

Celebrate?
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Luke 15:20-32

One of our great losses during “lock down” is the loss of celebrations with family and friends. When somebody throws a party are you the first to show up and the last to leave? Here’s a really strange question: When there’s a party do you join the celebration or stand outside and question whether the party should happen at all? Do you celebrate with the revelers or question the choice of the guest of honor? Those are strange questions will make sense as we get into our text.

We’ve all had the experience. You break out the delicious food for your picnic and within minutes you’re fighting a battle with nasty flies and yellow jackets. *“This food is for us! It’s not for nasty creatures like you! Go away!”* When Jesus walked the earth promising forgiveness and restoration he drew sinners the way a tasty picnic draws flies and yellow jackets! His response to those sinners continued to cause tension with the religious elite of the day.

Luke 15:1–2 (ESV) tell us, ¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

- They were really saying, *“No ‘self-respecting’ prophet of God would associate with sinners, and certainly not the Messiah!”*
- They missed two points. Reaching out to sinners in love is what Jesus’ is all about, and that THEY themselves were sinners too (and so are we!)
- In Luke chapter 15 Jesus used three parables to respond to the misguided view of the scribes and Pharisees.
- His illustrations of finding a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son tell us that God’s people should celebrate the words of Psalm 31:1, *“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.”*⁴

Big Idea: Have you heard? There's a party! Heaven rejoices when even one sinner repents. A true follower of Christ will always join in with that celebration!

- Jesus began His third parable in this encounter with the words, *"There was a man who had two sons."*
- Even if someone is only marginally biblically literate, they know this one.
- They've heard of the rebellious younger son, the forgiving father, and the cynical and selfish older brother. Let's summarize the first few verses.
- The younger son felt restricted and bored. He craved the bright lights and big city. He longed for his "pay day" inheritance to fund the high life!
- When he asked his father to "divide the inheritance" in essence he was saying, *"Dad, I wish you were dead so I could get my cash!"*
- The father's agreement to a premature payout would likely have made him the laughing stock of the neighborhood. *"What a pushover! You know that boy will blow all that cash in no time!"*
- Was the father so frustrated he'd pay the boy to just go away?
- Was this "tough love" to teach the son about reaping and sowing?
- Whatever the father's motivations, the predictions of the crash came true.
- Wine, women, and song turned to homelessness, hunger, and hogs!
- Feeding hogs is a nasty affair. There's a reason they call it "slop!" Farmers still feed the pigs a nasty stew of rotting leftover garbage.
- Imagine this entitled Jewish boy craving to eat the slop of unclean pigs.
- To Jesus' audience this was the very definition of hitting rock bottom.
- The scribes and Pharisees were nodding and smiling. *"Good enough for this sinner. He got his just desserts! Now Jesus is making some sense!"*

- But Jesus wasn't done with the story. He was just getting started.
- Verse 17 is the pivot point. *"And when he came to himself."*
- We might say, *"When he came to his senses."* I imagine this once healthy and attractive young man looking into the mirror and being sobered up by the shockingly sad and disheveled shell of his former self.
- This could have gone either way. He could have spiraled further in despair, but something told him he could *"arise and go to his father."*
- Even if he had to grovel to his father it would be better than this!
- He rehearsed his pitch to the "old man." His plea was surprisingly on-target theologically: *"I have sinned against heaven and you. I'm not worthy to be called your son."* THAT is sorrow for sin!
- Was this true repentance or just remorse for his circumstances?
- His desire to turn back to his father gives a clue.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes, "The man who has not repented, but who is only experiencing remorse, when he realizes he has done something against God, avoids God.... The man who has not been dealt with by the Spirit of God and has not been convinced and convicted, tries to get away from God, to avoid him at all costs. He does not think, he does not read the Bible, he does not pray; he does everything he can not to think about these things. But the extraordinary thing about the man who is convicted of sin by the Holy Spirit is that though he knows he has sinned against God, it is God he wants – 'Be merciful to me, O God.' He wants to be with God—that is the peculiar paradox of repentance, wanting the one I have offended!"²⁰

