

The Fourth Sunday of Lent

Text: Luke 15:1-3,11-32 (NIV)

¹Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. ²But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³Then Jesus told them this parable: ... ¹¹Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The 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. ¹⁴After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to a



citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He 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! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ ²⁰So 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. ²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴For 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. ²⁶So 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. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰But 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. ³²But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

Theme: A Father who is Reckless with His mercy

Who is the sanest person in this parable? – The prodigal son, the older brother or the father. I would think that it is the older brother. He never acts reckless as opposed to his brother and his father. The prodigal is reckless in his behavior, which destroys his life, but the father is also very reckless with his mercy. He pleads with that older son to become as reckless as He is with that mercy.

I. The prodigal’s recklessness destroyed his life.

He gave up pure joys for those which would destroy him. He was born into a wealthy family. His father had given him work to do, but he also had a lot of privileges, which other people never had. Then one day he basically told his father, that he wished that he were dead. He demanded his inheritance. Then he went far away from home and wasted the entire inheritance on wine, women, and song. Before he knew it, it was all

gone. He had nothing. His friends abandoned him. He was left to tend pigs, which was abhorrent for Jews, and he even longed to eat the pig food, but no one gave him anything. Now he longed for the goodness of his father's home. Even his father's workers had life better than he had it now. He came up with another reckless idea. He would return to the father, whom he had grieved, and beg for forgiveness. He didn't expect to be received back as a son. He had squandered his inheritance already. He hoped that his father would at least receive him as a hired hand.

In Jesus' day this applied to the tax collectors and sinners who were coming to Jesus. These people had been raised in the synagogue. They had learned right from wrong. They were part of God's chosen people, but they threw it all away. The sinners had fallen into an immoral lifestyle. They did things that should have been punishable by stoning according to the law. Just like the prodigal in the parable, their lives also brought great dishonor to their parents. People like the tax collectors loved money. Their whole purpose in life was to make money, no matter how much they swindled and took advantage of other people. But none of them found happiness in their wild living and greed. In fact, they longed for the goodness of God's house which they once enjoyed, but no one gave them anything. They were outcasts, who brought their shame and grief on themselves.

But then Jesus came and spoke of repentance. Was it possible that they could return? Could they be redeemed from the trouble and misery that they had gotten themselves into? Many of them listened to Jesus. Some actually returned to our Lord and rejoiced in His reckless mercy for sinners like them.

This is a big temptation for us also. Has the grass ever seemed greener on the other side of the fence? Don't the immoral things that other people do, sometimes seem fun? Would it be better to stop listening to your conscience in your business dealings? Think about the money that you'll make if it didn't bother you so much when you take advantage of someone else. There are times when God's people fall into these temptations. We squander all that we have learned from our Lord's Word. Soon we see what a mess that we have gotten ourselves into. We realize that life apart from our Lord and His ways is not good at all. We long for what we had in our Father's home. That recklessness of throwing away our Father's love will destroy our lives.

II. The older brother led a very careful life.

He was faithful to his father. He did his chores faithfully. He worked in the fields. He felt that he never disobeyed any of his father's commands. He always lived in the goodness of his father's home, an inheritance which one day would all belong to him. But there are glimpses that all was not right in his heart either. While the prodigal son longed to return as a hired worker for his father, the older son felt as he were a slave for his father all of these years. What did he get for all of his service, NOTHING! This son also felt no love for his father. He felt although his father had been harsh and demanding, and never really gave him what he deserved. When his prodigal brother returned, it offended him, that his father would receive him back at all.

That is exactly how the pharisees and scribes felt. They felt that they had followed all of the Old Testament laws. In addition, they slavishly followed another 618 laws, which they had made. They saw their righteousness as being flawless. They felt that they deserved God's goodness, but there was a part of them which felt that they were more faithful to God than He was to them. How could God allow them to be subject to the Romans, considering how faithful they were to Him? Why did they have such trouble in their lives? Shouldn't God have made their lives better? They took offense at the mercy that Jesus was showing to those who repented of their sins. To them it seems as though things should be better for them before God would accept people back who

had wandered so far from Him.

We can fall into that same trap today. We worship out of a sense of duty. We follow the ten commandments because we have to. We don't do it because we love God. We look at our lives and feel, that if God really loved me, my life should be better than this. After all that I have done for God, He should have been better for me. When our attitude is that way, it is impossible to rejoice when those who have wandered, return to our Lord.

III. The Father was reckless in showing mercy.

He went far over and above what any father would do. When his younger son wanted to leave home, he let him go, but he watched, hoped, and prayed that his son would come back to his senses and return home. When he saw his son returning, his heart went out to him. He ran to his son, hugged and kissed him, gave him proper clothes, and celebrated with a lavish feast. It is significant that when the older son refused to go in, the father left the feast and personally pleaded with him to come in and celebrate. The question at the end of the parable is whether the older son goes in to celebrate or stays outside the feast.

That is a picture of God's grace and mercy to all who repent. The Bible is clear that God does not want to punish the sinner. He wants us all to repent. He loved us so much that He sent His only Son to bear our sins. They are all paid for in full. Our Lord desires that those who wander off return. He pleads with those who are unforgiving to forgive. He doesn't want anyone to miss the joy of His house, a joy that will last forever.

IV. Do you and I want to receive that reckless mercy of God?

Do we want to receive it for ourselves? Do we look at our lives and see how far we have strayed from our Lord and His goodness? When we return to the Lord in repentance, He forgives all of our sins. It is the joy of joys to be received by our Lord after we have sinned. The Bible is full of examples of people who experienced that joy, and every Christian has felt it to some degree, our Lord's reckless grace to all who repent. Do we also want others to receive that mercy? If we pout about God's mercy for others like the older brother did, we have put ourselves outside of our Lord's people. God also pleads with us to forgive. He wants us to be as forgiving as He is toward us, so that we don't lose His mercy for us. Both of these are important. We need to repent and receive God's forgiveness for us, and we need to forgive as God has forgiven us.

This is a story about reckless mercy, a father who is gracious and merciful to those who don't deserve it at all. May God give us faith in that mercy for us, and make us as merciful to others as He has been toward us.

Amen.

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