

GRATEFUL FOR WHAT?

In Luke 15, Jesus told a parable of a rich man's son, who took his inheritance, ran away from home, and spent everything he had sowing his wild oats, while his elder brother served faithfully at his father's side. Having abandoned his dad and squandered his inheritance on prostitutes and self-indulgence, the prodigal son finally came to his senses, and realized that he had been looking for love in all the wrong places. So, he packed his bags, and set out for his trek back home. Not knowing what to expect, and no doubt fearing that he might receive what he justly deserved, the son rehearsed his carefully prepared speech along the way. . . "Okay, here's what I'll say: Uh, Father, I don't expect you to forgive me so easily. I accept my blame. In fact, I don't even deserve to be your son. So, just treat me like one of the servants. Let me work as one of your hired hands; just please, dad, accept me back. I need a job! I need to be forgiven.

But the waiting father saw his son coming in the distance, and, of course, you know the rest of the story. But remember, this is a very wealthy guy in ancient times. And patriarchs in those days, with their long flowing robes, would glide gracefully through the city streets in very dignified processions, with their servants following behind. Can you imagine the bystander's utter amazement when this wealthy land-owner, seeing his long lost son approaching in the distance, suddenly hitched up his skirt and began running - in a most undignified manner - down the middle of the street, with nothing more noble on his mind than the thought of embracing his son! Keep in mind, the prodigal had been a hired hand on a pig farm, so by now he must have smelled as bad as he looked. But that didn't stop the father from throwing his arms around his son, hugging him and kissing him.

The symbolism is striking! Because, of course, this is the exact picture of how God treats us! And yet, I'm afraid that for many of us, that is where the similarity between our story and the prodigal's comes to end! . . . The prodigal, at this point in the story, might have said something like: "Hey, wait a minute! Dad's not handling this quite as badly as I had expected. Maybe I'll just kind of cut out the "groveling" bit in my speech and see how far I can take this. After all, I am the king's kid. Come to think of it, I really do deserve some royal treatment after all I have been through."

But, no, the prodigal didn't do that, because he wasn't just trying to "manipulate" his father's emotions to get back into his good graces. The prodigal knew that he didn't deserve his father's forgiveness, and he wasn't just looking for "cheap grace." He really felt ashamed of what he had done with his life. So he said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and against you . . . I'm no longer worthy to be called your son." And he meant it! Here is a picture of genuine repentance!

But just as the father's immediate reaction upon recognizing his son was one of compassion, so now, the father in his infinite mercy, responds to his son's confession, almost as if he never heard it! You see, all the father could think about was celebrating the fact that his son had returned! "Quick, kill the fatted calf," the father told the servants in verse 24. "For this son of mine was dead, and now, is alive again. He was lost, and is found!" So they began to celebrate, and believe me friends, this was one party that was completely unlike the ones that the son had known before, in the far country.

The prodigal was "dead". Odd isn't it? "Dead." Well, not really. You see, the Bible says that we are all born into the world "dead", spiritually - hostile to God. By nature, we are children of wrath, and therefore, quite literally, "dead" to the things of God. Oh sure, we are very much alive to the pig-pen! But like the prodigal, we only come to our senses when the Holy Spirit wakes us up, and causes us to see what we never could have seen on our own, namely, that God has reconciled us to Himself through the death of His son.

So now, whenever a person is awakened, and just like the prodigal, leaves the "far country" of unbelief and rebellion, -- whenever a person returns home to God by placing his trust in Christ alone, he or she, is also given a robe. The "best" robe, as Jesus called it, for it is , after all, the "robe" of Christ's own rights! The robe of the true son . . . the incarnate, Son of God!

Friends, if that's not something to be thankful for, then I really don't know what is! I share that with you this evening because we need to recognize that gratitude always comes before stewardship. See, there really can be no genuine

stewardship without gratitude. One cannot truly worship, praise, or obey God apart from a realization of what God has done for us. That our salvation is a work of God alone, and therefore, something that is dependent upon Jesus Christ, from its plan to its fulfillment.

I guess the worst moment for an atheist is when he feels thankful, but has no one to thank. But if that is true, then the worst moment for a Christian is to be told that he should be thankful, when he doesn't really know why . . . when he doesn't understand what it is that he is to be thankful about!

Handel, after composing perhaps his greatest work, "The Messiah", exclaimed, ". . . *What a wonderful thing it is to be sure of one's faith. How wonderful to be a member of the evangelical church, which preaches the free grace of God through Christ, as the only hope of sinners. If we were to rely upon ourselves, my God, what would become of us?!*" You see, gratitude cannot be commanded, but it can only be inspired! It's much like a standing ovation after a marvelous performance. If the conductor turned to the audience and commanded, "Clap!", would the applause be genuine?

But God isn't like that! Ours is a relationship with a Heavenly Father. And our gratitude is inspired by the sheer fact that every time we try to get "one up" on God, by showing Him an example of our devotion, He outdoes us every time! He not only out-gives our taking, but He gives us more grace than we can ever sin away!

So I guess the only question we still have to answer this evening is this: With all that God has done for us in redeeming us, why is it that so many Christians act as though they aren't grateful at all? Well, again, I think the parable gives us the answer. You see, there was another brother in the story, the one who had stayed by his dad's side the whole time. The one whom Jesus quite obviously identified as the "religious" of his day. And this son, like his wayward brother, could not believe his father's actions, but for a completely different reason! His unbelief wasn't born out of gratitude, but rather out of self-righteous indignation! See, the elder brother didn't want his father showing mercy to his younger brother. In the face of such obvious rebellion, he wanted justice, not compassion! As though his own relationship to his father were based upon merit, rather than unconditional love! And friends, do you see the point? He felt no gratitude, he felt no mercy toward his brother, because he had no awareness of grace in his own life.

Now Jesus, of course, used this parable (like so many others) to illustrate the heart that God has toward sinners. Toward you and me! Towards the very people whom we, in our own self-rights, sometimes consider "unclean" in the same way that the Pharisees of Jesus' day considered all "Gentile sinners!" And what irony! Here Jesus is the true, the loyal, the faithful son of Abraham - standing before the Pharisees, trying to convince them that God doesn't respond to us the way that we often respond to one another. You see, sometimes we forget that we don't deserve to be called "sons" either! But that's what we are here to celebrate tonight! The infinite mercy that God has toward those who, admittedly, don't deserve what God in His compassion, decides to give! The unfathomable grace of God, as He clothes us in His son's own rights!

And praise be to God that our elder brother is God's true son. And instead of begrudging His father for having compassion on the likes of us, when He has been eternally faithful and obedient to the father's will - instead of clinging to His own rights - Jesus Christ was willing to give His very life, so that we could wear that robe and put that ring on our finger!

Covering the stain and stench of our filthiness, the Father's joy at our homecoming - at our eternal salvation - must cause us to marvel with St. John the Apostle: "How great is the love that the Father has lavished upon us, that "we" should be called "children" of God!" And that, the Bible reminds us, is exactly who we are! Let's celebrate that fact this evening, and let's give all the thanks and the glory to God alone!