

WHOSE GRACE IS IT ANYWAY!

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Scripture: Luke 15: 11-32

You will probably recognize today's scripture as the lost things – the lost sheep, the lost coin, and then the lost son who didn't get lost.

Luke 15: 11-32

¹¹He said, "A man had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. ¹³And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. ¹⁴Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. ¹⁶And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. ¹⁷But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."' ²⁰So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹And 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.' ²²But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; ²³and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate.

²⁵Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. ²⁷And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' ²⁸But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. ²⁹But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; ³⁰but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' ³¹And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'

What a wonderful picture of God's love! The father waiting and waiting for his son's return, hoping every day that a distant speck would turn into the form of his son. Until one, it did. And at the moment that he recognized his son, he ran towards him, embraced him, and celebrated him.

But there was one who refused to celebrate. The other brother couldn't bring himself to accept the fact that his brother, who had squandered his entire inheritance, could be welcomed back with a feast, a ring, sandals on his feet, and a robe. He just couldn't.

The elder brother looked at his father's response, and the only thing he felt was resentment. To him, the younger son has squandered everything and didn't deserve the welcome that he received. Grace

was not a part of his vocabulary, but consequences were. Think about it for a minute. If one were to look for consequences, I'm sure they would have been there. maybe not visible immediately, but they were bound to show up as the days went on.

Consider the younger son as he returned home. He came back with nothing. No inheritance; no money. He came barefoot, a picture of poverty and shame. He had no means to provide for himself. He would now depend on his father for food, for housing, and for care. He had nothing. And since the estate was already divided, he might even have to borrow from his elder brother for sustenance.

Even more than that, he would have to face the shame and ridicule of servants and neighbors who had seen and heard of his reckless lifestyle. He had lost trust. Who would believe his words now? A vagabond coming home. who would want to marry him? A man who had wasted everything. So there were, and would have been consequences. The natural consequences of his rebellion were still unfolding.

Here's the thing, beloved. God forgives us. he takes our confession. He cleanses us. and He restores us in the spiritual realm. But in the natural world, in the natural physical world that you and I live, there are consequences. And those consequences are ones that will need to be faced.

And this is what the elder brother missed. He saw the robe. He saw the ring. He saw the sandals. And he saw the feast. And he saw only grace. And concluded that there would be no consequences. But he forgot that consequences don't always disappear in the natural realm. They don't.

The natural realm most often bears the marks and the results of sin.

- Consider a robbery. A thief, when caught, will do jail time.
- Consider adultery. The family will endure broken trust and fractured relationships.
- Consider substance abuse. There will be consequences to health and dependency.
- Consider anger or violence. There will be strained relationships. There will be legal trouble.

Forgiveness cancels guilt, but doesn't always take away the consequences.

Spiritually, God removes our condemnation. Paul tells us in Romans 8:1 *"Therefore now, there is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus."* But naturally, that effect, that consequence of even what we have been forgiven, that consequence still has to be met in our physical realm.

Galatians 6:7 Paul says, *"Do not be deceived. God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows."*

The scandal of grace is that the Father's forgiveness is real and complete. That's grace. But the sobering reality is that sin's consequence often continues. In the natural realm, the consequences of the younger son's riotous living were about to unfold. He came home with nothing. No inheritance, no money, no sandals on his feet. He would have to live with shame, ridicule, and dependence on someone else.

But here's the caveat, beloved. Those consequences would unfold under the canopy of the father's love. Those consequences, the results of all that he did, would begin to unfold for him under the canopy of God's love. And that's what makes all the difference.

As forgiven ones, we still face consequences for our actions. But God can take those very consequences and make something beautiful out of them. He redeems even what sin is broken. So even though we go through the consequence of what we had done, God is alongside of us. He may not take that away, because the natural realm that we live in, the physical world, goes according to God's laws. And any sin that contravenes it, has a result, has a consequence.

But you can see the elder brother's blind spot. The younger brother knew his need for forgiveness. He said, "I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son.'" He came contrite. He came repentant. He came confessing.

But the elder brother, he also needed forgiveness, though he didn't realize it. His heart was proud, self-righteous, and filled with resentment. He said, "All these years I've been serving you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet, you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends." For him, obedience was duty. Service was a transaction. His worldview had no room for grace. So, when grace was extended to his brother, he could not rejoice.

Jesus talked about this in the parable of the laborers as well, in Matthew 20. If you remember, some worked all day. Others were hired at noon. Still others in the final hour. And at the end of it, they all received the same wage. And those who worked all day, grumbled. They cried, "We have borne the burden of the work and you have made them equal to us."

