

Fourth Sunday of Lent
March 21, 2004
Luke 15: 1-3, 11-24

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Sinners Welcome Here

1. Rejection
2. Repentance
3. Rejoicing

*^{NIV} **Luke 15:1** Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³ Then Jesus told them this parable: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³ "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. ²⁵ "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and*

pleaded with him.²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'³¹ "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.'³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In the estimation of the Pharisees, Jesus is in some unsavory company here at the beginning of Luke 15. It says, *"Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him."* Many tax collectors in that day were practitioners of a legalized form of extortion. They cheated the people from whom they collected taxes and threatened to make life miserable for them if they protested. We're not told the specific sins of the rest of this unsavory crew, but whatever they were, their defiance of God's will was public knowledge.

The prophet Isaiah had once written, **"He who walks righteously and speaks what is right, who rejects gain from extortion and keeps his hand from accepting bribes, who stops his ears against plots of murder and shuts his eyes against contemplating evil—this is the man who will dwell on the heights."** (33:15) The Pharisees were wondering, I suppose, "If that's the case, then why does this Jesus allow himself to be seen in the presence of extortioners and all the rest?" The answer, of course, is not that Jesus is trying to be provocative or contest conventional moral standards. Rather, it's that Jesus came to seek and to save the lost—lost tax collectors, lost sinners—the lost of every description.

Luke 15 includes three parables about searching for and restoring the lost. What we have before us this morning is the last of the three, the parable of the prodigal (wasteful) son. With this parable Jesus is declaring for everyone to hear that **Sinners Are Welcome Here**. First, we see rejection. Then we see repentance. And, finally, we see rejoicing.

1. Rejection

Jesus begins this parable by saying, *"There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate. So he divided his property between them.'"* Inheritance

customs weren't much different in those days from what they are today. Usually, you got your inheritance when the person who named you in his will died. But here, the younger of this man's two sons asks him to make an exception. *"Give me my share of the estate,"* he said. The very request was an insulting and disrespectful rejection of his father. And remember that Jesus is telling this story in a time when most people didn't believe in coddling disrespectful children.

Surprisingly, however, the father complies. He liquidated enough of his assets to be able to give his younger son what probably amounted to a third of his total worth. But there's still more rejection coming. It wasn't long after this fellow got his inheritance that he *"got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living."* With his immaturity and his poor judgment he rapidly went about wasting everything his father had worked so hard to be able to give him. His wild living was a rejection of everything his father stood for.

Rejection is typically present in the spiritual state we call impenitence, that is, the refusal to admit and turn away from sin. People who are impenitent reject the precepts of God, reject the way by which God has promised to bless them, and follow instead the promptings of their sinful nature. The Bible says, **"Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness."** (1 John 3:4) That means that there's a sense in which all of us are prodigal sons (or daughters). While we're only too happy to open our arms to receive God's blessings, each time we sin we are rejecting God's ways and God's will.

It's an axiom of Bible truth that sinful living bears bitter fruit. The bitter fruit may not come immediately, but it does come inevitably. For the younger son, the bitter fruit appeared not long after his bank balance reach zero. And it just so happened that his wallet emptied out just as the land where he was living was experiencing a famine.

2. Repentance

It says here, *"After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need."* His father's money had all been spent, so he needed to find work. But the only employment he could locate was about the last job a Jewish man would want. He got hired as a swineherd. Even then he was so hungry that his mouth watered as he watched the hogs feed on the pods of the carob tree. *"But no one gave him anything,"* it says. This was rock bottom. He would have had to rise a few notches to get to

the level of desperation. He was without money, without friends, and without prospects in a land of famine far from home.

But then it says here, *"He came to his senses."* Literally, "he came to himself." This is the same phrase that's used to describe the situation in Acts 12 when the angel is leading Peter out of prison and Peter suddenly realizes he's not dreaming. The younger son had been living in what the hymn writer calls "sin's delusion." But now he wakes up. God used his dire situation to wake him up. The young man thinks of his kindly father. He thinks of how even the lowliest hired men at Dad's place have food to spare and he decides to go home and he suspects that a sinner might be welcome in his father's home.

What leads him to go home isn't just worldly sorrow, that he's sorry about what a sorry state he's gotten himself into. He's penitent. He resolves to say, *"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you."* He recognizes both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of sin. What he'd done by requesting his inheritance early and then wasting it on wild living wasn't just a sin against his father, it was a sin against heaven, that is, against God. As he comes to the realization of what he's done, he's stricken by a sense of deep unworthiness. He says, *"I am no longer worthy to be called your son."* And this is precisely what he did say when after his long absence he met up again with his father.

