

## **Forgiveness in a World Stripped of Grace**

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Finding Freedom From Your Past (Forgiveness)

Luke 15:11-32

I began a series on forgiveness last week, "Finding Freedom From Your Past." The focus of this series is about forgiving others when they hurt and offend us, and learning to receive forgiveness when we offend God. But is there anything more self-evident than this basic proposition – the world we live in knows almost nothing about forgiveness. All we need to do is just look at the explosion of lawsuits in America over the last few decades. Maybe you read about the Washington DC administrative law judge named Roy Pearson. If you haven't, I would like to ask you as you hear this story, to imagine that you had to do business with this man. Or imagine having him as a neighbor, or husband.

In 2005 Judge Pearson brought several suits for alterations to Custom Cleaners, which was a dry cleaning business run by two South Korean immigrants by the name of Chung. Two days later when he returned, one pair of his suit pants was missing. Mr. Pearson demanded that the cleaners pay him \$1150 for a new suit. A week later, the Chung's said that the pants had been found and they presented the pants to Mr. Pearson. But he claimed that they were the wrong trousers and he sued the dry cleaners for \$54 million dollars. That seems reasonable, doesn't it?

His claim was based on a strict interpretation of local statutes, which protected consumers from deceptive advertising and unfair trade practices. Mr. Pearson named each of the Chung's as a defendant and alleged that there were 14,400 violations of Washington DC's unfair trade practice law. He calculated that by 12 unfair trade practice violations over 1200 days at \$1500 each, plus a few million dollars for mental anguish, \$500,000 in legal fees, and \$150,000 for the cost of renting a car to drive to a different dry cleaners for the next ten years.

The Chung's made several offers to settle with Roy Pearson. In fact, they offered him \$12,000. But Judge Pearson absolutely refused.

During the trial it was disclosed that this wasn't Mr. Pearson's first go-round with excessive litigation. He had been sanctioned just a few years earlier in his divorce. While at trial, the judge ruled against Judge Pearson. But did that stop him? Of course not! He appealed to the District of Columbia Court of Appeals. The US Chamber of Commerce raised money for the Chung's to pay their \$84,000 in legal fees that they used to defend themselves. The Chung's don't want any money from Judge Pearson. They just want him to promise to stop suing them. Their lives have been made absolutely miserable over the last two years. And the Chung's have been left wondering whether it made sense for them to emigrate from South Korea to America in the first place. In fact, news of their plight has been regularly published all over South

Korea. People there cannot understand why someone would be this vindictive. Is this what all Americans are like?

As I mentioned, I started a series on forgiveness last week, something Judge Pearson knows nothing about and something that the Chung's, now have an opportunity to practice toward Judge Pearson. My favorite author, C.S. Lewis, said something really profound about forgiveness in his classic introduction to Christianity called *Mere Christianity*. C.S. Lewis said:

Forgiveness is a lovely idea until you have someone to forgive.

In other words, forgiveness is great in theory. We all love stories of people who are able to forgive their spouse's killer, or the person who ran over their child. But when you and I have to put forgiveness into practice because there really is someone to forgive that is an entirely different matter. So when you have to forgive your husband who has an affair with your best friend, or you have to forgive your wife who has an affair with your best friend, or you have to forgive a partner who promised to do a business deal with you, but at the last minute he reneges because he can make a better profit with his money somewhere else, or you need to forgive a friend who betrayed a confidence by sharing your embarrassing secrets with someone who will use the information against you – whenever you have to forgive someone, I mean really forgive them, you are going to find that it is difficult to put forgiveness into practice. Unless – and here is the big “unless” – you have personally experienced the forgiveness of God and you understand your calling to imitate God's forgiveness.

Today, I've borrowed today's title from a book by Miroslav Volf titled, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a World Stripped of Grace*. My sermon title is, “Forgiving Others in a World Stripped of Grace.”

Luke 15:11-20

Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. 13 “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. 14 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. 17 “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! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ 20 So he got up and went to his father.

There is almost no story in the entire Bible that is more popular than this story of the Prodigal Son, sometimes called The Lost Son, or sometimes the story is called “A Tale of Two Sons.”

