

Jesus continued: “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 servants 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 servants.’ 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.’” (Luke 15:11-32)

Welcome Home

You see him stumbling along. Where he came from, you aren’t sure. How he made it this far, you are shocked. His feet are caked with dust, mud and who knows what else. Torn and threadbare his clothes barely hang on a body that you could tell hasn’t had a good meal in a while. You can tell the poor guy hadn’t seen a shower in days not just by the way he looks; the smell coming off from him was nothing short of disgusting. You couldn’t tell if he had worked with pigs or just been rolling around in the slop with them. The worst part though was the haunted look in his eyes. This was a man who had lost everything; including respect for himself. He was broken, beaten, and desperate. There was nothing this man could offer. He had nothing. He was nothing.

That of course is the younger of the two sons. He couldn't wait for dad to die to get his hands on his inheritance. After dad split it up, he wouldn't stay a minute longer than he had to before he was off doing what he wanted no longer under his father's watchful eye. He's going on an adventure! Off he goes to a far distant country where the word "no" was not a part of his vocabulary. Spending money here, throwing money there, he didn't care. Women and booze, wild living and not a care in the world—he was living the life.

Of course the money wouldn't last forever. Things went from bad to worse when a severe famine arose in the country. He needs food. He needs a place to stay. He's in need. But no one seemed to feel the need to help him. He looked all over for a job, but things were tight everywhere. He had told himself he would never do it, but he was desperate. So he hired himself out to the last place any self-respecting Jew would work—pigs. But it was a job. Things had to start looking up, right? Work harder. Do more. This will fix everything. Instead he finds a cruel boss and task master that rubbed his nose in the fact that he wasn't even good to eat the pigs' food.

Then there's the older brother. The responsible brother. The hard-working brother. The brother who wasn't a screw up and had life figured out. He sees his brother come home and can't believe how everyone reacts. Sure it was good to see him. It's his brother after all; he's not completely cold-hearted. At the same time, there was no way he was about to join in this celebration. Then the nerve of dad when he comes out urging him to come inside and join! He's had enough. We might sympathize with him a little bit. After all, this brother stayed home. He worked on the ranch. He kept up the family's business. He worked hard. He had done everything his father had wanted him to do and his father had given him nothing—not even a young goat that he could celebrate with his friends.

At first glance the brothers' situations look very different. But when we look closer we see both had the same problem: being in their father's presence wasn't enough for either of them. The younger tried to find *it* somewhere else doing whatever he wanted. When that failed he tried finding *it* in working harder to fix his failures and to fill that gaping hole in his life. The older brother failed to see that he had *it*. Everything his father had already belonged to him—more than just some young goat. But he thought he had to work for the gift and, therefore, the gift was no longer a gift. It was a burden that he grudgingly obeys while secretly stewing over something he didn't see himself receiving. Both are equally lost.

Our situations are not that different. Sometimes being in your Heavenly Father's presence can feel like such a chore! You have a thousand different things that you need to do and a thousand other that need your attention in the not-so-distant future. We are not content to just be with God—not just in church but in our daily lives. His presence doesn't satisfy us; we demand more. We listen to the lies of the world and the empty promises the devil shares that being with God, having this relationship with him, means that you are missing out on something better. God is holding you back from your full potential. Maybe at some point in your life you made those life decisions that you weren't going to say "no." You lived life to fullest doing whatever you wanted not caring who said what. More likely it's the simple reckless daily life of just not doing what your heavenly Father wills for your life. You know

what you should and need to do. But you've decided your situation is different; what he says is old-fashioned, he doesn't get it, and you know better than him.

Or we rebel running off trying fill up with these life experiences that you want for yourself and especially for your children. You have these life goals that you want to achieve so you run off determined that you won't let anything or anyone get in the way. Or it's just the fact that life is busy. Too easily we allow ourselves to drift away from our Father's presence.

