

## **Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time***

### **The Legalistic Son**

Scripture: Luke 15:25-32

Code: 91-3

### **January 2006**

Luke 15 is our text, and back to the story that Jesus told, the parable starting in verse 11 and running to the end of the chapter. Verses 11 to 32, probably the most familiar of Jesus' stories is the story of the prodigal son. Everybody knows a little bit about that story, but it really is not the story of the prodigal son, that's just one third of it. It's about a prodigal son, a loving father, and a very dutiful son. A younger son who lives openly in wickedness, and immorality, and disregard for all conventional thinking, all moral standards, doing only what he wants to do, when he wants to do it, the way he wants to do it, and pays the consequences.

It's also about an older son who's very devout apparently to his father, stays home, does everything that he's supposed to do, does it the way his father wants him to do it. Fits into the conventional expectations of the religious community around him. Performs admirably. One would be classically the bad son, and the other would be the good son. And in the middle, touching both lives profoundly is this amazing figure of the loving father.

Now it is important in understanding this story, we've been telling you this, to understand that these people were highly sensitive to the idea of honor and shame. You did everything in your life basically in order to sustain your own honor, or to achieve your own honor, because that's what was so important. It was very, very important to be an honorable person. It was a works righteousness system.

You earned your way into favor with God by being good, and being religious, and being moral, and toeing the mark, and walking the line, and dotting all your i's and crossing all your t's in terms of the standard for behavior in the community. Very important that you maintained your honor that way, and that you were respectable and honorable, and that you didn't do anything to shame yourself.

The Pharisees, who believed themselves to be honorable, they were the leaders of Jewish religion. They believed they were the architects of what honor was and they also were the definers of what shame was. They had concluded that Jesus was a shameful false Messiah, that He was, in fact, not of God at all, but of Satan. They said the worst about Him that could be said. They said He did what He did by the power of Satan.

And for their evidence, they said, "Look at the kind of people He hangs around." We see at the beginning of the 15th chapter another occasion where all the tax gatherers and the sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. He attracted the worst remnant or element of the society: The outcasts, the flotsam and the jetsam, the scum, the nobodies, the lowlifes, those who had been excommunicated from the synagogue, socially untouchable. People that the Pharisees wouldn't go near, lest their supposed purity be somehow polluted.

In fact, that was their criticism, wasn't it, in verse 2 about Jesus. "This man receives sinners and eats with them." Anybody who socializes with sinners betrays that he belongs there. And so as they are of Satan, so must He be of Satan.

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

Do they not understand the heart of God? No they don't. Don't they understand that heaven's joy is not in the self-righteous 99 sinners who think they need no repentance? Don't they understand that God's joy is found in the salvation of sinners? How far from God they are. They don't know God at all, these Pharisees and scribes who criticize and malign Jesus. And these stories are intended to make that clear.

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

First of all, the younger son makes a shameful request. He asks for his estate now. Well you didn't get it in that culture until your father died. This is tantamount to saying, "You're in my way. I wish you were dead. Since you're not dead, act like you're dead. Give me what's mine." Shameful, unthinkable in that culture of high honor for of all people the father of a family.

And then the father acts in a shameful way with a shameful response. He gives him what he asks. What father would do that? A father should slap him across the face and punish him, tell him, "Absolutely not. I will not be so dishonored." But a shameful request is followed by a shameful response. The father gives him what he wants. This is the request of the sinner to be as free as he can be from God, as free as he wants to be to fulfill his desires and his lusts. And you now what? God gives the sinner just that freedom. You can take your sin as far as you want. You can take it as deep

as you want, as high and as wide as you want. You can go into every nook and corner that you choose to go into. You have that freedom.

And so he does. The shameful request and the shameful response is followed by a shameful rebellion. We know the story in verses 13-16. The son goes away into a far country, leaves Israel, as it were, goes into a forbidden Gentile land, unclean. So unclean that a Jew coming back would shake Gentile dirt off his clothes so he didn't bring it into the land of Israel. He ends up trying to eat the food of pigs, the unclean animal, working for a Gentile for no pay, but just the right to fight the pigs for the carob pods that they're eating.

It is a rebellion that hits rock bottom. He wastes his substance, involving himself with prostitutes and whatever other wasteful things he can do. Runs completely out of a fortune which his father gave him, which he turned into cash as fast as he could at a discount sale. And now he's got his cash, he wastes it and it's gone, and then a famine hits and he has no resources, and he ends up with the pigs.

The shameful rebellion is followed by a legitimate shameful repentance. He feels badly in verses 17 and 19. He says, "Look, I have nowhere to turn. I'm going to die. I'm hungry. My father pays the people who are day laborers who work for him and he pays them more than they need," which is to say he's kind, he's generous, he's a good man. And I know my father, and I know he's compassionate, and I know he loves me, and I know if I go back he'll be willing to accept me on some terms.

So I, he says, will go back - verse 18 - to my father and I'll say, "Father, I sinned against heaven," that is another way of saying "my sins have piled as high as heaven." This is a full confession, holds back nothing. "And I'm telling you I have sinned as high as heaven. You know it. I've done it right in your face. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." This is the stuff of real repentance.