Ken Bailey was a professor for many years at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. One of the things he spent his life doing was explaining the parables to his Muslim teaching colleagues. Ken Bailey was also a missionary to Arab farmers throughout the Middle East. And this story about the lost son was a story that Ken Bailey told thousands of times to farmers and fishermen. He gained remarkable insights because Arab culture in the Middle East is remarkably similar to the culture of the Jews in Jesus’ day when Jesus first told this story.

So, Bailey would slowly tell the story and watch how his listeners responded. He said that invariably the conversation would go like this. When Bailey told them that there was a man who had two sons,

**Luke 15:12**

The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

He would ask his listeners the question: Has anybody ever made a request like this in your village? Would anyone ever make a request like this younger request made? Impossible. But if anyone did make a request like the younger son did, what would happen?

Well, his father would beat him, of course. Well, why would he do that? Because the request means that he wants his father to die.

The request: “I wish you were dead!”

Here is a young man who insults and hurts his father in the most dishonorable way that any son could insult and hurt their dad. “Father, I wish you were dead.” That’s what many of us have said to God – I wish you were dead – maybe not in so many words, but God I will treat you as if you don’t exist, as if you have not spoken, as if your desires do not matter. I will treat you as if you were dead. Haven’t you done that many times – treated as if he were irrelevant and treated his Word and commandments as if God’s Word does not matter. This boy not only dishonors his father by wishing him dead, he rejects everything that his father values and stands for. He sells the father’s property. And for Jews living in Jesus’ day, there was nothing more important than the family’s property, the family’s land. People were attached to their land and passed it on from generation to generation. He is living among the Gentiles, feeding pigs, which would have offended all Jewish sensibilities.

Here is a rebel who is basically doing everything he can to spit in his father’s face. Why is he doing this?

Because I think like many people living today, he is on a search for something that he doesn't believe he could ever find in his father's house.

#### The reason: The quest for freedom

He thinks that by escaping his father's rules and his father's authority, he is going to find real life. He wants the freedom to determine his life the way he sees fit – radical freedom without a bunch of laws and commandments. "I'm tired of everyone telling me what I'm supposed to be like, what I'm supposed to do – I want to be free to explore my own identity, free to find my own way, free to do my own thing."

I don't know if there is anything that captures better the core philosophy of my generation than this mad dash for radical freedom. Who cares what a thousand generations have said about the proper place of sex as existing only in heterosexual marriage. Forget that. We want free love, man. Forget what a thousand generations have said about divorce, we want out. We are not going to be bound by rules and conventions and traditions set by the church for the last 2000 years or by God.

But something happened to my generation and subsequent generations in our quest for freedom. We discovered that instead of radical freedom producing more life in us, this pursuit of radical freedom actually drained the life away from us. When it says in verse 13 that this younger son squandered his wealth, the word that is used is actually a word that comes from Greek philosophy. It is the word essence. The man is drained from his inner essence. It is like the life-force just drains out of him.

I remember years ago I read a little parable about a goldfish that was swimming around in a fish bowl that was placed on someone's table. The goldfish would press up against the glass walls of that bowl and wonder what would it be like to not be confined to that bowl. What would it be like to have radical freedom. And so one day the goldfish, as he was being lifted up by his owner in a net as his bowl was being cleaned, decided to leap out of the net. He thought, "I'm missing something; I want to experience all there is to life. I want to suck the marrow out of the bones. I'm going to make a dash for it. Finally, I'm going to be free." And he ended up on the living room floor gasping for air and dying.

That goldfish is a picture of what happens when we leap out of the father's hand and when we run from God, our Father's house. And what are the consequence? The consequence can only be described as addiction.

#### The Consequence: Addiction

We discover that there is no true freedom outside of the father's house. The story is one of spiraling down into total degradation. First his property goes; his life force begins to drain away; and, he is forced to hire himself out to a Gentile citizen of that country.

#### **Luke 15:15**

So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.

Literally, the text reads: he went and attached himself, or glued himself to a citizen of that country.

