

It's easily one of the most recognized and popular stories in the Bible. Folks who know nothing else about the Bible, folks who have never, and would never even pick up a Bible, let alone read the Bible, are familiar with the basic story line.

The parable (the teachable-moment story by Jesus) of The Prodigal Son – the story of a boy who squandered his father's money, yet he received forgiveness when he went home.

You know it. I know it. Everybody knows it. We all know the point of the parable: the Father forgives his undeserving son, he forgives us too. Be like repentant son #1. Don't be like stubborn, selfish son #2. So, we could probably just call it a day, I could say "amen," and we could all get out of here a little bit early today, right?

Ok, maybe not. But do you get my point?

I think one of the dangers we face when we come to a story as familiar as this, is to kind of gloss over it – "I know the story, I know what the story means, let's move on to something else." Let's take a moment this morning and really digest this familiar parable – the story of **a Father and his sons** – because I guarantee you it is a story that is just as relevant to your life today as it was the first time you heard it. It is a parable that we would do well to reapply to our lives on a regular basis.

First, let's look again at son #1...

Here's the truth we really need to chew on this morning when it comes to the first son: Sin never ends in truly fulfilling happiness... Sin never ends in truly fulfilling happiness – we couldn't agree more, after the fact. Regrettably, we couldn't disagree more beforehand.

Think about that. Sin never ends in truly fulfilling happiness – we couldn't agree more, after the fact. We couldn't disagree more beforehand.

Son #1 thinks that in order to be truly happy, in order to be truly fulfilled, he needs to get out from underneath his father's thumb – all that self-discipline and hard work his father had forced on him from childhood was draining his life of the joy he deserved – or so he thought. He looked at the world around him, and he saw people who looked happy (at least happier than he was), people who were treating themselves to whatever luxuries their hearts desired, people who didn't let responsibility and rules stop them from satisfying all their desires.

Son #1 looked at the world and he thought that what they had – the sex, the money, the partying, the alcohol - could make him happy. If only he could spend some more time serving himself, rather than serving his father, he thought he could find fulfillment and happiness. He was, after all, born with these desires, what could it hurt if he indulged in them a bit (especially if he wasn't hurting anyone else)?

That truth (sin never ends in truly fulfilling happiness), is something son #1 couldn't disagree with more at the beginning of Jesus' parable. And so he goes on his reckless binge, and what happens? You know how the story goes: **"After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to**

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

Did he find happiness in the money? Yes, for a time. But was it truly fulfilling happiness? No.

Did he find happiness in the sex? Yes. But was it truly fulfilling happiness? No.

Did he find happiness in the alcohol and partying? Yes. But was it truly fulfilling happiness? No.

And here's where the story flips, **"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! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.'"**

Let me read that first phrase again: **When he came to his senses...**

Sin never ends in truly fulfilling happiness – son #1 couldn't agree more, *after* the fact. Trying to find satisfaction in sex, money, parties, and everything this world has to offer is just plain foolish, and sitting there staring hungrily at pig slop, that truth finally began to sink in. He came to his senses.

So, as we chew on this parable this morning, let me ask you this: is there a sin in your life right now over which you still need to come to your senses?

Do you experience fulfilling happiness after you've spent an hour staring at pornography on your computer?

Is that fulfilling happiness you are feeling when you wake up from a good bender – after polishing off that bottle of wine and filling the air with gossip, slander, and language you would never repeat sitting in this church right now?

Would you say you feel happy and fulfilled *after* you have lashed out at your kids, or your spouse, or your co-workers?

I could go on and on, and so could you, couldn't you? We realize on a daily basis (at least we ought to) the heartbreaking truth about ourselves that Jesus so skillfully identifies through son #1: Sin never ends in truly fulfilling happiness. And we couldn't agree more, *after the fact*. But we also couldn't disagree more beforehand. And what really makes this a heartbreaker is that we never really, fully learn the lesson, do we? We come to our senses only to slip right back into the lunacy of thinking that sin can make us happy and content.

So as we chew on this familiar parable, let's allow Jesus to pull back the veil on those pet sins you harbor in your heart. Let's let Jesus help us come to our senses, because life doesn't have to be this way.

Our lives don't have to be spent running on the hamster wheel of this world – frantically bolting from one worldly pleasure to another, desperately hoping that the next one will finally bring us the fulfillment and joy we didn't find in the last one. We don't have to stare hungrily at the pig slop of this world, hoping someone will give us some to quench this hunger for truly fulfilling happiness. We, like son #1 know of a better place, where everything we need is provided by a loving Father.