Comes to his senses, evaluates his sin, evaluates where it's taken him, evaluates that he has no resource within himself to change it. I'll go back. I trust my father. He will accept me on some terms. I'll offer to work for him as a hired man. Not a household servant, that would be too much. Not a son, that would be way too much. I'm not worthy of it. But I'll earn my living day wage, the lowest person on the socioeconomic ladder. That was the Jewish view of repentance.

Salvation in the legalistic system of Judaism - and in any other legalistic system in the world and all religions - are a form of works salvation except true Christianity. They're all the same. Good people go to heaven, people who are religious who do good things. If you do them long enough and well enough, that's going to be how you get to God.

And he had that conventional kind of thinking in the story. Jesus makes him a Jew subject to Jewish thinking, and so he says, "I'm going to go back and earn my way into the favor of my father. I'm going to earn my salvation. I'm going to do whatever it takes for as long as it takes to get my way back into my father's house, and into his treasures, and into his heaven." And so he comes back.

Now remember, the Pharisees are listening to all this and they're saying, "This whole thing is a big story of shame: A shameful request, a shameful response, a shameful rebellion, a shameful repentance." He's going to come back, "Ah, now the father's going to do something honorable." But the father gives the son a shameful reception. Amazing.

Verse 20, "He gets up, comes to his father." He arrives in stinking garments that smell like a pig. He has nothing at all. He's destitute, absolutely bankrupt, absolutely nothing. "His father sees him a long way off," which indicates the father's actually been waiting for him, hoping for him, suffering in silence in his absence, loving him even while he's gone. "The father sees him, feels compassion for him, and ran - " he runs right through town, which a nobleman in the Middle East do not do. That is unacceptable shameful behavior.

First of all, you don't let your legs be shown in public. And we went into that in detail. But he runs, and he runs through town to get to the boy before the boy gets to town because when he arrives in town, the whole community is going to heap scorn and disdain and mockery on him because that's what they're supposed to do. That's part of his penalty for the way he behaved toward his father.

The father takes the shame that should belong to the son. He does a scandalous and shameful thing, runs through town before the son ever gets there, saves him from the shame, "throws his arms around him, kisses him" all over the head, which is tantamount to saying, "You're a son, and I receive you as a son. All is forgiven, all is past. Trusting in me and coming, repenting of your sin is all I ask."

And all that can come out of the boy's mouth in verse 21 is, "I've sinned against heaven and in your sight; I'm no longer worthy to be called your son." And he drops the part about being your hired man because that's irrelevant now. He has been reconciled.

And here is the glory of salvation, folks. God forgives the one who asks and who repents without any works, with nothing to commend him in his filthy, rotten, stinking rags as a beggar who possesses nothing and who can earn nothing. This is gracious salvation.

And the shameful reception goes into a shameful reconciliation in verse 22. The father not only takes him back as a son, but he gives him full privileges. "Bring the best robe, put a ring on his hand, sandals on his feet." What is the robe? Honor. This is the most important garment in the family owned by the father, worn by the father at the most prestigious events the family ever conducted or was engaged in. Give him all the family honor that is possible to give him.

Then take the signet ring, which you used to stamp official documents, which gives him freedom to act - and authoritatively to act - on behalf of the family with all the family resources. And then put shoes on his feet. Servants are barefoot. Hired men are barefoot. But masters, and rulers, and sons wear shoes.

Give him full sonship. Give him full power of that sonship, full authority, and full honor. This is a picture of salvation. When the sinner comes bankrupt with absolutely nothing, cast himself on his father's mercy, says, "I've wasted everything. My sin is as high as the heaven. I've sinned against God. I've sinned against you. I can offer you nothing. I'm willing to work." Then the father embraces him in love and says, "You don't need to work. I give you full sonship with all rights and privileges, all honors, all authority." That's salvation.

Why does the father do that? Because it gives him joy. In verse 23, what the Pharisees would see is a shameful celebration. "Bring the fattened calf, kill it, let's eat and be merry." The father's joy, the heavenly Father's joy is found in the sinner who comes home and repents and is forgiven. This is the joy of God.

Verse 24 says it, "This son of Mine was dead." You remember I told you when he left, they had a funeral for him. He was out of the family. But he's come to life. He was lost. He's been found, and they began to be merry.

Now we come to verse 25, and there are three more shameful things here: A shameful reaction, a shameful response, and a shameful resolution. These involve the older son. The shameful reaction, verse 25, "His older son was in the field, when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. Summoned one of the servants, began inquiring what these things might be. He said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' " And we meet the older brother.

Now most people say the older son. Oh yeah, he was the Christian. Yeah, he was the believer who was at home doing what he should. That's not true. No, that's not true at all. The older son - fascinating what Jesus does here. The older son - now you've got to understand, you're the Pharisees and the scribes, the legalists. You're sitting there listening to the story. Everything everybody has done up to now is shameful, everything. You're just waiting for somebody to do what you perceive as the right thing. Now here comes somebody who will do something that the Pharisees think is the honorable thing to do. This is our boy. This is our guy.

Verse 25. By the way, meeting him, they meet themselves. This is their guy. This is they. "His older son was in the field." Now he's been out in the field working that day as much as landowners work: Sitting under a shade tree, making sure everybody else does what they need to. Overseeing is what

they do. In fact, noblemen in the Middle East didn't usually work. That was somehow beneath their dignity at a certain point.

