The Pharisees and teachers of the law considered Jesus’ behavior inappropriate. Tax collectors and other people whose sins were well known to the community had gathered around Jesus to hear him. The Pharisees and teachers of the law criticized Jesus: **This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.** Jesus had heard this before. The religious leaders thought that Jesus’ willingness to talk with and even eat with sinners was scandalous. They thought that way only because they were blind to their own sinfulness and their own need of a Savior.

But what great news that Jesus welcome sinners! It means that you and I will find a welcome with him. Here Jesus tells a parable that shows us his attitude toward sinners. This morning we are going to examine the parable of **THE LOVING FATHER AND HIS TWO LOST SONS.** We will look first at the loving father and his younger son.

Jesus begins: **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.** Now, it was not common in those days to give a son his share of the estate before the father’s death. In fact, for a son to make such a request of his father was considered to be a terrible insult, much like saying: **Father, I wish you were dead.** You would expect the father to give such an insolent son a tongue-lashing, if not a physical thrashing. But in Jesus’ parable the father does no such thing. Without a word of protest, the father does what his son has asked.

The father probably was not surprised by what his younger son did next: **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.** A son who had treat his father so disrespectfully as to ask for the early distribution of his estate would not want to remain under the observant eye of his father. So this son set off, not to seek his fortune, but to squander his father’s fortune. That is why he is called the **prodigal son.** He was wasteful and reckless in the way he lived. That is what word **prodigal** means.

But there was a price to be paid for such prodigal living. His share of his father’s estate was significant, but not limitless. The money ran out. The high living ended and trouble took its place: **After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country and he began to be in need.** So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

You can hardly imagine a more humbling circumstance for a good Jewish boy than working with pigs! Tending these unclean animals and actually envying them for what they ate. He was broke, humiliated, defiled, and starving.

But then the younger son **came to his senses,** literally, he **came to himself.** Today we call it **hitting bottom.** The godless pride that caused him to think he could work this out on his own was gone. He was going to die if something did not change.

He thought back to earlier days and his father’s house. **How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.** His father’s home was the only place he could think of where someone would take him in. But because of the way he had treated his father, he figured he could not try to return to his position as a son. He had sinned against his father and against God. No, the most he could ask was for a position as a hired man.
The son was sincere in this plan. He was not trying to manipulate his father with this confession. This is what repentance looks like. He owns up to his sin and asks humbly for mercy. Even after his father has welcomed him so warmly, he still confessed: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.

Once again the father’s reaction’s amazing. Many a father would say: I told you so! I saw this day coming a long way off. I knew you would never amount to anything. You are worthless! Anf even if the father lets the son come home, he never lets him forget what a foul-up he is.

But not this father. He sees his son returning while he is still a long way off. He has been watching for him to return, not to say, I told you so, but to welcome him. Rather than waiting for his son to come to him, he runs to his son - undignified behavior for a Jewish man. He throws his arms around his son and kisses him. And all this before he’s even heard the son’s confession of sin.

When he uttered his confession, the father will not hear of it. Everything he orders to be done next indicates that he’s taking this boy back, not as a hired man, but restoring him to his status as son: the robe, the ring, the sandals, the feast featuring the fattened calf. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. Let us have a feast and celebrate.

That is why Jesus did not tell the tax collectors and sinners to get away from him. He came to save sinners, not to avoid them. He rejoices when even a single sinner repents. It gives him a thrill. Mind you, he is not implying approval of sin, of cheating people like the tax tax collectors did, of immoral or reckless living. Those who live like that without repenting will not inherit the kingdom of Gog. God is clear about that.

But it is an assurance that a repentant sinner can always come home. I do not know whether every sinner that Jesus talked and ate with ended up repenting, but they were far more likely to repent when they knew that he genuinely cared about them. Truth is, there is more than a little prodigal in all of us. How horrible it is to be the recipient of God’s rich blessings and then to turn around and defy him by sinning. If God responded to our disobedience by forever blotting us out of his book, we would all be left to die eternally.

Here we learn something that is so comforting about our Savior. He forgives us. He delights to show mercy. This forgiveness was not cheap. Jesus was stricken, smitten, and afflicted. He was despised and rejected by men. He was killed, not because he had been a prodigal son but an absolutely obedient son. Jesus won this forgiveness so that he could lavish it on us. He replies to our confession of sin with his complete forgiveness. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. It is amazing that God unfailingly forgives us when we repent.

But the father in Jesus’ story had another son. The older son did not insult his father by requesting the early distribution of his estate. He did not run off to a far country and squander his father’s wealth with wild living. He was, by all appearances, a good son. While Jesus’ parable leaves no doubt that the younger son was restored, the parable ends with a kind of question mark about what became of the older son. Did he ever come around to his father’s way and forgive his brother?

Jesus continues: Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. Your brother is come, he replied, and your father has killed
the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound. But rather than rejoicing at the return of his prodigal brother, the older son became angry. He would not come into the house and celebrate.

When the father went out to plead with him to join in the festivities, he gave a list of complaints against the father. He characterized his role on the farm as that of a slave, which was surely an exaggeration. He claimed a record of perfect obedience to his father, which was also an exaggeration. He claimed that his hard work had gone unrecognized by his father: Not even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. He did not even call him brother. It was This son of yours. Bottom line, the older son was accusing his father of injustice. You celebrate the prodigal son and you ignore the faithful son.

The father’s explanation is a plea for his older son to understand and share his outlook: 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. And that is where the parable ends. We do not know if he joined the celebration or if he continued to disagree with his father’s forgiveness and cast a pall over the celebration?

We also do not know what the Pharisees and teachers of the law said in response to this parable about our Savior’s love for the lost. Did they stop grumbling about Jesus and stop criticizing him for consorting with sinners? You hope they did.

But I believe that Jesus left the parable open-ended about the older son for our sake. He wants us to think about our attitudes toward those whose sins are obvious and well-known. Will they find a welcome like our Savior has with us when they repent? Will we forgive them or will we welcome them only conditionally and place them on probation? Does it bring joy to our hearts when a sinner repents? Are we willing to talk and eat with sinners for the purpose of bringing them to repentance? Are we genuinely concerned about the lost or don’t we care?

We will understand this parable the way Jesus wants us to understand it when we can identify ourselves with the younger son, each of us as variations on this theme of being a prodigal. We have all responded to God’s goodness with disobedience and shameful ingratitude. But Jesus wants there to be no doubt that when we confess our sins and ask for God’s mercy, we will find a father’s welcome.

We’ve found the father’s welcome by his grace in Jesus Christ. Let’s share the father’s joy in seeking the lost and seeing the spiritually dead revived. As we are mindful of the costly grace of Jesus and what it has done to change our lives, let’s welcome the lost and straying. Amen.

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