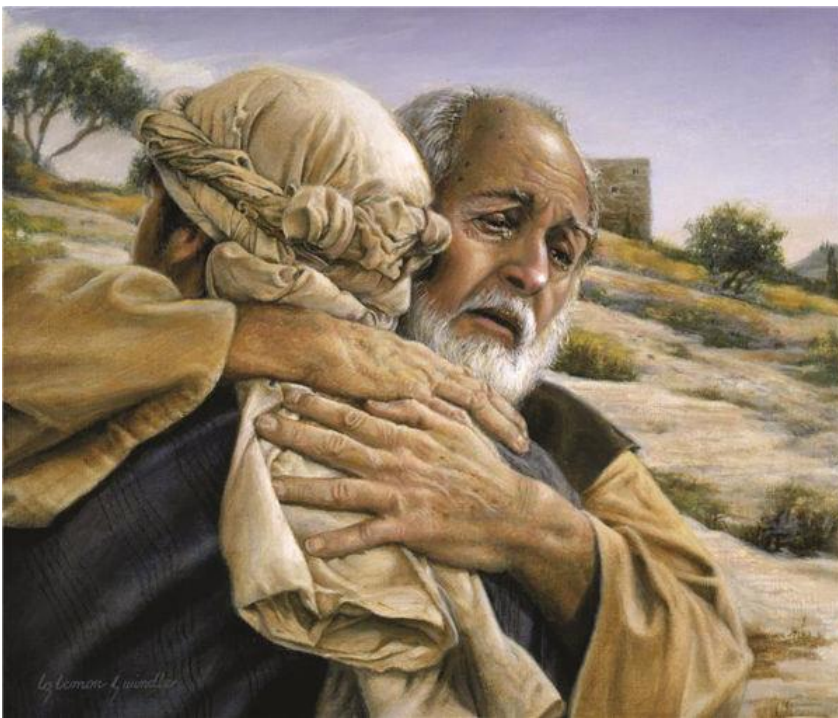


# Celebrate?

Luke 15: 20-32

How will you celebrate the release from restrictions associated with COVID-19? Have your life or your personal habits changed as a result of the pandemic? How we experience church fellowship certainly has changed in order to maintain the safety of our most vulnerable and in order to comply with the restrictions mandated by the Governor and the Virginia Department of Health. As the numbers drop, vaccines are being rolled out, and states are beginning to remove some of the restrictions, Virginia can also anticipate easing of restrictive guidelines in the coming weeks and months. Celebrations in Jesus' time were almost exclusively associated with something that was lost but was recovered. Religious leaders of the times criticized Jesus for spending time with sinners and even sharing a meal with them. His response was to share parables and today's lesson will focus on the lesson of the Prodigal Son. The story highlights God's willingness to forgive and to restore all who return to Him for salvation.



## **Forgiveness Granted 20 – 24**

An important message from the parable is the depiction of how much value God places on all people. While Jesus was willing to fellowship and minister to those the Pharisees held in contempt, it is important to consider that the Pharisees did not view themselves as sinners. We know from Jesus that we are all sinners; he taught humility and repentance of sin. For this, God forgives and we are to rejoice at the salvation of even one such sinner coming to God.

Imagine the desperation of the young son as he came to his senses and returned to his father, not as a proud son but as a beggar. His deteriorating health may have made the journey very difficult and, as someone who was willing to eat the scraps he fed the pigs, his lack of resources may have required him to beg for food along the way. In his tattered and dirty clothes, it's a wonder that his father would recognize him. That his father was watching for him and recognized him is a testimonial within the parable of just how well God knows us and how He anticipates our coming to Him.

When each of us come to the realization that we are sinners in need of salvation, just as the Prodigal Son had nothing to boast about and nothing to offer his father, we approach God with humility and He has compassion for us. This young son was willing to be a household servant. I wonder if God is frequently scanning the horizon watching for lost souls to come to Him.

The father ran to his son, put his arms around his neck, and kissed him. This act alone is presented as an out of character show of emotion for a man of this time. The behavior demonstrates the depth of compassion and forgiveness in our heavenly Father.