But anyway, he was out in the field. What strikes me is that the father hasn't told him anything. The father certainly hasn't been looking for him. The father hasn't sent a messenger out to the field wherever he was to say, "Hey, hey, hey. Your brother's back and we're going to have a party. Come on in, greet your brother. Embrace your brother. Rejoice with me and help me get this party off the ground."

Because, look, he was the number one primary party planner in the family. That was the job of the firstborn son. He had the responsibility to carry off all the events of the family, particularly those that were designed to be in honor of the family. And the party was in honor of the family, not so much the son who came back, but the father who took him back, reconciled him. And the whole village game together to give honor to such a loving, gracious, merciful, forgiving, reconciling father. But nobody bothered to tell him.

The father doesn't go to him. Why not? Wouldn't you listening to the story say, "Why didn't somebody go get him and bring him back?" The answer is he has no relationship to the father. The father knows he has no interest in his brother. He proved that at the beginning of the story when he didn't try to stop his brother from doing what was terrible. He had no interest in his father. He proved that by not intervening between his brother and his father to stop his brother from such a dishonorable act toward his father. In fact, he took his part of the inheritance gladly, never defending his father's honor.

He has no relationship to anybody in the family. Being out in the field is sort of a metaphor for where he was in terms of that family. The younger son was in a far country. This guy's in a far field. But the symbolism there is they're both way off from the father. They both come home, but to very different receptions.

So he's out in the field. The day ends. It says he came and approached the house. And since he hadn't, up to that point heard anything, there must have been an indication it was a pretty big estate. This father has a great estate where someone can actually be far enough away you don't even know when a huge celebration involving hundreds of people is going on at your house, which is a way to indicate the greatness of the kingdom of God.

But he comes back and he approaches the house. And he says, "He heard music and dancing." Now again, everything up to this point has been shameful. It's all just against what all of them believe to be right. They're drawn into the story now. They've been making critical judgments all the way along. Jesus was a master at this. He pulled his audience right into the story. They had to make ethical judgments all the way. Simple story, understandable, ethical elements of the story. They sit in the position of making the ethical judgments.

There they are, the experts on honor and shame, having been surprised, and shocked, and outraged by the conduct of everybody, they are about to find somebody they like who turns out to be them. It's brilliant stuff, brilliant stuff. They understand nothing of divine grace. They resent divine grace. They don't understand the loving heart of God. They don't understand His mercy, and tenderness, compassion, forgiveness, and desire to reconcile with sinners. They know nothing of that.

That's why they don't understand why Jesus, God in human flesh, spends His time with sinners. This is the one guy that makes sense to them. They resent the unholy son. They see him as the opposite of their own self-righteous selves, and they think the father is some kind of a fool for shaming himself in the way he treats this sinful son. But finally they have somebody they can identify with, somebody who knows what honor is.

And he comes to approach the house. Not having been included in anything at all. The father knows that. He knows he has no interest in him. He knows he has no concern for his joy. He knows he doesn't care about his younger brother. He knows that. He has no love for his father, no desire to honor his father, no respect for his father, no interest in what pleases his father. He has no compassion on his father's grieving heart for the wayward son. He doesn't care at all about his brother. He's a Pharisee. He is a Pharisee.

He pretends to stay in the father's house, to be dutiful, to do what the father says, to hang around, to get what he wants, to get approval, and affirmation, and wealth, and land, and community prestige. He wants to appear religious. On the outside, he upholds all the conventional modes of external honor.

So he comes and he "hears the music and the dancing," the sumphnias and the choros, from which we get "symphony" and "chorus." It's a party. There's music, and in those days the men danced in a circle - men only - and there was clapping and singing. There would be instruments included in the music. In fact, sumphnias is originally a double pipe, but it also in some Arabic translations is used to refer to voices together. So voices, instruments, dancing, the whole thing is going on.

It's a celebration. The fattened calf has been killed. What they did was not filet it, but they chopped it up into slabs of meat, and they would cook it in chunks in the bread ovens. And they would start the party in a very imprecise way. Life was not nearly as by the clock as it is today. The day was over, the work was over, the announcement would go out. "Come, they're killing the fattened calf. The son is home." And people would begin to come. When they arrived, and they would come, and they would eat, and the meat would continue to be cooked. And it would be continually cooked for hours, and the singing and the celebrating would go on into the night as the ebb and flow of this wonderful celebration took place.

Well, it's already on its way. It's already full-blown when the older son arrives. And again an indication that he probably came a long way, indicating the greatness of the father's estate. He is stunned. He is shocked. He is surprised. He is confused. But mostly he is suspicious, because legalists are always suspicious, particularly of joyful people.

And by the way, something this big wasn't ever planned in a day. This was planned by months and months and months of preparation. And not with him as the center of it. He is, after all, the owner of the land because the estate has already been divided. Though he doesn't take possession of his part until his father's death, it is already assigned to him. These are his resources. This is, then, his calf, and all the rest of the things that are going on are using the things that actually belong to him, and he hasn't even been consulted. Here's the biggest event that the village has ever known, the biggest event the family's ever known, and he doesn't even know anything about it. He doesn't even know it's happening until he shows up. This, too, is another outrageous act on the part of the father, who just continues to do shameful things in their minds. It's an insult.