See, this is a great picture of addiction. When we detach ourselves from God the Father, we don't remain in this state of complete freedom. Instead, we find ourselves nailed or attached to a thousand other things. As Bob Dylan said,

You gotta serve somebody  
It may be the devil or  
It may be the Lord.  
But you've gotta  
Serve somebody

You are going to be attached to something! Your life and your will are going to be glued to something. The attachment may be to alcohol or drugs. The attachment may be to another person, or to your kids, or to work, or to a certain mood, or to power, or to money, or to success, or fantasies. The further we run away from the Father's house, the more we forge the chains of our own slavery. And in this incredible paradox of life, the more you run after freedom, the more you lose freedom altogether.

I remember reading an interview involving a homeless man. He was a very intelligent man. He actually had several years of college. He absolutely could have done something with his life. The interviewer asked him: Why is it that you aren't holding down a job? Why are you not living in a nice house?

The man said, "I had a job, but I just hated all the rules. I hated the thought that my life was going to be spent in some 9-5 occupation, someone telling me what to do. I wanted to be free. I wanted to be free to drink with my friends when I wanted to; I wanted to be free to get up when I wanted; go to sleep when I wanted."

The reporter said, "Now he is free. Free to be cold at night; free to be hungry; free to be attacked by other homeless men; free to have his stuff stolen; free to be addicted."

So this young son ends up feeding pigs. And it says in verse 16,

**Luke 15:16**

He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

He is trying to fill himself with pig food. But this fodder leaves him even more unsatisfied, eating but not full, stuffing himself, but still hungry. Can any of you identify with any of this?

This young man, as a Jew, is reduced to feeding pigs. The prototype of the unclean animal. The Jews used to have a list of the most dishonorable professions. In fact, there were professions that a woman was permitted to divorce her husband for, if he was involved in one of those occupations. So under rabbinical law, if your husband was a dung collector, you could divorce him. There was nothing more dishonorable in rabbinic law than being a pig farmer. This would have been an impossibility for a Jew.

This young man started off hanging around some Gentile friends, he suddenly finds himself doing what he never thought he would do – feeding pigs (an unclean profession for Jews). Have you ever found yourself doing what you never thought you would do? Have you ever found yourself doing something, or involved in something, or saying something that in the past you thought there is no way that I will ever sink to that level? There is no way I would ever do that. You weren't raised that way. It is totally contrary to your values.

Maybe you are a woman raised in a Christian home. You've been around church and yet you found yourself in an abortion clinic aborting your baby. Or you are a college student, or young adult, raised with strong morals. You find yourself in bed at night lying next to a man or woman staring into the darkness and saying to yourself, "How in the world, did I end up in this bed? This is contrary to everything I was raised with; everything I used to tell my friends not to do – and now I'm doing it!" Have you ever found yourself involved in something that you never thought you would be involved with – working for a company whose ethics and way of doing business you totally despise?

And now he is even longing for the pods the pigs eat. He is going after garbage.

You can get yourself so addicted that the longing in your soul is no longer for freedom, or for God. In fact, you get no pleasure at all. But you are lusting and longing after garbage – perverted sex, a destructive relationship, and drugs. To use AA language this young man hits bottom.

Now, AA and the various 12-step programs that exist will tell you that people have different levels of when they have hit bottom. For some people, getting a DUI is hitting bottom; just getting locked up even for a few hours and the public humiliation of a court date is the only signal they need to indicate they have a problem. For other people, 10 drunk driving arrests have no effect whatsoever. They drive without a license and don't care. Alcoholics have lost drivers' licenses, careers, girlfriends, wives, family, children and they still deny that they have a problem. The human mind is capable of so many rationalizations and excuses. We are factories of rationalizations, which keep us from admitting that we have a problem. We don't have an anger problem, we don't have a bitterness problem, we don't have a sexual problem, we don't have a drinking problem, and we are not workaholics.

And so the alcoholic might say, "You know, the only reason why I got my DUI was because of my red car. You know, police are always focused on red sports cars. It is all those women, that MADD organization – they are the problem."