- The son lowered his expectations: *"Maybe he'll let me be a hired hand."*
- We pick up the drama in verse 20:

²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I

have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’²² But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet.’²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.’²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

- Our heart leaps when we read, *“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.”* Note, this all happened BEFORE the son the son started his well-rehearsed confession and plea. The father was poised to forgive.
- The neighbors must have been shocked at this public display of acceptance and forgiveness. The son had made his father look like a fool, yet the father didn’t punch the son in the mouth or sneak him in the back door. He publicly and lovingly embraced his smelly, bedraggled son.
- The story could have ended there and we’d be satisfied.
- Anyone can grasp and be grateful for the story of the tender, undeserved forgiveness of a child that strayed. It’s the very picture of grace, but there’s more to the parable of the prodigal than that.
- As if this isn’t enough, the father’s immediate response is to celebrate!
- This is the real point of Jesus’ words in all three parables.
- In Luke 15:7 (ESV) Jesus said,⁷ ...I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. (Did you hear that Mr. Pharisee?)
- In Luke 15:10 (ESV)¹⁰ ...I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (Did you get that Mr. Scribe?)
- Have you heard? There’s a party! Heaven rejoices when even one sinner repents. The party was over the top, but this was more than just a party, it was a restoration. Hired hands didn’t have sandals and robes, much less a family ring! The gifts signaled his full restoration as a son.

- The party was underway, the son was relieved and grateful, the father was pleased. But the story still wasn't over. There was another son.

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 And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And 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.’ ²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’

- We tend to think this parable is mainly about the prodigal, but as Jesus responded to the charges of the religious elite, the message for them is wrapped up in the reaction of the “elder brother.”
- *“Father, why would you celebrate my no-good brother who made a fool of you and squandered his inheritance in debauchery? I’ve kept the rules, I’ve worked full days, and I never got a party!”*
- The older brother thought fatherly love and acceptance should be reserved for those who “earn” it with good behavior not for rebellious sinners. Hmmm, sounds like a Pharisee to me.

³¹ [The father replied] ...‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’ ” [And there the parable ends.]

- The father’s words illustrated Jesus’ appeal and rebuke to the self-righteous Pharisees: *“You don’t earn the father’s love; He gives it freely to those that love him. If*

you really understood that you would join the celebration when a sinner comes home!”

- The elder son couldn't mentally trade places with his younger brother. He couldn't say, *“but for the grace of God that could have been me...that IS me...in need of the father's forgiveness.”*

So, What's the Takeaway?

- John MacArthur in his book a “Tale of Two Sons” writes, *“The parable...contains a message and an application that every one of us must heed...no one is free from the need for repentance...If you can hear the parable of the prodigal son and not identify yourself, you are missing the unspoken point of Jesus' message. It is a call to repentance, and it applies to prodigals (immoral, outcast sinners) and Pharisees (moral, respectable hypocrites) alike...On the one hand, we see how repentance unleashes heaven's joy. On the other hand, we learn that refusing to see one's own need for repentance is nothing but stubborn, self-righteous opposition to heaven's agenda...It reminds us of Jesus' tender words in John 6:37: “The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.”ⁱⁱⁱ*
- Heaven rejoices when even one sinner repents. A true follower of Christ will always join in with that celebration!
- We will celebrate that we ourselves have been graciously forgiven.
- We will celebrate because we can see ourselves in another prodigal that came home seeking the Father's restoration.
- We will celebrate the fact that God's free gift of salvation doesn't require us to get into Heaven on “good behavior.” Instead it's the lavish gift of a Father who sees us when we are a “long way off” and has compassion on us though we deserve punishment.
- We will celebrate that Jesus died in our place to pay for our sin.
- Have you heard? Heaven is throwing a party! Will you join in?

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- ⁱ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (Ps 32:1). Wheaton, IL:
- ⁱⁱ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "Out of the Depths" (Wheaton: Crossway, 1995) 57-58
- ⁱⁱⁱ A Tale of Two Sons: The Inside Story of a Father, His Sons, and a Shocking Murder by John F. MacArthur, Thomas Nelson (April 1, 2008) pp 36-37