

Grace Lessons from the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Luke 15:11-32

This familiar story depicts God's love for sinners, and indeed that is the main point, but there is much to learn here about God's magnificent grace. In the context, Jesus answers the Pharisees who criticize His love for sinners (Luke 15:2-3) with three stories. The story of the lost son especially illustrates God's love for sinners as an overcoming, amazing, and misunderstood love.

Some question whether this story is about unsaved sinners coming to God, or about sinful Christians being restored. Surely, the primary audience was the Pharisees in the context of the Jewish nation and its rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. God welcomes all those Jews who would come to Him from the rebellious nation. But the story is recorded only in Luke, a book written primarily to Gentiles who also need to know the Father's love for them. Anyone who sins against God, whether Jew, Christian, or unbeliever, needs to know God's love and acceptance. We must not miss this main message, which is that God loves those who sin, forgives them, restores them, and rejoices over them. We learn much about this grace from the parable.

Grace is Risky. To understand the Father's forgiving grace later, we must first see his initial grace in giving his son freedom to make bad choices. Since the father obviously represents God, doesn't this tell us that God created us with the freedom to make choices? Can the possibility of reciprocal love exist under any other condition? Love and grace are risky. This father can determine to love, but not to be loved. Love proffered is not always returned. We are not pre-programmed robots, but free agents with moral responsibility. This destroys the theology of determinism that teaches all actions are preordained, God loves only some, chooses only them to be saved, and they cannot resist His will. God is willing to risk the rejection of His free love rather than have a pre-determined compliance to His forced love, because voluntary love brings Him glory.

Freedom is Dignifying. As a free moral agent, the erring son makes choices allowed by his father. The father could have chained his son to a pole to keep him from leaving, but that would be degrading. Not only does he let him leave, but he gives him his inheritance. Even in sin, the son's human dignity is preserved as he exercises his moral prerogative as one made in the image of God. God is free and has created man to share that freedom. Man is not bound by a will forced upon him by God, as strong Calvinists teach. That would make God responsible for our sin. This son, made in the image of God, retains enough of God's image to realize he does not belong in the mud of a pig sty. He gets up and goes back to his father.

Grace Never Cancels the Relationship. The son's will does not permit him to negate the reality of the father-son relationship. Contrary to Arminian teaching, the son always remains a son. He may reject his father, but His father never rejects him. He may have gone to a "far country," but he could not stray outside his filial relationship or wander beyond God's loving reach.

Repentance is a Change of Mind. When the son realizes his foolish choice to live a profligate life, Jesus describes an "Aha!" moment in the pig sty: "he came to himself" (NKJ, 15:17; NASB, NIV, ESV, "he came to his senses"). In other words, he had a change of mind; in other words, he repented. The description in the text shows this repentance clearly.

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The son changes his mind in the mud. As a result of his repentance, he gets up and heads home. We see a clear relationship, but also a clear distinction, between the moment of repentance and the subsequent result of repentance, or the root and the fruit.

God's love and grace exceeds our sin. As the son nears his home, his father sees him and runs to him. Though the son has sinned big and gone far from his father's will, he was never separated from His father's love. So great is the father's love that he not only forgives his son, but has a celebration in his honor. The father's acceptance shows amazing grace; the celebration shows abundant grace.

Death is separation, not total inability to respond. The father's love rejoices in a son who was "dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found" (Luke 15:32). Calvinists like to refer to the raising of Lazarus in John 11 to say that "dead" means total inability to respond, as with a corpse. Here, we see that "dead" is also used as a figure of speech, but to signify separation from the father, not the total inability to respond. Like fallen Adam in the Garden, the prodigal son was able to respond to God's will. Those dead in sin, though separated from God, retain remnants of God's image.

Grace Means we don't have to run any more. Upon returning home and seeing his father's love and forgiving grace, we can surmise that the son realizes he does not need to run away ever again. He is safe in his father's love. He is free to grow into a new future.

Some will not comprehend God's grace. The older brother, who was a faithful son, resents the grace shown toward his prodigal brother (Luke 15:25-30). The older brother is depending on his outer performance to earn his father's favor, and indeed he has, but the father's love goes beyond deserved recompense to undeserved grace. The older brother evidently has never needed to avail himself of his father's grace, so does not appreciate it.

Misunderstanding grace continues today. Both brothers are prodigals to God's grace, which is reflected in their faulty thinking. The younger brother thinks that if he returns home and promises to be good and serve, he will deserve his father's favor (Luke 15:19). The older brother thinks that because he has done good and served, he deserves his father's favor (Luke 15:29-30). One conditions grace on promised human performance; the other conditions grace on proven human performance. The one thinks the father will owe him; the other thinks the father already owes him. Neither comprehends the magnificence of unconditional grace apart from human performance. Love and grace trump human performance, whether good or bad.

Conclusion

Grace shows us that God, like this father, will never cease to love and forgive sinners. Should we sin and even relapse, God will never cast us out. This is much different from the Arminian belief that a believer can sin, lose his salvation, and get saved again—then sin again and get saved yet again. It is also different from the Calvinistic belief that a person is not really a child of God unless he faithfully perseveres to the end of his life. The Arminian can have assurance today, but not necessarily tomorrow; the Calvinist has assurance today that the elect will be saved, but he has no assurance that he is elect unless and until he faithfully perseveres to the last moment of his life. Only God's free grace can simply say, "You are loved and always welcome home!"