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

So in verse 26 it says, "He summoned one of the servants." "Servant" actually is paidn here and it's from pais in the Greek, which means "a young boy." All the family servants would be inside. They would be taking care of all the guests. As I said, 100 to 200 guests wouldn't be unusual to eat a fattened calf. Not everybody ate a huge 16-ounce piece. In fact, they didn't eat a lot of meat except on special occasions, and then not a lot.

But on the outside, there were young boys. And what this tells us a little bit about that Middle Eastern culture. The adults would all be inside. They would all be in the house having - in the courtyard of the house - having this great celebration at some point, and out on the fringes would be the kids that didn't get to come, but they were sort of the perimeter celebrators, you know, the fringe participants. The young boys would all hang out on the edges because this is a huge event. And this would be the first group that he would meet as he comes in, and the first ones he runs into after he hears all this are these young boys.

So, verse 26. "He began inquiring what these things might be." This is shocking. "What in the world? I go to work. It's a day like any other day. I go out there to sit under the tree and make sure everybody does what they're supposed to. I come in and you've got the biggest celebration ever. What is going on? And why wasn't I consulted? And how is it that I don't know about this?"

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

"Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound." His worst fears, his brother came back, oh, and his father what? Received him.

This outrageous conduct is more than this older brother can bear. Look at the phrase "safe and sound." That's a funny thing, isn't it? An Old English colloquialism that seems to last in our modern translations. It's actually *hugiain* in the Greek, from which we get "hygiene," and it basically means "wholeness, well-being." But in the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament, that word is almost always connected to *shalom* which means what? Peace. That's really what he's saying.

It's not that he's not physically hurt. It's not limited to that. He's received him back in peace. This is not just good health, this is *shalom*. This is peace of a full reconciliation between a father and son. It isn't his son came back and the father told him to sit at the edge of town for a week and think about what he had done until he gained a right to talk to his father, and then he'd give him the things he needed to do to earn back his reconciliation. Not that. The father received him and he received him in *shalom*. He's made peace. *Shalom* forever. That's why there's a party. There wouldn't be a party if he had come back and had to work for the next twenty years.

This is the worst possible scenario because now the father is using his resources on this party. The son has already depleted the whole family treasury by taking his half, selling cheaply, and leaving, which meant that that whole thing couldn't grow so that the older son when the father did die would have more. Now he's back depleting more of our family resources. And the foolish father is using those resources on him.

The son is the favorite guest at the banquet, but the banquet is really in honor of the father. The town is there to celebrate a father who's that merciful, and gracious, and kind, and loving, and reconciling. You see, that's the picture of heaven's joy. And a legalist who thinks you earn your way to heaven

doesn't understand that God's joy is found in justifying the ungodly, that God's joy is found in forgiving the sinner who is bankrupt and has nothing.

The older son, that's why his worst fears have come true. His brother's back. His father has embraced him. This is outrageous. And for the first time in the story the Pharisees are saying, "Yep, that's exactly the right attitude. That's exactly what he should feel. He should be outraged. We are outraged. This whole story is just one outrage after another."

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

Of course not. Boy, I'm reminded of Matthew 23, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of Heaven from men; and you do not enter in yourselves, or do you allow those who are entering to go in." You don't have any way into that kingdom because your understanding of salvation is so warped. That was perhaps the most significant indictment in the Matthew 23 diatribe against them, that they did not enter the kingdom, and nor were they leading anyone else into it.

Later in that same chapter He said, "Outwardly you appear righteous to men, inwardly you're full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." Hypocrites are all sinners on the inside because hypocrisy has no way to constrain the flesh internally.

Of course he wouldn't go in. He hated the idea of grace. He resented this mercy and this instant reconciliation. And he says all of this, as we will see. But before we listen to his speech, let me help you define this kind of sinner. Augustine said, "Free will without grace has the power to do nothing but sin. Free will without grace has the power to do nothing but sin." And long ago he was right, and that is still true. As I said, the sinner can choose his category but he can't choose anything other than sin.

Now let me just follow that a little bit. And this is just to give you a little historical footnote. This is the kind of thinking that set Martin Luther going in the right direction. Just over the last few days, I read a treatment of his various theological emphases, and it pointed again to this very important element. He came up with this glorious truth that all of us know to be the substantial heart of the gospel: Salvation by grace alone through faith alone, the great doctrine of substitution imputed righteousness, and all of that which had been lost in the Dark Ages.

But what led to that was an understanding of the inability of works to do anything. Let me help you to understand this. Works may appear good. They may appear good. And they may be on a human level good. That is, they help people. They're kind. They relieve people's suffering. They're charitable. They're philanthropic, whatever. But they are really sinful when they are done by the unregenerate

because they lack purity and they lack true motive, which is the glory of God. And anything that is not done to the glory of God is done, then, to the glory of man and that is the sin of all sins. They are really expressions of human pride.

We're glad for them because they're better than other kinds of expressions of human pride. We appreciate what we call the "milk of human kindness." But it is really a form of sinful expression done for the well-being of the sinner. And as such, good works, especially when they proliferate in the life of an unregenerate person, tend to layer the deception so that the person, instead of seeing himself as wretched, begins to convince himself by his goodness that he is far better than he really is.

So anybody who thinks that by their good works they are somehow doing what is meritorious and earning favor with God is just making the deception further and further buried in their hearts, and layer, and layer, and layer of good work make it harder to get to reality.

