

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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THE HEART OF THE FATHER

Luke 15:1-2, 11-24

Have you heard the song “Tie a Yellow Ribbon ’Round the Old Oak Tree?” Sung by Tony Orlando and Dawn, the tune hit the charts way back in 1973 – that was when I was in high school.

The song is about a man who was in prison. He served his time and is now on a bus, coming home. He admits that the woman who once loved him has every right to reject him. He knows he’s to blame. So he wrote to tell her that if she forgives him, she should “tie a yellow ribbon ’round the old oak tree.” If there’s no yellow ribbon, he’ll stay on the bus and just ride on by. As the miles roll by, all the man thinks about is that old oak tree. When he gets home, will there be a yellow ribbon on it?

If you know the song, you’ll remember that it ends in triumph with the entire busload of people cheering. The man sees not just one ribbon, but a hundred yellow ribbons on that old tree! His lover not only forgives him, but she enthusiastically welcomes him home.

Like the man on the bus, we may wonder what’s ahead. We know our own hearts – our own behaviors and attitudes – and we wonder if God really forgives us. What is really in His heart when He thinks about us?

Today and next week, we’re going to look at an old and familiar story. Charles Dickens called it the greatest short story ever written. We know it as the “Parable of the Prodigal Son.”

Jesus told it in the last months of His life. He’s on His way to Jerusalem, to die on the cross as a perfect sacrifice for sin and then, three days later to rise from the dead. For three years, He’s traveled across the Holy Land preparing for that moment, calling men and women to come to Him through repentance and faith.

You’ll notice that I began the passage with the first couple of verses in chapter 15. I want you to get an idea of the audience to whom Jesus was talking. First, He was with “tax collectors and sinners.” Those are the outcasts of society, the ones who broke all the rules of decent behavior – the criminals, prostitutes, corrupt officials who collected money for the Romans and skimmed a little (or a lot) off the top for themselves. They were despised and hated, but they are the ones with whom Jesus hangs out.

There are also Pharisees and teachers of the Law – the religious elite, careful to obey all the rules. They’re self-righteous. And they didn’t like Jesus. They condemned Him for associating with such people, believing that a man of God would never do such a shameful thing. But they don’t really understand the heart of God.

So Jesus tells this parable of the prodigal son.

Actually, the story is one of three parables in this chapter. They all make the same point. In verses 3-7, a shepherd, who has a hundred sheep, rejoices when he discovers the one lost lamb he was looking for. Then a woman who lost a valuable coin delights when she finds it. These parables, along with the prodigal son, illustrate the heart of the Father. They show us what really brings God joy.

So the Parable of the Prodigal Son is more about what the Father is like than the two sons. It's about repentance and faith, it's about forgiveness, but most of all it's about the heart of God. Let's dig in and see what we can learn.

THE SHAME AND CONSEQUENCES OF SIN

The parable begins with the younger son who has a rather impetuous request: "Father, give me my share of the estate." It's really a shameful demand, one that dishonored his father. You see, the Jewish culture was one of honor, especially honoring one's parents. Remember the Fifth Commandment, "Honor your father and mother." To ask for your share of the estate while the father was still alive and apparently in good health was unthinkable. It was an insult.

The property and wealth was normally distributed after the patriarch of the family had died. But if the father's assets were given early, the action was initiated by the father, not the son. And the management of the property and its income was left to the father until he was too old to work. And then, the estate was used to provide for the parents. It was a matter of honor.

But the father concedes to his son's wishes and generously divides the estate. According to Mosaic Law, one-third went to the younger son and two-thirds to the elder.

Then the young man – he was probably 19 or 20 – "got together all he had" and went to a distant country. That means he sold the property and went away with the cash. He abdicated his responsibility to honor his parents and sustain them in their old age. It was as if he said "I don't want anything to do with you. You are in the way of my plans and I wish you were dead!"

Now the normal action of the father would be to conduct a funeral. The whole village would join in. The son rejected his family, the community, his religion, God. To them, he was a dead man.

That's what sin does. Scripture tells us that we were dead in our transgressions and sins. Like the prodigal and his father, our relationship with God is severed and must be restored.

