

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 27, 2011**

PRODIGAL GRACE

Luke 15:11-32

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE READING

Jesus was a great storyteller. He used stories to get people's attention. He told stories to illustrate spiritual truths. He told stories to paint a picture of what God is like. He told stories which were like a mirror in which to see ourselves, to show us what we are like. He told stories to show us our need of God's mercy and grace. He told stories to help us understand what it means to live in the kingdom of God under His gracious and sovereign rule.

Luke 15 contains three of Jesus' stories, all with a common theme. In each of these stories, something – or someone – is lost. In verses 3-7, it is a story about a lost sheep, and the trouble its shepherd would go to in order to find it. In verses 8-10, it is a story about a lost coin, and what its owner would do in order to find it. In both stories, when what was lost has been found, there is great joy – which is a picture, Jesus says, of the celebration which takes place in heaven whenever a lost sinner repents and is lost no more (15:7, 10).

The third story, beginning in verse 11, is one of the best known and best loved of all the stories Jesus told. It is considered a masterpiece of storytelling, and has even been called the greatest short story in the world. It is usually called “the parable of the prodigal son” or “the parable of the lost son,” with the emphasis on the younger son who demanded his inheritance from his father, and then wasted it all in wild and promiscuous living, before hitting rock bottom, coming to his senses, and returning home to his father in a spirit of repentance. I think it is better to call it “the parable of the loving father,” because the father is really the central figure in the story, and the father's love for both of his sons, not just for the “prodigal,” is really the central message of the story. I hope that will become clear to you. I hope you will see that there are two lost sons in this story, not just one. Both sons are lost. They have chosen dramatically different paths in life. But both are lost, each in their own way. And both are loved by the father.

Whatever title you prefer to give it, let's look together at the story Jesus tells in Luke 15:11-32. It is a story of prodigal grace which comes to us from the heart of our Heavenly Father. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

THE AUDIENCE

In order to really *get* what Jesus is teaching through this story, we need first of all to take note of the audience to whom Jesus is speaking. For whom is this parable intended? To find the answer, we have to go back to the opening verses of Luke 15. Look at verses 1 and 2: “Now the tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were all gathering around to hear (Jesus). But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered [among themselves], ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”

Jesus *attracted* sinners. Both “men and women of doubtful [and dubious] reputation” (*The Message*) were drawn to Jesus, not because He condoned their sin or changed His message to make it more palatable to them, but because they could tell that Jesus cared about them. He loved them. He welcomed them with open arms.

The Pharisees and the experts in the law, on the other hand, pushed “sinners” away. As far as they were concerned, the people hanging around Jesus were losers. They wanted nothing to do with them. And they thought Jesus should have nothing to do with them. In their rigorous devotion to God’s law, in their zeal to earn God’s favor by their obedience to every minute detail of the law, they looked down on people who didn’t live up to their standards. They considered themselves to be better than pretty much everybody else. Like Jonah in his attitude toward the Ninevites (see last week’s sermon), the Pharisees and religion scholars were adamant in their belief that “those people don’t deserve the blessing of God, they don’t deserve the grace of God, like we do.” They were ticked off that Jesus would give such despicable sinners the time of day. Their hearts were filled with ungrace. Seeds of self-righteous pride had taken root in their hearts, and now the bitter root of ungrace was producing its bitter fruit in their attitude toward others and their criticism of Jesus for welcoming such undeserving sinners to come to Him. As Eugene Peterson says in *The Message*, “their grumbling” – the grumbling of the Pharisees against Jesus for hanging out with known sinners – “triggered this story.”

In each of the stories Jesus told in Luke 15 – the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (or the loving father) – the target audience was the same. Jesus was trying to get through to the Pharisees and religion experts. He wanted them to see the joy of heaven when a sinner repents, regardless of what our sin(s) may be. Especially in the parable of the loving father, Jesus wanted them to see that God loves and welcomes and shows grace to repentant sinners – grace which comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it. Like the prodigal son who dishonored his father by demanding his inheritance, and ran off to Vegas (or its 1st century equivalent) where he wasted it all “in wild living” (15:13), before eventually coming to his senses (15:17) and going back home to his father in a spirit of repentance and humility (15:20). And like you and me.

THE POINT OF THE PARABLE

The second thing we need to be clear on is the main point of the parable. One evening at bedtime, a mother read this story of the prodigal son and the loving father to her four-year-old daughter. When they finished the story, the mother asked her daughter what she had learned from it. After thinking a moment, the little girl said: “Never leave home without your credit card!” Hmmm. I don’t think that is the point Jesus was making. The point of the parable is that God is a gracious and loving Father who welcomes repentant sinners who come home to Him. He welcomes us with open arms and with great joy.