In contrast to the son's rebellious demand for his inheritance when he left home, the son's confession to his father upon his return was much more humble. He knew he had dishonored his father and sinned against heaven. I wonder if his father's joy at seeing him and the warm reception helped facilitate the son's confession. He confessed having sinned in his father's sight and in God's sight and was no longer worthy to be called son. The latter is important for our lesson: think about whether anyone has ever sinned too much or too greatly to be saved. The answer is a resounding "No" from God but must have baffled the Pharisees hearing the parable because they would have never responded in this manner.

The father's response to clothe, sandal, place the ring on his finger, and to hold a celebration with the fatted calf are all testimonials that the prodigal would be restored as a son. Celebrations of this sort were reserved for the most important occasions. The images create a beautiful vision of the immediate effect of salvation and grace. The son did not deserve any of the response; nor could he work for them. Salvation is freely given by grace through faith.

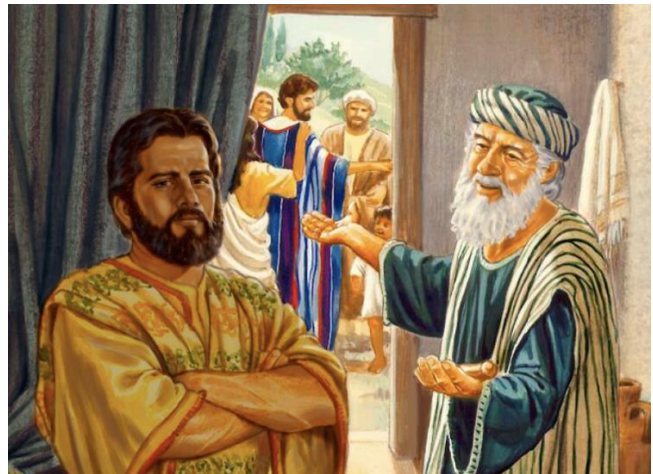
### **Resentment Expressed 25-30**

In contrast to the father's reaction upon the return of his son, the older brother's reaction was more in line with that of the Pharisees response to sinners, a label they placed only on the worst of society such as prostitutes, tax collectors, and thieves. This son likely did not care whether his brother was alive or dead but he knew for sure that his brother was not carrying his weight by working or managing his father's affairs. If the younger brother had encountered his older brother first, we can be certain that the reception would have gone differently.

**Why was the older brother so angry? How is his behavior different from ours if we think we are being treated unfairly?**

The older brother's response was likely focused on his desire for his squandering brother to receive justice rather than grace. When the father heard that his older son would not join the party, he went out to him. The father wanted to restore not only his broken relationship with his younger son but also the broken family. He loved both of his sons.

**Does the older son resent his father AND his brother?**



A closer look at the older brother's reaction to the news of his brother's return reveals more about the father and more about the son. This son had remained behind after his younger brother demanded his inheritance and left to live in selfish pleasure. Perhaps he resented having to stay behind and not having the same opportunity. Perhaps he resented his father. In his resentment, he may have felt like nothing more than a hired servant to the father. We cannot be totally sure but we know the older son does not approve of the celebration. The older son's perspective is more like that of the Pharisees in that he does not have the same understanding of grace as the father. Is the father wrong?

## Reality Defined 31-32

The encounter between the father and son reveal a lot about their relationship and give us insight into Old Testament law. The older brother may have been concerned that he would now have to share the remaining inheritance to which he was entitled with his recently returned younger brother. Jewish law provided the oldest heir with a double portion of the family inheritance; something he may have felt he earned by being loyal to his father in addition to his birthright. His father reassured him that his inheritance was intact but that, because he loved both of his sons, he needed to celebrate that the one who was lost has now returned.

In this parable, Jesus revealed His Father. He rejoices when a lost person is saved and expects the same response from us. We are to care about the salvation of sinners and experience joy when a lost person finds God. We don't know from the parable what the older son's response was to the conversation with his father. Perhaps this allows an opportunity for us to examine our own hearts just as Jesus may have wanted the Pharisees to examine theirs. We cannot lose sight of the Great Commission's command to win and disciple the lost for God. When one sinner is saved, we know there is rejoicing throughout heaven. Shouldn't we experience that same joy?

