, as an unwelcome point of accountability. He doesn’t want the father around; he doesn’t want accountability; he wants freedom, independence; he wants his money, and he wants it now. This is totally disrespectful. This is, of course, a violation of the commandment to honor your parents. He wants nothing to do with an on-going relationship to the family. I want you to notice something, very important. He says, “Give me the share of the estate” (*te susias*)--give me the property and the goods. He didn’t want to take over his inheritance and to begin to develop it and use it for the good of the family in the future. He wanted the cash. I want the goods. I want the property. I want it now. I want no future with this family. I’m not asking you to let me manage what is rightfully mine and would be mine at your death--and just give it to me early and let me take over the management. He wants nothing to do with the father, nothing to do with his brother, nothing to do with the family ever again. And there is no precedent in Jewish society for this. This is an absolute outrage. This is a shameful request.

And the village, as well as the Pharisees listening--if there were village people in the story, they would expect one thing. The father would raise his right hand and slap that young man right across the chops. And then he would punish him as severely as it could happen--a beating publicly because the father must protect his honor at all costs.

The shameful request, however, leads to a shameful response. I want you to see what the father did. End of verse 12, “And he divided his wealth between them.” What? The father is supposed to protect his honor. He does exactly what this willful, rebellious, hateful son asks. This is absurd. You’re supposed to wait till he’s dead and then the younger gets one-third, the older gets two-thirds, but not until. You might assume that a father would do this for a good purpose, but to fund the rebellion of a hateful, disrespectful son? The father should do everything to protect his own honor. He’s been publicly embarrassed by this son, and he needs to take the high ground and preserve his brother.

But he does the very opposite. He acts in a shameful, disrespectful way toward himself. This is a dishonorable, ridiculous father. First of all, no boy would ask that. Secondly, no father would do that. The whole thing is an outrage. Somebody might say, “Well the father must really love the boy.” Yeah, but it’s a silly kind of love from a human viewpoint. It’s a foolish kind of love. This is not tough love; this is a ridiculous kind of thing, letting go of this boy when you know he’s the kind of boy he is. You’d want to do everything you could to pull him in tightly.

By the way, just as a footnote here. The older had the son, had the job in the family of protecting the father’s honor, and protecting the younger siblings from doing foolish things. But the older son never appears here, never shows up in this story. Some of those people, those Pharisees, would be saying, “Well, where was the older brother here?” His duty is to preserve the father’s honor if the father doesn’t protect himself. Where is he? His duty is to protect the younger brother from doing foolish things. Where is he?

So there’s a sense in which even the older brother appears shameful in the story. But the estate is split, and that means the older son got his two-thirds. The younger son got the one-third that was coming to him, and that launches a shameful rebellion. Verse 13, “Not many days later,” this is to indicate how fast this young man acts. He is driven by lust and passion and evil desire, and there’s no delay possible. He wants to move as fast as he can. And what he does, it says, the younger son gathered everything together. In the Greek that simply means he turned it into cash.

Now how do you take an estate that’s been accumulating for really generations--family building a very large estate because there are servants, there are hired men, there are hired musicians, there’s a fatted calf? All that stuff that shows up in the story indicates a very wealthy man. How do you liquidate that rapidly?

Well, you can do that, but you’re going to have to sell it at a...What?...at a discount. So he trivializes the value of this thing. He wants to turn it into cash. Now, in Jewish culture, even if you bought it, you couldn’t take it till the father died. So somebody was willing to buy a future. The reason they would buy a future is because they would get it at a discounted price. So he gets the cash, turns the property over to some buyer who will take that property when the father dies.

This is stupid. Sacrificing your future on the altar of the immediate, he goes on a journey into a distant country. That was the whole point. Get as far away from home as you can, far away from accountability as you can, far away from restraint as you can, far away from anybody’s scrutiny as you can. Get out there where you can live exactly the way you want to live, and nobody that cares about you is going to know.

