

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

With all the snow we had this winter, imagine this situation. You step outside after a heavy snow. Suddenly, out of nowhere, you're smacked right in the face with a big, hard packed snowball. It really stings. Cold pieces of ice got under your collar and they're melting on your neck. Your eyes watering you look up and see the person who threw it laughing at you. How would you feel? If you're like me, you would be really mad. Some very sinful thoughts would be going through your head. Then you see that person jogging up to you and they say, "Hey, I'm sorry! That looked like it might have hurt." What's your reaction? Would you forgive him immediately? Would it be easy to just put it behind you, fully forgive and move on? At the very least, I bet you would try to evaluate if that person was sincere, or if he just wants to escape your angry payback. And if only he had thrown a small, loosely packed snowball... that would be easier to forgive. It's our nature, isn't it, to be slow to forgive. We typically will only forgive those who deserve forgiveness.

It's natural that we would assume God is like us when it comes to forgiveness. Deep inside of us, we know we don't deserve his forgiveness. And so when we sin... especially the big sins, we may avoid God... by avoiding church, prayer, his word. And if we should seek his forgiveness, we instinctively feel that there must be a probationary period after we sin. After all, that's what we're like.

But today we look at a parable told by Jesus that explains the Father's forgiveness to us. Jesus often told earthly stories to help us understand heavenly realities. We haven't seen God with our eyes, so Jesus would use stories that *were* real and understandable to help us understand truths about God and his kingdom that are hard to get.

The parable that helps us understand our Heavenly Father's forgiveness is commonly called the parable of the prodigal son. Or, in more modern times, we've started calling it the parable of the lost son. You know what? This really is a poor name for this parable. It implies that the story is all about the son. But in reality Jesus told this parable so that we would understand something about the Father. So I would suggest to that we rename this parable to properly reflect its purpose, and call it: the parable of the faithful, forgiving father.

**Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Then Jesus told them this parable:**

**"There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to**

**death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ”“My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”**

Jesus starts his parable by describing the good-for-nothing younger son of a man who had two sons. The younger son asks his father for his portion of the inheritance. The custom in those days was for the father to divide his estate in as many parts as he had sons... then add one part. The extra part would go to the oldest son. So if a man had 5 sons, the estate was divided into 6 parts... the oldest got two parts (a double portion.) In this case, the father had 2 sons, so the estate would be divided into three parts, and two of those parts would go to the older son. But still, 1/3 of the fathers estate must have been a substantial amount.

Had the son asked for his portion so he could set up his own household next door, I don't think his request would have been so bad. But that wasn't the case. He made his request, and **“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.”** By his actions, the younger son showed he didn't respect his father, didn't like living in his father's house, and wanted to get away. Any he didn't just go to a nearby big city to live it up. No, he went to a distant country. He clearly wanted nothing to do with his Father any more. He did not want his father to be a part of his life any more. He went where he knew his father would never find him.

Let me ask you this... the parable doesn't say it, but how do you think the Father felt about all of this? Do you suppose his attitude was “good riddance” or was his heart broken? It was the latter, wasn't it? He must have laid awake at night thinking about his son, and lamenting the poor decisions he had made. The father must have agonized over his son. We'll see this later in the story.

Then we are told the younger son lived it up. He took all that money his father gave him and lived the wild life. He had no regard for anything his father ever taught him and he lived the way *he* wanted.

We see where Jesus is going with this, don't we? The Father in this story is of course the heavenly Father. The son is the unrepentant sinner. Going to a distant country and squandering wealth is when a person rejects God, his loving care and his laws that are given for our blessing, and lives his own way doing what he wants... having a complete disregard for God and his will.

Friends, do you see in yourself a part of you that is like that younger son? Maybe in the past... maybe now... do you see behavior that says, "I know what God says. I know God's will. But I'm going to live *my* way. I'll do what *I* want." That's living in a distant land, far from God. That's squandering the wealth he gave us... the time, talents, and treasures that he gave us for his glory and for building up of his kingdom, we often throw away on selfish things for personal pleasure with no regard for God or for others.

This wild life didn't last too long. He burned through his inheritance money in no time. **"After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything."**

Living wild and free seemed like such a good idea. But it got the younger son broke. Broke with no money and broken in his spirit. He had *nothing*. All of his possessions were gone. He was hopeless with no food. There was no Open Door Mission to stay in. So he took the only job he could find: working for a pig farmer, herding and feeding pigs. Now for us today, that already doesn't sound like a fun job. I was on a pig farm last summer. It's muddy, it's smelly... it's not really fun work. But to Jesus original audience, what he was describing sounded far worse than how we take it. God had made a law for the people of Israel which said pigs were unclean animals. They were not to eat pork, or they would be sinning against God. So here this young man was standing in the mud and stench taking care of animals that God had said were unclean. What's more, he wasn't paid enough to survive on, because he wanted to eat the pig slop. What's more, he had no friends... no one would help him in his time of dire need. The man hit rock bottom. He had no where left to turn. He was alone. He was starving to death. He was out of options. It took this degree of emptiness to finally turn his thoughts back to the Father.

