

## **“The Merciful Father”**

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

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I'd like for all the adults in the room to imagine and remember what it was like being a small child again. For all you small children, just be yourselves. And while you are remembering that state of “innocence,” I'd like you to think of a time when you did something utterly reprehensible, something that you simply knew immediately was going to bring “the hammer down” on you. And, for most of us, I think, we weren't afraid of our mothers and their fiery wrath, but we wanted no part of what we knew dad was bringing when he got home. Our Gospel lesson highlights a son, whom we usually refer to as “the prodigal son,” and he has gone completely astray, wandered off into debauchery, lust, and greed, and has hit “rock bottom.” The most typical reaction in these cases is one of, “He got what was coming to him,” or, “It's his own fault, and, man, his dad is gonna be seriously fed up with him if he shows his face at home again.”

But what is the reaction of the father in our text? Is it one of anger, sorrow, and wrath for the misdeeds of his son? He certainly is well within his rights to hold those things against him after the pain it caused him. And yet, when his son returns in humble repentance and sorrow for his sins, rather than recounting his sins and taking his pound of flesh for each one of them, the father grants him mercy and welcomes him home with a great feast. This parable is often viewed from the perspective of the prodigal son, the one who was lost and came back home to his rightful place. But without the love of his merciful father, nothing he did to come home would have mattered. So, we look at this parable in that light this morning, from the perspective of the one who grants forgiveness, restores life, and brings salvation, from the perspective of the merciful father.

Our God, our heavenly Father, has every right to hold our transgressions against us. We are rebellious, sinful children who deserve nothing more than the condemnation of hell, to be cast into the pit of eternal fire. This is the lot of all who are descended from Adam (which is everyone) and that is the battle that we fight in this life. Because of the sin of our first parents, we must contend with our sinful flesh, and this is a battle that will never end while we walk this earth. But as those who are in the faith, those who have been blessed with the gift of the faith of Abraham, we are prepared for this battle. We have been given the necessary tools to fight it, and those tools are the Law and the Gospel.

The mercy of our Father is on full display with His gift of Law and Gospel. Though we are deserving of only His wrath, His grace is showered upon us in these gifts for the sake of Christ. That is why we teach so adamantly the proper distinction between the two. Because if we misuse these tools or muddy the waters and blur the lines between them, then we will end up on a path that leads right back to the damnation from which the Lord has died to save us. God gave us His Law through Moses on Sinai, but it has also been “written on our hearts,” as Paul says in Romans 2:15. The Law of God is absolute, and it is perfect. And that is why we cannot keep it.

We are imperfect beings, seeking to keep a perfect Law, and that ends only in failure. We end up going out on our own with our inheritance, like the prodigal son in our parable this morning, and we squander it as one who misunderstands its purpose for us. The Law is not given to us to make this life better, nor is it given to us as something that we are able to keep. God did not send down His Law knowing that the Israelites would be able to keep it. In fact, even as He gave the Law to Moses, the people were making a golden calf, dancing, and proclaiming, as Moses records in Exodus 32, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” God knew as He gave it, that we were imperfect people that had no hope of keeping His perfect Law.

But our Father is merciful, and in His mercy, He promised in Genesis 3:15, to send the seed of the woman to crush the serpent’s head. He would send the Messiah to fulfill the Law in every aspect, and then impute that perfect righteousness to us for the sake of His Son. And more than that, He would adopt as sons, making us equal with His only begotten Son according to His humanity, that we might have eternal life. That love which our Father has for us is beyond our understanding. But that is the Gospel—the Gospel is Christ Jesus and Him crucified for our salvation. That is why we proclaim as Paul tells us in our Epistle lesson from 1 Corinthians 1:23, “but we preach Christ crucified.” His death has redeemed the world, and brought us into a state of grace before our righteous God in heaven.