That is the point Jesus wanted the Pharisees to see. It is the point He wants us to see. It is not, as the Pharisees mistakenly thought, about how good they were or how good we must be in order to win God’s approval. Trying to please God through our moral virtue or spiritual discipline is a dead end. It doesn’t work. It is like a bridge to nowhere, because that is where

it will get you: Nowhere. Jesus wanted the Pharisees to see that there is a different way. He wanted them to come to grips with grace. And He wants the same for us. More than anything, Jesus wants us to see how gracious and loving God is. He wants us to see how much God loves us, regardless of how bad or how good we've been. He wants us to see how merciful, how gracious and compassionate our heavenly Father is toward sinners who repent and come to Him in faith. He wants us to see the incredible expanse of God's grace. God's *prodigal* grace.

THE MEANING OF *PRODIGAL*

Third, what about the word *prodigal*? It is usually associated with the younger son in the parable. As a noun, *prodigal* means "one who spends or has spent his money or substance with wasteful extravagance," or "a spendthrift." In this sense, clearly, it applies to the younger son, who wasted his entire inheritance – squandered it, Jesus said (15:13), all of it – in a lifestyle of self-indulgence. He spent it all. He wasted it all. With no thought of tomorrow, he lived for the moment and refused himself no luxury his heart desired. Until it was all gone. There is no question about it: He fits the definition of a *prodigal*.

When it is used as an adjective instead of a noun, *prodigal* can mean "recklessly extravagant." It can also mean "lavish" or "lavishly abundant." All of these apply to the father in the story, who lavished his love on his returning son. He had compassion on his son when he might have exploded with anger instead. He ran to meet his son and greeted him with a loving embrace instead of an accusing lecture. He pulled out all the stops and threw an extravagant party to welcome his son home, when he could have treated his son like a *persona non grata*. The welcome he received from his prodigal father was something the son could never have expected in his wildest dreams.

What Jesus wants us to see, of course, is that God is a prodigal Heavenly Father who loves each of us with an extravagant and unconditional love. Do you think God is ever disappointed in you and me? Sometimes He is. When He is disappointed in you, does He stop loving you? No. Like the younger son in the parable, sometimes we may make selfish choices to go our own way, choices that grieve the heart of our Heavenly Father. Even when we do, our Father in heaven does not and will not stop loving us. Ever. You and I have a Father in heaven who loves us and will keep on loving us beyond anything we could ever deserve. This is true not just for us, but for everyone who comes to Jesus in repentance and saving faith.

As Tim Keller affirms in the title of the book he wrote on this parable (*The Prodigal God*), our Heavenly Father is exactly that. He is the *prodigal* God.

Prodigal is a good word to describe God's grace, too. It is rich. It is abundant. It is lavish. It is extravagant. It is extended to us from the heart of God not only in spite of our sins but without regard to anything we have ever done or failed to do. Did the younger son in the parable deserve to be received back into his father's family as a son, after the way he disrespected his father by demanding his inheritance and then deserting his family, after all the selfish, irresponsible, foolish things he did and the desperate straits in which he ended up?

Did he deserve to be treated the way his father treated him when he returned home? Absolutely not. But grace is not about “deserving.” Grace, as we have been saying throughout this series of messages, comes free of charge to people who do not deserve it. Which includes each of us. Nobody *deserves* grace.

Nevertheless, like the son who received prodigal grace from his father when he returned home, you and I have a Heavenly Father who delights in playing the grace card. He takes delight in lavishing His grace on us. He takes delight in giving us good gifts we could never deserve. He takes delight in showing compassion to us. He takes delight in welcoming us home when we come to our senses and see the foolishness of our ways, when we change direction, turn to Him, and repent of our sin – whatever it is. Whatever you may have done, wherever you may have been, whatever trouble you may have gotten into, whatever kind of mess you have made in your life, whatever damage you may have done to someone else, God is ready to show you His lavish, abounding, prodigal grace.

Do not, I pray, miss out on this prodigal grace. Do not for any reason shut yourself off from this grace. Open your heart to receive the grace, and the blessings of grace, that God has for you.

THE OLDER SON

Sad to say, there is one character in the parable who didn’t get it. There is one character who seemed to have no place for grace in his heart. There is one character who had breathed too much of the toxic fumes of ungrace. You know who I mean. It is the older son of the father. The older brother.

