

A Tale of Two Sons: With A Never Heard Before Surprise Ending to the Parable of the Prodigal Son (VCY Rally)

sermonaudio.com

By Pastor John MacArthur

Bible Text: Luke 15:1-32

Preached on: Tuesday, September 9, 2008

Grace Community Church

P.O. Box 10608

San Antonio, TX 78210

Website: www.gccsatx.com

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/gcc

Tonight it is a real joy to have John MacArthur with us in person and I want you to give him a good old warm Milwaukee welcome as he comes to share ministry with us. Let's say "Hi!" to John.

Thank you. Thank you.

Let's turn to the Word of God.

Now, it is always hard, again, when you come in from outer space and just plop in the middle of a place to know what to talk about, but there was something that is ringing in my heart because it is going to be my next book I think. I am trying to slow down that process a little bit. And so I want you to turn to Luke 15.

I am preaching through Luke. I am now in chapter 18 in my eighth year in Luke. Now wait a minute. Slower is better than faster. Deeper is better than shallower. Longer is better than shorter because every Word of God is pure. "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable." I can't force myself to leave anything out.

But, tonight anyway, I am going to condense what I taught our church a few months ago in the 15th chapter of Luke. By the way I think I will finish Luke in about two to three years and I will have probably spent about 10 years in Luke. And then when I am done with Luke I am going right back to Mark. I figure five years in Mark and I will have finished the whole New Testament and I can continue to work on the commentary series.

But in Luke 15 there is a familiar story about a father who had two sons. We call it the prodigal son. That is really not a good title for the story because it is not primarily a story about the prodigal son. In fact, there are two sons in the story. But more importantly it is a story about the father.

If you want to rename it you could call it the forgiving father. Or better yet let's just call it the joy of God because that is really what it is about. Luke chapter 15.

And in this 15th chapter there are three parties, three over the top expressions of rejoicing, three great celebrations. The first one comes out of a story that Jesus tells from verses three to seven about a man who lost one of his hundred sheep, went out and found that sheep and brought it back and called all of his neighbors to have a party and to celebrate because he had found the sheep that was lost. Everybody understood that story because sheep had great value for their wool and the party was a celebration of the shepherd's success in finding the sheep.

And then Jesus tells another story about a woman who lost one of 10 coins. Typically in ancient days people would put their fortune in a very personal place around their neck and under garments where it could be safe by being on their person and she probably had what amounted to a family fortune for a Middle Eastern peasant women around her neck and somehow lost one of those coins and, of course, went through the hard effort of searching everywhere in the dusty house until she had found the coin. And she, too, calls her friends and they have a celebration of joy because the lost coin had been found.

And in the third story there is a son who is lost and a son who is found—or, better yet, a son who is, for all intents and purposes dead and who is brought back to life again in the language of the story itself—and the father puts on a celebration, invites the entire village to come to the party.

These are three great parties, three great celebrations and they illustrate, obviously, the joy of God and that becomes very clear, for example, in applying the first parable in verse seven.

Jesus says, “I tell you that in the same manner as the celebration over the sheep, in the same manner there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 who need no repentance because they deem themselves righteous.”

And in verse 10, the second parable is applied, “In the same way I tell you there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

And in the third story there is one sinner who repents and there is a subsequent party and therefore the same conclusion can be drawn. This is about three parties all symbolizing one great celebration in heaven over one sinner who repents.

Now Scripture is very clear that God has no joy in the death of the wicked. That we are told three times in the prophet Ezekiel. “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked.”

If you look at the 19th chapter Luke you will see Jesus looking over the city of Jerusalem and weeping over it.

If you read the 13th chapter of Jeremiah you find Jeremiah crying the tears of God over the desolation of the people of Israel who are about to come under divine judgment.

God has no joy in the judgment of sinners, but does find his joy in the salvation of sinners.

In Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses nine and 10 we read this. “For the Lord your God will rejoice over you if you obey the voice of the Lord your God to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in the book of the law.”

Well, how are you ever going to do that in your own strength? Well, you can't do it in your own strength. So the next verse says, “If you turn to the Lord God with all your heart and with all your soul.” God will rejoice over you when you give your heart to him and out of that become obedient.

In Isaiah 62:5 it says, defining the nature of God's joy as a bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall God rejoice over you.

Now, men, you look back at your wedding day as the highlight of your life up to that point, the anticipation, the thrill, the joy of taking your bride, that is the pinnacle of human emotion. And God says of himself that he has over the repentant sinner the joy of a bridegroom taking the bride of his love.

This is not some kind of minimal joy. This is not some kind of mid level joy. This is the high point of joy. God borrows an expression from an experience that we all know very well. It even goes further than that.

Zephaniah the prophet, chapter three, verses 16 and 17 says, “The Lord your God is in your midst. He will rejoice over you with shouts.” God has so much joy that he yells.

Now this is a little bit different for us, isn't it? We don't think of God as wildly, over the top hollering because he is so full of joy. We think about God a serious and somber and perhaps even morose and weighted down with massive awareness of the wretchedness of sin and its presence in his universe and of all those rebels who fight against him and dishonor his name we would think of him as consumed and burdened with that and maybe now and then a sort of momentary smile might cross his anthropomorphic lips. But we don't think of God as having a party. We don't think of God as knowing the exhilarating joy of the most wonderful anticipated and happy human experience. And we certainly don't think of God as yelling at the top of his divine voice because he is so joyful. But that is what Scripture says.

