
REJOICE WITH THE FATHER THOUGH IT IS NOT FAIR

1. We who were once dead are now alive
2. Others once lost now are found

The reading for today from Luke 15 addresses the self-righteous and mean spirited notion that there are some, who because of great wickedness, do not deserve to have Christ as Savior. Jesus was at a dinner at the home of some Pharisees. Luke tells us: All the tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus to hear him. But the Pharisees and the experts in the law were complaining, This man welcomes sinners and eats with them. He told them this parable.

The attitude of the Pharisees was wicked because it came from a self-righteousness so strong that the Pharisees seemed to think that only certain people, like the Pharisees, were worthy of being with Jesus. The Pharisees, confident in their self-righteousness, did not understand that no one deserves to be with Jesus. Jesus addressed their complaints by teaching several parables including the one before us known as The Prodigal Son. May we learn from Jesus to rejoice with the Father though it is not fair that we, who were once dead, are now alive and that others, once lost, now are found, for after all, as Jesus would later say: For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

To address the self-righteous attitude of the Pharisees, Jesus painted a very ugly picture of a young man that would call for utter condemnation. Luke tells us: Jesus said: A certain man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, Father, give me my share of the estate. So he divided his property between them. What a wicked son. He could not wait to get his hands on his father’s estate. Giving no thought to how the father would support himself, the selfish son demanded his share long before he had any right to it. Inheritances by definition become a right only at death.

His intent was not to use the money for the care of his father but to satisfy his evil desires. The Pharisees would waste little time condemning this young man. But Jesus was not done, he really drove the picture of a wicked worthless young man saying: Not many days later, the younger son gathered together all that he had and traveled to a distant country. There he wasted his wealth with reckless living. To live a riotous life, wasting his father’s estate on wild living, on partying, prostitutes and drunkenness was about as low as a person could get in the eyes of the self-righteous holier than thou Pharisee.

To further drive home the worthless condition of this young man, deserving only of total condemnation, Jesus continued: After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that country, and he began to be in need. He went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He would have liked to fill his stomach with the carob pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. A Jew could not get much lower than this because a Jew was not to eat or touch a pig because God had declared it an unclean animal. No self-respecting Jew would ever tend pigs, but to actually feed them and then wish to eat their food, was about as disgusting as anyone could get, especially in the eyes of the self-righteous Pharisees.

But then the young man had a change of heart. Jesus went on to say: When he came to his senses, he said, How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, and I am dying from hunger! I will get up, go to my father, and tell him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants. One can almost hear the Pharisees saying: You got that right, you worthless kid! Would you agree that the son was right in thinking
Jesus went on to make his key point, saying: He got up and went to his father. While he was still far away, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, hugged his son, and kissed him. The son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, Quick, bring out the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s eat and celebrate, because this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. Then they began to celebrate. Notice the father did not address the son’s statement of being unworthy. It was as if the father was thinking: My son, you are back. It does not matter what happen. What matters is you have come home!

Yes this young man indeed was no longer worthy to be his father’s son! But we miss the picture here if we, in our own self-righteousness, think Jesus is only speaking about the wicked degenerate people around us. Who among us can claim the right to be called God’s child? Has not the least of our sins caused our Father in heaven great sorrow and grief? One sin, no matter how small, separates us from God and was the reason Jesus, God’s Son, suffered and died so great a death. By the sins we have committed this day, this hour, we have lost any worth we may have had before God. We all must confess with David that from the moment of our conception, we had no self-worth before God, as David says: Certainly, I was guilty when I was born. I was sinful when my mother conceived me. So, to understand this parable, see yourself as the lost son and the father as our gracious Father in heaven.

Paul explains in Ephesian 2 how, before God brought us to faith, we had no worth before him at all. He writes: You were dead in your trespasses and sins. In Romans 8, Paul describes the condition of every person before coming to faith: For the mind-set of the sinful flesh is hostile to God, since it does not submit to God’s law, and in fact, it cannot. Those who are in the sinful flesh cannot please God. Even after coming to faith, we daily sin much. Upon what basis can you or I claim to be worthy of our Lord Jesus? Indeed, if we were worthy of him, then why would he have to die for us?

Yet, the very fact that Jesus died for our sins and then through faith credits us with his perfect righteousness makes us worthy before God, but that worthiness is not of our own, but of Christ. If we see ourselves as the lost son, then we have reason to appreciate even greater and to rejoice with God who rejoices over our repentance.

The moment we are brought to faith, God rejoices, for it means that though we were dead in sin, now we are alive in Christ. Then when we come to him in repentance he rejoices again and again, for we are then living in faith. Rejoice with God though it is not fair that we should be called his children, for we have sinned. Rejoice that though we deserve it now we, who were once dead in sin, are now alive in Christ. Thank God our salvation has nothing to do with fairness and everything to do with God’s love and compassion.

But Jesus was not yet done teaching and had a major point yet to make and so he went on to say: His older son was in the field. As he approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. The servant told him, Your brother is here! Your father killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound. The older brother was angry and refused to go in. His father came and and began to plead with him. He answered his father, Look, these many years I have been serving you, and I never disobeyed your command, but you never gave me even a young goat so that I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours arrived after wasting your property with prostitutes, you killed the
fattened calf for him!

The older son was the good son, one who never left. It is the picture of the Christian who maintains his faith and tries to live a life pleasing to God. But do you see the hypocrisy of the older brother? He thought he had served his father so many years without once breaking a command. He did not know his own sin! He looked upon his own actions as making him worthy of his father. He is self-righteous - the picture of the Pharisees at the dinner.

Have you ever thought of a wicked person coming to faith and said to yourself: It's not fair, he doesn't deserve forgiveness? Or, If that person is in heaven, I don't want to be there. This attitude ignores the simple fact that no one, not even the best among us, deserves God's forgiveness. Now and then we hear of a wicked murderer or criminal like Ted Bundy who received what he deserved this side of heaven, the death penalty. Yet in the last week of his life he confessed faith and trust in Jesus for forgiveness, but many cried out there was no way God would forgive him - that there was no way he would be in heaven. And why? Because it was not fair that someone so evil could be forgiven. But do you really want God to be fair with all sinners? If so, then be prepared for his judgment of condemnation for you - for you have sinned. I do not want God's justice, but his mercy and compassion.

Jesus went on to say: Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. But it was fitting to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. The father reminded the son that everything the father had was the son's. Remember in the beginning the father divided the estate between the two of them so that both sons received their inheritance. Upon what earthly reason could the Christian who has already inherited what he or she does not deserve - forgiveness of sins and eternal life - object to another poor soul receiving the very same thing?

Notice that we do not know if the son listened and came to rejoice with his father over his brother, once lost, now found. What really matters is that our hearts come to rejoice with our Father in heaven over anyone who was once lost and dead in sin, but has been found and brought to life through faith! It is such joy that drives a life devoted to sharing God's Gospel at home and abroad, every day, with one and all!

This parable is often called The Prodigal Son. I would suggest that this parable might more aptly be called the Parable of the Father's Love. Let's never forget his great love for us and all others. May this parable give all of us the encouragement to always rejoice with the Father though it is not fair that we who were once dead are now alive and that others once lost now are found. Amen.

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