The works of sinners may not all be crimes, but they are not without sinfulness because they are done for personal and selfish motive and gain. They bring honor to man. They produce self satisfaction. They produce self gratification. They produce pride, and a sense of well-being, and that deceives the sinner, and that increases sin because it is proud. And pride is at the head of all sins, and so we really in doing good apart from God, apart from grace are adding to our pride, which is to compound our sinfulness at its most devastating point.

And then when you add - that's not enough - you add the next element, and that is this, that if you think by doing those good deeds you are obtaining salvation, now you have added another sin to your pride. You have added the sin of a misunderstanding of the revelation of God and the gospel. You have added the damnable lie of a works righteousness system to your pride.

It's bad enough - let's look at the three again - to do works that you think are good, but they're not because they're for yourself. And then add to that that you proliferate those works, which builds up your sense of pride, and well-being, and feeling of self satisfaction, which increases your pride, which makes the sin all the worse. But add to that the illusion that somehow you're gaining favor with God, and you have added the ultimately damning sin that somehow you can earn your salvation.

And the further you go down that road, and the more you do that, the more blind you become, and that is why Jesus said to the Pharisees, "They are - " what? " - blind leaders of the blind. On the outside they are painted white, on the inside they're filthy." This is what happens to extremely religious people.

So you see extremely profligate evil people in the story and extremely religious people in the story. And the point is not that everybody is either one of those extremes. The point is that God opens His compassionate, forgiving, reconciling love to those who are at those extremes, and everybody in

between. And you see that because at this point the Lord, in telling the story has the father, who is God in Him, in Christ, mercifully humble Himself.

It's amazing. It says in verse 28, "And his father came out and began entreating him." Here we see God the initiator again. Here we see God in Christ the seeker. Just as in the case of the younger son, the father came down out of his house and ran right down to the middle of town for all to see, bearing the scorn and the shame of the embarrassment of violating public common conventional behavior. And he did it to embrace the sinner and protect him from the shame.

Here the father leaves the festival, goes out, and does what you would never expect God to do, beg a sinner, beg a hypocrite. But He is the one who seeks to save the lost.

When the information, obviously, about the older son reaches the father, the word comes to him that his son is on the outside and he's not going to come in. He now knows he has his second rebel son, and we're now going to find out how God feels about religious hypocrites. What they would have expected - what they would have expected - was that the father would be absolutely insulted by this. It is a blatant insult. It is an utter disregard for the father's honor, the father's joy, the brother's well-being. He shows himself as having no love for either of them.

And the traditional Middle Eastern response would be to take the son and give him a public beating for such dishonor. But nothing goes the way you'd think it's going to go in this story. It's just one breach of perceived honor after another, after another, after another, after another. But instead of the father ordering him to be beaten and locked in a room somewhere until he can be dealt with, the insulted dishonored father comes out and he starts begging him.

Here he shows up again in condescension. Here he shows up again in mercy. Here he shows up again in compassion, and love, and humility, and kindness. Leaves the party, comes out, goes into the night with everybody watching, and the buzz sure is going to go through and they know what's going on. Another act of selfless love kindly toward this son in the same way that he ran to embrace the younger son. He goes out in mercy, and he reaches to the hypocrite the same way he reached to the rebel.

I want you to notice the word "entreating" there. It says that he "began entreating him." Parakale, that's a very, very common word. It's actually a word that comes in a noun form, the "Paraclete" meaning the Holy Spirit, the one who comes alongside. "Entreating" is to "come alongside to speak to," to come right alongside someone. That is, he comes right out and goes alongside his son. And he pleads with him, and he calls him to come to the kingdom, to come to his house, to come to the celebration.

And this son with whom the Pharisees and scribes are so clearly identified should have brought them face-to-face with themselves and their complete ignorance of the father whom they said they served. Oh, they were in the house. They were around. They were the religious ones. They were the dutiful ones. They were the moral ones. But they didn't know God. They didn't know the heart of God. They had no understanding of the joy of God. They had no interest in the recovery of lost sinners. They refused to honor God for saving grace, which has always been the way God saved. They see Jesus, in fact, as satanic. And as Jesus said in John 5:23, "If they honored the Father, they would honor Me." They refused to go in.

But here is this wonderful compassionate grace of God reaching out to these angry hypocrites. And the response of the older son, verse 29, "He answered and said to his father, 'Look - ' " Let me stop there.

Everybody would take a breath there. Ah. I mean, even the prodigal came back and said, "Father, father," just as he had said, "Father," at the beginning when he asked him for his estate. You don't address your father, "Look - " There's no title. There's no respect. And then he says, "For so many years I have been serving you," douleu, slave language, doulos.

"For so many years I have been your slave." Now there's a legalist mentality. That's a no-fun posture, no joy. And what it indicates is that in the heart of this guy, he has seen this as a horrible, grit-your-teeth, grind your way through these years and years of slugging out your slavery to this guy, so that when he finally dies, you can get what you're after. He was no different than the younger son. He wanted what he wanted. He just had a different way to get it.

He didn't have the courage of his younger brother. He didn't have, you might say, the chutzpah, the moxie. No, he decided the safe ground was to hang around and wait until the father dies, and then get it. It's all nothing but slavery to him. Bitter, resentful, angry for so many years. And he piles on the descriptives.