Where does God get this joy? He gets it when one sinner repents. That is what it says, verse seven, one sinner repents.

Verse 10, one sinner who repents.

Can I just give you a little insight here? God isn't waiting to start the party when 1000 people are saved. He is not waiting to start the party when 100 people are saved. You want to know the truth? The party goes on all the time because every moment of time

somebody is coming into his kingdom. It is a non stop celebration. And what we will do when we are in heaven in the new heaven and the new earth is eternally celebrate the completion of his saving work.

I have studied that the New Testament and the Old Testament all these years. I have written and preached many, many times on the theme of heaven. I have a book on heaven. I autographed one earlier tonight and I will tell you that the consummate way to understand heaven is to simply sum it up in that small, three letter word, joy, the joy of God which is what verses seven and 10 are talking about, not the joy of the angels, the joy of God in the presence of the angels. The joy emanates from him and it bounces off the angels and it bounces off the glorified saints. It is the defining reality of heaven, boundless, unmitigated, unrestrained, full, complete joy. And all of it is directed at God for the amazing work of redemption.

Now the Pharisees, they thought they knew God, the Pharisees and the scribes. The scribes, by the way, were the theologians. The Pharisees were the practical purveyors of their religious system, but the brain trust were the scribes. They did the work. They were the lawyers. They dug in and tried to understand the law. They crafted the foundational theology which the Pharisees then taught. And the Pharisees were the most influential people religiously in the land of Israel. They basically operated in the synagogues and everywhere where there were 12 men you could have a synagogue. So every town and village had synagogues. And through that system of synagogues Pharisaic religion had basically dominance in the land of Israel. The Sadducees were religious liberals who ran the temple. They were basically hated by the people and they were a small influence theologically.

The Pharisees, they were the purveyors of the religion that dominated the land of Israel at the time of Jesus and had for a long time. And the Pharisees believed that they knew God. They knew God intimately. They knew God well. They understood his truth. They represented him. He knew them.

And the task of Jesus in his ministry was to destroy that illusion, to show the people and the Pharisees that they did not know God. And that is what is going on in this chapter.

And to prove they didn't know God let's go back to verse one.

“All the tax gatherers and the sinners were coming near to him to listen.” This is speaking of Jesus. Tax collectors, they were the lowest of the low, the scum of society in Israel because the Romans were an occupying, idolatrous, pagan, blasphemous presence. And these tax gatherers were Jews who purchased a tax franchise and they had a certain amount they had to pay to Rome. But beyond that they could extort anything they wanted out of their own people. They were the traitors of their nation who paid money to Rome, extracted from the Jewish people and extracted a lot more to become filthy rich. Probably the best known one is Zacchaeus who, when he was converted, paid back what he had virtually stolen four fold.

That is what they did.

Now these people aren't going to cough up this money just because you ask and so tax collectors were surrounded by thugs and muggers and strong armed criminals and, of course, all of the rest of the riff raff of society including the harlots and the prostitutes and all the rest of the low lifes. They were sort of the street mafia, all the gang bangers associated with the tax collectors to do their dirty work by any means.

But it was those people who kept coming to Jesus.

You remember if you look back at the end of chapter 14 it closes with this line. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." And the people who had ears and were willing to hear were these people, tax gatherers and the assorted sinners that collected around them like debris. They were coming near him to listen to him.

And this outraged the religious elite, the Pharisees and the scribes so in verse two both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, murmur, complain. Here was their complaint. "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

In Middle Eastern culture then and in Middle Eastern culture now if you eat with somebody at your table you affirm them. This was proof positive in their mind that Jesus was satanic.

You remember they said about him that he does what he does by the power of Beelzebub. What convinced them of that? It wasn't the miracles. Healing sick people, raising dead people, making lame people walk, blind people see and deaf people hear is a good thing. Feeding the hungry, calming a storm, banishing illness and disease from the land of Israel during the duration of his ministry, you don't necessarily attribute that to Satan, why do you come up with this conclusion that he does what he does by the power of Satan? And the primary and compelling reason was that he associated himself so readily and so comfortably with that category of people that the religious elite knew belonged to the devil. He suffered by his companions.

And they brought it up again and again and again. And early in Luke he said to them on one occasion, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

So they think they represent God.

By the way, they were so self righteous that they identified this class people. They had a name *am haritz*, *am haritz*. They were unclean. And if you had a low life person cleaning your house, for example—this is in rabbinic law—the minute that person stopped working to rest your house became unclean. So you needed to hire two of them so that one was working while one was resting. They went so far, as recorded in the Talmud, as to say, "Do not go near those people even so much as to teach them the law of God."

Pharisaic religion was anti evangelistic. They wanted nothing to do with those people. And Jesus wanted everything to do with those people.

So Jesus said, “You think you represent God, huh? And you think I represent Satan. Let me tell you about God. God rejoices when the lost are found.”

And that leads him to this third story starting in verse 11.

That was all introduction. You can start timing me now. But I have got to give you a few things to think about.

