

## THE GOSPEL OF GRACE (PART TWO)

**Luke 15:** <sup>11</sup> And [Jesus] said, "A certain man had two sons. <sup>12</sup> And the younger of them said to the father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' And he distributed to them his living.

<sup>13</sup> "And not many days after, the younger son, having gathered everything together, went abroad to a distant country and there squandered his estate by living dissolutely.

<sup>14</sup> "And when he had spent all, a severe famine occurred throughout that country, and he began to be in want. <sup>15</sup> And he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed hogs. <sup>16</sup> And he longed to be satisfied with the carob pods which the hogs were eating, and no one gave him anything.

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<sup>17</sup> "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants abound in bread, but I am perishing here in famine! <sup>18</sup> I will rise up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.'"

<sup>20</sup> "And he rose up and came to his own father.

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"But when he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion, and he ran and fell on his neck and kissed him affectionately.

<sup>21</sup> "And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

<sup>22</sup> "But the father said to his slaves, 'Bring out quickly the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> And bring the fattened calf; slaughter it, and let us eat and be merry, <sup>24</sup> because this son of mine was dead and lives again; he was lost and has been found.

"And they began to be merry.

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<sup>25</sup> "Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing, <sup>26</sup> and calling to him one of the servants, he inquired what these things might be. <sup>27</sup> And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has received him back healthy.' <sup>28</sup> "But he became angry and was not willing to enter.

And his father came out and entreated him. <sup>29</sup> But he answered and said to his father, 'Behold, so many years I have been slaving for you and have never neglected a command of yours, and you have never given me a goat that I might be merry with my friends; <sup>30</sup> but when this son of yours came, who devoured your living with harlots, you slaughtered for him the fattened calf.'

<sup>31</sup> “And he said to him, ‘Child, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to be merry and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life, and he was lost and has been found.”

(Recovery Version, 1991)

**Other Scriptures:** Hosea 14:1-8; Psalm 64; Ephesians 2:1-10

**Hymns:**

Praise & Adoration: *All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name!*  
Invitation Hymn: *Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling*  
Communion Hymns: *Just As I Am, Without One Plea*  
Sending Hymn: *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*

**Introduction (Luke 15:1-3)**

The parable of the Prodigal Son is well known and important. All Christians should make themselves very familiar with it. Jesus drew the elements of it from the writings of the prophets: their illustrious depictions of God’s relationship to Israel, Israel’s rejection of God, Israel’s repentance and God’s extravagant receiving of them. Jesus applies this to the people who come to him. Let the parable now speak to each of us individually. As we do, we will keep the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin in the background, as Luke intended.

**The Distant Country (Luke 15:11-13)**

The story begins with the rupture of the younger son’s relationship to his father. By asking for the share of the estate that falls to him, he is essentially saying that his father is as good as dead to him. Only, he does not want to wait until his father is actually dead; he wants to leave home now. The father, rather than constraining him, lets him leave—with the share of the estate.

The son finds himself in a “distant country” far from home, and there he squanders the share that the father has given him by living dissolutely. “Dissolutely” literally means unsavingly; that is, without intelligent restraint. How is this a picture of us?

The book of Ecclesiastes gives us a clear picture of what it means to be a human being. To be human is to be Adam. The Hebrew word for human being is “Adam”; we are also called the sons of Adam. Adam severed his personal relationship with God. It was ruptured, and he

was cast out of Eden to live all his days in toil and vanity (futility—literally, vapor or smoke), under the cloud of God’s judgment knowing that he will one day die. The sons of Adam tried to deny the reality of death in defiance of God. They built great civilizations and in their grandiosity they caused great suffering to one another. This is the condition into which all of us are born, the moment our parents took us up in their arms. From that moment, we have been part of society, the world whose relationship to God is ruptured.

As adults, we find ourselves in a distant country, far from home. Our relationship with God has been ruptured and we live under the cloud of God’s judgment. It is only a cloud, but the signs and forebodings of judgment are everywhere. We may think it is God’s severe judgment, but really, it is all indirect. The judgment has not yet come on any of us. Even death is a mercy, though we do not recognize it. Nevertheless, we know we live under this cloud. We do not know when we left “Eden,” but somehow we all have this longing for it—hence our myths of a Golden Age in the past, and the innocence of childhood. We feel this way, even if we dismiss it as false, and we secretly resent that we are no longer there. What we do not realize is that we are the ones who left home; we are the ones who broke the relationship with God—we are Adam.

We do not live under the direct heat of God’s judgment, only the overcast of its cloud. Instead, we really live by God’s mercy moment by moment. It is by the kindness and compassion of a merciful God that we live each day, though we rarely recognize it. This goodness (the sign of God’s persevering love for us, Romans 2:4) that we experience constantly is our share of the estate with which we have left home. But we misunderstand it. As we grow up we develop mythological ideas of God, ideas of God modeled after our parents, and later, on the struggle between our parents and our developing ego. We imagine God is “a hard man, reaping where [he] did not sow and gathering where [he] did not winnow” (Matthew 25:24). We resent the restraints that this “hard man” puts on us and fear that he will punish us for every infraction of his arbitrary rules and for having our own desires. He may even fear our accomplishments. In any case, this idea of God we have—the mythological God—is not the cause of our rupture with God but the result. The rupture takes place all along our development and it is our resentment of God that shapes the way our particular myth of God develops. Our

idea of God is a myth; the true God has become hidden from us by our distance from Him.