We sinners can be awfully stubborn. We desperately desire to be the master of our fate and the captains of our souls. We will stubbornly stay on our sinking ship – our *stinking* ship... because it's OUR ship. Not until it's slipping beneath the waves do we finally concede that it was not ship to be on in the first place.

Can you identify at time in your life when you felt like the younger son did when he hit rock bottom? Are you right now living disobediently, refusing to submit to what you know to be God's will. Friends, you're in the foreign country... and it's not a good life.

Now let's see the happy ending to the story. **"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father."**

Did you notice how the younger son, after hitting rock bottom, thinks about his Father's servants? Why didn't he think of his older brother? Why wasn't his line of thinking: "My big brother certainly isn't hurting in my father's house. I will go back and be like him." He knew

didn't he? He had burned his bridges. He had broken the father/son relationship. He had no hope of being accepted back as a son. But as a slave? Well... maybe. It sure wouldn't hurt to try. Maybe he could be a slave for his dad, and at least he'd have food on the table. Being a slave for his dad would be a great life compared to life apart from his dad. That was his reasoning.

By this attitude, we see his repentance was sincere, don't we? He knew he deserved *nothing* from his father. He had no right to demand even a crumb of bread. But he went back hoping that his father might have mercy. He rehearsed his speech along the way. He knew what he would say to his Father. He made the long trip home.

**So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.**

Isn't this awesome. The father sees his son coming from a long way off. How did he see him from a long way off? Do you suppose that ever since his son left, he kept his eye on the horizon, hoping, waiting for his son to come back? When he finally saw that dot appear on the horizon, he couldn't contain his excitement. He *ran* (not walked) to meet him. His heart was filled with compassion for his son. Before his son can even say a word, he throws his arms around him and kissed him. His son was back! How he missed him! What a happy day.

The son still recited the speech he had prepared. His father's greeting must have caught him off guard, but he still said what he had to say. , **'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'**

But his father wasn't even listening. Instead he turns to his servants. **'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'** So they began to celebrate.

The robe, the sandals... acts of kindness. The *ring*... now that was proof of full restoration. The ring said, "You are family. You are my son." Completely a son! And dad wants to celebrate. His son who was lost had been found. It was as if he came back from the dead. It was party time.

Did you notice the difference between what the son expected and what the father did? The son knew he didn't **deserve** to be called a son again. The father did it anyway. The son knew his father would be **hesitant** about accepting about. But his acceptance was immediate! The son knew that his restoration and forgiveness would be **partial** at best. But it was complete restoration and total forgiveness! The son knew that his return would have all sorts of **conditions**... all sorts of strings attached. But his father took him back unconditionally.

Friends, do you see the divine truth of this lesson? We humans don't think this way. We humans don't act this way. But our God does. Where could a story like this come from but from God himself? Oh, what a God we have! **A God of unconditional, complete, immediate forgiveness for those who are undeserving.**

Are you living in unrepented sin? Are you disobedient and afraid of God because of what you've done? Have you turned your back on him with selfish living? God wants you to know that he is seeking you. He longs to have you in his family. He is eager to forgive you. He wants you to be in his family.

The reason the Father can forgive in this way isn't mentioned in the parable. But it's sure clear from the rest of Scripture. The Father fully forgives, because of Jesus. His perfect life is

considered ours. His death on the cross is the penalty for our disobedience. In Christ and in him alone can the Father forgive and welcome us with a smile and with open arms.

Now there's one more important truth to this parable that Jesus brings up at the end.

**“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ ‘The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’”**  
**“My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”**

Here our Lord Jesus would have us think about this: how do we receive sinners who come to the Father in repentance? God fully and free forgives them... do we? Or are we angry? Critical? A “better than thou” attitude? Truth is, those who are life-long Christians are no more worthy of the Father’s mercy, grace and forgiveness as are “sinners” who come to him later. When anyone repents and believes. It’s a reason for *us* to celebrate as well. God would have us share his attitude about sinners who return to him.

Friends, rejoice today having heard this parable of the faithful, forgiving father. And know that the Father is your heavenly Father. Our God is a forgiving God who yearns to be close to us and whose heart is broken when we disobey him and leave him. He is a God who forgives even the worst wrong. And his forgiveness is unconditional, independent of our actions, undeserved, free and complete. Rejoice in such forgiveness when you receive it. Rejoice in that forgiveness when someone who is lost and dead in sin is restored to the father and receives it too. All praise be to our Father in heaven who joyfully forgives us. Amen.