By the way, there would be a funeral. The family would have a funeral. That's why later in the story the father says, verse 24, "This son of mine was dead." He was dead to the family. Shameful rebellion; he squandered his estate with loose living. So driven by lust and sin and evil desire, he just wastes it, absolutely wastes it. This is where "prodigal" comes from; it's a term that means wasteful. He scatters his future and has nothing to show for it. Loose living is dissipated, debauched, irresponsible living. Later on in the story, his older brother (verse 30), points out that he wasted a lot of it on prostitutes. All that was his fault, but there were some things that weren't his fault. Verse 14, when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country and he began to be in need. Not his fault, but that's how life is. And what happens in a famine, you can read some fascinating things about famines in ancient history. People eat garbage; they eat sandals; they eat stray animals. During famine times in Israel went under siege; the Jewish people even ate the afterbirth. This is life at the bottom. And he becomes a beggar, verse 15. He went and attached; interesting Greek word here, *kalao* means to glue. That's what beggars do. If you've been in third-world countries, man, it's hard to get rid of beggars. They stick their hands in your pockets; they pull on your clothes--particularly young ones. So he does this. He attaches. He finds some citizen in this far country, which would be assumed to be a Gentile country, and he glues himself to this citizen and the guy can't get rid of him. So finally, he sent him into the field to feed swine. It wasn't really a legitimate hiring. I guess he thought it was, but it wasn't. It was just a way to get rid of this relentless beggar.

Now you can understand the outrage--the shame of approaching the father this way; the shame of the father in funding the rebellion; the shame of selling the estate cheap; the shame of turning it into cash, funding your grow immoral living; the shame of becoming a beggar, attached to a Gentile and now to be sent to feed pigs. And, you know, they're just rolling their eyes saying, "This...this nobody is going to do that; no good Jewish boy is going to do that. Are you kidding?"

And it gets worse. Verse 16, he's out there ostensibly to feed the pigs. Guess what? He's longing to fill his stomach with the pods the swine were eating because nobody was giving anything to him. He went out there, maybe thinking he had a job. Nobody gave him anything and now, to survive, he has to fight the pigs for the carob pods that the pigs eat.

I mean, this is just bizarre. I mean, you go from wealth to trying to stick your face in between snouts and eat carob pods with pigs in a Gentile place? I mean, the shame is beyond comprehension. And even so, he is starving to death. Verse 17, he says, "I'm going to die of hunger." He can't do it. He can't beat the pigs to the pods. What is this? What is Jesus talking about?

Well, this is desperation. This is the sinner, poor, destitute, hungry, hopeless, debauched, dissipated, dying; this is desperation. And the lesson? Sin is rebellion against God, and God will give you the freedom to choose your sin. You can choose it. He'll give you freedom to take your sin as far in any direction as you choose to take it. Here is the rebellion of one who had no relationship to the one who gave him life, no relationship to the one who gave him life. No relationship to the one who held all the

riches he ever could have needed all his life. No relationship to the one who could give him a future, as well as a present. That's how it is with sin. It is disdain for God's person, God's rule, God's authority, God's will, God's goodness, God's resources. Sin is a desire to run from God to avoid all responsibility, accountability to God. It is to deny God any place in your life. It is to dishonor God, to take all the loving gifts that are available and squander them as far away from God as you can get. It is to waste your life in self-indulgent dissipation, unrestrained lust, shunning all God's goodness. It is reckless evil. It is selfish indulgence that takes you to the brink of death. Sin looks for fulfillment outside and away from God and never finds it. It leaves the sinner exhausted, empty, hungry, hopeless.

Now the picture is extreme, no question. Not everybody's this bad. But the question is, How is the father going to deal with somebody who is this bad? Jesus really has invented the ultimate sinner. This is as bad as you can get--disrespect to parent, disrespect to community, dissipation of your own body, immorality to the max, violating all your cultural conformities, going to a despised place and attaching to despised people. This is the pits. This is not skid row; the skid is over. This is the bottom. This is the ultimate sinner, and not every sinner is that bad. But it's pretty important to find out how this father's going to deal with one who is.

And the shame is not over. A shameful repentance follows. Verse 17, "When he came to his senses." By the way, that's always the start of repentance, when you begin to assess your true condition. He said, "How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread?" I'm dying here of hunger. Just a little note here--Jesus speaks with an economy of words; that's always staggering to me. He says, "More than enough." Wow.