“My boss was a pain to deal with anyway. I’m glad that I lost that job. I can’t stand office work anyway. I enjoy being outside picking up trash along the highway.”

But every person has some place where they hit bottom, where the pain just gets to be too much. Let me ask you a question, have any of you arrived at the place where you have hit bottom? Where you say, “I just can’t do this anymore; I need to change.”

And notice friends, that the father doesn’t enable this young man. He doesn’t rush in to prevent him from experiencing the consequences of his own destructive lifestyle. Is this not the hardest thing we could ever go through as parents? To watch our children make horrible mistakes and not rush in to rescue them? But often in rescuing we keep our son, our daughter, our husband or wife, from hitting bottom. They never experience the pain that will drive them back to the Father’s house.

So here is the question: How can someone who has done all that this young man has done be forgiven?

Well, it says in verses 17 these words:

**Luke 15:17**

“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!’

He came to his senses; literally, it means he came to himself. It is interesting; we think we are going to discover ourselves, our authentic selves, only if we pursue the freedom to be us. But the reality is that we lose ourselves every time we move away from God. You see, you are never more truly yourself, who you essentially are, than when you aim at being at home with God your Father. Yet, we live in a culture where everyone is pursuing authenticity in life apart from God.

Like the New Jersey Governor, who said a couple of years ago, “I needed to be honest with myself; I am a gay American.” Or someone in a bad marriage says, “I just need to be honest with myself, I am unhappy in this marriage and I’m in love with someone else.”

But away from the Father, you lose yourself.

Here is the principle, friends. You are never more unauthentic, you are never more fake and unreal living an utterly counterfeit life than when you move away from God and his will for your life. And you will never be more true to who God made you to be, never more authentically human than when you turn towards Christ and embrace his plan for your life. Away from God, you lose who you are. With Christ you discover who you are.

It is only when the young son starts thinking about his father that he comes to himself. He rediscovers who he really is. But one problem for this young man, he doesn't yet understand grace or forgiveness.

#### The Problem: A Failure to Understand Grace

See, he doesn't just go back to the father broken, bankrupt, empty-handed solely relying on the Father's goodness. He comes back with a self-help plan, a self-improvement plan, if you will.

#### **Luke 15:18-19**

I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.'

He thinks: Perhaps somehow I can earn my way back into my father's good graces. Perhaps somehow I can pay my father back. He is thinking about the lost property. He is thinking about his waste of his father's land. But he is not yet thinking about the wound that he caused to his father's heart. The dishonor that he caused to his father's reputation. The hurt that he caused to his father when he ran away from home. The basic problem is his broken relationship with the Father. He is not yet focused on the father because if he was just focused on the father, he would realize that no amount of money could ever pay for the hurt and pain that he caused his father. And that there was no way he could ever pay his father back. He also does not know his Father well enough to know that his father is just waiting to embrace him and forgive him for everything – all the slights, all the rebellion, all the false paths, if only he will come home.

You know, just incidentally, I think this parable shows us the reason why we need community, particularly in the form of recovery groups and support groups for those struggling with habits and addictions. And small groups – women's, men's and co-ed groups for those who just want to grow in their relationship with Christ. You see, when we are in the far country, we may wake up one day and come to our senses. We may say, "I really need to go home; I need to get back into a relationship with God."

But depending on how far we've walked away, we are going to have to travel the same distance back. And there are so many obstacles that get in our way on our journey back to God. Old friends show up. Old desires reappear. We suddenly lose our job. Our spouse wants out of the relationship. We're tempted to get off the road that leads back to the Father's house, even though we started with the best of intentions.

What a recovery group does is keeps us on the road. When we are tired and we say, "We will never get home, I will never reconnect with God, it is just too hard; we'll never get home," a friend in a small group will say, "You can get home; you can do it; you'll make it; don't give up. I'll help you get there."



But you aren't going to make it on your own. And I say this all the time in this church, the Christian life cannot be lived alone. I have never seen anyone grow as a follower of Christ without deep relationships with other Christian men and women. I've never watched anyone outside the context of the practice of Christian community in some small group setting, a men's group, a women's group, a support group – I've never seen anyone do well in the Christian life alone. The journey to the Father's house is too long and too hard to travel it alone.

