# Fourth Sunday in Lent March 31, 2019

***THE PARABLE OF THE FORGIVING FATHER (Luke 15:1-3, 11-32)***

1 Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. 2 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

3 Then Jesus told them this parable: 11 "There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

13 "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. 14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

17 "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! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' 20 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.

21 "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

22 "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. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

28 "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 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. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

31 "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 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.'"

**Introduction**: Don’t people make you mad, or at least disappointed, sometimes? Have you ever been deeply let down by someone of whom you had such high hopes for? Or maybe someone has actually betrayed your confidence and deeply hurt you.

This is the situation we have before us in today’s Gospel reading. However, it is not just the “Prodigal Son” who is the bad guy. Let’s examine this parable (an earthly story with a heavenly message), and see why this is really about the Forgiving Father.

**I. The Setting (15:1-3)**

**A. A Problem  “Lowlifes” come to Jesus (15:1)**

15:1 – **“Tax collectors”** in Jesus’ day were despised by the Jews, since they were working for the Roman government and viewed as traitors to the Jewish nation. Also, they were very wealthy and oftentimes got that way because they cheated the people.

**“Sinners”** refers to people who had a very immoral lifestyle such as thieves, prostitutes, murderers, dishonest businessmen, adulterers, and other types of wicked people and criminals. They were looked down upon very much by the rest of society.

**** What a tremendous thing – godless people are becoming interested in the things of God!

**B. Criticism of Jesus’ Acceptance (15:2)**

15:2 – **“The Pharisees”** have criticized Jesus earlier in 5:21, 30; 6:2, 7; 7:39; 11:38, 53-54, and Jesus has criticized them in 5:31-32; 7:44-47; 11:39-44; 12:1.

**“Pharisees”** affirmed that the Messiah and salvation would come when every Jew obeyed the entire law. Thus, they were concerned about the sins of others. They wanted to reform, not withdraw from, society. They were popular and well respected, because they taught the people, believed in key doctrines like the afterlife, and lived godly lifestyles (at least on the surface). However, they had a condescending attitude toward the common people.

**“The teachers of the law”** were severely criticized by Jesus in 11:46-52.

**“Eats with them”** probably refers to the incident of Levi’s banquet in 5:29-31, though Jesus may have eaten with **“sinners”** on numerous occasions. In Jewish society to have a meal with someone implied close fellowship and mutual acceptance (see 5:30-32).

**** What an evil reaction – religious leaders are griping about Jesus’ love for the godless!

**II. An Outrageous Request (15:11-12)**

15:12 – For a son to ask for his **“share of the estate”** was unheard of. By asking for his inheritance, he was gravely insulting his father and in essence wanting his father to die! There was no custom which entitled a son to have a share of his father’s wealth before his death.

**“He divided his property among them”** was a highly unusual act by the father. There is no evidence that a father in good health would ever do such a thing! The normal response for a father in this extraordinary situation would have been to beat his son or throw him out of the house and disown him. It is also interesting to note that no loud refusal was made by the older son. His silent acceptance of his share shows that he had a poor relationship with his father.

**III. An Outrageous Waste (15:13-16)**

15:13 – **“Not long after that”** reveals the hurry the younger son was in to dispose of his share of the property for cash. All people in the area would have been filled with disgust at such a shameful action as selling off family property, especially while the father was still alive. No wonder the son wanted to get out of there as soon as possible! Also, it is unusual that the older son made no attempt to prevent his younger brother from leaving.

15:14-15 – During **“a severe famine”** there would be people in great **“need”** who would attach themselves to others in a better financial position. A polite way for this **“citizen”** to get rid of the needy was to give him a job that he would refuse. **“Pigs”** were unclean animals to the Jews. Therefore, his desperate condition is apparent, since he did not refuse this job.

15:16 – **“The pods”** are probably wild carob, a shrub having bitter and unnourishing berries.

**“No one gave him anything”** is an exaggeration, since he must have received something for his labor. He did not regularly get enough nourishing food to survive.

**IV. A Sensible Plan (15:17-20a)**

15:19 – There may be a hint of pride in the son’s plan to be treated like one of his father’s **“hired men”** (*misthios*). These men were not slaves but were free to work for a wage of their own. The son may have even hoped to eventually pay his father back what he had taken from him earlier. Certainly his labor was worth something!

This view of the repentant son fits in well with the rabbinic teaching that repentance was a work that a person did to merit God’s blessing. The rabbis believed that they needed God’s help – He went part of the way to save the sinner, and the sinner went part of the way to Him. The work of repentance (turning from sin, making restitution for past sins, and having a firm determination to stay away from future sin) atoned for a person’s sin and earned forgiveness.

**QUESTION**: Why did the younger son never actually say the petition to “make me like one of your hired men” which he had originally planned in 15:18-19? [A] Was he cut off from saying it by his father who interrupted his speech with great joy and anticipation of a feast? Or [B] did he change his mind about offering to be a hired worker?