Let me just give you a little hint. If you ever hear a preacher say, “We need to bring the Bible into modern time?” Translators think they need to do that, tamper with the text. “You don’t want to give people antiquated, old expositional messages. Got to be updated. We have got to bring the Bible into modern times.”

That is exactly opposite what you should do. You never want to bring the Bible into modern times. You want to take people back into ancient times. When you teach the Word of God you want to recreate the setting so the person is there, so the Bible comes through with its divine message in its original context. Anything less is robbing Scripture, snatching verses here and there to make them mean whatever they want. If you are going to retain the true meaning of the Scripture you have to go back into the original context.

And let me tell you something about the Bible. The meaning of the Scripture is the Scripture. Did you get that? That is not circular reasoning. The meaning of the Scripture is the Scripture. If you don’t get the meaning right you don’t have God’s Word. You may own a Bible. You don’t have God’s Word until you know what it means by what it says. And the meaning is in understanding the context.

Now Charles Dickens and Ralph Waldo Emerson called this story the greatest story ever written and they were pretty good at some stories, too. But it is more than just a great story. And to understand it I want to take you back, ok?

Just kind of, everybody, we are going to go back in time. Just imagine yourself living in a Middle Eastern peasant village. It wouldn’t be much different today in Arab culture in the Middle East or in some rural Jewish culture. I have been in Bedouin tents over there a number of times.

Just imagine yourself in a Middle Eastern peasant village because that is exactly where these people were and what they understood.

Now we got to go back because this makes the story unfold for us. One thing dominated, one thing dominated. Shame, honor, culture, shame, honor culture. That was the defining thing. Folks, it still is. Whatever is honorable you do as you pursue. You avoid at all

cost anything that brings shame on yourself or on your family. This is the way it has been and it still is.

We have a girl at the Master's College who is an Arab. She was a Muslim one year ago. She came to the United States. On her visit to the United States she came to Christ. She came to the Master's College. She was stunned. She was dramatically changed. She came to a Bible conference. She heard the Word of God taught, came to Christ, amazing story. She went back, walked in her house.

First of all, she was arrested when she went back. Her father was able to finagle her release. She went home. She just gave me this story a few weeks ago. She went to her home. Her mother was not there. Her father was not there. She walked in the house. Her uncle was there and he said to her—this just happened to her in November—you have brought so much shame on this family by your Christianity that in order to preserve the honor of this family you must die. And her uncle grabbed her, slammed her around in the kitchen against the wall until she fell to the ground. Picked up a chair and pummeled her and beat her bloody, separating her shoulder, separating her knee until someone came in the house and rescued her and got her some through kind of process—her father having some kind of pull with the government—onto an airplane and she is back here.

By the way, she told me she is studying. She is 18 and speaks three languages. She is studying Greek and Hebrew because she said there are only 200 Christians in her country and they don't have any tools and so she wants to translate. She asked me if she could have permission to translate the MacArthur Study Bible into Arabic. Can you imagine 25,000 footnotes by an 18 year old? I think she'll need some help.

It is not any different there now than it was in Jesus' day. Shame and honor is everything. You do what is honorable. You avoid what is shameful.

If you understand that, you understand this story because in this story Jesus describes the most shameful cast of characters ever devised. He made it all up. Jesus invented all these characters, three of them: a father and two sons. And they are all shameful. The younger son is shameful, the Father is shameful and the older son is shameful and everything is so shameful as to be bizarre and ridiculous and outrageous and unbelievable. It is a head shaking eye roller for the Pharisees.

“Come on,” they are saying. “This is impossible. No son would act like that. No father would act like that.”

Jesus paints extremes here and it is all based on that shame, honor perspective.

All right. Let's begin the story. It starts in verse 11 with a shameful request. And the first shameful character we meet is the younger son. And Jesus said, “A certain man had two sons: And the younger of them said to his father, Father,” that's nice, respectful, “give me the share of the estate that falls to me.”

We'll stop there.

You are out of rank, son. You are the younger son. What are you doing? The older son is the son who would be the only one who would have a right to make such a request, but no older son in his right mind would make such a request because you didn't get your inheritance until your father was what? Well, dead.

So to go to your father and say, "Could you please die," is outrageous conduct.

Even in this day in the Middle East the honor of the father dominates the culture. You don't do this. This is the first scandalous, shameful behavior. It is disrespectful. It is selfish. It is hateful. He wishes the father to be dead.

And he is not saying, "Look, dad, I have got some business skills. Kind of split this baby up here..."

And, by the way, the older brother would get two thirds if there were only two sons and the younger third because the older always got the greater amount so it would be a two-thirds one-third.

"Split this thing up and let me manage my third."

And it is a big estate. He has got servants. He has got hired men. He has got a fatted calf which would feed between two and 300 people. It is a big party so there is some wealth involved here. Plus he received enough of a fortune to go and spend it like mad in a foreign place as we will see.

So we are seeing a picture of wealth here. He is not saying, "I want my piece of it because I want to grow this wealth, I want to pour my own ideas into the family agricultural business and see what I can do with it." That is not what he is saying at all. He is saying very clearly this, "Give me the share of the estate that falls to me. Give me..."

