

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.  
Amen.

You may be seated.

Okay, so today in our gospel lesson, we have the very familiar story of the prodigal father. I know you've heard it as the prodigal son, but really, what this is, is the story of the prodigal father and two prodigal sons. That's really what it's about.

Prodigal is a word that means wasteful or wanton or overly abundant, and it's very obvious that the kid, who literally wasted his inheritance on wine, women, and song, he was wanton, he was wasteful, he was prodigal. That is very clear; we understand that. But really, the story is not so much about him as about what the father does with him and also, by extension, what the father does with the other son, because the other son is just as wasteful and wanton in his attitude as the other one. It's just arrogance and self-righteousness. He thinks he deserves God the Father's blessing. He thinks that he has earned it. After all, he said, "I've done everything that you've ever wanted me to do. I've always been obedient and respectful." Because every child, and all of us know, as parents, that every child has always been obedient, every single time, right? They've never done anything wrong, never, right? Yeah, okay.

So Jesus is talking to the Pharisees and the Scribes and the righteous people of Israel, and He's telling this parable because they're offended at what He is doing. He is eating with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus, a miracle worker, who seems to know what He's talking about, a prophet who wants to reform Israel, at least as far as they can tell, who's challenging them on their righteousness. Then He, in his righteousness, goes, eats with sinners and tax collectors and prostitutes and all sorts of low lives that you don't want to be around. I mean, these are the people that when you see them walking on the sidewalk, you cross the street and go to the other side. That's the type of people that Jesus is spending time with, and the Pharisees and the Scribes are offended at that.

And so Jesus uses this parable to help us understand what's going on. The son, first of all, the prodigal one, the one that we're most familiar with, who goes off and wastes his inheritance, he finally comes to his senses when he's got nothing left. And he remembers the nature of his father. You see, that's the point of this parable. It's not about how the young son came back. It's not about how the older son resented it. It's about how the father treated all of them and what he did for both of them. That's the point.

And what does the father do? The father seems to be waiting with anticipation for his son to come back. He seems to be constantly looking down the road, hoping that his son would repent of his ways. And while the son is a long ways off, the father sees and runs after him and embraces him. Very undignified thing to do, for an older man to run to his child. And yet his compassion, his love, was so great, that that's what he did. And notice the son's speech. This is very interesting. Son has three things that he wants to get out: "I've sinned against heaven and against you." Correct; that is true. "I'm no longer worthy to be called your son." Correct; that is also true. The third thing he wanted to say is, "Treat me like your servant." That he could not get out, because God does not want us to think that we deserve His mercy and His love. He doesn't want us to think that we are earning it or that we are paying off our debt somehow.

See, the son figured that he wasn't worthy to be called the son, so he should grovel and be treated like a servant and somehow earn back his father's respect and love. That's not how God works. God loves us in spite of the fact that we have done nothing to deserve His grace, in spite of the fact that we have indeed squandered His gifts, either by wasteful, wanton living or by sanctimonious, self-righteous living. Both are equally condemned.

You see, listen to what Isaiah says here in Chapter 12: "Oh, Lord, for though You were angry with me, Your anger turned away that you might comfort me." That last part doesn't fit with the first part, logically, at least not in my mind, initially. "You were angry, but You turned Your anger away from me so that You might comfort me." Really? Comfort me? I just messed up. I just did everything wrong, and You're rightfully angry. But you choose. God chooses to turn His wrath away from us for the sake of His son, so that He might show compassion and love to us. Now, that's the child that ran away. The other child, the good kid, the one that did everything right, his problem was he was rather judgmental about it all. He thought he was better than his brother. He thought he deserved everything that he got, and he thought he should have gotten more. He deserved to have this feast. The father never gave this young man a goat? Really? They never celebrated anything? He never got any blessings from his father? It was just work, work, work all the day long? That doesn't ring true.

And how often do we, as Christians? Again, this is Jesus talking to the holy people in Israel. How often do we, as Christians, look at the other people, who are living awful lifestyles, who are sinning, who are obnoxious, who are liars and cheats and immoral, and what do we do about that? We stick our nose out at them. We

judge them. We condemn them for their behavior, because we're better than all of that.

But what are we supposed to be doing? Why did God save us? In Corinthians, Paul says, "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us a ministry of reconciliation." We are called to reconcile the people back to God by sharing the love of God with them. Not to judge them, not to look down upon them, not to feel superior to them, but to love them, to care for them, to welcome them into the family. There's a stereotype in churches, where a stranger comes and sits in your pew, because a lot of us have a pew, right? I mean, we often sit in the very same place, and a stranger comes and sits in your pew, and the attitude, at least they show in the cartoons, is, "Well, you're in my pew. Get out of here." The judgmental nature, it springs up in all of us. It's very easy to come out.

But we're called to be compassionate, as God was compassionate to us, as He graciously gives so much that it is wanton. It is excessive. It is prodigal in its nature, because that is how much the nature of God loves us. When you were standing before the sermon, before I had you sit down, I said, "The grace, mercy, and peace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ be and abide with you always." The grace and mercy, the love of God that forgives our sin, that doesn't count our evil against us but gives us His love and His forgiveness. That leads to a peace which surpasses all understanding. That is ours. We don't deserve it. We don't earn it. We never will. And yet, for the sake of Christ, it is ours.

And we are called, then, to be as generous with His love and our own love as He is with us, to the people that we cross the street to avoid, to the neighbor that irritates us, to the boss that we disrespect and dislike, to the people that really, really irritate our last little nerve. We're called to love them and to pray for them and to seek God's will for them, because God has been generous to the wayward and the self-righteous and to all of us. And for that, we rejoice, because He did not have to know sin, but He knew sin, and He took sin upon Himself so that we might be free of it.

We don't need to judge and condemn the world. The word of God does that well enough. Their own conscience does that well enough. We don't need to do it. What we need to do, what we are called to do, what we have been reconciled with God to do, is to love one another as Christ has loved us. So let us be ministers of reconciliation. Let us be ministers of the love of God. Let us be quick to listen, quick to forgive, quick to love, because God has so richly loved us.

MARCH 30, 2025 SERMON

May His grace and His mercy and His peace be and abide with you always, now and forevermore, unto life everlasting. Amen.