

March 27, 2022
Fourth Sunday in Lent
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 (1 Corinthians 1:18-31)

THE PRODIGAL FATHER IS EXTRAVAGANTLY LAVISH WITH HIS LOVE AND MERCY.

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

Our text for meditation today comes from the Gospel according to St Luke, the 15th chapter which you heard read earlier.

The parable of the Prodigal Son is one of those Bible stories that even non-Christians are somewhat familiar. The word *prodigal* is not found in the Bible. It comes from the Latin word *prodigus* – meaning: *“lavish and extravagantly wasteful.”* (Concise Oxford English Dictionary) And while you know the story quite well, perhaps you will be surprised to learn this morning which character in the parable is the greater prodigal.

As our text opens, sinners and tax collectors have come to Jesus by faith to hear His teaching. This causes the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees (who are confident and secure in their works and deeds) to grumble aloud that Jesus receives and eats with sinners. Jesus replies to both groups in parables, the sinners and tax collectors along with the scribes and Pharisees, so that each group might see themselves in the parables which illustrate the gracious kingdom of God. Our text skips over the first two parables. In the first, (cf: Luke 15:3–7) a shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep in the open country and goes after the one lost sheep until he finds it, to which Jesus says:

“... I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” (Luke 15:7)

In the second parable, (cf: Luke 15:8–10) a woman who has lost one of her ten coins lights a lamp and searches diligently until she finds the coin. She then calls her friends and neighbors together to rejoice that it is found, to which Jesus says:

“... I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (Luke 15:10)

The first two parables are pointed toward the sinners. The third parable, the prodigal son, is pointed toward both the *self-righteous* and *sinner* alike. All three include the theme of recovering the lost and great rejoicing when the lost is found. And this is why Jesus eats with sinners. Our Lord is patient and longsuffering. He desires that all who are lost in sin to be found by His lifesaving Gospel. All of heaven rejoices over the lost one who repents and believes in the Gospel.

The third parable, the focus is not exclusively on the two sons, or just one son – but on the father. Jesus says:

“There was a man who had two sons.” (Luke 15:11)

The father is good and loving to both sons, but neither appreciate their father’s love. The younger son is a picture of the tax collectors and sinners prior to coming to faith. The older son, a picture of the self-righteous religious leaders. The younger son neither loves nor appreciates his father’s love and generosity. He doesn’t want to wait until his father dies to receive his inheritance. He wants it now! So, he asks for his portion and the ***prodigal*** father gives it to him. I say ***prodigal*** father because the father is extraordinarily wasteful with what belongs to him. The ***prodigal*** father complies to the younger son’s demands.

Notice that verse 12 says:

“And he divided his property between them.” (Luke 15:12)

The father hands over ***all*** the inheritance with no concern for himself, no lectures, or strings attached, each according to his proportion. In Jewish culture, the inheritance wasn’t divided fifty-fifty. The older son is entitled to two-thirds of the estate and the younger only one-third.

Soon after, the younger sinful and unloving son flees far from his father’s love, squandering all that was graciously given him. What the son thought would be freedom leads him further away from the father. His reckless living left him hungry, humiliated, and in deep despair. (cf: Luke 15:12-16)

The older self-righteous son, on the other hand, sinned against his family when he never attempted to reconcile his brother and father. He never tried to talk his brother out of leaving home. And while he didn’t ask for his portion of the inheritance, he never refused it. He not only gladly received his portion, he sat on his riches and watched as his younger walk off to his death.

When his brother returns, he doesn’t care that the younger brother is alive. He is secure in his self-righteousness. He is proud of his work ethic and his loyalty. He is so full of himself, he has no time for compassion on his brother. He is insulted that his father would graciously receive the younger son back into the family. He is offended at the father’s joy of having been reconciled with the younger son.

Can you see yourself in the parable? Perhaps you are the younger son who went through some sort of rebellion against God or mid-life crisis chasing after excitement, the pleasures of the world, or romance. Only God and you know the skeletons in your closet. But all of us are susceptible. St Paul says:

“All have turned aside... no one does good, not even one.” (Romans 3:12)

When you spurn the Father’s love, you are lost in a pigpen in a distant land, left in spiritual hunger, humiliation, and deep despair. The ultimate result is spiritual death.

Maybe you identify with the older son. You have always done what was expected of you. You are preoccupied with status, possessions, and your work. Like the older son, you are angry and jealous when you perceive others are receiving more attention and more blessings than you. You look down on those sinners over there, especially when you believe you live a more holy and pious life. You delight because you avoided riotous and salacious living. In your self-righteousness, you too, despise the Father’s love – leaving you estranged from God, suffering bitterness and spiritual death.