Let's read together, Luke 15:25-30.

**Luke 15:25-30**

"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' 28 "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!'

Now, it is easy to beat up on this older son. He is so self-righteous. He is religious. He is like Judge Pearson prosecuting and suing for his rights. But surely, it is not too hard for us to understand this older son's feelings.

The Feelings: Hurt, Resentment, Anger

Why is this older son so bitter? Well, there are some obvious reasons. First of all, it is very painful to watch your brother or sister hurt your parents through your brother or sister's rebellion. This older son is at home watching his father grieve day after day. This older son is the one who is there, perhaps trying to encourage dad. He is the faithful child, who is left to pick up the pieces. He sees his sibling burning through the family's money.

Have any of you ever had a sibling who caused your parent's grief? Were any of you the responsible child? The one who did life the right way?

You know, it is hard to let go of hurt when the hurt was not caused to you but to someone you love. When someone offends your spouse, or hurts your child, or disrespects your parents, you may carry the anger and bitterness longer than the one whom the offense was actually caused. It seems, friends that it is harder to find the grace to forgive when the offense was not against me, but against someone I love. Have you discovered that in yourself?

And then, so that we aren't too hard on this older son, could he not be suffering from the legitimate resentment of having stayed home, having done the work, having cared for his aged father while his brother got to do whatever his brother wanted to do? Maybe he is sitting there saying to himself, "You know the old adage that nice guys finish last is absolutely true in my life."

One of the repeated themes in "Dear Abby" is this theme of the nice guy who is complaining that he can never get noticed by single women. He writes this kind of letter:

I have regularly heard over the years the complaint from single women saying, "You know, sometimes I wonder what I'm saving myself for. I've chosen not to have sex before marriage, but even Christian men when they discover that I am really serious about maintaining my sexual purity, drop me like a hot potato. And then I've watched women who sleep with their boyfriends end up happily married."

Have you ever felt like you are the biggest fool in the world for maintaining your standards? Nice men, nice women finish last?

And out of his hurt, resentment and anger, this older son faces the temptation to write his brother off.

#### The Temptation: To Write People Off

And so we read these words in verse 30:

#### **Luke 15:30**

But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!

When someone has hurt us, or they've hurt someone we love, we do face this enormous temptation to shut the door on this person and to never want to open it again. Or to hope that this offender never shows up again in our lives.

"Isn't it nice that I don't have to deal with dad? He lives in California;" or "he's stopped calling."

"I'm not going to answer the phone calls or emails of this former friend, not after what they've done to me."

Is there anyone you've written off, anyone you've shut the door on and thrown away the key? The problem with this older son is that he was self-deceived regarding what it means to be a lost person.

I was reading the story of a young man who used to go out doing door-to-door evangelism with a friend. One day they stopped at a house where a guy was sitting in front of his television set pounding down some beers. They guy listened to their spiel for a while and then said, "Thanks, but I'm not interested. I'm not interested in turning to God." He said his friend looked at this man in the eye and said, "That's fine. I hope you have a good time burning in hell." They walked out of the house and his friend said to him, "That guy sure is lost." This man wrote, "In subsequent years as I grew older, I began to ask who was it that was really lost in that encounter."

We can get lost not just in the far country; we can get lost when we are in the Father's house. It is very possible to be like this older son and be in the Father's house, but be away from the Father. You can sit in church and be a million miles away from God. Do you know that one? I certainly do. You can be volunteering, serving in the church, doing good things in the community, you can be teaching the Bible and yet feel absolutely cold and dead inside regarding God.

You see, the far country is not just a place out there. The far country is something that can be inside your own heart. You can have your back absolutely to God while your hands are lifted up and your mouth is singing praise songs.

This older son judges his brother for being lost, and yet has no perception at how lost he is. Like the younger son, he also insults his father. In the ancient Middle East it would have been the community expectation that in any banquet given by a father the older son would not only be there, but have an official role. He would be expected to move among the guests, do toasts, hand out complements, make sure that everyone had enough to eat. He would also be expected to welcome his brother back home. Everyone would be waiting for this older son. And yet, he publicly humiliates his father by allowing a family squabble to become subject to public gaze.