There's an awful lot we can learn and apply to our daily lives from son #1 from this soul-searching parable of Jesus.

Now, how about son #2...

Here at St. Paul's we are celebrating our 150th anniversary. Now, I know I'm new here, but I have already gathered that there are some families here who have been here for a good chunk of that time, over multiple generations. Many of you, like me, have been active, volunteering, faithful Christians for your entire lives. I also know that many of you lead lives that (at least on the outside) are far from what one might call "wild living." All of this means there are a lot of people here today for whom the lesson of son #2 is relevant.

As we chew on son #2 this morning, let me ask you this: Are you ever offended by grace?

That's what happens with son #2 in Jesus parable, right? He is offended at grace – that term we use for the Father's undeserved love.

Baby brother comes home while big brother is out working hard in the fields (like he had been doing, day in and day out while baby brother was off with his wild living), and sees a party going on. When he finds out why the party is going on, he's disgusted.

It turns out, he'd been responsibly working for nothing all those years! His hard work had apparently earned him nothing, because his father was showing just as much (maybe even more) love for his younger brother – the brother who had quite on him and his father, and thrown away half of his father's hard-earned money on sin.

He had worked his entire life to earn and remain in his father's good graces. So often he had denied himself the simple pleasures of this world because he knew that's what his father wanted, and it turns out he could have had his father's love for free – and this grace, this undeserved love was offensive to him.

It's important to keep in mind, friends, the first two verses we read from Luke 15: **Now 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."**

This is why Jesus told this parable in the first place – the Pharisees and teachers of the law were son #2 – offended that Jesus was hanging out with tax collectors and sinners (a bunch of son #1s). This Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, the Son of God – if he was really God's Son, he would know that those sinners had squandered the lives God had given them in wild living, while the Pharisees have done nothing but work all day, every day to earn God's love. If he was God's Son he would be hanging with Pharisees, not the sinners. They are offended by the implication that God would love those sinners as much, maybe even more, than he loved his faithful older sons. They are offended by grace.

So, back to that question, what about you, are you offended by grace?

If you are anything like me, this is another one of those times when your gut reaction is to say, "Of course I don't find grace offensive. Of course I don't have a

problem with the Father's treatment of son #1 in this parable!" But just like this last Wednesday, we should never get too busy condemning the Pharisees that we fail to see that we are tempted in many of the same ways they are.

It really all boils down to worldview. When you look around at this world; when you look at the other members of St. Paul's, some of whom may not be working as hard as you for the church; when you look at the homeless guy begging for money on the street, or the divorcee, or the single mother, or the drug addict, do you see someone who has no more, or no less right than you to call on the Father's love? Or do you at least a little bit, pat yourself on the back because at least you volunteer at this church, or are there some people in this world you would you rather not be associated with, and you certainly wouldn't invite them into your house to eat with your family, because, God forbid you spend time with tax collectors and sinners...

One of the incredibly important and always applicable lessons Jesus wants us to chew on this morning is that whether you've been a member of this church your whole life, or if this is your first time in a church in years, whether your life is void of "big ticket" sins like adultery, theft, murder, drugs, alcohol, or your life is messed up because of some of the choices you've made, **all of us have a desperate need for a Father who forgives. None of us deserve him, and his love, and his blessings...**

So how about that Father? This is a story of a Father and two sons, both of which are guilty of displaying some pretty ugly sin. Most importantly of all, it is the story of a Father who offers grace to both of these undeserving sons.

Son #1 comes to his senses, gets up and goes 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."**

This Father spent every day scanning the horizon hoping that this would be the day that his younger son came home. And when he finally did... the father had nothing but compassion and grace for his son. There was no, how could you do this to me? There was no, I'll let you come home, but you are going to have to earn my trust back. There was just pure, unadulterated, amazing grace, forgiveness, and love.

Son #2 keeps his distance, refuses to join the party because he's mad – mad at his brother, mad at his father. **"So his father went out and pleaded with him... 'My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. We had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"**

This Father isn't skimping on his older son, all of the Father's undeserved love and blessings belong to that son too. Neither does he want his older son to miss out on what a beautiful thing it is when the lost are found, and the dead come back to life.

It's a familiar story. It's a popular story. No matter where we are in our walk of faith, it is the story of our relationship with our Father in heaven. None of us deserve his love. All of us have his love. It's the incredible, amazing, breathtaking, true story of a Father and his sons.

Amen.