

Luke 15:11-24

Trinity 3, June 16, 2024
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And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. ¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" ²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

There's a rule among fiction writers: in order for a story to be interesting, it must be believable. You've probably experienced this before, you're watching a show that you want to like, but there are too many unbelievable elements for you to really enjoy it. Obviously, when you're watching anything on TV, you need to suspend your disbelief a *little* bit. But sometimes, a show will have too many unbelievable twists, too many unbelievable plotlines, or too many dialogues that just don't sound plausible. And then, you probably just give up on the show altogether.

Some stories are simply unbelievable. Try as you might, you just can't convince yourself that things like that could actually happen in the real world. Well, our text for this morning is a story like that. It's a parable Jesus told to illustrate the unbelievable depth of man's sin and the unbelievable heights of God's mercy. And even though Jesus made this story up, even though it seems impossible, this is a true story—and you and I are the main characters! Our theme for today is:

The Unbelievable Parable of the Prodigal Son

- I. Could there ever be a "son" this bad?
- II. Could there ever be a "father" this good?

The reason this parable seems unbelievable is *not* because it's complicated. It's not complicated. It's simple. A simple story for the plain people Jesus was talking to. As you know, Jesus didn't take His message primarily to the high and mighty, He reached out to the poor and lowly, to tax collectors and the people that the Pharisees lumped together under the term: "Sinners." And that right there was one of the problems Jesus was trying to address with this parable: people who thought they were righteous enough the way they were—people like the Pharisees, who wouldn't admit that they, too, were sinful and needed forgiveness. To them, Jesus said, ***"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."*** (Mark 2:17)

So, He tells them this parable, this *unbelievable* story. And the reason it's so unbelievable is that the characters in it are so extreme. Take the son, for instance. **Could there ever be a "son" this bad?**

We all know how young people can be. Most of us can remember that teenage stage which for us perhaps could have been described as rebellious. But I'd venture to guess none of us was *this* bad to our parents. This kid in the parable—he's the bottom of the barrel. He's the worst. He decides that he's had enough of farm life. He wants his independence. He wants to see the world and have some "fun." So, he goes to his father with an outrageous demand. ***"Father, give me the share of the property that is coming to me."*** And that brings us to the first unbelievable element of the story: the father gives it to him! He liquidates half of the farm and turns the proceeds over to the son. Cash in hand, the young man leaves. He leaves his father behind with a smile on his face. **Could there ever be a "son" this bad?**

Even worse is the way that the young man spent his money. Our text says, ***"Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living."*** The Greek words used there describe him scattering his money, like a handful of seeds into the wind. He made lots of so-called "friends," with his money. He threw parties, he got drunk, he paid for the company of women. One by one, he wasted his father's inheritance to break every commandment there was, and then he went back to the beginning and started over again. King Solomon writes in his Proverbs, ***"He who loves wisdom makes his father glad, but a companion of prostitutes squanders his wealth."*** (Proverbs 29:3) That's who this young man was and that's what he did. And before long, this prodigal son found himself flat broke. He eventually found a miserable job feeding pigs, but he was still starving to death. He'd have gladly filled up on the slop the pigs were eating, but nobody would even give him that.

Could there ever be a "son" this bad? Oh, yes! This story is perfectly true, as far as that goes! In fact, it describes you and me to a T. By nature, you and I were just as lost as this young man. Before the Holy Spirit put faith in our hearts, we were just as blind, just as perverse, and just as wicked as he. And even now, as Christians, we still have that sinful nature plaguing us. It tempts us to rebel against God with every step. And we still feel that pull, don't we? We want to strike out on our own, be independent, follow our own desires rather than the Lord's. And every day, in one way or another, we sin. I don't have to name those sins for you; I'm sure you can come up with plenty of examples.

And then, the Law kicks in. The Bible and our own consciences tell us that we're wretched sinners, and they're right. We are. Unbelievable as it may seem, God's mighty Law reveals to us the fact that we're not one bit better than the prodigal son. So, **Could there ever be a "son" this bad?** Yes. That sinful son is me. That sinful son is you.

In the parable, the young man finally figured out that this great "independence" from his father wasn't so great after all. Sin is like that. It's always so beautiful and alluring at first, and so bitter and wretched in the end. Sitting there starving in the pig pen, the young man literally "came to his senses." He decided to return to his father. He knew he could never be a son again—that went without saying—but perhaps he could get a job as a hired hand. Then he'd at least have food to eat!

But if you ask me, this is where the story gets really bizarre. The ragged, starving youth rounds the last

bend and looks down the road upon his family farm. That's when his father catches sight of the boy too. What will happen next? Well, if I were writing a *realistic* end to the story, it would involve the father sitting there in his front porch rocking chair, not even acknowledging his son as the boy pleaded with him for a job. I could imagine the father considering the boy to be dead to him. Or, if the father was stirred from his stoop, I could imagine him running and chasing the young man off the property. That's what the boy would deserve, and *that* would be *believable*!

But Jesus' ending to the story seems absolutely *unbelievable*: ***“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.”***

We're supposed to believe *that*?! Not only did he forgive the young man on the spot, he joyfully received him back! And not as a hired man, either, but as his very own son! The father willingly gave his son back everything he'd forfeited in his sinfulness. The sin was forgiven and forgotten, and in its place was instead a celebration of joy.

Could there ever be a “father” this good? By now, you know the answer to that question. Yes—our Heavenly Father is *exactly* this good to us! When we've turned away from Him, broken His commandments, and struck out on our own sinful path, our Heavenly Father receives us back not only with forgiveness, but also with great joy in His heart. So, when we've sinned and come to Him in humble repentance, we aren't met with a stern face. We don't hear an angry rebuke. What we hear is the gentle voice of the Lord's reassurance, *“Fear not, for I have put away your sin!”* And we don't have to wait a certain amount of time for that to be true. We don't have to go through any probationary period to see if we're really sincere. We're simply forgiven.

And why? Because the punishment that our sin deserves has already been paid by Jesus. Just like that father in the parable, our Heavenly Father had compassion on us. Such *great* compassion, that He decided to allow Jesus to bear our sins in His body on the cross. ***“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*** (John 3:16) And now, rather than being lowly day-laborers, God has given us the exalted position of members of the royal household, with all the rights and privileges of sons. Instead of guilt and fear and doubt, God gives us righteousness and peace and confidence through our Lord Jesus. Instead of eternal death, we look forward with absolute certainty to a life of eternal happiness in heaven.

What an incredible story! **Could there ever be a “son” this bad? Could there ever be a “father” this good?** Can we really sing with the hymnist: *“Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed His blood for ME”*? Oh, each of us knows that the first part is true. But thanks to the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit, we believe the second part is true as well. Unbelievable as it seems, this is *our* story. Jesus did shed His blood for us. All is forgiven. Today, as you bow before the Lord's altar and confess your many sins, Your Heavenly Father has only two words for you: **“WELCOME HOME!”** Amen.