

Luke 15:1-3; 11-32 – Mount Olive: Lent 4–March 29-31, 2025

Dear fellow sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father;

In 1772 an Anglican pastor by the name of John Newton wrote the words to one of the most famous hymns in Christianity: “Amazing Grace”, the hymn we’ll sing at the end of our service today. 250 years later, two songwriters wrote the hymn we just sang: “His Mercy is More.” There’s something that connects those two hymns beyond the fact that they both speak of God’s grace. The refrain of that hymn is taken from a letter written by that same John Newton 5 years before he wrote Amazing Grace; words of encouragement to a member: “Our sins are many, but his mercy is more; our sins are great, but his righteousness is greater.” Both hymns are beautiful summaries of our text.

Many years ago when I was a child this story was known as the parable of the prodigal son. At some point it became known as the parable of the lost son. More recently some began referring to it as the parable of the lost sons, or the parable of the two sons. There’s so much to learn from this parable: 2 sinful sons representing so many of the sinful traps that we still face today, and a loving father, representing a father unlike any other: our heavenly Father.

Our theme today is taken from the hymn we just sang.

God’s mercy is more

1. For prodigal sinners
2. Because of prodigal grace

Part 1: Prodigal sinners. What does prodigal mean? There are some who mistakenly think that “prodigal” means “lost.” Here’s a definition: *to spend recklessly, to be wastefully extravagant.* Who does that describe? The son who didn’t ask, but demanded that his father give him his share of his inheritance. The immature son who had such a love affair with material things that he wanted no part of his father’s love. In fact, it’s fair to say that he was not just impatient for his inheritance—in a sense he was impatient for his father to die. A son who found it impossible to be content with what he had—living in a loving home, a home blessed with material and spiritual riches. A son who believed that lavishly spending money would make him far happier than living within his father’s budget. A disrespectful son who had such a sense of entitlement that he said, “**Father, give me my share.**” No “please, father.” No politely asking, “Would you consider advancing me some of the estate?”

And what’s the result when our sinful nature bristles against any sort of rules or restrictions? The young man made one bad decision after another. “**Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.**” “Set off for a distant country”... perhaps to get away from his father’s rules and his watchful eye. We’re told he “**squandered his wealth in wild living.**” The perfect example of the word prodigal. And what happens when we make poor decisions? Unforeseen consequences compound the problem. **After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.** ¹⁵ **So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.** ¹⁶ **He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.** For Jesus’ Jewish audience this would have been the ultimate shame: working with unclean animals and longing to eat their food.

Yet for all of his foolishness and sinful immaturity, here’s a positive: Both the dire circumstances of his current situation and his memories of the generosity of his father led the young man to return home. “**When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!’**” “*When he came to his senses...*” throughout the pages of the Bible there are countless examples of sinners doing exactly this: coming to their senses. David came to his senses when Nathan confronted him. Zacheus came to his senses when Jesus called him down from the sycamore tree. Peter came to his senses when Jesus looked at him. That’s what Jesus does...uses the law to nudge us or slap us or crush us and then follows with the gospel.

But before we get to the gospel, we’re going to jump past the welcome home party the younger son received and jump to the second prodigal son—the older son. If we only focus on the younger son we aren’t doing justice to this parable. Jesus included the older son for a reason—an important reason. Remember the first three verses of our text: **Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus.** ² **But the Pharisees and the**

teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”³ Then Jesus told them this parable...told them a parable meant for the sinners eating with Jesus, but also meant for the Pharisees and teachers of the law who didn’t appreciate God’s love for all people.

How does the older son fit the description of “prodigal”? He didn’t waste large sums of money from his inheritance. He didn’t engage in wild living. What did he waste? How did he react when he found out that his long lost brother had returned, and that his dad was throwing a welcome home feast for him? **“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’**

You can hear the anger in the older son’s voice, and from what he says his anger has been boiling beneath the surface for some time. **“All these years I have been slaving for you.”** All these years doing what? Not helping his dad, not working for his dad, but slaving for his father, and apparently bitter about still being on the family farm. This older son is *prodigal* in the sense that he wasted his father’s love. Not just in the moment of his father begging him to join in the celebration, but wasted his father’s love during the time his younger brother was off wasting his father’s money. The younger son was too immature to appreciate the hurt he caused his father when he couldn’t wait to take his inheritance and run away from home; the older son was too selfish to care about the pain he caused his father by refusing to go into the house and share in his father’s joy. He robbed his father of the full joy that he should have had, and as a result the father was now missing a different son.