Let me tell you about a hired man. The social structure, of course, you had the land owners, the people with the money, and then you had the tenant farmers who rented little pieces of it and worked the land, and you had the little shop owners who had maybe their own little business here and there, little craftsmen who did certain things. Then you had servants. "Servants" was the category of people who basically were part of the family. They were hired. You housed them. You fed them. And they did service, and they really were part of the family.

Then you had what are here called *misthios*, "hired men"; they were day laborers. They hung around--they just hung around hoping someone would hire them, like the parable where Jesus, you know, talks about the man who had a harvest and he went into town and looking for people at six a.m. and nine a.m. and twelve and then three, and trying to find people who could come and work for the day. And back in Leviticus it says when you hire a day laborer, you have to pay him at the end of the day, can't keep his wages over night because he sets his heart on that. He's got to feed his family. He works one day at a time. These are the low people on the pole. And some of them did very menial, most of the menial unskilled work, although some were craftsmen of some kind.

But there's something about the father here that's really interesting. He says, "How many of my father's hired men have more than enough?" You know what this tells you about this man? Because hired men barely eked out an existence, they were just a little bit above the destitute. And he is saying, "My father gives the low people on the economic ladder more than they need." What does that tell you about the father? That he is merciful, that he is generous, that he is good. And this is where he begins to realize the goodness of his father. He's good. He gives more than enough. And I am dying here with hunger. And he begins to trust in his father's goodness and trust in the mercy and compassion and love of his father, which he scorned once, but which he recalls was characteristic of his father.

Verse 18, "I will go, I'll go to my father and I will say to him, 'I'm going to trust my father's mercy, I'm going to trust my father's goodness and compassion, evidenced in the way he treats the lowest people, that I can go back to him and he will in some way receive me.' This is what I know to be my father's nature and I will say, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son, just make me as one of your hired men.'"

Wow, this is embarrassing. He's not only got to go to his father and face his father in the way he's treated his father in the past, he's going to face his older brother. He's got to face the village. The father has been shamed, but so has the son. And he's going to get the scorn and the ridicule and the mockery and the disdain of the village because it was required to give him that. That was part of the cultural punishment for this kind of misbehavior, to uphold the honor of the father and the village.

Not only that, he's looking at years of hard labor. How do you earn back a third of a massive estate as a hired man? At low wages, this will take years and years and years and years; and only after it's all been earned back, restitution complete, will there be hope of reconciliation. He knows his sins are great. Verse 18, "I have sinned"; literally in the Greek, "I have sinned into heaven." It's another way of saying what the Old Testament says, "My sins are as high as heaven. There's no holding back here. He knows what he has become." He asks for no privileges in his mind, no rights--he's forfeited them all. He can make no claim; he doesn't ask to be in the father's house. He doesn't ask to be a family member. He doesn't ask to be a servant in the father's house. Not at all. All he wants is the father to be merciful enough to him to let him work as a day laborer, paying minimum wage for as many years as it takes to earn back everything he lost and the hope that there could be a reconciliation. He sees now that when he's exhausted his options away from his father, all he got was death. And he will pay any price for the life his father possesses. He'll take the punishment. He'll take the humiliation. He'll take the hard labor. What a picture.

Here is a sinner in true repentance--he's come to desperation--who realizes that this is the path of death. He wants reconciliation; he's willing to confess that his sins are as high as the heavens. He knows he has no rights and no privileges and could lay no claim to anything. He wants reconciliation

at any cost, even a life of hard labor. Boy, that's the real kind of repentance. What a picture, what a picture.

At this point, the Pharisees and the scribes are saying to themselves, "Well, that's exactly what that boy should do." This is the first thing that had any sense to it. That's what he should do. And he did. Verse 20, "He got up, came toward his father"--walked back in his filthy, swine-smelling, stinking clothes; trudged back toward the village.