And look where this rebellious, impetuous, sinful attitude took him. He set off to a distant country and squandered his inheritance on wild living. He threw his money away on stuff like booze, gambling, and prostitutes. The word "prodigal" means someone who is wasteful, senselessly extravagant, self-indulgent. No responsibility, no accountability, no care for anything except pleasing yourself.

But the money ran out! And then, disaster struck. The land faced a severe famine. Not just a minor economic collapse, but a really bad crisis where almost everyone was poor and hungry. No one was willing to give him anything to eat.

So, this younger son had nothing in a land that had nothing. He became a beggar and hired himself out to a citizen of the country. And all the man could do was let him feed the pigs.

Now remember that this young man was Jewish. According to Old Testament law, pigs were unclean. Eating, feeding, touching dirty swine was abhorrent to any self-respecting Jew. But this guy has sunk right to the bottom and has lost all respect. He's not on skid row, he's gone right through it!

It's so bad that he even hoped he could eat the pods that he was feeding the pigs. These were bitter black berries that were boiled down and the pulp was thrown to the pigs. The young man is very likely competing with the hogs to get at some of their slop. It's a gross picture.

Friends, this is life at its lowest. That's the point Jesus is making. Rebellion has reaped its ugly consequences. The son left the comfort of a loving father and has sunk to the lowest depths possible. Your sin and mine doesn't always lead to calamity this bad. But it always leads to death and separation from God. The parable shows just how far sin can take us and how gracious the Father really is.

REPENTANCE AND THE FATHER'S HEART

It took a while before the young man came to his senses, but he does. He remembered the comforts of home. He remembered the generosity of his father, a man who paid his hired men more than what was required by law. These hired men are poor day-laborers who look for employment each day so they can buy food for their table. But the father pays well, more than they need to survive. They may even be able to put a little away. No wonder the son wants to go home!

This is the beginning point of repentance. The prodigal realizes he has sinned against God and his father. He understands that the predicament he's in is his own doing. It's his own fault. He doesn't blame anybody else, he doesn't make excuses. He owns up to his wrong and would rather face the discipline of his father than continue the life he is in.

So this young man formulates a plan. He will apologize and ask to become a hired servant. Since his father's workers earned a little extra, maybe he could get the same wage, save up and eventually pay back his dad. With a lot of effort, some day – just maybe – he might be restored to his position as a son. But he didn't understand the heart of his father.

Look at the father's reaction. The old man was moved with compassion. He runs to his son. Middle eastern patriarchs don't run! Children, women, slaves run. But not men who are owners of great estates. To pull up your robe, expose your legs and dash over to someone else was demeaning, embarrassing. But the father ran to his son. Why do you think he did that?

Most fathers would let the son wait and endure the rebuke and ridicule of the townsfolk, probably for a few days. The boy had shamed his father and his community. They declared him dead – not unlike the way we hear Muslims treat those who convert to Christianity. The son would have faced the shame and humiliation and perhaps some violence in the village – unless the father got there first, protected his son and endured the shame for him. But that would be unthinkable. Fathers don't do that.

There is an ancient Asian legend that tells of a rich man who had a wild and rebellious son:

The son got involved with some criminals in his village who persuaded him to join them in a heist of his father's money. His friends fled but he got caught to face the guilt of the crime alone. He betrayed the trust of his father and brought public dishonor.

Broken and repentant, he went to his father for forgiveness. It was granted. The father called the family together for a banquet. When all had enjoyed the feast, the father stood and lifted his cup for a toast. But, as the son drank, he grabbed his throat and fell lifeless across the table. The son had been poisoned. The father, with ceremonial dignity nodded to the guests who silently left the banquet hall. All was now put right. The son had paid the price of his pardon with poison. Honor had been restored.

The pardon of the prodigal's father is much different, isn't it?. He embraces and kisses his son! What kind of love is this that causes a father to endure the shame that ought to be poured out on the rebellious son? The son who had wished him dead?

