

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *Crushed*

Service Theme: *Our Condemnation Is Crushed by God's Grace*

Sermon Theme: *2 Lost Sons, and a Reckless Father (Mar. 27, 2022)*

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

If this isn't the most famous parable Jesus ever told, it's definitely Top 2. So much so, that all of you can probably complete the title commonly given to it: The Parable of the Prodigal _____... Son! But here's an interesting question. How many of you actually know what "prodigal" means? Because of the context, most people assume prodigal means something like "lost," which is true about the son in question. But "prodigal" actually means, "*having or giving something on a lavish scale*" or "*spending money or resources freely and recklessly.*" And while the common title might lead us to think that the lost, reckless, younger son is the main character of this parable, he's only a part of the story! Really, there are 4 main characters in this parable that we need to understand. So I hope you'll allow me to propose a fuller name for this parable: The Parable of **Two Lost Sons, and a Reckless Father.**

Let's start with the title character—the younger son. One day, the younger son comes to his father and demands, "*Father, give me my share of the estate.*" That request would have been a gut punch to the father, because you receive your share of the inheritance from your parents when they die. So basically, this son tells his father, "You're more valuable to me dead than alive, so let's just pretend like you're dead." Basically, "I just want your stuff, not you."

In a culture where honoring elders was paramount, the father would seem warranted to cut his disrespectful son out of the will, out of the family, and send him packing. But although he undoubtedly felt the pain of his son's disrespect and rejected love, the father grants his request, selling 1/3 of his assets to give his son his share.

Money in hand, the son moves far away from home and father to live in the freedom of anonymity. And there he "*squandered his wealth in wild living,*" recklessly throwing his wealth at anything and everything that his "wild living" must have included. To no one's surprise, eventually the money dried up. And compounded by a huge famine, the younger son was in trouble. So he hired himself out to a farmer who made him feed the pigs—about the most degrading job for a Jewish man. And if that wasn't rock bottom, he was so hungry he drooled at the sight of the pig's food!

And there, down in the pig muck, having blown everything on a hedonistic lifestyle, we're told that "*He came to his senses.*" Literally, Jesus says, "*He came to himself.*" That's fascinating, because so often, people separate and disconnect themselves from everything in their lives they think restricts them, so that they can "find themselves." And it worked for him! He removed all the restrictions from his life. He lived however he wanted. And he found himself—found out just how lost he was.

And so he makes a plan. You can picture him practicing his speech to the pigs. "*Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.*" Maybe he could earn back his father's love. Maybe he could slowly pay off the debt he owed by becoming one his father's servants instead of one of his sons. So he sets off toward home and the father he'd once left for dead.

But after the bridges he'd burned, how would his father react? In one word, unexpectedly! "*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.*"

He hadn't stopped loving his son. You can picture him, pausing for a moment every day to peer down the long road from the house, eagerly, expectantly waiting for the day he'd spot his son coming home. When the day finally came, who would have blamed him if he'd sternly waited by the house with his chin up and arms crossed for his lost son to come crawling back so he could tell him, "I told you so!"

But instead, he's filled with compassion, and runs out to meet his son. In that culture, patriarchs were distinguished and stoic. They didn't pull up their robes and run. But overwhelmed with joy, he sets aside decorum and runs to meet his boy, literally throwing himself around his son's neck and kisses him.

Which is shocking, when you consider that this younger son had been wallowing in pig muck. If you've ever driven past a pig farm, you can vouch that pigs have some of the most foul-smelling manure. And yet, the father hugs him tight. What's even more shocking is that he does that despite the stench of his son's sins. Despite every unloving thing the son had done, the father still loved him.

So much so that he doesn't allow his son to finish his rehearsed speech about becoming his servant, and working to pay back his debt. He cuts him off, telling his servants, ***“Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.”***

He covers his son's filthy clothing with the best robe—which would have been the father's own robe. He puts a ring on his finger, and sandals on his feet, not the gifts given to a servant, but to a son. This signified that the son didn't have to work his way back in, because the father had accepted him back into the family out of love and grace! And so the father brings out the finest meat to throw a lavish party, inviting the whole community to celebrate the return of his formerly lost son!

But not everyone wanted to celebrate. When the older brother comes in from working in the fields, he asked a servant about the commotion. When he found out the reason for this lavish party, he was so furious that he stayed outside, pouting. Which was an incredibly disrespectful action toward his father. By refusing to attend the party his father was throwing, this older son was visibly voicing to the whole community that he disapproved of his father's decision to allow his younger brother back into the family.

And that decision certainly did impact the older son. By allowing his brother back into the family, the father was once again giving the younger son a portion of the inheritance, even though he'd already blown his. Which means the older son would get even less. And it's clear that that's really all the older son cared about.