In the Greek it is της ουσιας (tase ou-see-us), the stuff, the property, the goods. It is not saying, "I want to manage part of the inheritance." "I want my stuff and I can't wait till you're dead. I want nothing to do with this family. I want nothing to do with you. I want you out of the way. I don't want to wait any longer. I have desires. I have things I want to do. I want my freedom. I want my independence. I don't want any more accountability to you. I don't want any more restraint out of you. I don't want any more commands from you. Give me my stuff."

This is outrageous. This is a violation of everything that they know and think about in family relationships. And what would be expected by the Pharisees standing there or by anybody in a Middle Eastern culture, as soon as those words came out at young man's mouth the father would slap him silly. "You insolent son." And after slapping him across

the face he would then take him out and flog him publicly in the same way that that uncle took a chair to kill the girl.

Why? Because he had brought such dishonor on that father. The father must protect his honor at all cost.

But the shameful request leads to a shameful response. And if the request was shameful the response was even more shameful.

Verse 12. “And he divided his wealth between them.”

What?

This is where the Pharisees would say, “Whoa, whoa. No father would do that. You don’t give in to that kind of shameful attitude. You don’t give in to someone that is that insolent.”

But he did. He divided his wealth among them. He didn’t have to wait until he was dead. He split it up. He gave two-thirds to the older son, one-third to the younger. This is a father abandoning his own honor. This is a father taking on shame. This is ridiculous. This is a very, very dishonorable son, but this is a more dishonorable father. This is a weak willed father in the minds of the Pharisees. This is a father who is not protecting what must be protected. This is a silly kind of superficial love in their eyes.

And, by the way, where is the older brother here? He is purposely not in the story. Jesus doesn’t put him in the story here, but he should be in the story and that is another eye roller here because the older brother had a responsibility to protect his younger brother from stupid things and he knew about the division because he got his two-thirds. Why didn’t he stop this kind of insolent behavior by the younger brother and why didn’t he, of all things, do what the older son was committed to doing, protect the honor of his father.

It is just absurd. The whole thing is absurd. The younger son behaves in an absurd way, the father in an absurd way and the older brother in an absurd way. It is all shameful. And it gets worse.

We then come to a shameful rebellion.

Verse 13. “Not many days later...” Why don’t we stop there for a minute? Not many days later? “The younger son gathered everything together.”

How do you liquidate one-third of an estate that has accumulated for who knows how long in a family? How do you liquidate an entire estate in a few days? You are talking about land and animals, all that goes with it, a whole agrarian...how do you do that in a few days?

I'll tell you how you do that. You sell cheap, right? You discount. And, of course, somebody buying it is buying a future because they are not going to get it until the father is dead. He sells it cheap. He discounts, devalues this estate to turn it into cash. Cheap, fast sale at a high discount.

And he takes his money and he went on a journey into a distant country, left the land of Israel for a Gentile land. That's what a distant country was and Jews didn't go into distant countries and come back again without shaking the dust off their feet so they didn't bring any defiled Gentile dirt back into Israel. That was Pharisaic religion.

It gets worse. He did go into a distant country, a Gentile country, a pagan country, an idolatrous country and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Squandered means scattered or basically threw away. That is why he is called prodigal. The word means wasteful. He took his entire future, liquidated at a discount and then threw it away. It had taken generations to accumulate and he wasted it fast.

Loose living? What does that mean? Dissipated, debauched, behavior. And the older brother in verse 25 says he spent it on prostitutes.

This is one stupid guy, right? One stupid guy.

But up to now it is all in his control. Insolent, rebellious against his father, discounting the value of the wealth that his father had for him, winding up in a pagan, idolatrous blasphemous environment, throws it all away on sexual immorality. What a fool.

In fact, of all the sinners that Jesus ever portrayed in his parables, this guy is the most extreme.

Everything up to now under his control, but life is not always under your control and something happens that wasn't under his control. Jesus introduces in verse 14 when he had spent everything—perfect timing. He has got nothing left, a severe famine occurred in that country.

Oh, gasp. This is the worst possible scenario, the worst possible sinner in the worst possible scenario. He has got nothing left and there is a famine. We don't understand famine, but in ancient days famine is basically when you eat garbage and when there is no more garbage to eat you eat your sandals. And when there are no more sandals to eat you eat your animals that you can catch. And when there are no more animals that you can catch, you eat people like the famines described in the Old Testament where they were eating afterbirth and children.

This is life at the bottom, absolutely at the bottom. It gets worse.

Verse 15. he went and attached himself, κολληω (kol-lah'-o) in the Greek means to glue, stuck himself to somebody.

Have you ever been to the third world? I have been to a lot of third world countries and I have had a lot of those little beggar kids coming up and grabbing my coat and pulling my pant leg. I can't get rid of them. They flock. Calcutta India gets pretty scary when you have got about 25 of them pulling at everything, can't get rid of them with their little distended stomachs and thin necks.

That is what he did. He has got nothing left. He has got no dignity, nothing. He has got no friends. He has got no food. He is going to die. So he attaches himself to somebody, a beggar. And this guy, not with the purpose of paying him, but just to get rid of him—as becomes very clear—sent him into the fields to feed swine. Now the eyes really roll.