Now, what can we expect the father to do when he gets there? Well, the Pharisees would know exactly what the father would do. Finally this father has an opportunity to disdain his honor and to do what he should--what is right and just and honorable--and what the father should do is stay up in his estate and when somebody says your son has come to town, the father says, "I'll see him in four days. Let him sit in these stinking clothes and take the scorn and the mockery of the village heaped upon him as discipline. And then after four days, I will see him." The father would expect him to come in, bow down, kiss the father's feet, and take punishment from the father, maybe even a lashing, and then get ready to work for decades. And if he could sustain it for decades and decades and decades, then maybe reconciliation. But reconciliation comes only because of restitution--so said the rabbis. There is no reconciliation without restitution. But if you think there's been shameful behavior now, here is the most shameful behavior yet.

Verse 20, a shameful reconciliation. Well, the young man was still a long way off, still outside the village. Maybe there was a gate; there was a dusty road leading to the village. Maybe there was a gate, maybe there was just sort of a defined place where the first little buildings were. While he's a long way off, his father saw him. Now we're okay up to here. And now the whole thing becomes ridiculous. "And felt compassion for him and ran and embraced him and kissed him." *Yoi-vay!* Are you kidding me? What a fool his father is. His father is a bigger fool than his son. So much here; still a long way off. That must mean the father was looking. I suppose we could assume that this was a regular thing for him to look for that son. Saw him. The father was the seeker, felt compassion, and those Pharisees are saying, "How weak is this man? Can't he ever respond in a righteous, honorable way?"

And then he did the unthinkable. He ran. Middle Eastern noblemen don't run. It's not just something you *don't* do, because physically you *can't* do it. There is an entire body of literature, Jewish literature, written about the fact that you don't run if you're a man. They wore robes down to the ground. And that was so that their legs were not seen. It was a shame to let your legs be seen. That is, of course, the case still, for some folks. When you get to a certain age, keep those things covered up is probably a good idea. But the bottom line in that culture was, if you ran you had to pull it up, and to show your legs was shameful. In fact, literature says that even a priest when he's offering sacrifice cannot lift his robe off the ground to keep it out of the blood. There was one rabbi who condemned a man for lifting his robe above his knees while walking through thorns to keep from getting it caught. You just didn't

run. You didn't run, first of all, because it wasn't dignified; you didn't run because you moved in a graceful, stately manner; and you didn't run because it would be a shame if anybody saw your lower body. And if you pulled them up high enough and ran hard enough, they could see more than your legs. This word "ran" in the Greek is the word for sprinting in a race. This man came out of his house and sprints down the middle of town toward this son.

And the people in town in a Middle Eastern village would have been appalled. This indecent, shameful thing; the rabbi said, "A man should not even jump for fear somebody might see your lower leg. In fact, robes were called *mikbadoth,* which means that which gives me honor.

So what is he doing? He's running through town, bringing shame on himself, shame on himself, taking the abuse. This is selfless. This is self-emptying condescension. Why is he doing this? Because he wants...listen to this...to get to the son before the son gets to the village. Because as soon as that son enters that village, he's going to be mocked and scorned and heaped upon with shame and ridicule. And father runs through town, takes the shame to embrace the boy before he receives the shame.

This is downright crazy behavior for a Jewish Middle Eastern noblemen. He embraced him--hugs the pig-scented rebel and kissed him. In the Greek, "kissed him repeatedly." Customary to kiss him all over the head; just kissed him all over the head--full reconciliation, full reconciliation. No shame for the boy; the father has taken the shame. The father came out of his palatial home, came down, came to the village, sprinted through, took all the scorn and the shame, threw his arms around the boy, kissed him all over the head, and everybody knew. He's received him fully as a son.

No shame for that boy. He should have been beaten. Should have had to sit there and take the shame. That's what they thought. What is this? I'll tell you what it is--one word, *grace*. And they didn't get it. It's grace and they didn't get grace. He got it because in verse 21 the Son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, I'm no longer worthy to be called your son," and he stopped. What did he leave out? What did he leave out of his speech?