His problem was he didn't understand grace either. He tells his father in verse 29,

**Luke 15:29**

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.

He doesn't understand himself as a son in his father's house any more than his younger brother did. He claims to have never disobeyed a command, and yet he is more than willing to dishonor his father. He is so locked into his own hurt and resentment that he can only see the bad when God's grace is breaking through everywhere.

Two sons – each lost in their own way; one in rebellion, one in resentment. One lost in the far country; the other lost at home.

You know, whenever we read the Bible we ought to read it with an eye that looks for Jesus. Where is Jesus in this passage? You always ought to ask that question. Where

is Jesus? Because Jesus is the center of the scripture. The great Protestant Reformer Martin Luther said that as a mother goes to his cradle looking for baby, a Christian goes to the scripture looking for Jesus. It is not enough to just read the Bible to get a couple of promises or to hear a word of comfort. Always go to the Bible asking, “where is Jesus in this text.”

So, where is Jesus?

Jesus became the Prodigal.

We find Jesus in the guise of the younger son, the Prodigal. Henri Nouwen, in a fantastic meditation on the story of the Prodigal called *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, quotes a Catholic priest named Pierre Marie, who wrote this:

He, who is born not from human stock, or human desire, or human will, but from God himself, one day took to himself everything that was under his footstool and he left with his inheritance, his title of Son, and the whole ransom price. He left for a far country...the far away land...where he became as human beings are and emptied himself. His own people did not accept him and his first bed was a bed of straw! Like a root in dry ground, he grew up before us, he was despised, the lowest of men, before whom one covers his face. Very soon he came to know exile, hostility, loneliness...after having given away everything in a life of bounty, his worth, his peace, his life, his truth, his light...all the treasures of knowledge and wisdom and the hidden mystery kept secret for endless ages; after having lost himself among the lost children of the house of Israel, spending his time with the sick (and not with the well-to-do), with the sinners (and now with the just), and even with prostitutes to whom he promised entrance into the Kingdom of His Father; after having been treated as a glutton and a drunkard, as a friend of tax collectors and sinners, as a Samaritan, a possessed, a blasphemer; after having offered everything, even his body and his blood; and after having felt deeply in himself sadness, anguish, and a troubled soul; and having gone to the bottom of despair, with which he voluntarily dressed himself as being abandoned by his Father far away from the source of living water, he cried out from the cross on which he was nailed: “I am thirsty.”

To rescue us, to offer forgiveness to us, God the Son became the Prodigal. He so identified with us that he lived as a homeless man – hungry, cold, thirsty, abandoned, no one to help him.

But not only that, Jesus became the oldest son for us.

Jesus Became the Older Son

The obedient son; the one who was obedient without resentment. He didn’t fantasize about breaking out of his father’s house, but being too afraid to do it. He joyfully did the

will of God the Father. Jesus said, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me.” And “I always do what pleases the Father.”

Jesus is the younger son without rebellion. He is the older son without resentment. And he reveals to us the father without any restriction at all.

### Jesus Reveals the Father

Do you want to know what God is like? Do you even wonder what would it be like to meet God? You don't have to strive for some mystical experience or get some secret knowledge from some guru. You don't have to go live in a monastery, or make a pilgrimage to a shrine. Do you want to know what God is like? God is like Jesus. That's what this whole parable is about. The Pharisees were criticizing Jesus in Luke 15.1-2,

#### **Luke 15:1-2**

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.”

And Jesus is offering his reason for eating with sinners and tax collectors and his reason is simply this: I'm just acting the way God acts towards sinners. I am revealing to you what God is like.

What do we learn about God, and in particular, what do we learn about God's forgiveness, which is the topic of this series?

We learn, first of all, that God's forgiveness is unconditional.