It's important to see that this younger son is repentant. That is, he had changed his mind about the way he was living. Unless we see this, we're apt to think that the father in the parable was a weak-willed softy who was condoning or minimizing the sin of his son. Or we might be led to think that Jesus was condoning or at least ignoring the sins of the tax collectors and the others who had gathered to hear him. That's not the case. The prodigal is now the penitent. He admits now that his blatant rejection of his father's home and values was not just stupid but sinful. He confesses and forsakes his sin. Real repentance always includes a change in the way we've been living. Sin is nothing to toy with. The Bible portrays sin as infection and uncleanness. It compares it to a crushing debt. It separates us from God and has us heading for hell. The only way to deal with it is to confess it—to God and to those we've sinned against—and to renounce it. This the son did.

Repentance is our daily work as Christians. That's because we sin every day and on account of our sins deserve nothing but God's anger and punishment. Repentance means confessing our sins: the big

one's that press down on us like an anvil, the little ones that we can't even remember, and the hidden ones that we aren't even aware of. Then, having pled guilty of sin, we take refuge in God's mercy. God tells us, **"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."** But then he promises, **"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."** (1 John 1:8-9) To all who repent of their sins, God gives the assurance, "My child, you are forgiven." The infection is removed, the impurity has been replaced with spotlessness, and the debt has been fully paid. And it's important to know, too, how this great change in our status happened. It's not simply that God declared it to be so, but that he declared it to be so on the basis of Jesus' atoning sacrifice for our sins. Jesus shouldered the staggering debt of our sin and took it to the cross. **"He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."** (1 John 2:2) **"God made (Christ) who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."** (2 Cor. 5:21)

Let me ask you, though, what do you reasonably expect when a son like this comes home, dirty broke, and broken? Wouldn't this story sound more realistic if the father said, "I knew this is what was going to happen. You've never amounted to anything!" Don't you kind of expect the father to say, "You're right you're not my son! You can sleep out there in the bunkhouse with the rest of the hired hands." But what we find—amazingly—is the sight and sound of rejoicing.

3. Rejoicing

Jesus says, *"While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him"* I don't think it was an a coincidence that the father saw his son coming a long way off. I think he was watching for him, hopefully scanning the horizon, longing for the day when the boy came back. And then one day he spotted him. He must have lost weight. His clothes were probably little more than dirty rags. His feet were bare. But it was his son—lost but now found, dead but now alive. The father rejoices. In his joy he runs to greet his son. In his joy he throws his arms around the son. In overwhelming joy he smothers the son with kisses. The son pushes away a bit and utters his confession of sin and voices his repentance. The father doesn't here formally absolve the son, but his actions before the confession and his commands after it make it clear that he has forgiven him. The commands show, too, that this son isn't coming back as a hired man. He's been restored to the family: the robe and the ring and the

sandals testify to that. And then there's the feast. The fattened calf is prepared, the one the father had been saving for just this occasion. Soon there's the happy sound of music, dancing, and feasting. The father just has to celebrate.

What does Jesus want us to know from this parable? First, I think he wants us to know something about himself. Jesus is this father who yearns for the return of his wayward son. To your comforting images of Jesus—Jesus the Good Shepherd carrying the lamb close to his heart, Jesus the Good Shepherd laying down his life for us at Calvary, Jesus with his hands lifted in blessing as he ascends to heaven—add this one: Jesus, hopefully scanning the horizon like a compassionate father, yearning for the return of his wandering son. When we fall into sin, when we suddenly come to a realization of our shameful condition, Jesus wants us to know that we have a compassionate God, a compassionate Savior, with whom repentant sinners always find a welcome. Sinners need never hesitate to come to him.

I think it's also true that Jesus tells us this parable to guide us in dealing with others. There are a lot of prodigal sons and daughters out there. Some of them are scarred by sexual sins, or reeling from one or more failed marriages, or suffering the ravages of drug or alcohol abuse. They may be so filled with shame at their condition that they don't consider themselves worthy to darken the doorway of a church. Such people need to know from us the message of this parable: sinners are welcome here. Like the hymn we sang before said, "***Today your gate is open, And all who enter in Shall find a Father's welcome And pardon for their sin.***" We all need this assurance.

This chapter began, you recall, with the Pharisees muttering, "*This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.*" The chapter ends with an explanation and an invitation to those same Pharisees—and to anyone else who thinks that Jesus spends too much time with sinners. He speaks of another son, the older one, the one who returns from the fields after work to hear the sound of music and dancing. His words to his father make it clear that he doesn't share the father's compassion for his wayward brother. He can't comprehend such compassion and even feels it's unjust. But notice that the father speaks tenderly to this son, too: "*My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.*" Jesus doesn't tell us whether the older brother changed his mind and came in to join the celebration. We hope he did, don't we? Because, in the

end, we all need the compassion of Jesus. And all of us can rejoice to know that repentant sinners are welcome with Jesus. Amen.