Jewish boys don't do any of this and they certainly don't hang around swine. This is beyond possibility. The Pharisee is saying, "This is so ridiculous. This is so extreme. Nobody could ever be in this bad of condition."

Well, you know what? When they sent him into the field to feed the swine he went. It was a pretense, though, because it says in verse 16 he was longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating and no one was giving anything to him.

The man wasn't going to pay him. He wasn't going to feed him. It was just a ploy to get rid of him. And he got out there and he has to eat what the pigs are eating. Now he is not only around the pigs, he is a pig. And, again, I can't tell you the outrage. This is so bizarre to the Middle Eastern Jewish mind.

Oh, by the way, he can't eat the carob pods. There is some interesting history on carob pods. Pigs can digest them. People can't. So a few forays into the carob pods with the pigs and he would have to stop because it would get so sick.

And they are saying, "No one possibly would end up a pig. What Jewish boy would ever do this? This is the worst possible sinner in the worst possible condition. It couldn't happen."

What is this about? I'll tell you what it is about. This is a picture of the reckless sinner. This is the most extreme, immoral, disrespectful, stupid, wasteful sinner ever portrayed by Jesus. This is a sinner in rebellion against God his Father. This is the sinner disdaining the goodness of God and the available inheritance. This is the sinner who hates God's person, who hates God's rule, who hates God's authority, who hates God's will, who shuns all responsibility, all accountability. This is the sinner who ends up in the street. This is the kind of sinner that kept coming to Jesus, the riff raff, the low life. This is the sinner that squanders every good thing. That's who this is. Sin is reckless evil. Sin is selfish indulgence. Sin brings destitution and it brings death. The freedom of the will is the most horrible bondage. He got what he wanted, the freedom of the will.

Sin looks for fulfillment outside and away from God and never finds it. It leaves the rebel sinner exhausted, empty, poor hungry, hopeless.

So Jesus invents the ultimate sinner.

Now not every sinner is that bad, right? Not every sinner is that bad. But when one is that bad it is pretty important to see how God treats him. Would you agree? Because how God treats the most extreme sinner is important for all the rest because it is he who can forgive the worst of the worst. That's important to know, isn't it?

So let's go to the fourth point, a shameful repentance.

Verse 17. When he came to his senses. Ah, finally a breath of sanity. He came to his senses. That's when repentance always starts when you make a true assessment of your condition.

He came to his senses and this is what he said. "How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread?"

Oh, I love that. I love that.

"How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread?"

You say, "What's such a big deal about that?"

Hey, I'll tell you. Hired men were day laborers, μισθιος (mis'-thee-os), a term referring to a day laborer. They didn't have a job. They didn't bore him to the family as servants. They weren't craftsmen and tradesmen. They were the very lowest of the low. They were the minimum wage guys. They were shoeless. They were the destitute and the poor. In the Old Testament law or the Mosaic law said you pay them at the end of every day because they set their hope on that. If they don't get that at the end of a day they can't eat.

So they were the people that stood around in the agora, they stood around in the village center. Those were the ones, you remember, that Jesus told the story about going into the town on the 6 AM in the morning and then at the third hour, the sixth hour, the ninth your and finally one hour, the 11th hour and taking them out to the harvest and then they all received the same pay. Well, those are the day laborers. They were the lowest on the socio economic ladder.

And guess what? This young man remembered that his father gave hired men more than enough. What does that mean? He remembered his father was generous. He remembered that his father had compassion on the poor. He remembered that his father was sympathetic. He remembered that his father was good. And that is the foundation of why he goes back,

[gap in audio]

...because he is going to have to eat crow big time. It is going to be humiliating to go back because when he goes back, according to Middle Eastern culture—and you can read some fascinating studies of this—when he goes back the minute he enters that village the whole village which has been dishonored by his behavior is going to take up the defense of that father's honor and they are going to heap scorn and ridicule and mockery and condemnation on that man. They are going to defend the honor of that village and that landowner by heaping scorn on that son and he knows that.

In fact, in most cases he would have to sit in the village for days while children mocked him and adults mocked him and maybe after days of taking the scorn that he deserved, the father might grant him an audience at which point he would allow him to kiss his feet or his hand and come no closer than that. And then he would publicly whip that boy before the whole village to return some honor to himself after which he would lay out the terms of restitution and there would never be reconciliation until there had been restitution.

That is how it is in a legalistic system. You earn your way back and restitution would have been pretty simple. You earn back exactly what you cost the family. Then maybe after years and years

of working at the wage, the minimum wage, maybe then when you have made full restitution the father might grant you reconciliation. He knows that. He knows going back is going to be embarrassing, humiliating, agonizing and hard.

But he says in the end of verse 17, “I am dying. What’s my option? I am dying. If I want to live I have to go back. And this much I know. My father is compassionate and my father is good and my father is generous.”

Verse 18. “I will get up out of the pig slop. I will go to my father and I will say to him, ‘Father,’” respectful, “‘I have sinned against heaven or better I have sinned as high as heaven. I have piled up my sins as high heaven and you have seen it.’” Implication that the word had come back.

“I am no longer,” verse 19, “worthy to be called your son. I am not asking to be a son. I am not asking that at all.”

