

**Luke 15:1-3, 11-32**

We would have little trouble writing down the name of someone who resembles the prodigal son. And we would not be hard-pressed to add the name of someone who resembles the older brother. Writing down such names, however, would not do us much good, for it would keep us out of the parable. We would be nothing more than bystanders taking note of the characters in the story. But Jesus did not relate this parable so that you and I can remain aloof from it. He speaks these words into our ears because we are included in the story. This is not about two fictional boys and their father—it's about you and me. This is not about the church member sitting in the next pew, or that member whom we rarely see in God's House—the parable is about me and you.

The father in the parable did not have three sons—he had two. If God is our Heavenly Father, then the story is about us. We are those two sons. And that doesn't speak well for us. Neither one was a knight in shining armor. The one thought that he was, and the other one didn't care. But the sad truth is that without the father in that home, that household would have been in pretty bad shape. The one brother lived for himself; the other one did not grasp the concept of mercy and forgiveness.

What pulls the story together, however, is the fact that the father did live in that house, and because he did; because the father is at the center of the parable, those two sons lived in the presence of mercy and grace. And so do we.

But on a regular basis we take this truth for granted. We don't appreciate what we have as God's children. And so, like that younger son, we leave. We find better things to do with our time than come to God's House week after week. We make excuses why we don't join in with the study of God's Word. We place more importance on preparing Sunday dinner for company than we do on receiving Christ's meal for us.

That younger son didn't suddenly leave on an impulse. Things had been building up for a time. Over time he thought less of his father and more of himself. Over time he grew weary of listening to what his father had to say. Some of us are "prodigals in the making" right now. We grow weary of hearing what God has to say. Our time in His Word has become "little to nothing." Younger church members want to get out from under their parent's control, and so they rebel against going to church and reading their Bible. Over time the Christian values which they had been taught become hindrances which prevent them from "living out their life." Often they marry outside the Faith and are pulled even farther away.

The sinful world beckons all of us to become prodigals. It has so much to offer—much more than a life lived in connection with God's Word and Sacraments. At least, that's what our sinful flesh tells us. And so we become prodigals for a night, or a day, or a month, or longer. We think we know better than our Heavenly Father how to get the most out of life. And that means forsaking His Word and Will to do what our flesh desires. But when we do that, we die. "This son of mine was dead," said the father. Spiritual death takes over when we, like that son, reject God's will to live for our own. We abandon our faith when we, like that son, close our ears to what God has to say.

And many prodigals never return home. A heart attack takes their life before they have the chance to repent and receive the Savior's forgiveness. Or they may stubbornly refuse to return, and they blame everyone else but themselves for the choices they made in life.

But no matter how long you and I are away, God does not stop being merciful to you. Even when his son was spiritually dead, the father longed for his return. He did not stop being his son's father when his son was out living a wicked life. No matter what you and I have done to reject God, He remains your dear Father. He is not angry when we leave Him to live for ourselves. He is merciful. His way is not to get even, but to forgive.

Now that prodigal returned because something happened to cause him to return. Prodigals don't just return on their own. Something has to happen to bring it about. Dead people do not come to life on their own, and those who are spiritually dead do not return to God on their own. God works in our lives to bring us back to Him.

The younger son returned because he began to be in need. He had fallen on hard times. And he remembered how his father treated the slaves back home. Even the slaves were treated well. And so he returned. Dear parents, do you see why it is so vitally necessary that you nurture your children in the love and admonition of the Lord when they are young? So that, like the prodigal, if they leave the Lord down the road, He can bring to their remembrance His mercy and love, and through that bring them back to Him.

When that prodigal returned there was great rejoicing. "Give him the best robe," the father said. "Put sandals on his feet and a ring on his finger." The son was still his father's son. He may have thrown away the ring he had from before, or he may have sold the ring to blow the money on loose living, but the father said, "Give him another." "I don't care where he's been or what he has done, he is still my son. This ring belongs to him."

You do not wear a ring to show you that you are God's child, but you do wear your baptism. At times in our life, that may not mean a whole lot to us. We may be tempted, like that son, to reject our sonship and trade it for a life of pleasure. That doesn't change who you are. Lost or found, you are always God's baptized child. Dead or alive, God is always your merciful Father. Your baptism does not "go away" when you and I live for ourselves. For when God brings you back, He does not bring you back as a slave, but as a son—His baptized child; a child whom He loves and forgives.

Do you know that some have said that although Jesus tells this parable, He Himself is not in it? The Father is...you and I are...but no Christ, they say. And yet, all Scripture is about Christ, and this story is about Christ. Three times in the parable there is mentioned the killing of the fattened calf. Fattened calves are fattened up to be killed and eaten. That fattened calf did not enjoy the party, for when everyone was rejoicing at the son's return, he was being slaughtered for the feast.

The fattened calf is Christ. Our joy comes at His expense. Our return comes at His expense. The Father asks that the "calf" be slaughtered, and He is—on the cross of Calvary—He is slaughtered there for you. And here on God's altar is the "fattened calf" for you to eat and drink, because this feast is for you. You, who were dead, have been given life in Jesus Christ. You, who were lost, have been found by your Lord and Savior. You

are God's child. He loves you and forgives you. The feast is prepared. The "fattened calf" is butchered, and is now given here for you for the remission of all your sins.

And the older brother wants no part of it. He refused to rejoice. He refused to partake of the feast even at his father's urging. Such is the way of those who think they have been good sons their entire life. They need no "fattened calf." They need no Savior. They can easily spot the "younger sons" around them, but they cannot see the "older brother" within their own heart.

If this is your way, repent! Repent and come to the feast. The "fattened calf" is as much for you as for the younger son. You have the same Father as the younger son has, and it is His way to show mercy to His children. If you have anger toward God, as the older brother had toward his father, be assured that God has no anger toward you. The father pleaded with his son to come in to the feast. He loved his older son just as he loved his younger son.

Now I ask you, what do you think of stories that end before the mystery is solved? Frustrating? Well, this story is one of them. We're not told what the older brother did. Did he listen to his father and go in to the feast? Did he learn the meaning of mercy and forgiveness? Or did he remain stubborn and refuse his father's invitation?

Maybe Jesus left this story unfinished because He finishes it with us. If there is someone in your home, or a neighbor in your community, or a member here, whom you are having trouble forgiving—then finish the story and come to the feast. The "fattened calf" has been killed on the cross also for you. For Jesus' sake, your Heavenly Father forgives you. He has nothing against you. And He enables you to forgive that one in your life.

If you have bitterness in your heart as the older brother had against his father, come to the feast. It is for you. Here God opens His heart to you and you see only love and mercy for you. He forgives your anger. He died for your bitterness. And here He gives you His heart.

And so we see that, "A certain man had two sons"...and those sons are here today in a little church in Augusta, Missouri. And those sons are forgiven children; loved by their Father, and His home is always their home—a home where the "fattened calf" is set before them to feed them and nourish them in their faith. And those sons, nourished by that blessed feast, their sins forgiven, will enjoy eternity with their merciful Father. And now you know...the rest of the story. Amen.