

“GRACE ALL THE WAY HOME (#2): THE BITTER HEART”

(Luke 15:25-32)

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[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 9-18-22]

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1. [11am... Watch video below **AS SCRIPTURE READING**... (words from [Luke 15:25-32](#))...]
2. [WATCH VIDEO:"*The Older Brother*" from [SermonSpice.com](#) (WeirdOut Productions, Time: 3:42), end with "*Doesn't it matter?*"]
3. So... "*Doesn't it...?*" Doesn't it matter that all the bad things this younger son had done were seemingly being tossed aside, and that he was now being treated *as good* (or *better than*) the older brother who'd stayed faithful all that time?

A--That's a question I want us to address as we continue discussing the meaning and impact of God's Grace in our series from Luke 15 called "**Grace All the Way Home.**"

B--Of course, the story is popularly known as the "*Parable of the Prodigal Son*," but more accurately it should be called the "*Parable of the Man with Two Sons*" ...

C--...Because -- as today's verses highlight -- it's story about a father who had two sons...

1--Who loved *both* of them,...

2--Who, when they came *to* him, he went out to meet them *both* (Vss. 20 & 28),...

3--Who was generous to *both* of them (Verses 22-23,31),...

4--But who each *responded* to his love in very *different* ways: one with repentance and remorse; the other with bitterness and resentment.

4. Now, it wasn't that the older brother didn't want his younger sibling ever to return. No, as we heard in the video, it was the *party* that was so offensive!

A--"*Sure, let the penitent come home! But keep his homecoming in character with Jewish tradition: give him bread & water to eat; a sackcloth to wear; ashes to adorn himself; let him kneel & grovel in penitence; and let there be tears of remorse & repentance!*"

B--But instead, what does the father do?

1--He kills the prized fatted calf (which, we learned last week, you only did for *dignitaries*);

2--He gives him "*a robe--the best one*" to wear (symbolizing *honor*);

3--He gives him rings to adorn his fingers (symbolizing *authority*);

4--He calls *not* for kneeling and groveling, but for *dancing*;

5--And instead of tears of sorrow, there's joy and merriment!

C--Oh, the scandal of it all was just too much for the older brother!

1--He felt angry, sullen & hurt at the celebration for this person who (as we heard on the video) he couldn't even call "*brother*," but instead "*this son of yours*" (Vs. 30).

2--In other words, he let all of his anger & hurt turn into bitterness and resentment which cut him off from his father *and* his brother, causing him to *miss the party*.

5. Now, perhaps the "bitter heart" of this older brother was justified, at least to some degree.

A--I mean, on the surface it *doesn't* seem fair that his younger sibling should be treated this way after all the bad things that he'd done.

B--And too often, I fear, this older brother's concerns in many ways mirror our own:

1--Like him, we're concerned that an offer of grace might seem to *minimize* or *excuse* wrongdoing -- that "*forgiving*" might look too much like "*condoning*"?

2--And we certainly don't want to *condone* sin or wrongdoing, do we? So, we're reluctant to offer to grace (or even forgiveness) to others when they've done things that either hurt us, or that we feel are wrong.

6. Yet, *does God's Grace really eliminate accountability?* Well to be fair, *this* parable doesn't address that, because *that's* not it's point.

A--But other parables *do* address it (as do Jesus' own *actions/treatment* of sinners) ¹, and they tell us that Grace does *not* mean that we *ignore* a person's sin, but that we should love the *sinner more than* we despise the *sin* -- not that we *disregard* wrongdoing, but that we don't *define* people by it, either. ²

1--At one of my previous churches, a young man (I'm going to call him "John") came to us with a lot of dysfunction: drug & alcohol issues; relationship difficulties; a lack of trust in people and God; and a very short temper!

2--At first, he was deeply suspicious of me and our church members, and he severely tried our patience many, many times.

3--But John kept coming, and we kept loving on him (in spite of himself), refusing to define him by his problems.

4--And over time, he gradually began to soften and change, so that by the time I was appointed to new church, he was different... & all because of love & grace.

B--In Jesus' parable, you see, the father is *NOT* showing favoritism, but instead is showing how Grace can empower us to *love* a prodigal *more than* we *despise* his mistakes. ³

C--Unfortunately for this older brother, though -- who represents the self-righteous Pharisees who'd rather see sinners destroyed than be saved, and who've criticized Jesus for hanging out with such people -- his bitterness and resentment caused him to miss the party (which in this story is a metaphor here for God's *Grace*).⁴

--II--

7. You know, I wonder how many of us today as Christians are missing out on God's party -- God's Grace -- because we're bound-up by bitterness, resentment, or smug self-righteousness that we're harboring towards someone else?

A--Maybe it's a spouse or family member who's hurt us; ...
 ...a co-worker who pulled the rug out from under us;
 ...a friend who we feel betrayed us;
 ...a fellow church member who we think talked bad about us;
 ...a Pastor who did or said something we didn't like, or who hurt our feelings;
 ...or maybe we're bitter and resentful towards even God Himself because we think He either caused or *allowed* some bad thing to happen!