And, by the way, when he left there would have been a funeral in the family. They would have held a funeral for him. He was as good as dead.

“So I am not asking to be back in the family. I am not asking to be a son. Just make me one of your hired men. Let me earn back through minimum wage for as many years as it takes what I have lost.”

You see, that is all he knew because, hey, they were in a legalistic system where you earn your way to God. Here is the sinner come to desperation. Here is the sinner who comes to the end of his life. “I am going to die,” no other place to turn. “I have got to go to the one I know is good.” And no matter what it costs me I will work as long as it takes to live.”

It is reminiscent of Matthew 18 where the man who owed the unpayable debt came back when the king called him in. The king said, “You owe me this unpayable debt.”

Now, remember what he said?

“I will pay it all back.”

That is the culture. That is the culture in which legalism exists. That is all the religions of the world except the true gospel. They are all systems of works. You earn your way to God. You get reconciliation at the end of restitution.

And, you know, for the first time the Pharisees are saying, “Well, it is about time somebody did something sensible here. This whole thing has been so bizarre. This is the first honorable thing this guy has done. He is going to go back and earn it all.”

And so in verse 20 he got up and he came to his father. He is on the way back stinking like pigs, gaunt, hungry, near death, stinking, wretched, foul sinner, commiserating with the wretched harlots of his foreign country. He comes back. You can imagine what he expected and what he should have gotten, rebuke, scorn, mockery condemnation. He expects it as he comes down through the dust toward that Middle Eastern village and toward the entrance which would be where the first couple of little houses were.

And then the story takes an amazing turn. But while he was still a long way off, he hadn’t reached the village yet. Really important. His father saw him.

What does that tell you? His father was what? Looking. He was looking and he saw him. And listen to this. He felt compassion for him.

“Oh, no,” the Pharisees say. “This guy is hopeless. Come on. How about a little anger, right? How about some tough love. This guy is just weak. He felt compassion, huh?”

Yeah, he did.

What does compassion mean? He felt in his own heart the pain of his lost son and then, amazing, he ran. See that? It’s a Greek word that means sprint. Middle Eastern noblemen don’t sprint. Old men don’t sprint. Middle Eastern noblemen don’t run. They glide like a sort of Arabic moon walk.

This is not dignified.

I read some fascinating material on this written by Kenneth Bailey who lived for many years in the Middle East and studied all the ways. If you look at the Middle Eastern garb today, you see it on the news all the time, the Arabic culture. All the robes go clear to the ground and it is a shame upon any man, certainly any woman, but also any man to show any part of his legs. First of all you don’t run. It is not dignified to run. Secondly, you don’t sprint which is the same word of someone who ran a race. Here comes the father at the high point of his house looking down the dusty road. He sees his stinking sinful son coming. Down out of there he comes and at full speed runs through the middle of town.

In order to do that he has to pull up his robe.

Do you know there is an Arabic word for robe [?]. Do you know what it means? That which brings me honor.

If you know anything about the Middle Eastern culture you know that covering is where the honor lies and it is dishonorable to uncover anything. You see these women with only their eyes.

But the father pulls up his [?]. Yikes. And he is running at full speed. This is even embarrassing. You don’t want to be running through town with your robe up.

And then in so doing—do you follow this? The father shifts the shame from the son to whom? To himself. See the picture here? The father is the seeker. And the father comes down and he comes all the way down to the dusty street of our town and he runs at full speed and takes the scorn and the shame on himself that is due the sinner. And when he gets to the sinner he gets to the sinner before the sinner gets to the village, before the condemnation can begin he gets to him and look what he did...And embraced him.

That’s a sign. It is a sign of full reconciliation.

“What a minute? Where is the restitution?”

Forget it. There is no restitution. Full reconciliation. Why? Because he came with a penitent heart understanding that he was coming to a good, compassionate, forgiving father.

He embraced him, that pig stinking sinner.

And then it says he kissed him and the Greek says he kissed him and kissed him and kissed him and kissed him and kissed him and kissed him all over the head, just kept kissing him and kissing him. Yeah.

Have you ever had a picture of God like that? That's bizarre, isn't it?

Wait a minute. God is high and exalted. He is. But he condescended to come all the way down into our dusty world and bring shame on himself to run through our town to take the shame upon himself that was due to us and he embraces the penitent sinner and kisses him all over his head.

Did you ever see that picture of God before?

And he is saying to the Pharisees, "If that is not your God, then you don't know God. You just think you do."

The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.

Well, wait a minute. What should have been done? He should have been scorned. He should have been slapped. He should have been beaten. He should have been given an audience with his father at a distance and then he should have been set on a course to work off all his debt.

No.

There is one word for this action. Are you ready for it? Grace. And guess what? Legalists have no category for grace. It makes them mad. It makes them angry.

Oh, by the way, when he gave this speech—remember he rehearsed the speech back in verses 18 and 19. "I'll go to my father. I will say to him, 'I have sinned against heaven in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired men.'"

That was the religious system. I'll earn my reconciliation. But when he gets back after he has been embraced and kissed all over his head the son does give his speech. He says, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son...period."

What does he leave out? What does he leave out? "Make me one of your hired men."