### Forgiveness is Unconditional

Look at Luke 15:20,

#### **Luke 15:20**

So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

What do I mean that forgiveness is unconditional? We need to answer the question when did the father forgive his son (and when does God forgive you)? Did he forgive only after the son had proved himself to not be the scoundrel that he used to be? There is no proving yourself in this story. Did he forgive the son only after the son paid him back, or after he demanded that his son grovel? There is no request for payment; there is no demand for groveling.

But surely, the father forgave his son only after the son came back, only after he repented. Surely God forgives us only after we repent. But that's not it either. The

father ran out to see his son before he ever heard the son's words of confession. You see, forgiveness, friends, is unconditional. God loves us and forgives us before we repent. Even before we ever sinned, Christ died for our sins. God's forgiveness is not reactive. It doesn't depend on our repentance. Before we're ever worthy of it, before we ever do anything - vow to change; begin to change, the Bible says that from the creation of the world, God planned the death of his son. Or as Miroslav Volf puts it in his book *Free of Charge*,

God's giving and forgiving are as unconditional as the sun's rays and as indiscriminate as raindrops. One died for all. Absolutely no one is excluded.

But what if the son never came back? Where does repentance fit it? Repentance is the way we receive God's unconditionally free gift of forgiveness. Our repentance doesn't provoke God to forgive. Our repentance doesn't earn God's forgiveness. Our repentance is the way we receive God's forgiveness.

Let me put it this way. You receive a package in the mail from your father with whom you've been estranged for several years. It looks to be an expensive gift from an upscale department store. But as you look at the gift you begin to wonder, is my dad trying to manipulate me? Is this one of his old tricks of trying to control me again? Is dad trying to worm his way back into my life? If I accept this gift, does that mean I have to go back to the way things were with dad? You have a decision to make. Should I take the gift or should I reject it and mark it "return to sender"?

Repentance is the decision we make regarding whether to accept the gift of forgiveness from our father. If we choose to make excuses for ourselves; if we choose to deny that we have offended God, if we choose to pretend that we aren't in the far country; we reject the notion that we're lost, those are all ways for us to keep ourselves from receiving forgiveness from God. We are taking the gift of forgiveness and we are marking it "return to sender."

But nothing that we do, friend, inclines God to forgive. Jesus is a pre-emptive forgiver.

You know, when the Iraq War started, we had a national debate about pre-emptive strikes, whether it was just for the U.S. to attack another country, who had not attacked us. We talked about pre-emptive strikes.

Jesus is a pre-emptive forgiver. Before we do anything, God forgives us in Christ. Before we believe, before we turn, before we change, God forgives us. And this forgiveness is costly.

Forgiveness is Costly

The younger son just doesn't offend his father, he scandalized the community by his dishonor to his father, by his lifestyle of partying and waste. So when he came home,

the son not only had to face an offended father, the son also had to face an offended community.

What does the father do? Before the community could get to the younger son, before the older son could get to the younger son, the father lifts up his robes and runs out to meet the son at the edge of town.

Ken Bailey, with his knowledge of Middle Eastern custom, tells us that there would be nothing that would bring more dishonor on a wealthy man than baring his legs and running through a village. Rather than having his son experience the shame and scorn of the community, the father takes the shame and scorn on himself.

Don't you see Jesus in this saying to you and me, "I will take away all your shame, all the ways you've blown it in your own eyes, all the ways you've blown it in the eyes of the world; all the ways you've blown it in the eyes of God; all the people that you can't face; the God that you can't face. Let all of the dishonor fall on me. Let all the shame and all the scorn fall on me." That is what Christ did at the cross. Unconditional forgiveness. Costly forgiveness. And total forgiveness.

Forgiveness is total

The father embraces his son; falls on him and kisses him on the neck. He puts a costly ring on his son denoting his son's authority as a son in the house. He gives him the best robe and invites him to the party. And not only so, but he also speaks kindly to the older son. He tenderly invites the older son to come to the party also.