And then if you want to know the self-image of a hypocrite, here it is. "And I have never neglected a command of yours." Wow. Now if that isn't the language of a self-righteous hypocrite, I don't know what is. Who does that sound like? It sounds like the rich young ruler, doesn't it? It sounds exactly like the rich young ruler. Matthew 19, Luke 18 where Jesus says, "Here are the commandments," and he responds by saying, "I've kept all those. I've kept all those."

Here is the proud hypocrite. Here is the guy who because he has done good is under the illusion that he is good. Because he has done good for self-satisfaction and pride, he has buried the truth of who he is deep. Because he has done good for satisfaction and pride as a way to earn salvation, he has pushed it so far down that he can't even touch it any longer. It's completely buried in his subconscious. And he lives with this illusion that he has never, ever neglected a command that his

father had given him.

There is the amazing self-deception of a hypocrite. He's perfect. I'm perfect, which is to say to the father, "And look, buddy. You're not. I am perfect. I understand what perfection is. I understand what perfect righteousness is, and perfect justice, and I know what perfect honor is, and I know how you're supposed to behave, and you're in violation of it. Again and again you're in violation of it. You took him back. You ran. You shamed yourself. You protected him from shame. You forgave him. You embraced him. You kissed him. You gave him full sonship. You gave him honor. You gave him authority. You gave him responsibility. You hold this massive celebration for an absolutely unworthy sinner. I'm perfect and you're not."

By the way, this is why Paul went around killing Christians, because he hated grace. It was Paul, you remember, in Philippians 3 who says, "Blameless according to the law. That's how I live my life, under the illusion that I was absolutely blameless, and these Christians with their message of grace were violators of God's holy law." And he went everywhere he could breathing threatening, and slaughter, and imprisoning, and killing them.

He has no love for the father. He has no interest in the father's love for his younger brother. He has no desire to share in his father's joy. He has no joy, period, in anything. But he's still perfect and needs no repentance. How about that? What a classic illustration of a hypocrite. Angry, bitter, slave mentality. I've done all this to get what I expect to get. But he sees himself as perfect and needing no repentance.

You want to know something? Nobody goes into the kingdom of God without repentance. This is classic hypocrisy. His heart is wretched. His heart is wicked. His heart is alienated. His heart is selfish. And he's blind to spiritual reality.

And again, here are the Pharisees and the scribes, here's the religious sinner in the home of God, in the house of God, if you will, making a public display of affection for God, wearing clerical garb, or attending a certain kind of ritual, certain religious activities. Moral on the public front, outwardly good, outwardly obeying the law, keeping all the rules. But no relationship to God. No concern for the honor of God. No joy. No understanding of grace.

The son isn't finished. He's going to dig his claws deeper into his father, whom he sees as a sinner. He sees his father as a violator of righteous standards of which he is the source and says to him this. "I have never neglected a command of yours and yet you have never given me a kid, or a goat, that I might be merry with my friends." I've been the worker and I don't even get a goat. He's done nothing for you, and he gets the fattened calf. This is not fair. This is not equitable. This is not just. This is not righteous.

You know what the son is really saying? “Father, I don’t need to ask you for forgiveness. I haven’t done anything. But I’ll tell you something, you need to ask me for forgiveness for what you’ve done.” That is the outrage of hypocrisy. That is the outrage of legalism. It demands that God forgive us for a violation of our understanding. He thinks the father needs to ask him for forgiveness.

And the Pharisees are going to identify with him. Yeah, this is right. This is the right posture. This is outrageous conduct by the father. The father is the culprit. The father is the bad guy here. The son is a bad guy, son number one. Sure he’s a bad guy, the younger son. But the father’s really the bad one. He’s the one who has completely violated all conventional standards of respect and honor.

The son gives himself away a little bit here, he says, because he says, “You’ve never given me a kid that I might be merry with my friends.” My friends. He’s accusing the father of favoritism and he’s accusing the father of an unjust favoritism. But he’s also pointing out the fact that when he has a party, it’s not going to include his brother and it’s not going to include his father.

He lives in a completely different world. He has a completely different group of friends. He’s at home but he has no relationship to the family. All his friends are outside the family. He parties with those who think the way he thinks. He parties with those who have no connection to the father. He doesn’t understand the father’s love, compassion, kindness, mercy, forgiveness, and joy. He has no fellowship with the father. He is angry, resentful, jealous, envious, impenitent, and greedy.

He thinks he’s worked as a slave for so long and what has he gotten? Nothing. And when he does get what he wants, it’s not going to be a celebration with the family because he has no relationship to them. His father is nothing more than a slave master. He’s going to have his party with his buddies. So classic in his description of the Pharisees, who associated only with themselves, as we have seen in other texts.

This is the time when the older brother wishes the father were dead. He probably wished it a lot if this were a real person. But in the story it comes out. “I haven’t had my party. I haven’t had anybody kill a kid for me so that I could have a party with my friends.” He doesn’t care about his father, and now his father is wasting assets on this other son, a wicked son who by his own admission is unworthy. If his father was just dead, all of this would be over. If his father was just dead, then he would possess everything, and he could start the party with his own buddies. Get the father out of the picture and everything is good, everything is as it should be, everything is honorable again. Let’s get back to an honorable world here. We’ve got to get rid of all this shameful stuff.