He did have some good things going for him. He stayed out of trouble. He played by the rules. He never did anything to embarrass his father or the family. He did his best to live according to the law, in the hope that he would receive some recognition or reward for his virtue.

He was, in fact, self-righteous, which is not a good thing. He believed himself to be better than others. Especially, he considered himself to be morally and spiritually superior to, and more deserving of the father’s favor and blessing, than his prodigal brother. You saw in the Scripture how he reacted when one of the servants told him what was going on, and why there was such a celebration. He got angry. No doubt he was angry with his father for welcoming home this wayward son in such a lavish and extravagant way, or even welcoming him home at all. His brother didn’t deserve it! He (the older brother) resented the fact that his younger brother was being shown so much love and honor. He (the younger brother) deserved to be thrown out of the family. He deserved to be punished for the damage he had done to the family name and the grief he had brought to his parents.

The older brother got angry because, instead of giving the younger brother what he really deserved, their father threw a big party for him. The father didn’t treat the repentant son as his sins deserved. He treated him with compassion and love and grace. He forgave his son.

The older brother wanted nothing to do with that. He wanted nothing to do with his brother. Two bitter roots had grown up to poison his heart: A bitter root of resentment and anger toward the father, and a bitter root of unforgiveness toward his younger brother. The older brother epitomized ungrace.

Envy and covetousness were lurking in his heart, too. He was green with envy over the royal reception his brother received. He wanted a party like that for himself. He wanted a party where *he* would be the center of attention, a party that would show everyone what a virtuous and admirable young man he was.

The terribly sad thing about the older brother (who, of course, represented the Pharisees) is that he had failed to see that his father loved him every bit as much as the father loved the younger brother. Somehow he failed to see or understand or embrace the fact that the father wanted to lavish his love and grace on him. And he didn't have to earn it. He didn't have to first prove he deserved it before he could receive the blessing of his father's love. The love and grace of the father were there for him all the time.

The love and grace of the Father – God the Father – are there for you, too. God loves and welcomes and lavishes His grace on repentant sinners, just like the father in the parable. His love and grace are there for older brothers and younger brothers alike.

PRODIGAL GRACE FROM OUR PRODIGAL GOD

For some of us, I know, our relationships with our earthly fathers (or parents) may be complicated. For some of us, it is a source of disappointment or hurt that has not yet healed. Ernest Hemingway, whose relationships with his parents left him with deep wounds, wrote a short story called *The Capital of the World*, about a father and teenage son who had a falling out. The son runs away from home, and the father, wanting to be reconciled to his son, searches for him all over Spain, but he cannot find him. Finally, in Madrid, in desperation, he takes out an ad in the daily newspaper. The ad reads:

PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN
PAPA

He hopes that maybe, just maybe, his son will see the ad and realize that his father loves him. The next day, when the father arrives at the Hotel Montana, he is stunned to find 800 "Pacos" looking for their fathers. Eight hundred boys named Paco saw or heard about the ad in the newspaper, and each one hoped it was meant for him. Eight hundred "Pacos" estranged from their fathers – all of them longing for forgiveness and reconciliation. Each one seeking the love of his father. Each one in need of the father's grace.

Tim Keller points out that the prerequisite for receiving the grace of God is to know you need it (*The Prodigal God*, p. 45). In the parable, the younger brother knew he desperately needed the father's mercy and grace. The older brother, like the Pharisees, refused to recognize or acknowledge his need.

What about you? Do you see how lavish the love of God really is? Do you know how much your Father in heaven loves you? How much you matter to Him? Do you see how incredible God's prodigal grace is, and how much we all need it?

Whatever your relationship with your earthly father or mother or parents may be, or may have been, and whatever scars or blessings you may have received from them, do not ever forget that if you have given your heart to Jesus and belong to Him, you have a Father in heaven who loves you with an everlasting and unconditional love. You have a Father in heaven whose prodigal grace is available to you. You have a Father in heaven who longs to welcome you home with open arms and a heart filled with joy when you turn away from any sin in your life and turn back to Him. You have a Father in heaven who celebrates whenever a sinner repents and comes home to Him. You have a Father in heaven who loves *you* and will *never* stop. You have a Father in heaven who gives grace upon grace, prodigal grace, abounding grace to His children. Not because you or I deserve it, because we don't. And we never will. He does it because it is just the way God is. He is full of grace and compassion, slow to anger and rich in love (Psalm 145:8).

The prodigal grace of God comes free of charge to people who do not deserve it. For that, we shall be forever grateful.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.