Only according to that blessed truth can we stand before the Father and be judged among the sheep and not the goats. Without Christ’s vicarious atonement, His substitutionary sacrifice, we would be condemned along with the unbelieving world. But we are not condemned. We are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. That truth carries us through our life of faith, and by that gift of the Holy Spirit, we use the Law that God has given us to guard the promise of eternal life that is ours for Jesus’ sake. Though we fail time and again to keep the Law and abide by our Father’s expectations for His people, He still loves us. This perfect love is pictured for us in our Old Testament lesson from the prophet Isaiah. He bids the people of God to say, “I will give thanks to

You, O Lord, for though You were angry with me, Your anger turned away, that You might comfort me. Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and He has become my salvation.”

Our Father’s righteous anger is justified against us, and yet He turns His anger away from His dear children. He is our salvation, our strength and our song, in Jesus Christ who has come to redeem the world. That is the blessed truth of this parable in our Gospel lesson. Because of that which is outside of us, because of the gift of faith in Jesus and for His sake, we are declared justified and worthy to come home. Our filth and unrighteous deeds would have us cast out otherwise. And so, we appeal to the mercy of our Father, as the son in our Gospel lesson, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” Sounds awfully familiar, doesn’t it?

We appeal in repentance to the mercy of our Father because of His great love for us. It seems stereotypical, but nothing describes the love of our Father better than the very well-known John 3:16. And though it has been taken to so many lengths and abused beyond measure by “mainstream Christianity,” it still is the truth of God’s Word to show the love He has for us and the reason why we repent and seek His forgiveness. But what is often left out when people pull this one out to quote it and justify certain things, is the next 2 verses that follow which cannot be separated from it. The words of Jesus, from John 3:16-18:

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because He has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

It is in His name, and on account of His will that all men would be saved that we have salvation. The Father has sent His Son into the world to redeem us all, and those who have rejected Him, like those He sought to gather under His wings in Luke 13:34, will face the wrath of God alone.

That is the comfort and blessed truth that we must confess with all our strength. That Jesus Christ has come into the world to redeem us by dying the death that we deserve. He took our sins upon Himself as He went to the cross and bled and died that we might have eternal life and never perish. And as we walk this earth and live out our faith, He has given us the means to receive forgiveness and comfort in the face of evil

and despair. In His Holy Supper, He gives us His very body and blood, that we may eat and drink of that which has saved us, for the forgiveness of all of our sins. We hear the Word of forgiveness proclaimed to us by the mouth of His undershepherd, and are called sons according to the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This story told by our Lord and Savior is one of repentance, yes, but moreover it is one of salvation. It is a story that represents the loving kindness of our heavenly Father, who says to His people through the prophet in Jeremiah 31:34, “For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” On account of Christ Jesus and the faith which we have by His gracious gift, we have been set free from the bondage of sin, and the stain which it would leave upon us if left alone. The merciful Father, our merciful Father in heaven, has put our sins as far from Himself as the east is from the west, as it says in Psalm 103:12, and that is what this parable is about. It is about the reality that for those who are in the faith there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!

We stand before our loving Father, despite the errors of our ways and the misuse of His gifts, and we are welcomed with open arm because of what Christ has done for us. We have been adopted as sons and accepted into the kingdom of God because Jesus has done all that is necessary to satisfy the righteous wrath of our Father. There is no longer any need for it. He has only steadfast love, faithfulness, and forgiveness for you, for me, and for all of His people. The people of God will often go astray. We are sinful beings who cannot help but lose the battle with our Old Adam all the time. But as we battle that old man, and drown him in the memory of our baptisms, we can stand before our Father in righteous humility, to receive the blessed gift of forgiveness which he freely gives to us on account of His only begotten Son. And as we come to partake of His Holy Supper which He has instituted for the purpose of conveying that forgiveness, receive the love of your merciful Father, who loves you and will care for you no matter the struggles you have in this life. For He is unwavering in His faithfulness to you, because in Christ Jesus, our Lord, you too are counted among His sons. Amen.