Go back to verse 19. What's his last line in verse 19? "Make me one of your hired men." But he doesn't say that. He planned to say it, but he doesn't say it because he doesn't need to say it, because he doesn't have to earn back his father's love. He doesn't have to earn the reconciliation. He gets grace. He leaves out the hired man part--that would have been an insult to his father's compassion, an insult to his father's love, an insult to grace. He just repents; he entrusts himself to the mercy of his father, and that's all a sinner ever needs to do. And this, of course, is what outraged the Pharisees all the time, Jesus gracing sinners--Jesus embracing sinners, kissing them all over the head and reconciling with them. This young man receives reconciliation, restoration, forgiveness, sonship, and all he does is trust his father and repent of his sin. He has no plan for restitution, no works; this is grace--a gift of a loving, merciful, compassionate father.

So what do we learn about the father? The father really is God in Christ, coming down from heaven to the dust of our towns, to seek and save the lost sinner who comes to him. God initiates; he's the seeker. He sees the sinner before the sinner sees him. He finds the sinner before the sinner finds him. And he runs the gauntlet and takes the shame. His love is lavish. His pure grace is limitless. And here we see the point--God finds His joy in the salvation of one lost sinner who he runs to embrace, to kiss and restore.

We have a lot of views of God; that's normally not one of them. We're not used to seeing God so eager, so effusive, so lavish, so loving to the worst sinner. The son got it; he got it. He was reconciled.

A shameful reconciliation though in the minds of the Pharisees--shameful. A father is just breaching justice, righteousness, honor. And, of course, the Jews have never understood the condescension and the suffering of God for the love of sinners.

Well, shameful reconciliation is followed by a shameful rejoicing. Look at verse 22, this is really something. "The father said to his slaves, "Quickly"...I love it...*tachu* in the Greek, "quickly." Salvation is an instant thing, isn't it? Not a long process of restoration by works and ceremony--it's an instantaneous thing, quickly, right now, all the privileges, get the best robe. A wealthy family like this would have one robe, by the way, the father's robe, and it was used for those maximum kinds of occasions of great grandeur and importance. Get the robe; get the best robe. This would be a beautiful, embroidered robe--the best the family had--worn by the father and perhaps his father; heirloom kind of thing. Get that robe, he says, quickly; let no time pass and put it on him. He doesn't say to this young, "Now get yourself cleaned up." He treats him like he's a prince. He treats him like he's a king, calls all the servants together and says, "Take care of him, clean him up, dress him up." He's just going to stand there while you do this to him. They're just going to lavish him. Put the robe on him.

What is that? It's the robe of dignity. He shared the full dignity of the father, the full majesty of the father. Put a ring on his finger. The rings weren't just for looks; they were used to stamp in soft wax the family symbol on official documents. This is authority to act in behalf of the father. He can signify the father's will in any document. It's like getting the keys to the kingdom. Put shoes on him. Slaves and hired men and the poor didn't wear shoes. Shoes were for people who had responsibility. Give him dignity; give him authority; give him responsibility. He has my dignity; he has my authority; and he has a share in my responsibility. This is full sonship. My, how grace triumphs over sin. My, how grace triumphs over sin. Grace gives to us when we come--the full dignity of God as we are clothed with his own righteousness; the full authority of God to act on His behalf, consistent with His revelation; and responsibility to carry on His work, in His name, in the power of His Spirit. And once the Son had been given all these things lavishly, verse 23 says, "And bring the fattened calf."

Wealthy people had one calf that they kept, usually for the marriage of the older son. They used it for the best and biggest occasion; kill it. That would be an operation in itself, take a little while. And by the way, they didn't filet it and put it on a big huge spit. I've been to some things like that where that's been the way of doing it. They chopped it into steaks and chops and everything else, and cooked it in their bake ovens, their bread ovens. Kill the fattened calf and let's eat and be merry. We're going to have a party.

Now go back to verse 7. There's more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance; verse 10, joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents--this is that in this story. The celebration begins.

Now I just want to point out one thing, we don't have to develop it all, but the celebration is directed at the father. It's not directed at the son. The son received the robe and the ring and the shoes, but the party is a party in honor of such a gracious father. Let's all eat.

Now a calf could feed anywhere from one hundred to two hundred. They didn't eat a lot of meat. They didn't eat meat every day. Meat was for special occasions, and this could be a hundred to two hundred people to dig into this thing. They're going to do it, verse 24 says, "For this son of mine was dead." We could talk about that. God knows who His sons are and in His wonderful providence and sovereignty, He has His times when He will raise them from death to life. "This son of mine was dead and has come to life again. He was lost and has been found and they began to be merry." They began because the party will never end. The celebration over the redemption of every sinner will go on forever. And the object of the celebration will be God, God, God, God--the saving God.