**ANSWER**: B. Reasons: [1] It would only take a few seconds to say “make me like one of your hired workers,” so there was plenty of time to get these words out. [2] His original plan to be like a hired worker was an attempt to save some face and have at least a little something to offer his father other than a confession of sin. [3] According to the culture of the day, there is no way that the younger son could have expected such a warm and joyful acceptance from his father. His father’s compassion and gracious welcome in 5:20 were extraordinary and totally undeserved. Instead of offering his service, he simply confesses his sin and unworthiness in response to his father’s great love. **Conclusion**: The younger son originally had a plan to repent before his father yet offer his service so that he could somehow atone for his own sin and merit his father’s favor. This is basically the rabbinic view of repentance. However, this prospective is radically altered because of his father’s extraordinary display of love and grace. There is no way he can merit this favor, so all he can do is confess his sin and unworthiness and accept all that the father has for him.

**V. An Outrageous Action (15:20b-24)**

15:20 – The father’s **“compassion”** was extraordinary in this culture. The entire village would have been outraged to see this son return home, because of the shame he had earlier brought. Their normal reaction would have been one of verbal harassment or even physical attack.

The father **“ran out to his son”** to protect him from hostile villagers. In this culture it was humiliating for a man to run in public. He takes the shame of this son upon himself.

**“Threw his arms around him and kissed him”** was a visible expression of forgiveness and reconciliation. This aggressive display of love prevented the son from kissing his father’s hands or feet as a sign of submission, which was to be expected.

**“Kissed”** (*kataphileō*) means “kiss repeatedly,” emphasizing the father’s joy/acceptance.

15:21 – **“Heaven”** is here used as a reverent substitute for God.

Some manuscripts add the sentence, “Make me like one of your hired men.” However, these words were mistakenly copied from 15:19. The son’s omission of these words to his father is a crucial aspect for interpreting this parable. He no longer feels worthy to offer his services, but is forced to swallow his pride and accept his father’s gracious forgiveness and love.

15:22 – For the **“servants”** to **“put”** these three things (robe, ring, sandals) on the son shows that they are to regard him as their master in full restoration of his rights as son of the father.

**“The best robe”** is undoubtedly the father’s which would only be worn on very special occasions – a visible symbol of the son’s acceptance back into the family. See Isaiah 61:10: “He has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness.”

The ring is probably a signet ring, which indicates a high position of trust and responsibility within the family.

15:23 – **“The fattened calf”** (not a mere sheep or goat) implies that the entire village will be invited to **“celebrate,”** since this huge animal must be eaten soon before it spoils. This **“feast”** will reconcile the son to all the people of the village, and was expected to last well into the night.

**VI. An Outrageous Insult (15:25-30)**

15:26 – **“Servants”** (*pais*) is more accurately translated as “young boys,” because the Greek word for “servants” in 15:22 is *doulos*. Children would play outside the house and listen to the music, and would be the first group the older son would see before entering his house.

**“Asked”** is in the Greek imperfect tense which signifies continual action in the past. The older son intensively quizzed the boy about his younger brother. He would have found out such things as losing his inheritance and his father’s highly unusual, accepting behavior.

15:28 – The older son’s refusal **“to go in”** and greet the guests was a grave insult to his father. At this point he is socially expected to greet his younger brother as an honored guest. Later in private, it would be appropriate to complain to his father. In essence, he is trying to publicly humiliate his father by arguing with him while the feast is still going on. This is greatly looked down upon in Palestinian culture. This son is guilty of breaking the commandment to “honor your father and mother” (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16).

15:29 – **“Slaving”** (*douleuō*) shows the older son is exclaiming that he has not been treated as a son but as a slave (*doulos* in 15:22), highlighting the poor relationship he had with his father.

**VII. An Outrageous Kindness (15:31-32)**

15:31 – This gracious reaction of **“the father”** is remarkable, because the normal thing to have done was to rebuke his older son and beat or send him away.

15:32 – **“Be glad”** (*chairō*) reveals the key theme of joy in this chapter (see 15:5, 6, 7, 9, 10).

**QUESTION**: Who do the characters in this parable represent?

**ANSWER**: The younger son represents a despised “sinner” in 15:1-2. He even claims to have “sinned” in 15:18, 21. The extremely rude, condescending, and critical older brother represents the Pharisees. His relationship with his father ended up to be seen as worse than his wayward younger brother’s was! The father, then, represents God who graciously forgives his repentant son. In fact, the father may even further represent Jesus in that he publicly humiliates himself to protect his son. He in essence takes the son’s shame upon himself, which is an excellent picture of Jesus’ substitutionary and atoning work on the cross for rebellious, unworthy sinners. What joy we have as we trust in God’s magnificent, undeserved mercy and amazing grace! Let’s share this message of good news (the gospel!) with others this week!

# In the amazing grace of the Forgiving Father through the Crucified/Risen Son,

Pastor Steve Waterman