Verse 30 carries on a further assault on his father’s character, integrity, and virtue. “But when this son of yours - ” he won’t even say “my brother,” so much disdain in him. “When this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with harlots, you killed the fattened calf for him.” You don’t give me a

goat, but you kill the fattened calf for him, this son of yours. Wow, you can cut that contempt with a knife.

How did he know that he had used all that money with harlots? Because Jesus said he knew in the story. Just a little insight that tells us more about the behavior of the first son in the story, and there, of course, characters that Jesus has fabricated. And so this is part of the story. This is to emphasize again that this man has lived as low as low gets. Add that to all the rest of the horror of his behavior.

Some people have suggested that he made this up just out of scorn. But there's nothing in the text that says that. We assume that if Jesus puts it in his mouth, it was a reflection of what Jesus wanted us to know about the behavior of the younger son.

So here is something juxtaposed against a celebration that's pretty stark. You've got a celebration going on with music and dancing, and the younger son, and the feast, and it's just a high time of joy. And out in the dark of the night, you've got this horrific assault going on, and the older brother is attacking the virtue, the integrity, the character of his father.

All that he had kept in for all those years explodes out of him, all that fake respect and honor is gone. The facade is off. The cover is blown. And while they're all inside honoring that father, he's on the outside heaping contempt on him.

This is the Pharisees. They saw themselves as righteous. They saw themselves as just. They therefore sat in judgment on God in Christ, and they condemned Jesus for His mercy, compassion, love, and the gospel of grace. And the Pharisees would see this older brother, yeah, and they would say, "This is righteous indignation. This is for finally in the story we have somebody who holds up honor."

You know, in his mind a Pharisee would think that son should be dead. If you spend your money on harlots, you get killed. Deuteronomy 21:18-21, you get stoned to death. He should be dead. Instead of dead, look at the party. This is incongruous. This is outrageous. This is shameful, everything about it. It's a shameful reaction by the son who is looking at the whole thing as shameful.

By the way, a little note here. You killed the fattened calf for him. Not really, not really. The fattened calf wasn't really killed for the son, he was killed for the father. The father is the one who gets the credit. He's the reconciler. He determines who is going to be reconciled and under what terms. He's the one who ran, and embraced, and kissed. It really was a celebration of the father.

But his anger has completely blinded him. And he has no knowledge of his father. The father is the main figure at the feast. The father is the one they're all honoring for such loving forgiveness. And the people will accept the younger son because it's against convention to accept him. It would be against

the norm to accept him back under those conditions. But they will because the father has.

And so it's really the father who is being celebrated, just as in the end, in heaven, the joy of heaven, the eternal joy of the angels and all the redeemed that gather around the throne of God, and even the joy of God, is the joy that comes to God Himself for being the reconciler. When we go to heaven, the direction of our praise isn't going to be toward the sinners, it's going to be toward the Savior.

So here is this great feast and all the celebration honoring the father. And here at the same time is this son who heaps dishonor on the father simultaneously. It's the picture. The party symbolizes all the sinners who have collected around God to honor Him for their salvation. And outside are the Pharisees, who are heaping scorn upon the Father God in Christ.

Then there's a shameful response. From another angle, verse 31, "He said to him, 'My child, you've always been with me, all that is mine is yours.'" What a tender response. That would be shameful in the eyes of the villagers. They would say, "Wait, you should, finally somebody slap this guy. I mean, enough is enough. This mercy is getting a little over the top here. Please."

But he says, "My child," *teknon*, eight times in this section *huios*, the more formal word for "son." *Tekna*, my boy, my child, it's speaking in grieving, painful, agonizing, compassionate love and mercy. He speaks to him in endearing terms, and that's the heart of God toward a wretched hypocrite. Wow. Is there any question about God being a loving, compassionate Savior?

The son uses no title, no respect. The son attacks the virtue, the integrity, the justice, and the righteousness of the father. The son is saying in effect, "You need to be forgiven by me for the outrageous, and unjust, and dishonorable conduct that you have perpetrated." And here you see the patience of God with the sinners, even hypocrites.

Sometimes, you know, it's easier to be patient with prodigals than it is with hypocrites. I will confess that. We all love a great story about a wicked and outrageous sinner who is converted. But we aren't nearly as excited about a hypocrite who's converted. And, of course, that's even more rare. People who are in false religion don't come as often.

In fact, just as a footnote, it never says in all four gospels that a Pharisee believed on Jesus and was saved. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and it implies that he came. Later on, Paul the Pharisee, was saved on the Damascus road. Those are the only two. But he says to him, "Look, my child," endearing terms. "You've been around."

The father knows he's estranged. You've been around here superficially. Everything has always been available. It's all here. I always think of that when I think of people who misinterpret the Scripture. You know, cults, false religions, it's here. It's all here. You've always had it. If you ever wanted a

relationship with Me, I was here, and everything I have was here. And look what he says, "All that is mine is yours. I don't ever have to split it up." And here's the picture of the magnanimity of God, and the endlessness of His grace and His resources. It's all for all who come to Him. It will never be yours with your attitude. It will never be yours by works. You'll never earn it. But it's here if you ever want to establish a relationship with Me.