Because of our resentment (though it be unconscious), we do not recognize the goodness and mercy of God that comes to us every day for what it is. Instead we squander and waste it, treating it as our *own*, instead of seeing that it is *God's* love that upholds us.

### **The Cloud of Judgment (15:14-16)**

As we live this way into adulthood, following our own dictates—the complex and often painful interplay of our conscious and unconscious minds—and digging ourselves into a hole, we discover that we are like the sheep lost in the wilderness, lost and alone—whether we have companions or not (for they are equally alone). We have become enslaved to the “age of this world,” to its powers, and all our imagined freedoms are not really freedom at all. We are stuck in the working world because we need to maintain our living, and we are forced to conform, to fit in, or else we suffer ostracism and the system is unwilling to sustain us. If we do not conform socially, we also endure an emotional cost. The food of our soul is a “pig’s diet” and we feel like we are starving on its fare. We may be God’s precious lost coin, but we are so covered in dirt, we cannot see it.

Even though we may have been believers for many years, do we still not recognize this as our world, the life we live in this world?

It is into this distant country that God comes in search of us. Jesus, the Son of God incarnate, did not remain aloof from us, but joined Himself to our condition, experiencing our futility and suffering, even if it was only by the sympathy of His concern. His heart was rent asunder by His fellowship with us, knowing deeply—through His sympathy—our alienation from God and the suffering we bring on ourselves. He bore the cloud of God’s judgment with us, and eventually, on the cross, more alone than any of us have ever been, in spite of the intensity of our loneliness, He bore the direct heat of God’s judgment that rightfully is due to us. He bore it, though it was *not* His due. He bore it as if it were His own, but in faithfulness to God, without resentment, the way we should if we were not lost in our sin, in the breach of our relationship with God. God honored His fidelity, and raised Him up, glorifying Him with the glory that God originally meant for humanity but that humanity had forfeited. God did this so that, by our

union with Jesus (as Christ), His honoring of God in judgment can be counted as our own and we can share with Him as Man all that the Father has given and will give to Him. But that is jumping ahead of the story, for how can this happen? The point is, that while the prodigal son thinks he is all alone in a distant country, he does not know that he has a companion, the Son of God who has followed him into the wilderness.

### **Coming to Himself (15:17-20a)**

Jesus says that finally the lost son “came to himself.” He decides to return to his father. He still does not understand why he is starving and his father’s hired servants abound in bread. He is not motivated by a love for his father. All he knows is that he is suffering. He will go home and apologize—hopefully that is what it will take—and he will ask to be accepted as a hired servant. He does not expect his father to be happy to see him, but he can at least appeal to his father’s selfishness.

We are like this too. When we first turn back to the Father, we still have a mythological idea of God—He is miserly and harsh, but if I can promise to do this or that, maybe He will turn to me and be kind to me in my misery. Unfortunately, many so-called Christians live their lives this way. They think that by trying to be good, by acting as God’s hired servants, God (their presumed Father) will look kindly on them and relieve them of some of their suffering and maybe let them into the pearly gates of paradise when they die. Their idea of God is that He is miserly and harsh, watching their every move and counting against them every infraction and rewarding their good deeds.

This is hogwash (in the language of the parable!), but in the case of this lost son—the son in the parable—it was different. For—to mix the parable with its interpretation—his turning to the father was the invisible work of grace. It is the story of the woman lighting a lamp and sweeping the house in search of the lost coin—in search of the individual’s heart. For while the son indeed thinks this way, this turn-ing is the work of grace and he actually begins to *go back home*. In the case of these others who say the same thing but remain there, they use their self-imposed good behavior to protect themselves—they think!—from the worst of God’s judgment. They fool themselves.

The woman inside the house is the Holy Spirit searching the interior of our soul, using the light of the Word, the Gospel, to find us out. The sweeping is the internal turmoil She creates as she searches for our heart until She can enlighten our spirit and recover us. We think we “came to ourselves” on our own, and we want to give ourselves credit for it, but really it was the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, we would never have discovered who the Father really is.

### **The Father’s Reaction (15:20b-24)**

Jesus begins to describe the father’s reaction with the word “but.” The son returns to the father with a load of guilt and shame, but that is not at all how the father receives him. The son imagined that his father would not welcome him at all. He would be very stern and might be so angry that he would not even want him as a hired servant. He might see his son coming and remain in the house and only begrudgingly answer the door. He might want the son to grovel and apologize profusely and beg for mercy. The son expected that before his father would receive him as a hired servant, he would first have to disown himself: “I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the son does not understand his father at all. In the same way, apart from the revelation of God’s grace, the only idea of God that we have—the mythological God—is false through and through.