B--But *whoever* it's towards, you see, a "bitter, resentful heart" creates a *barrier* to us finding and experiencing the Grace of God in *our own* lives, as well.

1--So, the older brother here missed out on the party -- he missed out on Grace -- because he was too smug and self-righteous!

2--Bible scholar I.H. Marshall was right when he once wrote that "*One can be lost even [while still] at home,*"⁵ because we can be "lost" through bitterness and resentment.

C--And unfortunately, there are all kinds of *religious* people -- "church"-people, perhaps even some of us worshipping today! -- who have lived and worked in our Father's house for many, many years, but who've become spiritually "lost" because we've grown bitter and resentful towards others who've come to God differently than we did, or who experience and worship God *differently* than we do!

8. In our fixation on the *prodigal* son, you see, what we (and they) may miss is Jesus' *main question*,⁶ which is... what if *WE TODAY* are the Pharisees and scribes here in this story?⁷

A--What if this parable is *not* just about *being* lost and coming home, but about *accepting* those who *do*, and recognizing our *own* "lostness" in the process?

B--What if it's about us stepping out of *our* comfort zone and realizing that God has bigger priorities than making *US* happy, comfortable and safe (like the older son thought)?

C--What if it's not really about the accolades, acknowledgements, or praises we think WE deserve, but about the lavish forgiveness and Grace of God that we're to *pass on* to those who WE don't think *deserve* it?

D--What if the main point IS the "lost" and not just the "found"? ...what if it's *not* just about what we're doing *right*, but about what *more* we can be *doing* right now?...

E--...That it's *not* for us merely to *know* this story, but for us to *live it out* -- to be a living story of Grace for others?

--III--

9. OUR story, you see, doesn't have to turn out the way the older brother's did -- there's nothing in Jesus' parable to indicate that *he* ever made it to the party. **BUT WE CAN!**

A--In fact, I believe Jesus tells this story as he does *partly* to give not only the Pharisees, but also those of us caught up in self-righteousness *today*, a second chance at Grace.

B--...To recognize that whether we've been away from God for a while and are just now coming "home" (like the younger son) OR whether we've been "home" all our lives but have taken for granted what that means (like the elder son), ...

C--...What God wants for us is a relationship with Him that's characterized neither by greed (like the prodigal) or by "duty" (like the elder son), but by *joy and contentment* (like in the party itself).

10. So, I don't know where you are in your relationship with God right now. But He wants you & I to know & experience *joy & contentment*--for us to experience the party of Grace!

A--And if you and I aren't experiencing joy & contentment in life right now, then we need first to ask ourselves... Is it a because of a self-righteous, resentful, "bitter heart"?

B--If it IS, then *choose* to celebrate with your sisters and brothers whom God welcomes "home" to Him, *regardless* of *how* they got there, and *how* they experience Him today!

C--Celebrate with them what "home" actually is for them *and for you* -- a place where the love, compassion, forgiveness, & Grace of God can enfold and welcome us ALL back!

11. [PRAYER]

ENDNOTES:

¹ For example, the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11) and the woman at the well (John 4:1-29) both contain invitations to accountability as part of Jesus' offer of grace.

² Grace means that neither I nor you are *defined* by our wrongdoings, but by the *undeserved/unmerited* love of God. And, I should point out, biblical accountability has nothing to do with judging *past* sin, but with peoples' actions/behaviors *now* and going forward in *the future*.

³ As has been written, "*The embrace of publicans and sinners does not mean a rejection of the Pharisees; the reception of sinners is not a rejection of saints. Ours is a both/and not an either/or God*" [Fred Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, Gene M.. Tucker, Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year C: Lent, Holy Week, Easter, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1984), p. 60].

⁴ In fact, it may have been more than mere bitterness and resentment that caused him to miss the party. It could be, for example, that the older son never really had a *real* relationship with his father to begin with -- that it was merely a superficial relationship in which he related to his father only in the sense of being duty-bound; that he is more a slave than a son, and so he never really experiences the love and generosity of the father. Another indicator of this is the fact that his attitude reveals that his years of obedience and service to his father had been years of grim duty rather than of loving service. Whatever was the cause, it's clear that the elder son's relationship with his father was not what it should have been.

⁵ Marshall, I. H. (1994). Luke. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), New Bible commentary: 21st century edition (4th ed., p. 1005). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

⁶ The following "*What if...*" statements (Point #8.A-E in today's sermon) were inspired by words from the video "*The Prodigal Son*" (produced by WeirdOut Productions) found at www.SermonSpice.com.

⁷ Remember that in this parable, each of the characters represents members of Jesus' original audience: the father represents God; the younger son represents the "sinners and tax collectors"; the elder son represents the Pharisees and Scribes in the audience. So, the fact that the younger son is the "heroes" of the story (the ones you "root" for) helps us understand why the Pharisees and Scribes were so upset with Jesus: he was metaphorically making them out to be the "bad guys."