

## Luke 15:11-32

If you look up the word “prodigal” in the dictionary, it defines someone who is exceedingly lavish, profusely reckless, even wasteful with what he has. And so I think that the common name for this parable of Jesus is quite correct...except for one little change. Instead of calling it the Parable of the Prodigal Son, we should call it the Parable of the Prodigal Father. He was even more lavish and reckless than his son was. His younger son wasted his inheritance on reckless living, but the father was reckless with his mercy and compassion. He was so reckless, that when his scoundrel of a son returned home, he embraced him with love, forgave him completely, and spared no expense in throwing a celebration. And with his older son, the father here, too, was so reckless in showing mercy that he seems, to us, to be wasting his compassion on a son who is bitter and unforgiving.

This is your God. He is a prodigal with His mercy toward us. He is more wasteful with His compassion than our government is with the tax dollars it receives. But His wastefulness is our redemption. His recklessness is our salvation. As we look at this parable, and find ourselves in it, and condemned by it, our comfort and peace lies with our prodigal Father who spares no expense to bring us back to Him from death to life.

This is how the parable ends - the father declaring that his son who had been lost, is found; that he who had been dead, is alive. And this is how the parable begins - about life and death. The younger son wanted to really live, and so he wished for his father to be dead. “*Give me,*” he said, “*the share of property that is coming to me.*” He was not about to wait for his father to die. He wanted his inheritance today. He thought more of his father’s property, than of his father. Truly, in his eyes, his father was dead to him. He did not want a place in his house, his protection, his conversation, or his love. All he wanted was his money. And when he got it, he was reckless and wasteful spending it selfishly on himself.

This younger son lives within each of us. We think more of the world God made, than we think of God. We don’t want Him, His love, and His conversation as much as we want His property. The shoes of the younger son have a place in our closet, and we wear them out. It’s not just those church members who, for every reason under the sun, have abandoned their Father’s house, rarely if ever, coming to hear the Word preached and to receive the Sacraments. It’s not just these who wear the younger son’s shoes. We all wear them. Every time we turn away from our Father’s love, we are the younger son. Every time we walk away from His Commandments to do instead what we desire, we are that son. And when we live like this, we are putting God to death. When we fail to live as His people, we are declaring that God is dead to us. We want His money, His worldly goods, but like the younger son, we are content if our days are filled with happiness and things, even if they are not filled with our loving Father.

But the son came to his senses. The things of this world are fleeting, and when they went away, he remembered what he was lacking--a place in his father’s house. And so he returned. But take notice of how he did not return. He returned not proud of his sinful living, but ashamed of what he had done. He returned not ready to bolt back out the door again if anyone gave him a dirty look, or said something negative to him; he returned to stay. If we think we can return to God, return to His house, return to His Communion Table holding on to our sin and refusing to let go, then we are not returning at all. If our return is based upon how the other church members treat us and speak to us, then our return is conditional and our pride is keeping us from returning to our Heavenly Father with a contrite heart.

This younger son who left home, his father dead in his eyes, now realized that he was the one who was dead. *"I am dying here with hunger!"* he cried to himself. He who had left his father's house full of himself and ready to enjoy life, now came to the awareness that when he left his father, he was the one who died. If this is your awareness as well, then welcome back to your Father's house. If you truly believe the words you said about yourself...*"I, a poor, miserable sinner...deserve temporal and eternal punishment,"* then you have a Father's welcome. That father rushed out to his son, embraced him, kissed him, forgave him. In his eyes, nothing had changed. This son was still his son. His own clothing was put back on him. His ring was placed back on his finger. His room was prepared and ready for him. And now the feast would begin with the slaughter of the fattened calf.

Friend, this story is your story. Here is the love of your Heavenly Father for you. He welcomes back His sinful children no matter how far they have wandered, no matter what they have done. And for you, also, the fattened calf has been slaughtered and the feast is ready. Jesus was slaughtered on the cross of Calvary so that you can have a place in your Father's house. Jesus was fattened up with all your sins and mine, and with the sins of the whole world. Everything was given over to Him and charged to Him, and He was killed so that we poor sinners can celebrate. And the feast is spread out for you upon the altar. Every time you come forward to the Supper of the Lord, you partake of that feast which is a foretaste of the feast to come in heaven. The fattened calf, who was put to death for you, but who was raised to life, is on the altar in bread and wine, and your welcoming father rejoices as you come to join in the feast of celebration.

And yet the older son would not come. He had no need of any feast with his father, not with sinners like his younger brother. He had a place in his father's house, but he felt he deserved that place. He felt that he had been the good son. He was upset, not so much in the return of his younger brother, but in the reckless mercy and compassion his father showed to his son who returned. And every time we have a bitter heart toward our neighbor, we are that older son. Every time we hold a grudge and refuse to forgive, we are the older son. Who are we to condemn when God has forgiven! There are not two feasts within the father's house. There is only one. One feast for all sinners. If we stay away from the Father's house because of someone who is here, then we have put on the shoes of the older son. If we stay away from the feast of God for sinners, then we will miss out on the feast to come.

But it's not what our loving Father wants. You and I are the younger son in the parable. You and I are the older son in the parable. We go back and forth putting on the shoes of the one, and then of the other. But your God only wears shoes of mercy. He comes to you pleading. He comes to you in love. He comes to you and He forgives you. He forgives you right now for all you have done against Him and against your neighbor. The fattened calf is proof of this. Jesus was killed for no other reason than this...your God is merciful toward you and He forgives you. He is reckless with His mercy wanting no one to perish, but that all who are lost may be found, all who are dead may be made alive in Christ Jesus. The feast is ready and is for you...for you in Jesus. Amen.