Or, like the older brother, we get really religious. We shake our heads in shock that someone isn't living up to the moral standards that we have set. We are shocked when she hasn't improved more with her behavior—she's so spoiled! We look disapprovingly when he isn't doing as much as he should. We might say someone is forgiven, but then expect them to follow these steps in order to be really forgiven. You want to make sure they are really sorry and won't do it again! Even then, we conveniently pack it away until we can say, "I told you so!" when they've fallen again. You make sure to do the right things. You make sure to do things the right way. But inside you feel like you are ready to boil over because the ones who aren't working as hard as you, the ones who have screwed up their lives, the ones who by all accounts don't deserve it, they are the ones who are getting ahead. We don't want much—just the young goat—a little more comfortable life, as nice as things as someone else, to get ahead. And when we don't receive what we think we should have, we get upset, even angry with our heavenly Father.

Either lifestyle is offensive to your God. Both imply that God is not good enough to make us happy. Both imply that his promises are not what he says they are. Both imply God is a liar.

And what does your heavenly Father do? He goes out to bring you in. He runs out to you. I can picture the father in Jesus' parable every day walking to the end of his land just waiting. Every day he kept an eye on the horizon watching for his son. Then he sees him. He doesn't wait for his son to make it to him; he runs out. He hears, "Father, I'm not worthy to be called your son." He knows it. There's no surprise there. His son doesn't deserve it. He doesn't care. He loves him. He grabs his mess of a child caked in pig slop and who knows what else into his warm embrace. He doesn't flinch away from the smell but plants a kiss on him. His son is home. There's no reprimanding. There's no staring down at him. There's no probation period to make sure he is really sorry. He orders the finest robe to dress him. Kill the fattened calf and get the prime rib going; it's time to celebrate. Even when the older brother is sulking and having his own pity party, the father doesn't let him stew. He goes out to him. He wants to bring him in.

And that's what your heavenly Father does for you. Our hands and feet are stained with the slop of sin that we've rolled around in. It's more than the things that we have done wrong or that which we've left undone. By nature, from the moment of conception, we are hostile towards God. We do not want to follow God's will. We do not want to be in God's presence. We are his enemies. The stench of death hangs over us because that is the result of this sin. So we confess, "Father, I am not worthy to be called your child." And he knows it too. Your confession doesn't surprise or shock him. This isn't news to him.

And still he grabs us sinners caked in our sins. He doesn't flinch at the stench of death that hangs onto you. He plants a kiss on you and welcomes you home. He knows you don't deserve it. He knows there is nothing that you can offer him. He knows you could never begin to repay him. And he wants you to stop trying to do that too. He loves you; that's grace. He's already sent his own Son, Jesus, who took on flesh and blood in our own likeness. He gave up his Son, not sparing him any pain or suffering while he walks on this earth or pain or suffering on that cross. He knew we could not do this on our own. The stain would not go away on its own. We could not do enough to fulfill the requirements. So he offers his own Son. The Lamb of God, Jesus, true God, is sacrificed. His precious blood pours out and pays the debt you owe. His life really ends as he gives up his spirit. The perfect Son of God, Jesus, dies in the place of us lost and dead in sin to free us from death and sin. In Jesus, your broken relationship with God has been fixed. You are no longer God's enemies. There is now no condemnation for you in Jesus. Your sins have been paid for entirely, all of them. In Jesus, it is finished.

And so what else should your Heavenly Father do but welcome you home. He runs out to wrap you in his embrace in baptism where he declares you his son, his daughter in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In those waters he wraps you in the new robe of Jesus' perfection and cleanses you of your sin. Just as Jesus was raised from the dead and lives, so you who were dead have been raised to live as God's child. He promises that from that day until your last day your sins will not be held against you. He's prepared a feast for you in the presence of our enemies. Here is Jesus' body and blood given and poured out for you with the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper. Take and eat, take and drink; see that the Lord is good! Come home, be here in your Father's presence where he welcomes us unworthy sinners as his dearly loved children and feeds us with his Word and Sacrament. When you scratch that itch of temptation and fall into sin again, when you may wander away from his presence, the Father continues to reach out ready to forgive you again. How could he not? You are his son. You are his daughter.

We know we don't deserve it. Humanly speaking this isn't fair. But that's grace. Your heavenly Father loves you. Deal with it. He knows you don't deserve it. He knows that you can't work it off. He knows that you can never begin to repay him. And he doesn't want you to try either. This is grace; it's his love he freely gives. You are always welcome home. Amen.