Well, this is another outrage to the listening Pharisees and Sadducees. The whole thing is now getting beyond bizarre; it is becoming irritating; it is becoming agitating. This is like fingernails down a blackboard. This is just too contrary and shameful. The father is now acting stupidly, giving all of this to the son and then having a celebration as if some honor had been earned. No characters existed like this in their world; there weren't any sons like this. There weren't any fathers who would do this. They knew no sons like this and fathers like this. And there is their unmasking. They didn't know God.

Well, we come to an amazing conclusion, a shameful reaction. Verse 25, we'll cover this in just a few minutes, "His older son was in the field and when he came and approached the house." By the way, wouldn't you think the older son was supposed to plan all these big events; it was his responsibility. His father never even consulted him on it, didn't tell him about, didn't send a messenger to get him. Why? He knew he had no relationship with him either. He hated his father also. He was alienated from his father also. He just stayed around the house, but he had zero relationship to his father. That's why he didn't defend his father's honor in the beginning, and he didn't try to protect his brother for doing something as stupid as he wanted to do. This man played no role in anything because,

though he was at the house, he had no relationship to the father. The father knew that he cared not for his brother. And he knew that he had no interest in his own joy, and so he was not a part of it. He's out in a field. He wasn't working; he was just making sure people do. His father left him there till he came home at the normal time at the end of the day. By then the party has started. He came, approached the house, heard music and dancing. Summoned one of the servants, actually *paidion* (boys). This would be village boys who were outside--you know, the young people would hang around while the adults were in having the party. He comes to one of the young boys; he begins inquiring what these things might be. He's totally in the dark. He doesn't get it. He has no part in this whole redemptive scheme. And this boy in verse 27 says, "Your brother has come. Your father's killed the fattened calf because he's received him back safe and sound." That little phrase, "safe and sound" (whole), actually is connected to s*halom*, he received him back, *shalom.* He's at peace with his father--full reconciliation.

Now you might think, "Wow," and he would celebrate. No, no. Verse 28, "He became angry." Guess what, the Pharisees and scribes just appeared in the story. This is they. They just appeared in the story. They were angry that God in Christ was embracing sinners. That's what ticked them off. And here they are in the story. They are, by the way, referred to earlier as "the ninety-nine who need no repentance," never seeing themselves as sinners. He became angry, was not willing to go in. I will not be a part of anything like that; it is shameful. The father is shameful; the son is shameful; the village people who are celebrating are shameful. This is no time to honor the father; the father is a fool. You don't give honor to a man who is a fool. Shameful reaction.

No, he had been home hanging around the house. He had zero relationship to his father. He is as lost as his brother. And the Pharisees and the scribes were just as lost as the tax collectors and the sinners, just a different kind of lostness. Some are lost in the far country; some are lost around God, around the church.

And you know, if the truth were known, legalists like this, religious people, superficially religious people are jealous of prodigals because inside they have the same lusts but they're never fulfilled. They have the same hankering for sin and iniquity, and they are jealous and envious of those who play those out to the max and don't care what people think. They do because their approach to get the stuff is to conform outwardly.

And so, here they are in the story. But, you know, from their viewpoint they would be saying, "Finally, a sensible guy. Finally a guy who gets it. Hey, this is righteous indignation; we like this guy." This is the Pharisees' and scribes' guy because this is them.