You can feel his rage as he points a finger in his father's face and sneers through clenched teeth, “Look, you! I've been slaving away for you for years, always obeying your orders. And you've never even given me money to get pizza with my friends. But when your deadbeat loser son comes back, you break out the fine wine and filet mignon! That's not fair!”

Don't his words reveal his heart? While outwardly, it might seem like the two brothers were very different, in reality, they were very much the same. Both just wanted their father's stuff, not a relationship with him. They just went about it differently. The younger brother demanded it and threw off obedience to his father. While the older brother, in his own words, “slaved for it,” so that he'd be rewarded and compensated for his obedience. But neither of them really loved their father!

And that's why this is better called “The parable of the 2 Lost Sons.” Which leads us to an important question: Which brother are you? The context tells us that Jesus taught this parable to people who fit both types of brothers. ***“The tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”*** Which brother are you?

Are you the younger brother, having removed any restrictions from your life—be they from God, faith, or family, so you can find yourself? Have you tried moving as far from your heavenly Father as possible so you can sin in anonymity without anyone telling you to stop? Have you spent your wealth, your health, or your life in wild living until there's nothing left?

Or maybe you've already experienced that "find yourself" moment when you're knee deep in the muck, and realize that such odysseys only lead to lonely dead ends that reveal just how lost you really are. But the reckless sins of your past still haunt you, making you doubt the Father would ever take you back, or making you assume you must become his servant and pay back your debt before he will.

Or are you the older brother, feeling entitled to God's blessings because you've slaved away for him as an obedient Christian? And thus, you feel morally superior, so that the thought of God showing grace and forgiveness to people who sin differently than you, or whose politics differ from yours, or whose lifestyle is different than yours—is repulsive. Because they haven't earned it like you have!

And because you think you've earned God's blessings, if you ever don't receive the blessings you expect, you're quick to point an angry finger in God's face and say, "Look, you! Have you forgotten everything I've done for you?" Older brothers are obedient to God, not to express their love for God, but to try and control God so he'll give them everything they want—not a relationship with him, but just his stuff.

But honestly, the question isn't, "Which brother are you?" but, "How often haven't we been both?" Self-devoted one minute, self-righteous the next. And the problem is, both sons were lost. The two lost sons represent two different ways to be alienated from God. If left unchecked, both attitudes and mindsets will leave us "outside the house," in the end.

But while it's important for us to take to heart Jesus' warnings against the lifestyles and mindsets of both of these brothers, neither of them is the main character. It's the father! While the title we attach might focus our attention on the prodigal son, the parable itself focuses us on the "prodigal father." For transparency, I have to give credit for that thought to Pastor Timothy Keller, who wrote an incredible book about this parable called, **The Prodigal God**. Definitely a recommended read!

Again, prodigal means "giving something on a lavish scale" or "spending money or resources freely and recklessly." And so, the main focus of this parable is on the prodigal, shall we say "reckless" father! Giving and spending lavishly and recklessly not his wealth, but his love!

The father willingly gives up everything he could have hung on to in the way he reacts to both of his lost sons. He had every right to be angry, to exact revenge, to demand repayment, to cut off and throw out both of these unloving disrespectful sons from the family and inheritance. But instead, he "recklessly" gives all his rights, and lavishly pours out his love on his two lost sons. Because he wanted all his children to join in the joyful celebration in his house.

In love, he doesn't wait inside for his lost sons to come crawling back. He goes out to them, to bring them into the house. And despite how much their sin stunk, he embraces his sons—loving them, forgiving them of any debt or disrespect, pleading with them to receive the free gift he was giving to them. Such love. Such compassion. Such...grace.

Brothers and sisters...lost sons and daughters that we are, that's your Father. God feels about and acts toward you in the same way. In his love, he has forgiven, pardoned, and paid for all of your sins. No matter how far you've wandered from home. No matter how often you've condemned others and ignored your own sins. No matter who you are, or what you have done, your heavenly Father is there, eager to throw his loving arms around your neck and smother you with his perfect love! In his grace, he has covered your filthy sin-stained clothes with his perfect robe of righteousness. He has prepared the celebratory feast!

Because God's grace crushes our condemnation, that is, the condemnation we deserve for our lost ways. And when we know that, then God's grace also crushes our condemnation, that is, the condemning judgment we're quick to heap on others who have hurt us; on people we feel morally superior to. Our condemnation of them gets crushed, because God's grace is also for them, just as it is for us! As

Paul writes so comfortingly in Romans, “*There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*”

Which reminds me, I said at the beginning there are 4 main characters in this parable. The two lost sons, the reckless father, and...the one telling the story. Jesus is our perfect brother—our perfect substitute. The one who made it possible for us to belong to his Father’s household. He is the most exceptional example of the Father’s reckless, lavish love, that he was willing to give up even his one and only Son to save us. So maybe even better, we’ll call it the Parable of Two Lost Sons, a Reckless Father, and our Perfect Savior.