But the master replied, "Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? You agreed to work for a denarius, I've paid you a denarius. It's fair. It's just." Then he said, "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" In other words, "Grace is mine to give, not yours. Mercy is mine to extend. And I can give it to whomever I choose."

And that's what the elder brother didn't see. He thought he had a say in how his father dispensed the father's grace. He thought his years of duty gave him entitlement. But here's the truth. He too, stood in need of forgiveness. His sin was pride. His sin was being judgmental. His sin was anger toward both, his brother and his father.

And the tragedy is this. The younger son, broken and repentant, was restored and celebrated. And the elder son, proud and resentful, stood outside, unforgiven, because he had never asked for forgiveness. The father's invitation was so clear. "My son, you are always with me. Everything that I have belongs to you. It's yours." But until his heart softened, he would have to live with the bitterness instead of the blessing.

But here's the danger for us as well, that it is possible for us to have an elder brother's spirit within us. We know grace with our minds. But when we see it extended to others, our hearts resist. The elder brother's spirit is more than just a bad attitude; it's a heart posture that can creep into any of us if you're not careful. It's so subtle. It shows up in various ways. Let me give you just a few.

1. The elder brother couldn't handle his father's generosity. When his younger brother was embraced, celebrated, and restored, he seethed. Why? Because grace offended his sense of fairness. He wanted justice and not mercy. The elder brother's spirit resents when others receive forgiveness or blessing that seems undeserved.

We've all been there, isn't it? We see somebody who has lived a life doing all kinds of things, and then they one day confess and waltz into the community and act like nothing happened. And we look at them and say, "What do you mean nothing happened?" And it's so difficult for us to give the same grace that God has extended to that person, forgetting that we too, stand where we are because of grace.

And scripture puts it well, “Are you envious because I am generous?” is the question. And sometimes that can creep into the way we respond to God’s grace all around us.

2. Could be pride in performance. He said, “All these years I’ve been serving you, and never disobeyed your orders.” Notice the language. “I’ve been serving you.” His obedience had become duty. It wasn’t a delight. He was measuring his worth in tasks and rewards and not relationship.

The elder brother’s spirit takes pride in its own goodness and sees service as a mere transaction. And Isaiah writes it well when he says, *“All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.”*

3. The whole idea of entitlement. The elder brother expected that his years of faithfulness should earn him more. He said, “Yet, you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.” He believed blessing should be parceled out based on effort. And the elder brother’s spirit lives where there’s a sense of entitlement rather than gratitude.

Scripture puts it well. What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not? You have because you have received. And you have because of God’s benevolence, His goodness, His love, His compassion. Entitlement.

4. Then we need to be careful about judgment of others. He said to his father, “This son of yours, who squandered your property with prostitutes.” Notice that he didn’t even call him ‘my brother’. This son of yours. He disowned him in his heart.

And we have the elder brother’s spirit. It separates one from sinners rather than celebrating their restoration. Even after restoration, we continue to look at them through eyes that say, “You’re a sinner.” Scripture says, “Be careful. Don’t judge, or you too will be judged.”

5. Bitterness. Bitterness toward his father. Underneath it all, he was angry, not just with his brother, but with his father. “Look, all these years I’ve been serving for you.” He saw his father as a taskmaster, not as a loving parent. The elder brother’s spirit distorts our view of God. We serve Him as a master, not delight in him as a father. And scripture says, “You did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but the spirit of adoption as sons by whom we cry, Abba, Father.”

So to wrap up, the elder brother’s spirit is marked by resentment, pride, entitlement, judgment, and bitterness. It blinds us to grace. It keeps us outside the celebration. It makes us miss the father’s heart. And the tragedy is this: The prodigal son, though broken, was inside, restored. The elder brother, though righteous, remained outside, estranged.

And the good news is that the father’s words to the elder son are his words to us as well. “My child, you’re always, always with me. everything I have is yours.” You already have His presence. You already have His provision. You already have all of His promises.

So, there’s no need for us to live in envy or resentment. Why live as though we’re servants earning wages, when we are children of abundance? The younger brother reminds us no sin is beyond forgiveness. The elder brother reminds us no righteousness makes us entitled.

So the call for us today is this – to lay down the elder brother spirit, to rejoice in the father's grace, whether it's poured out on you or on someone else, and live with gratitude that all that is His is already yours in Christ.

Amen.