What lessons can we learn from these two prodigal sons? When are we like the younger son? Whenever we believe that our idea of happiness is better than anything God can give us. Whenever our lack of contentment with God’s will leads us to pursue something that is not God-pleasing. We’re also like the younger son when we have a sense of entitlement when approaching God in prayer.

Or do we think, “I’d never demand anything from God...I always say “Please.” Yet how many times we’re like little children who have been taught to say the magic word: “please.” “May I please have a cookie?” “Can you please read me a book?” “Can I please watch one more Bluey?” Our children learn that when they say “please” good things will happen. But they also may develop a sense of entitlement and are outraged when mom or dad says “no more Bluey, no more cookies, time for bed.” “But mommy, I said ‘please’!” And so we take our requests to God, just as God has asked us to do and we pray, “Please God, can I have ____” So often God says, “Of course.” But when God says “No”, or “Not yet,” then we question God’s love. We might say please, but our sense of entitlement is the same as the younger son.

And the older brother? Perhaps an even more disappointing type of entitlement. Not only did he believe he had earned and deserved his father’s love, he thought that he was entitled to greater love than his younger brother. **But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!** The words “this son of yours” carries a tone of contempt. He refused to acknowledge him as his brother. He refused to go into the banquet. Why? Because his brother had returned? No... because his father was throwing a feast.

Do we ever find ourselves angry at God because he throws a feast for someone else? When’s the last time your joy at someone else’s blessings was tempered by envy? Or were just a little envious when someone who has strayed returns because we believe that God has blessed them more than how we think God has blessed those of us who have seemingly always been faithful?

The younger son saw and recognized his sin. The older son did not. It’s easier to deny sins of self-righteous pride than the obvious sins of the younger son. Just as the Pharisees criticized Jesus for eating with “sinners”, the older son criticizes his father for doing the same.. So the father offers a gentle rebuke: **But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”**

Remembering that Jesus’ parables always include you and me, where do you find yourself in this parable of the lost sons? I’ll speak for myself. I’ve been both sons.. I’ve been the son who ignores what my Heavenly Father has taught

me and looks for contentment on my own. And maybe more often have been the self-righteous son who feels at least somewhat entitled—or at least more entitled—to God’s grace than those in 2025 who blatantly ignore God’s Word and will. Then I need God’s reminder: **This brother of yours.** The man who is my blood brother and the man who isn’t. The brother who looks like me and the brother who doesn’t. The brother who votes like me and the brother who doesn’t. The brother whose temptations are just like mine and the brother whose temptations I cannot fathom.

Part 2: His mercy is more...because of prodigal grace. This is the main take away from this parable. I have been both sons, and yet God loves and forgives me. While prodigal is usually viewed as a negative word, it can be viewed positively. A “lavish feast,” or “lavished with praise..” We sang **“What riches of kindness he lavished on us.”** We correctly want to think of the unconditional forgiveness of the father when his son returned home and of the spiritual blessings that God lavishes on us, but let’s not forget the earthly blessings as well.

The younger son demanded his share of the inheritance. And then what happens? His father gives it to him. Did he suspect that the son might misuse the gift? Perhaps. No, not perhaps... probably. And yet the father in love offers such a generous earthly blessing. We see this throughout Jesus’ ministry. Jesus feeds thousands of people even though he knew that they would then try to make him a bread king. Jesus cleansed a leper and asked him not to tell anyone, but that man couldn’t help himself, told everyone he knew and as a result crowds of people made it difficult for Jesus to preach and teach. God gives us more than what we deserve, even though God knows that we may abuse/misuse what he gives us. He pours so many blessings into our lives that like King David, our cup overflows.

God is always extravagant in his generosity. The father doesn’t say “I wondered if you’d learn your lesson.” He doesn’t say, “I told you so.” He doesn’t say, “This is your last chance.” Instead he runs to meet his son and wraps him in a hug. God’s forgiveness doesn’t depend on how serious the sin. It depends on Jesus. That is the same love he shows the older brother when he begs him to join the feast. The love that says, **“My son,” you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.** Everything God has is ours. And what a good thing since so often we jump from one character to the other in the biography entitled: **“My life as the two sons.”**

There is a 3rd son in this text, a son who is often overlooked. Who is this 3rd son? He’s in verse 3: **“Jesus told this parable...”** The third Son is Jesus, because without Jesus there is no point to the parable. Without Jesus our heavenly Father can’t be the forgiving Father. Without Jesus, God the Father can’t run down the driveway to meet us when we stray or come find us when we are wallowing in the back yard in self-righteous pride. Only would Jesus narrate a story that can only have true meaning if the narrator dies, Why would Jesus do that? Because thanks be to God, his mercy is more. Amen.

Pastor David Wenzel