Why? Moot point. He doesn't have to work it off. He understood he had just received grace, laving over the top grace.

Now this is commensurate with God rejoicing over one sinner who repents and God's joy being like the joy of a bridegroom on his wedding day and God's joy being so great that he just yelled across infinite heaven.

The boy is given reconciliation immediately, restoration and forgiveness and has nothing to earn. He came with a rabbinic idea, a Jewish idea, a legalistic idea, a typical religious idea that you earn your way to God. And he was so smothered by sovereign grace and he accepted it so fully that he understood he had been given full sonship just because he came trusting and penitent.

Who is the father? Oh, easy, right? God in Christ coming down from heaven just like it is God in Christ who is the shepherd who finds the lost sheep. It is God in Christ who is the woman who finds the lost coin.

And, by the way, it is God who initiates. He is the seeker who finds the sinner before the sinner can find him.

Do you remember Romans three? No man seeks after God. God is the seeker. God's love for the penitent is lavish, pure grace, apart from any works. God finds his joy in the salvation of one sinner who repents. My, my, what a party must be going on in heaven.

We are not used to seeing God like this. God seems to be unrestrained here for us.

Well, it leads to a shameful rejoicing, a shameful rejoicing in verse 22, shameful by the Pharisees' standard.

The father said to his slaves, "Bring out the best robe."

What's that? Well, every father had a best robe, right? This is your blue suit, guys. This is the best you've got or your tux that you go rent. This is what you use for the big events. Every father had a robe. It probably was his father's robe, got passed down only for those very, very auspicious occasions. It usually would be reserved for the oldest son's wedding.

"Get that best robe. Put it on him."

What is that?

"I am giving him my dignity. I am giving him my full honor."

This is just amazing, isn't it? And there's no works here. There's no restitution of any thing. This is just pure unexpurgated, unmitigated grace. Make him my son.

"I give him my full honor, my full dignity. Put my ring on his finger."

And the ring was a signet ring that had the possibility to stamp in wax to authenticate a document. Give him my dignity and give him my authority.

"And put shoes on his feet."

μισθιος (mis'-thee-os). The hired men were barefoot. Only servants in the household and sons wore sandals.

Full privileges of the house.

This is what happens to the most extreme, wretched sinner Jesus could invent. He is lavished and smothered in grace for the sheer joy of God who grants to that sinner honor, authority and full sonship.

At this point the Pharisees would be looking for a skyhook to get him out of this.

"This is just ridiculous, just ridiculous."

And, by the way, I love one word ταχυ (takh-oo') in verse 22, quickly, indicating this is instantaneous. The incredible miracle of salvation.

In verse 23, "Bring the fattened calf."

That would have been saved normally for the older brother's wedding.

"Bring the fattened calf."

You figure it would feed between two and 300 people. Kill it. That would be a bit of a process to hack that calf up and chop it up and that would be a big village barbeque.

"Let's eat and let's be merry."

You don't think of God as having a party, but there is a non stop party in heaven pictured here.

And, by the way, can I just add a note here? This is not in honor of the son. This is in honor of the father. And it is in honor of such lavish compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation. The celebration going on in heaven is not in honor of the sinner, it is in honor of the Savior.

Well, this is just the final outrage to the Pharisees, the final outrage.

What, for the father, verse 24, "This son of mine was dead."

That is why I said he had a funeral. He was dead. They had an actual funeral, typically.

"He is now come to life again. He was lost. He has been found."

How is that metaphor? Do you get that one? Dead in trespasses and sin, made alive. All in this instant of reconciliation and they began to be merry. And the party is on full blast.

Well, guess who is not around?

"Now his older brother," verse 25.

Well, interesting. A lot of stuff going on he doesn't know about, right?

You say, "Well, why didn't the father go tell him?"

He had no relationship with the father. The father had no relationship with him. They were totally estranged and alienated.

You say, "But he stayed home."

Yeah. He hung around the house. It was more his style of sin. Not everybody is a prodigal. Some are religious hypocrites. But his father had no relationship with him and he had no relationship with the father. The father saw no role for him to play in the event. The father knew he would have no joy over that son's return.

And if the Pharisees are listening, the older son is them. Right? They were the ones complaining that the sinners were coming to Jesus and he was receiving them and now the Pharisees who had been the audience entered the story.

Now his older brother was in the field and when he came and approached the end of his duties out there, whatever he was doing, he heard music and dancing. The thing is full on. The father communicated nothing with him. They have no relationship.

He summoned one of the servants outside around the party and began inquiring, “What in the world is going on?”

And they said to him, “Your brother has come and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.”

In the Greek that is related to the Hebrew word **שָׁלוֹם** (shaw-lome’), peace has come, reconciliation has come.

Verse 28. And he became what? Angry. Yeah, that takes you right back to verse two when all the sinners were coming to Jesus the Pharisees were angry. Legalists are always the enemies of grace. They hate the gospel of grace. They want to earn it.

Of course he is angry. He is as lost as his brother. He, too, had no relationship with the Father.

He hides his lusts, though. He hides the wretchedness of his wicked heart and he performs on the outside to please the father in order to hang on to his riches.

