

Laetare - Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 31, 2019
Pastor Matthew R Ude
Luke 15:1,2,11-32

The Extravagant Grace of the Father

Luke 15

**1 Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him.
2 And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, "This Man receives sinners and eats with them." 11 Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons.**

Here we have the parable that is commonly referred to as the prodigal son. Yet there is not one son but two and a father and all three are prodigal, that means wasteful or extravagant. The Father is extravagant with his love and mercy. The elder son is extravagant with his judgement. The younger son is wasteful with his father's gifts.

12 The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

Technically the father did not have to divide his inheritance until his death. However it was normal for the older son to receive the house and live in it after his Father's death. Any younger sons would have to built their own houses. Therefore it was not abnormal for the younger children to request at least part of their inheritance in advance so that they could build a home and start a family. The younger son of course has no desire to start a family. He is thinking only of sinful and selfish desires.

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.

Why does the text stress that he went to a distant country? Was it in an attempt to remove himself completely from His father's control? Probably. Probably also to hide from his father. Deep down perhaps he was ashamed of what he was about to do, yet he still did it.

How often don't we tried to hide our sinful activity from God?

In one respect however the shame is good. Because there is there the acknowledgement of sin. When there is no shame and no attempt to hide it from God then we are really in trouble.

Therefore when we feel shame or when we see that we are trying to hide from God. We need to repent now.

Hebrews 4:7 again He designates a certain day, saying in David, "Today," after such a long time, as it has been said: "Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts."

Do not try to make excuses for the sin, and in this way get rid of the shame. Recognize that the shame is there from God calling you to repentance. But if you will not repent then God may well send judgement on you as he does the younger son.

This also is part of his extravagant love and mercy. Even this early in the parable we see the Father's extravagant love.

Hebrews 4:6 For whom the Lord loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives."

But if even then you will not repent, if even then you harden your heart, then you are in grave danger of your soul.

Hebrews 10:26,27 If we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.

14 But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. 15 Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything.

No greater shame could come upon this young man than what here happens to him. First he is so desperate that he agrees to become a slave to this farmer. Second his task was to feed the swine. Swine were an unclean animal and to have anything to do with them was the greatest shame to an Israelite. Even then the farmer did not feed him so that he would have gladly eaten carob pods. Carob pods are long thin bean like plants with pods that grow all over the Mediterranean but are entirely unfit for humans to eat. Edersheim tells us there is an old Jewish saying, "When Israel is reduced to the carob-tree, they become repentant." But even that terrible food this young man is not allowed to eat. So pitiful is his existence.

This is surely what this young man deserves. Many in his situation might make excuses that it was the ill luck that a famine came on the land. But if he had not wasted the gifts of His father the famine would not have been a problem.

17 But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, 19 and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants." '

Here this young man confess what we so often forget. The vast difference between those who serve the Lord and those whose hearts serve any other God. When we live in the house of the Lord we have and we have in abundance. Our Father is extravagant in both his love and his gifts to us. This young man remembers how even the servants of our Father have been given extravagantly by the Father.

Many in India and Africa go to extremes greater even then this to receive spiritual food. There are huge lines at some of the temples where people literally wait for days. They eat and sleep in line waiting to receive a blessing from their gods. They roll around on sharp rock to prove their worthiness. I'm sure you have seen photos of those who put hooks in their skin. Yet they receive nothing. Spiritually they are starving.

Or those who set their hearts to serve the things of this world, money, popularity, pride, etc. How many of them have not found these things empty and meaningless? For all their hard work they also received nothing of value.

The younger son however remembers the extravagant wealth, grace, and gifts of His father. He remembers how much they have who live in the house of the Lord.

20 And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

In the other parables in this section Jesus says “does he not.” In the parable of the lost sheep, for example, He says, “does he not leave the ninety-nine and go after the one who was lost.” But here Jesus does not say that. In this case the love of the Father, the joy of the Father, the forgiveness of the Father is so prodigal, so extravagant that it is beyond the experience or conception of men.

In fact the Rabbi's have a parable very similar to this one. Except that the lost son is not welcomed back into the family, but is only allowed to be a servant. The meaning of that parable seems to be that if you mess up, you will have to pay for it the rest of your life.

Not so with our Father. His forgiveness pours out upon the son absolutely, completely.

22 But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. 23 And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; 24 for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry.

The garment is the stola, the outer coat of the rich and wealthy. The ring and the sandals are a symbol of a master of the house and not a servant. Notice that the servants themselves are supposed to put the garments on this younger son. Again another sign that he is once again a true son of his father and an heir of the household.

25 Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 27 And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.' 28 But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. 29 So he answered and said to his father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. 30 But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.'

Perhaps the elder son when he first heard the music assumed that the party was meant for him. That would certainly be quite a jolt. Thinking here my father has made a surprise party for me, but then all of a sudden to find out it is not for you at all but for your sinful and wayward brother.

In either case he is quick to judgement and to anger. He is extravagant in his judgement against his little brother.

CS Lewis talks about this attitude in one his books. There is a man who considers himself a good person. Yet because a thief and a murderer who repented was allowed into heaven, this man was then angry towards God. He himself would not enter for he did not want to associate himself with people like that.

31 And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. 32 It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.' "

"All that I have is yours." The elder son is so quick to be jealous of what the younger son received. Yet the younger son has nothing compared to the riches which the elder son has.

It was the elder son who worked every day with his father. It was the elder son who knew the father. It was the elder son whom the father trusted. It was the elder son who ate daily from the extravagance of his father. "All that I have is yours," that father says. And indeed the elder son had full access to the entirety of the Father wealth. Yet he is jealous of the son. He is jealous that he got to live a sinful life and still received a party. He is jealous that the younger receives one fatted calf and a single night of rejoicing.

We talked before about the emptiness of those who serve any other god, whether it is Baal or money or fame. We however, have the extravagance of our Father. Concerning the Jews Paul writes

Rom 9:4-5 to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; 5 of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen.

All these things we also have and more. It is we who have access at any time through prayer to the throne of God. It is we who may eat daily at the table of God. It is we who may walk each day with our Father. Yet we are jealous of the money and the frivolity and the emptiness of the lives of those who do not know God.

We do not appreciate the extravagance which God has poured out upon us.

"Son" the father calls the elder. Here it is a term of affection. You are my son the Father says to the elder. The elder wishes to be rewarded for all his hard work and dedication through all the years. He thinks "I deserve." But a son doesn't earn wages. Because a son has a stake and a share in the property. It is the servants who earn wages. The son instead partakes in everything that belongs to his Father. Would you like to be treated like a servant and receive wages for your work? Or is it better to be a son, and therefore an equal owner of all the Father has?

This parable ends here, with the question left open. Will the elder son go in and rejoice because his brother has returned? The question is there before the pharisees, but also before us.

We are reminded of the Father's prodigal that is extravagant riches. Will we rejoice in His love and his riches. "All that he has is ours." Or will we continue in jealousy? Jealous of whoever won all that money in New Berlin. Jealous of the parties and the sinful living of others?

All of His love, all of His wealth is ours, let us rejoice with exceedingly great joy.

Amen