

The Greatest Story Ever Told
Luke 15:11-32

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Sooner or later it's bound to happen. A child will climb into your lap and ask the question, a friend facing some struggle will want to know, or lifting up the floorboards of your own faith you will examine your basic assumptions. From age to age the question is the same, WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

People in Jesus' day needed an answer to the God question, too; so Jesus gave us the greatest story ever told. A certain man had two sons. We call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but really it's a story about a loving father who is so full of grace that he lavishes love on his wayward boys. The Bible never gets better than here in Luke 15. If you ever wonder about the true nature of Deity; if life has left you skeptical about the personality of God; then ponder it no more. The story of the prodigal son was meant for you.

WHAT IS GOD REALLY LIKE?

God is like a father who is willing to let go. In Verse 12 we read, "*The younger son said to his father, 'Father give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.*"

I often wonder what my response might be should one of my two sons make such a request during my lifetime. I've often tried to think of several nice responses like:

Drop dead
Dream on
You've got to be kidding
Get a life.

This is Middle Eastern culture. All the father's social security is tied up in extended family. To the first hearers the request of this son was absurd.

In fact, Kenneth Baily asked people of all walks of life from Morocco to India, from Turkey to Sudan about the implications of this son's request. Has anyone ever made such a request in your village? "No," came the reply. Could anyone ever make such a request? "Impossible," was the reply. If anyone ever did, what would happen? "His father would beat him, of course." Why? "The request means he wants his father to die." And yet, this father, in this story, grants the request.

Henry Nouwen writes: "The father, who represents God in this story, never pulls back his hands, never withholds his blessing, never stops considering this son the

beloved one. But the father cannot compel his son to stay home. He cannot force his love on his beloved. He has to let him go into freedom even though he knows the pain it will cause them both. It is love, itself, that keeps him from keeping his son at home at all cost. It is love, itself, that allows him to let his son find his own life, even with the risk of losing it.”

God has endowed us with this wonderful and marvelous risky thing called free will. He gave it to us with all potential for harm because God wants children who will love him, not robots who are programmed to please him. We are set free to do as we please, even if we are not pleased with what we do.

Oswald Chambers once put it this way, “The spirit of God is always the spirit of liberty. The God who made birds never made bird cages.” We are free moral agents. If that freedom leads us astray, God will let us go. We cannot drift beyond his love and care; neither are we forced to live under his strict control.
GOD IS LIKE A LOVING FATHER WHO IS WILLING TO LET GO.

GOD IS LIKE A FATHER WHO WELCOMES US HOME.

Things go bad in the far country, as they always do. In desperation the son turns toward him, the father. Jesus strains the language and stretches the sentences to describe this homecoming of a lost boy. Listen to it carefully.

In Verse 20 we read, “*While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son and embraced him and kissed him.*” Do you catch the emotion that is going on in this powerful scene? And while he was a long way off, his father saw him. The eyes of mercy are quicker than the eyes of repentance. Even the eye of faith is dim compared to the eye of God’s love. The father saw him—what he was, where he was coming from, what he had been and what he was soon to become. It was love at first sight.

He ran; it was improper for men in the Middle East, wrapped in long robes, to run. Aristotle said, “Great men never run in public.” This father runs. The son comes slowly with heavy heart and downcast eyes, with many a sob and many a sigh; but one glimpse of a lost son gives wings to the father’s feet. He who takes one step through doubting dim, God will advance a mile in blazing light to him.

He threw his arms around him and kept on kissing him. We might have kicked him. Catch the image. God Almighty throws his arms around you and affectionately holds you and reminds you that you are one of His very own. “*There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner that repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.*”

Not only does he welcome him back, but he restores him to the family. Look in Verse 22, “*But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger; put shoes on his feet; kill the fatted calf,*

the time of celebration has arrived; for this son of mine was dead, and is alive; he was lost and is found.” Get the robe, the one reserved for guests; put a ring on his finger; the ring of inheritance, the one that signifies that he is a son, put it back on his finger; he belongs in the family. Get the kid some shoes; slaves go barefoot. All God’s children have shoes. Kill the fatted calf for the time of festivity has come. This, my son was lost, but now he is found. He has come home. Do you get the picture of how glad God is when one of his own children returns?