He has got a little different spin on life. He doesn’t want to waste his money with prostitutes. He wants to horde it and keep it and keep up the illusion of his obedience and allegiance because it will get him more he thinks.

But to the Pharisees he appears like the righteous, honorable, sensible guy because he is them. He became angry, he was not willing, verse 28, to go in. His father came out and began entreating him.

Wow.

Here, again, is condescension. Here again is God in Christ coming down even to the hypocrites. In the latter months of Jesus’ ministry every time he spoke to a crowd almost the Pharisees were there and he kept extending the same kingdom invitations to them that he extended to the extreme sinners on the immoral side.

They were the extreme sinners on the moral side. Jesus continued to offer them entrance into his kingdom. Many sinners came as far as we know, in all of the gospels only one Pharisee ever came whose name we know and that was Nicodemus. Tough to reach the legalists and hypocrites.

But from their viewpoint he was righteous.

Verse 29. He answered and said to his Father, “Look.”

Oh, wow. How about a little respect. Even the prodigal said, “Father.”

Look?

“For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours and you have never given me a goat, let alone a calf to have a party with my friends. What did I ever get out of you?”

Boy, he is really pent up, angry, hostile. Legalists—again I said it—hate grace. They hate the gospel of grace. That is why the liberals continue to attack the Christian gospel. And so do every other form of false kind of Christianity and religion.

“But when this son,” verse 30, “of yours came who has devoured your wealth with harlots, prostitutes, you kill the fattened calf for him.”

I mean this is a pretty shameful I would say. And it just pictures the Pharisees so perfectly. No category for grace. They despise it.

But the father is compassionate and in verse 31 he said, “My child...” The tenderness in that.

The son says, “Look,” like, “Look, buddy,” disdain.

But the father says to him, “My child, you have always been with me. All that is mine is yours.”

And I always think of all those people in false forms of Christianity who have a Bible in their hand. It’s all there, isn’t it? It is all there. It has always been there.

“We had to be merry. We had to rejoice. We didn’t have any other option for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, was lost and has been found.”

You get the picture here. God cannot restrain his joy every time a sinner repents because it is another exhibit of his incomprehensible, lavish grace. And the party in heaven is about the grace of the father, the grace of the father, the wonderful grace that the angels don’t experience, but want to look into to understand.

Well, that’s not an ending. That just stopped. What happened? I don’t see anything between verse 32 and chapter 16 do you? Well, what happened?

Well, first I give you a little picture of the linguistics going on here.

Stories that were told in the Middle East, even in the time of Jesus, have some very interesting formats. Typically they run sort of in a parallel fashion and a prolonged story like this should have balance in this sense. If there were eight stanzas going from the introduction of the younger son to the reconciliation with the father, there should then be eight stanzas dealing with the father’s starting the celebration through the encounter with the second son. And you can show this. Kenneth Bailey in his research has shown how these stories are told that way because if you were living in a culture where everything was passed on verbally it was a memorizing device to work your way through parallel stanzas.

The problem is this has eight and seven. Where is the last one? I’ll tell you what. How about I write the last one. All right? Here is the last one. The older brother seeing the compassion of his

father repented of his hypocrisy, embraced by the father walked back to the celebration to enter the joy.

Do you like that?

Unfortunately, it is not the ending.

Do you want the real ending?

Upon hearing his father's words he older son picked up a piece of wood and beat his father to death.

That's the real ending. That is the ending. It was the Pharisees and the rest of the hypocrites who took the incarnate God and killed him with wood. And they even said, "Let his blood be on us."

And you know what? While the older brother was pummeling the father to death he was saying, "Someone has to protect the honor of this society. Someone has to protect the righteousness of this family. Someone has to uphold justice. You are shameful. You are shameful. You are evil. You are satanic," as he crushed out his life thinking he had risen to the heights of righteous judgment.

That's what happened. But the irony is the father being beaten to death paid the penalty of death for every sinner, hypocrite or profligate who repents and comes to him.

So it all ends at the cross. Silently, but that is where it is headed.

Why did God go to the cross? Why did he let them beat him to death and crucify him?

Listen to this.

"Fixing our eyes on Jesus," Hebrews 12:2, "the author and perfecter of faith, "listen to this, "who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the what? The shame."

He gladly took the shame for the joy.

Father we thank you for the power of your Word, the power of your truth. We thank you that this book is alive. We feel like we have got dirt on our feet from being there in the village when all this unfolded. We understand it a fresh, new grasp of grace fills our minds. Oh, Lord, we thank you that you have been gracious to us whether we came as the extreme profligate or that we came as the extreme hypocrite or anything in between.

You can save to the uttermost all who come to you! And in an instant comes reconciliation, forgiveness, sonship, the lavish affection and love and you give us the right to become children of God.

Thank you for this glorious message of grace and may it penetrate our hearts in a fresh way. And we give you the glory for you are the loving, compassionate Father who came down and took our shame. We love you in Christ's name. Amen.

You have been watching a special program originating at a VCY America rally. Audio tapes or CDs are available of this presentation for a donation of five dollars or you may obtain a video tape or DVD for a donation of \$20. Write VCY Tape Ministry, 3434 West Kilbourn Avenue, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208. Or you may call 1-800-729-9829. This rally has been a special presentation of VCY America.