You see, friends, there are no unforgiveable sins and there are no unforgiveable people. Wishing God were dead, bringing dishonor to God through scandalous behavior, rushing headlong into addiction by pursuing freedom apart from God, bitterness, arrogance, self-superiority, crazy law-breaking, legalistic law keeping. God will forgive all of it. There is no sin that God won't totally forgive and there is no person that God won't totally embrace. There is no person that God has simply chosen not to forgive – not wayward rebels, not self-righteous moralists, not church-going hypocrites. No one is too far off for God. But before we forgive others, we ourselves must be melted and broken.

What does this mean about our forgiveness? First, like the younger son, we have to be melted and broken by the grace of God. We must, ourselves, receive free and full forgiveness from the Father. You know, when the younger son was rehearsing his speech, he had this little line, "Make me like one of your hired servants." But when the father ran out and embraced him, that statement about being a hired servant was dropped. We read in verse 21 these words:

**Luke 15:21**

The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

For years I thought that maybe the Father cut him off before he got to that statement. But now I'm not so sure. Now I think that the younger son was so melted by the Father's grace that he no longer carried in his heart any desire to try to pay his father off. He realized that no amount of money would ever pay back his father for the dishonor that he showed him. And no amount that he ever did could ever earn this kind of forgiveness. The only possibility was for him to receive the Father's forgiveness freely.

The first step in forgiving someone is first receiving for yourself full and free forgiveness from the father.

The second step is imitating the Father – offering people unconditional, pre-emptive forgiveness. There is no person you have ever met who is unforgiveable. And there is no sin ever committed against you that is unforgiveable.

Let me finish with this story. I began with the statement from C.S. Lewis: "Forgiveness is a lovely idea until you have someone to forgive."

One of the most powerful stories I ever read about forgiveness was in the life of Corrie ten Boom who was stuck for years in a WWII concentration camp. She was humiliated and degraded especially in the showers where the women were all leered at by lustful guards. Eventually she felt that by grace she had, in fact, forgiven those people who had guarded the showers. So she went around and preached forgiveness. She preached it in America; she preached it in Europe. She spoke about forgiveness in public settings and to individuals.

One Sunday when she was in Munich, Germany, she saw a man coming towards her, his hand stretched out. He said, "Fraulein, it is wonderful that Jesus forgives us all our sins just as you say." She remembered this man's face. It was the same leering, lecherous, lustful, mocking face of the SS guard who used to watch her shower.

Corrie's hand froze at her side. She couldn't forgive. She thought she had forgiven everything, but she could not forgive when she met the guard standing in solid flesh in front of her. She became very ashamed and inside she prayed, "Lord, forgive me. I cannot forgive this person." And as she prayed and asked for God's forgiveness, she felt forgiven and accepted in spite of the fact that she was not a very good forgiver.

And as God's forgiveness poured into Corrie's heart, her hand was suddenly unfrozen. The ice of her hate melted. Her hand went out and she forgave, as she felt forgiven. Here is the secret for forgiving in a world stripped of grace – Receive God's free and full forgiveness and then pass it along to someone else.



# Forgiveness in a World Stripped of Grace

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Rich Nathan

September 22-23, 2007

Finding Freedom From Your Past (Forgiveness)

Luke 15:11-32

## I. A World Stripped of Grace

### II. Portrait of the Younger Son (Lk. 15.11-20)

- A. The Request: "I wish you were dead!" (Lk. 15.11, 12)
- B. The Reason: The Quest for Freedom
- C. The Consequence: Addiction (Lk. 15.13-16)
- D. The Problem: A Failure to Understand Grace (Lk. 15.17-20)

### III. Portrait of the Older Son (Lk. 15.25-30)

- A. The Feelings: Hurt, Resentment (Lk. 15.28, 29)
- B. The Temptation: To Write People Off (Lk. 15.30)
- C. The Problem: A Failure to Understand Grace

## IV. Portrait of Jesus

- A. Jesus Became The Prodigal
- B. Jesus Became The Older Son
- C. Jesus Reveals The Father
  - 1. Forgiveness is Unconditional (Lk. 15.20)
  - 2. Forgiveness is Costly (Lk. 15.20)
  - 3. Forgiveness is Total  
(Lk. 15.22-24; 31-32)

## V. Imitating God's Forgiveness