And verse 32 goes back to the main theme. "We had to be merry and rejoice." "We had to." It's not like we had an option. "For this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live and was lost and has been found." We had no choice. Why? This is what causes joy to God. This is heaven's joy. It can't be restrained. It can't be delayed. It can't be postponed. It can't be subdued. It can't be mitigated. It can't be lessened.

Divine joy is released when one sinner repents and is reconciled. And heaven's joy will be released not just for a prodigal, not just for someone who's immoral, and irreligious, and blatantly sinful; but for secret sinners, rebels, the religious, the moral, the hypocrites, the ones whose lawlessness is all on the inside.

God is saying here, Christ is saying, "I go out into the street for the prodigal, and I go out into the courtyard for you. I humble Myself and take on public shame for the prodigal. And I humble Myself and take on public shame for you. I come with compassion, and love, and forgiveness, and I am ready to embrace you, and to kiss you, and to give you full sonship with all its privileges, not just if you're the prodigal, but even if you're the hypocrite."

He's really inviting him to salvation. You can come to the party if you choose, if you recognize your true spiritual condition. If you come home, you can take possession of everything that's always been there.

The younger son was overwhelmed with his father's grace. Immediately confessed his sin, confessed his unworthiness in the very most magnanimous ways, and he received instantaneous forgiveness, reconciliation, sonship, all the rights and privileges that the father had at his disposal to give. He entered into the celebration of the father's joy, that is eternal salvation. And as I've been saying, that joy goes on in heaven forever.

The older son, the same tenderness, the same kindness, the same mercy, offered the same grace, reacts with bitter resentment, attacks the virtue, the integrity of the father. And his father makes one final appeal. "My child, it's all here. We had to celebrate - " implied " - and we will celebrate for you, too, if you come."

And it stops in verse 32, isn't that strange? What do you have hanging in your mind right now? Do you have a question there? I do. This is not an ending. What happened? Right? What did he do? You

don't end a story without an ending, it's - and I guess this is another one of a series of shocks. After all of this you're waiting, you're waiting, you're waiting, and it stops. And, you know, if you had been listening to the whole thing you'd say, "Come on." It's like a joke with no punch line that lasts a long time.

We're all saying the same thing. What did he do? What did the older son do? The guests are all there. They're waiting. They know what's going on outside because the word is going in. What did he do? The guests are waiting. They want to know if he comes in. Having embraced and kissed his older son who repented, they want to know if he humbled himself, if he fell down before his father, and sought grace for his long hypocrisy and bitter service.

They want to know if he was forgiven, and reconciled, and they would love to see the father come in with his arm around his son, bringing him to the head table, and sitting him next to his brother. Wouldn't that be great?

Now that's it. You know, there are a lot of stories like this. You just sort of write your own ending. By the way, just from a technical standpoint, the story is divided into two halves. The first half has eight stanzas and they feature the younger brother. The second half has eight stanzas and they - has seven stanzas, I should say - and they feature the older brother. It should be eight and eight, but it's eight and seven.

And in the symmetry of the story there's a lot of technical things that show you the symmetry of the story that I haven't pointed out. But you have eight, and then all of a sudden strangely you have seven. And so even in hearing the story, reading the story you would say it should be eight and eight, because that would be the symmetry that would be designed into that kind of Middle Eastern prose. The end isn't there. There's one section missing.

Now I would love to write one. I think maybe this would be good, "And the older son fell on his knees before his father saying, 'I repent for my loveless cold service, my pride and selfishness. Forgive me, father, make me a true son, take me to the feast.' At which point the father embraced and kissed him, took him in and seated him at his table by his brother, and all rejoiced in the sons who had been reconciled to their loving father."

I like that. Or maybe another shorter one. "The son, seeing his father's love, compassion, and grace; came to his senses about his wicked heart, was humbled, repented and reconciled."

But you know what? I don't get to write the end. Who wrote the end? The Pharisees wrote the end. Here's the end they wrote. "And the older son being outraged at his father, picked up a piece of wood and beat him to death in front of everyone." That's the ending they wrote. That's the cross. And that's what they did just a few months after this. And, by the way, congratulated themselves on their

righteous act that preserved the honor of Israel, and Judaism, and true religion, and God. Let's pray.

What an ironic thing it is, God, that the father who should have beaten the son, is beaten by the son to death in the greatest act of evil the world has ever seen. And yet, and yet, O God, out of that horrible ending of killing Your Son with wood came our redemption. The final shameful resolution of the story is the cross, but out of that You have wrought our redemption. For on that cross He died to bear our sins, and what the leaders of Israel meant for evil, You meant for good. We thank You for this glorious salvation.

While your heads are bowed for just a moment. I don't know where you see yourself in this story. We're all there. Either you're the open sinner or the hidden one, or some degree of that, or you're restored to the Father, and you really do identify with the Father's heart. You're one of those folks at the party. You have gathered around Him as one of the redeemed to celebrate. I hope that's true.

But if you're still estranged from God living in sin, or estranged from God living in secret lawlessness, corrupt on the inside, come to the Father who has borne shame for you, who has come down and run the gauntlet to embrace you and protect you from the shame you deserve, who has come out into the night, who's left his throne to plead with a hypocrite. This is our gracious and good God, who delights in mercy and finds His joy in forgiveness.

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