But isn't that just what our heavenly Father did? Because His heart is to seek and save the lost, He sent His son, Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity! God came down, humbled Himself and bore our shame. In this parable, Jesus wants us to see His Father's heart as one who seeks and saves the lost.

But notice something else. Something is missing in verse 21. After being overwhelmed by his father's love, the prodigal does not ask to be a hired servant! He admits his unworthiness. He acknowledges his sin against God and his rebellious behavior toward his dad. But no longer does he think he has to earn his father's love. That's where faith comes in.

You see, it was all grace. There was no action or deed required to gain the Father's love. Forgiveness and restoration were not something he could work on over time. The problem wasn't about the money, it was about the relationship – the love of the son for his father. Restoring that relationship depended not simply on the repentance of the son, but on the heart of a father who was willing to save a lost son.

Think about our own misconceptions for a moment. Our culture rewards human effort and punishes failure. We might be tempted to think that God might reject us if we don't add actions to our faith. But that's not biblical. That's not grace. Good works come after we are forgiven and restored by a gracious God. Listen to these words from Ephesians 2:8-10:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

Doing good, living a godly lifestyle, avoiding sin. These are the natural responses of gratitude to a father's love. That's why the prodigal is restored as a son. As a son, he would now be responsible, accountable, he would care about others and honor his father and mother.

But make no mistake about it, true repentance does not mean we say we're sorry to God and then try to gain His favor by being good. If you think that, you misunderstand the heart of the Father. God

accepts us because He chooses to. He does so because in the Cross of Jesus Christ He has endured the shame and guilt that you and I deserve.

Look at how the father restores the son's position. He gives a robe, a ring and sandals to demonstrate to everyone that the younger son has been restored. He has a celebration because the son once dead is now alive!

The symbolism here is remarkable. It's the best robe, the most important one. The one that belongs to the father, worn only on special occasions. Some day it will be passed down to the older son to wear on his wedding day. But today, the father uses it to clothe the dirty, filthy, pig-stained body of his younger son.

Those of us who put saving faith in Christ, when we are adopted into His family, when we become sons and daughters of God, our dirty, filthy sin-stained souls were clothed with the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ.

The father puts a ring on his son's finger, demonstrating that he has all the authority, privilege – and responsibility – of a son. Sandals are put on his feet, a luxury afforded only to the children of the master. Slaves went barefoot. By these actions the father has restored everything in the relationship that the son had lost – all the love, respect and honor that a son enjoys has now been given back.

So often we think that forgiveness does not mean full restoration, that when we sin against God or other people that somehow we have to demonstrate by our actions that we deserve forgiveness before trust and respect in a relationship can be restored. We have to prove ourselves and by our deeds “buy back” the relationship we once had.

But that's not grace. That's not what happened here. The son didn't earn trust and respect. The father gave it. That's the heart of the father. If you think that you have to prove yourself to regain trust and acceptance, you are confused about the nature of real repentance and forgiveness. And you misunderstand God's love. He takes great joy in seeking and saving the lost. He rejoices in restoring all of us He brings to repentance.

In our parable, the father celebrates. He has the fattened calf slaughtered for a great feast. That was a big deal. In those days, folks normally didn't eat meat at a meal. Steak dinners were reserved for festive occasions, really big, important events like a wedding or the visit of a king. The whole village would be invited. It was a great affair. A celebration. A dead son has come back to life!

CONCLUSION

Now that's the heart of our heavenly Father on display. God takes great joy in bringing sinners to repentance. In Christ, He endured the shame and humiliation that you and I deserve. And when we return to Him, He is thrilled! Up in verse 10 it says, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. That's what excites God!

So what can we learn from this story? All of us fail God, we rebel against His will and want to go our own way. Maybe not as dramatic as the Prodigal Son. But when we do, even for a moment, we are saying in effect, "Father, you are in the way of my plans and I wish you were dead!"

A friend once told me, "What God desires most from us is confession." I think he's right.

When we know the heart of the Father, we know He takes joy in our repentance.

When we know the heart of the Father, we return to Him, not expecting to earn His favor but anticipating His grace.

When we know the heart of the Father, we respond in gratitude and celebration

What is the heart of the Father? To seek and save those who are lost.