A sixteen year old girl up in Traverse City, Michigan ran away from home and landed on the streets of Detroit. She soon discovers there is only one way to make a living, but the life of prostitution was hard and drugs consumed her cash. She became ill and her thoughts return to Traverse City and the innocence of her youth. On an impulse she calls home and leaves a message on her parents’ answering machine. “Dad, Mom, I was wondering about coming home. I’m catching a bus up your way and should get there about midnight tomorrow. If you’re not there, I’ll stay on the bus to Canada.” On the bus ride home the girl was consumed by fear. What if they didn’t get the message? Maybe she should have waited to hear back from them. Soon she collected her fears and rehearsed her apology. She got off the bus and walked into the terminal where she is not only greeted by her parents, but forty to fifty other relatives and friends standing under a “Welcome Home” banner, wearing goofy hats and blowing noisemakers saying, “There is a party and it is here, for this our child has returned to the family.”

“Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling,
Calling for you and for me.
See on the portals he’s waiting and watching,
Watching for you and for me.”

You know what God is like. God is like the loving father who welcomes his children home. That is the nature of God. Don’t ever forget it. That is the God you worship. You who are weary are welcome home.

HOW WILL WE RESPOND to that kind of unmerited, undeserved, unending grace? What will be our response to a love like that?

And a certain man had two sons. The first accepted it. We can accept God’s grace. Paschal said, “Every human heart has a God-shaped vacuum that God and only God can fill.”

Deuteronomy 30:19-20 says: *“I set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life, so that you and your children may live, and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to His voice and hold fast to Him. For the Lord is your life.”*

When the prodigal hits bottom he discovers he is not a pig, but a son. He still has

a home even though he is away for a while. This realization becomes the basis for his choice to live and not to die. When we are tempted to wallow in our low lostness we will be wise to touch base with our original goodness, to choose life and come home. What can we do about a loving God who welcomes his children home? We can accept His grace; we can respond to it and rejoice in it; experience it and live it to its absolute fullest.

In John Grisham's novel, The New Testament, he paints the portrait of one man's surrender to God's will. Nate O'Reilly is a disgraced corporate attorney plagued by alcoholism and drug abuse. After two marriages, four detox programs and a serious bout with a chronic fever, Nate acknowledges his need for God.

Grisham describes the transformation this way: "With both hands, he clenched the back of the pew in front of him. He repeated the list mumbling softly every weakness and flaw, and affliction, and evil that plagued him. He confessed them all. In one long, glorious acknowledgment of failure, he laid himself bare before God. He held nothing back. He unloaded enough burdens to crush any three men. And when he finally finished, Nate had tears in his eyes. 'I'm sorry' he whispered to God. 'Please help me.'"

"As quickly as the fever had left his body, he felt the baggage leave his soul. With one gentle brush of the hand, his slate had been wiped clean. He breathed a massive sigh of relief, but his pulse was racing."

What can we do with the grace of God? We can accept it and live into it; we can experience it; we can open our hearts and lives to it.

We can reject God's grace. A certain man had two sons. The elder brother stayed home and did all the right things. He was obedient, dutiful, law abiding and hardworking. People respected him, admired him, praised him, and considered him a model son. When confronted by his father's joy at the return of the younger brother, a dark power erupts in him and boils to the surface. Suddenly we have a resentful, proud, unkind, selfish person who wants nothing to do with a homecoming party for his wayward brother.

The father goes out and pleads with him to join the party, but all the son can do is recite a litany of hard work and reluctant obedience that contains not one moment of joy.

Our churches are populated with good people to whom this story is directed. How do you really feel about grace? You, who have kept the rules, followed the regulations and have been faithful and honest and hardworking all of your days. The sin of being good is that it is hard to be graceful. Why should this sinner be given grace so easily when we have worked for it so long and so hard? Herein lies the point of the parable. It is all grace.

Karl Olson in his book, Come to The Party, writes, "I was one with the elder

brother, convinced with him that if I did my homework, tied the right knots, earned the right badges, deposited my paychecks, someday I would make it. I would maybe still be at it. Except in the loneliness of a college presidency I came face-to-face with a reality that for thirty years I had preached a gospel of grace without once accepting it for myself. I came to understand that God loved me. The party of his grace was meant for me. I did not have to be a professional, a preacher, a president, a Protestant, or anything else to make it with God, for God had already reached out to me.”

“My son,” said the father, *“You are always with me and everything I have is yours”* (Luke 15:31). It’s all grace. Are we willing to accept and receive that kind of grace?

So how does this story end? The interesting thing is that it has no ending in the Gospel. We must decide. Does the elder brother finally join the party? Does he stay outside and pout? Does the prodigal assimilate back into the family? Does he get restless again and run?

Of this I am certain, The Father is the same yesterday, today and forever. How His children behave is up to us. You hold the key to the rest of the story. What is the rest of the story according to you? Ah, that is the question.

Amen.