And if that's not enough shame, how about this? More shame, a shameful reply by the father, verse 28. "His father came out and began pleading with him." This is just unbelievable. The father comes down again--a picture of condescension--leaves the party, leaves the celebration where he's the

guest of honor. “Excuse me, folks, I have to go.” Comes down into the night, into the dark, finds this hypocrite who hates him and begs him to come to the party. This is another ridiculous, shameful act. Isn’t that father willing to punish any son that insults him? And by the way, he entreats him in a prolonged way. There’s no public slap, no beating; the father is begging. But the response, verse 29, “He answered and said to his father, ‘Look’”...that’s an eye-roller; you don’t say that to a father; you say, “Father, father.” You don’t say, “Look”--complete disdain, complete disrespect. This is “I wish you were dead, too.” “Look, for so many years I’ve been serving you.” That’s how it is with legalists. They do it; it’s a duty; it’s a grind; it’s bitter. “I have never neglected a command of yours.” Boy, there’s a deception. This is like the rich young ruler who said he had kept all the commandments. That’s how it is with religious phonies and hypocrites. They don’t want to admit their sin. “I have been grinding this service for you to get the estate that I want. I’ve never neglected a command. You never gave me a goat, let alone a calf, that I might be merry with my friends.” He wanted a party of his own but not with the father and not with the brother. He had other friends. He had his own group. Hypocrites hang with hypocrites.

And the father, verse 31 says...well, verse 30 says...“When this son of yours came who devoured your wealth with harlots, you killed the fattened calf for him.” And the father says to him, “My child.” Wow. Wow. From the Pharisees standpoint, even though they would agree with the older son having the just attitude, they can’t understand a man who appears to be this weak. Slap that guy. But he says, “My child”--not *huios*, that’s been used eight times, the word for “son.” Now it’s *teknon*, “my boy.” “You’ve always been with me. All that’s mine--it’s always been yours, just had to come and have a relationship with me. You’re never going to get it the way you’re going; you’re not going to earn it that way.”

And verse 32, “We had to be merry, we had to rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live and was lost and has been found.” What are we going to do? We have to celebrate.

What do you see in this story? Two kinds of sinners: the profligate, debauched, open, immoral, irreligious sinner, and the hypocrite in the house, around the church, religious, superficially moral. And both are extreme sinners. And a father who entreats both, who offers both everything he has. And the point is this, young people; listen to me--the extreme sinner falls within the purview of God’s grace. Not everybody is that extreme on either end, but that’s good news for all of us in between.

And why does God do this? Why does He do this? Because He rejoices when one sinner repents and all the holy angels and glorified saints rejoice with Him. But, you know, the story doesn’t have an ending. It just stops, and after you’ve read verse 32 you’re looking for verse 33 because what happened? What does the son say? Come on, what did he do? It just stops.

Well, how about if I write an ending. I’ll do that. The older brother, seeing the compassion and mercy of his father and desiring a reconciliation, confessed his sins of hypocrisy and asked his father for

forgiveness and was embraced and kissed and taken into the banquet and seated at his father's table.

I like that ending. I like that ending. But I can't write the ending. The ending's already been written. That's right. Here's the ending. "Upon hearing this, the older son being outraged at his father, picked up a piece of wood and beat his father to death." That's the ending. It would be only a few months before the Pharisees would kill him by nailing him on wood. And they would congratulate themselves that what they had done was an act of honor that protected their people, their nation, and the religion from one who came to shame it. In the language of the parable, the son was striking the father with crushing, killing blows saying, "You are evil; you are shameful. You are evil, someone needs to end the shame and bring honor to this family and I will do it by ridding this family of such a shameful father." And he says it as He beats Him to death.

That's how the story ended. And the final irony is that the father who should have beaten the son is beaten to death by the wicked son in the greatest act of evil ever. And they thought they were righteous, and they didn't understand love, mercy, and grace. Yet God, the saving gracious Father in Christ, uses that murder as the means by which He purchases our salvation. It all ends at the cross where He in Christ endured death, despising the...What?...the shame for us. He took the shame so you could be at the celebration that brings him joy. Let's pray.

We've covered a lot today, Father, in this session, and we thank You for the richness of this teaching by our precious Lord. Help us to be gripped in our hearts by its wonders. For those who do not know Christ, for those who do not know God in Christ, for those sinners in the far country at the end of their resources, for those hypocrites in the church, at the extreme end of the poles, may there be an understanding that grace awaits. No sin is too bad, no hypocrisy too determined to be abandoned and grace received. We thank You that the worst that could be done to You became the best, as in dying; You purchased our life. Do Your work in every heart, we pray. Make us grateful for such a Father, in the name of Christ. Amen.

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