Far from this, the father sees the son while he is “still a long way off” and he is moved with compassion and runs to him. This is the correct picture of God. While in our sin we turn our back on God, when the Holy Spirit turns us around—She being able to because of the work of Christ on the cross—the Father does not wait until we understand anything. Instead the Father races toward us before we have any idea. We are completely caught off guard. He leaves His home to come to us before we even have a chance to come to Him. We have merely had a turning of our heart, but the Father races to us—not in anger but in compassion. He falls on us and embraces us and kisses us profusely, “affectionately.” We do *not* understand this, because it is not what we deserve. We do not understand it because we have not yet seen what the Son has done for us. Indeed, to us the Father seems to react the exact opposite to what we deserve. The parable does not tell us about the son’s reaction, but what is yours?

Nor does the father stop with “merely” showering the son with his affection. Before the

son can step into the house, he removes the son's filthy clothes and puts on him "the best robe." He puts a ring on his hand, presumably with the seal, and sandals on his feet. Only then does he let the son enter the house. The Biblical symbolism is obvious if one is familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures.

The robe represents the righteousness of Christ and hence our justification (see Isaiah 64:6; 61:10; Zechariah 3:3-5). This means that, not only are we forgiven (we remove our filthy clothes), but Father sees us as having the righteousness of Christ, as being as worthy in a positive sense as Christ Himself. The Father loves us as much as He loves Christ, His Son.

The ring represents our being sealed with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13; compare Genesis 24:47 and 41:42), which is both the interior gift of the Spirit's dwelling in our spirit (eternal life) and the exterior gift of the Spirit coming upon us to equip us for life in the church. Likewise, the sandals equip us for life in the world (Ephesians 6:15), as the foundation of the Gospel that protects us as we walk in the world, but also the readiness to represent the Gospel to those bound up in the world.

When the son enters the father's house he is fed the fattened calf. The Father's house is the church, like the inn in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:34-35 (see John 2:16, 21; 14:2). When we enter the life of the church, we feast on the richness of Christ (Ephesians 3:8) who died on the cross to become food for our enjoyment, nourishment and life (see John 6:51-57).

When we celebrate the Lord's Table, in which we feed on Christ by faith through the Word, we are making merry—"because this son of mine was dead and lives again; he was lost and has been found." We celebrate Christ, feasting on the slaughtered calf, but we are also celebrating our own salvation through Him. More importantly, however, is that we are rejoicing *with* the Father, sharing the Father's own joy in our salvation through Christ. The Father does not receive us begrudgingly, but has been in anticipation for our return, and it is as though He cannot get enough of us. Let us not begrudge Him!

After we turn back to the Father, our journey from that day on, all through our life till its end, is this movement from verse 19 to verse 20—to this discovery of the Father's extravagant

love for us.

### **The Older's Son's Reaction (15:25-30)**

The older son is a picture of the Pharisees and scribes in verse 2. They worked hard all their lives to be faithful to the Torah. They feel that they never left the Father's house. They did not see themselves as prodigals but as faithful sons. Yet they cannot rejoice in the return of the prodigal son. In fact, they still see the Father as the mythological God, as someone they slave for. They have never even enjoyed a slaughtered goat to share with their friends. Notice that they think of sharing a slaughtered goat with their friends. For them, it is not about making merry because they enjoy their Father. Repeatedly Jesus says that these Pharisees are more concerned about the recognition they get from one another and the respect they get in public than they are with living in the sight of the Father. They love money, rather than depend on the Father's provision. This is the cause of their hypocrisy—the reality of God has not yet dawned on them. So celebrating with their friends comes to mind for them, rather than appreciating the love of the Father.

They, in fact, do not really love the Father. They slave for Him. Another clue is in the fact that the elder son accuses his younger brother of devouring the father's living with harlots. The younger son lived "dissolutely," without restraint, "spending all," but no mention is made at all of his enjoying himself, not to mention "with harlots." The elder son was slaving at home while he imagined the younger son was out enjoying himself "with harlots." In other words, the older son is revealing what he thought he was denying himself—what he really wished for. His heart is no different than that of the younger brother, only he compelled himself to "behave" and stay home. Yet this "home" was not really home to him if he thought of himself as a slave! And he thought of himself this way because he did not really know his father.

### **The Father's Importuning of the Older Son (15:31-32)**

Yet the father still importunes this still wayward son, just as Jesus now importunes the Pharisees and scribes. "Child, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours." You are Israelites, yours is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Torah and the services and the promises; yours are the fathers, and out of your flesh is the Messiah

(Romans 9:4-5). The Pharisees do not know what they have. Jesus appeals to them.

If they only knew the Father instead of the mythological God, they would rejoice “that this brother of yours was dead and has come to life, and was lost and has been found.”

We too should rejoice at all who come to the Lord’s Table, at all the sisters and brothers whom God gives us no matter what the burden of their past. We should feel towards them with the love and joy that the Father has. This is what life in the “house” should be like.

— *Pastor Peter Strand*  
*on the Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity Sunday*  
*(September 20, 2009)*