When the younger son hits rock bottom in the pigpen, he comes to his senses. He remembers the boundless love of his father. By the grace and strength of God, even though he has forsaken his father's love, he would return in contrition and confess his sin against his father and heaven itself. So,

“... he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” (Luke 15:20)

Even before the younger son gets home, before he has a chance to confess his sin, the father is moved with compassion, runs out to the son, and welcomes him with open arms. In the original language the word translated as ***compassion*** means being moved with pity and compassion to the point of your inward parts moving. (cf: BDAG, 938) This compassion is only used in Scripture when referring to Jesus having compassion upon someone or in one of His parables. When the son tries to confess his sin, the father interrupts him. In his love and compassion he restores the younger son back into the family, clothing him with the best robe, a ring, and shoes. He calls for the fattened calf to be killed for a celebration.

The ***prodigal*** father wasn't showing favoritism, although it was his right. He showered his love upon the older son as well, pleading with him to join in the celebration. Even while the older son disowns the younger, the father lovingly explains what the older son's self-righteous eyes refuse to see.

“... he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’”
(Luke 15:31)

The older son didn't realize that being with his father was its own reward. All that belonged to the father belonged to the son. Not just his future inheritance, but also what he has in the present. The riches of the father were already the son's to enjoy.

The last verse of the parable is very instructive. The father says to the older son:

“It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.” (Luke 15:32)

It was fitting to celebrate and be glad. The word ***fitting*** can also be translated as ***necessary***. The father thought the younger son was dead, but now he's alive. And there's one thing much worse than being physically dead – that's being lost: spiritually lost. It was ***necessary*** to celebrate and be glad for the one who was spiritually lost – is now spiritually found and restored to life. It is necessary to celebrate and be glad for there is:

“... more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents...” (Luke 15:7)

“... there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (Luke 15:10)

Your heavenly Father is the ***prodigal*** Father who is extravagantly lavish with His love and mercy. Not that He foolishly casts it into the wind for no purpose, but because of the perfect life, death, and resurrection of His only begotten Son, your heavenly Father extravagantly lavishes His rich love and mercy upon all mankind. For the sake of Jesus, all that belongs to the Father is yours... a present reality... life, forgiveness, and salvation.

God's Word does not return void. (cf: Isaiah 55:11) Whichever son you happen to identify as, God sends the Holy Spirit, working through the sternness of His Law and the sweetness of His Gospel, to call you to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. He bids you:

“Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” (Joel 2:13)

To paraphrase King David's words as he repented of his adulterous affair with Bathsheba:

“... according to [God's] steadfast love [and] ... abundant mercy [He will] blot out [your] transgressions. [He will] ... wash [you] thoroughly from [your] iniquity, and cleanse [you] from [your] sin!” (Psalm 51:1-2)

Celebrate the Father's love and grace by receiving it in repentance and faith, trusting solely in Christ Jesus for your salvation. And not only celebrating your God given gifts but unlike the older son in the parable, celebrating the love, grace, and blessings He lavishly pours out on your neighbor. God shows no partiality. (cf: Romans 2:11) Christ atoned for the sin of all mankind. God adopted you when you were spiritually dead. In Baptism He made you a new creation. So, you're in no position to begrudge the prodigal Father when He extravagantly lavishes His gifts upon others, no matter how unworthy they appear to you.

St Paul describes what this looks like in the life of the Christian.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Meaning – you don't have to live like the tax collectors, sinners, the scribes and the Pharisees. Christ has made peace between you and the Father... reconciling you with the Father and He's given you:

“... the ministry of reconciliation... entrusting to [you] the message of reconciliation. Therefore, [you] are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through [you].” (2 Corinthians 5:18-20)

Time is short. Spiritually lost people are dying every day, destined for eternal damnation. It is fitting and necessary that those of us who have received the extravagant gifts of grace from the Father, those of us who are no longer spiritually lost but now spiritually found, be witnesses to those who don't know Jesus, giving testimony of Christ crucified for sinners of all stripes and all who are spiritually lost. They need to know the prodigal Father's gracious reconciliation and forgiveness.

God's love for mankind is extravagant. He calls us to celebrate that love by telling others of His compassion and desire for the salvation of the lost. His desire is so great that He sent (pointing to the crucifix)

“This man [to receive] sinners...” (Luke 15:2)

Christ didn't die on the cross for the righteous. He shed His blood and gave His life for sinners such as you and me.

“It [is] fitting [and necessary] to celebrate and be glad, for... [you were]... dead, [but now]... alive; [you were]... lost, and [now] found.” (Luke 15:32)

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, Amen.