

Spared No Expense

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 (NIV)

¹ 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." ³ Then Jesus told them this parable: "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. "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. 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.' ²² "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. ²⁵ "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!' ³¹ " 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "

People were gathering around Jesus to hear him speak. This is nothing new. He has been gaining in popularity for some time now. The significant detail today was who was gathering around to hear Jesus speak. They're tax collectors, sinners. These people have the reputation of being despicable, unlovable. They are the dregs of society. Honorable people would not associate with such vermin. "The Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" (verse 2) Should we waste our time and our food on such people? To answer this question, Jesus begins a string of parables and gives us arguably the most memorable of all his parables: the story of the prodigal son.

We know that the younger of the two sons is the prodigal one, but do you know what it means to be a "prodigal" son. We put so much emphasis on his leaving and returning that we have come to associate the word "prodigal" with "wayward" or "lost." The word "prodigal" actually means "recklessly extravagant," "luxurious giving," even "squander." A prodigal person spares no expense.

Once the younger son got his inheritance, he moved away from disapproving eyes and spared no expense on his wild living. He recklessly squandered it all until he had nothing left, couldn't even buy food to eat. He had no friends, no family to help him when he was broke. He had to feed pigs, about the lowliest job a Jew could do since pigs were unclean animals.

The younger son finally came to his senses. He realized that he would be so much better off to be back with his father even if he were just a hired servant. He would have food, a place to stay. He prepared his confession and his humble plea bargain to live with his father as a hired servant not worthy to be called his son.

When the dad sees the younger son way off in the distance, he goes running to his son. He embraces his once lost son and kisses him. He doesn't even let the son get out his humble plea bargain, but instead lavishes him with gifts: the best robe, a ring for his finger, sandals on his feet, and he is going to throw a party for him. The father spares no expense on his returned son because "this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." (verse 24)

The older son was coming in from what was probably a long, hard day's work out in the fields. He hears the sound of partying, of music, of dancing. When he found out that the celebration was for his brother, he "became angry and refused to go in." (verse 28)

He had been the obedient one. He had stayed to help. He did what was right. This son of my father, though, wasted his money on prostitutes. There is no way that I should celebrate his homecoming.

The father came out and pleaded with the older son to celebrate with him and everyone else “because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” (verse 32) What did the older brother do? We don’t know. That’s where the parable ends.

Who do you identify with in this parable: the younger son or the older son? Both of them are awful in their own ways. The younger son wasted all the good things that his father had given him. The older son would not forgive the younger son for what he had done.

In Jesus’ setting, the younger son represented the tax collectors and the “sinners.” These were people who had most likely grown up learning about God, going to the synagogue or to the Temple. However, when they got older, they chose to waste all the good things they had learned. Instead of loving God by following his commands, they followed many paths of sin. They wandered away from God, but listening to Jesus had brought them to their senses.

How many of us have at one point in our lives wandered away from God? When you were finally free from the control of your parents, did you take a break from church, decided that you didn’t really need this and didn’t understand why Mom and Dad made you go all the time. Maybe you even resented all those mornings when you wanted to sleep in or stay the night over at a friend’s house, but no, you had to go to church in the morning. What’s the point? Just let me go off and live my life.

Although you probably didn’t realize it at the time, you were taking all the things that God had given you and recklessly wasting them. By staying away from God, you told God, like the younger son did, that you just wanted to the wealth, the blessings. I don’t care about this family; I just want the money and go do whatever I want to do. The longer you stayed away from God the more you spent of his grace. You didn’t care. You were going to do what you were going to do.

Then you finally came to your senses. You realized that you had sinned against heaven and against your Father in heaven. It was time to go back. When you returned, what did you expect? Did you come preparing in your mind a plea bargain? “God, I know I don’t deserve to come back, but if you will accept me, I will gladly take the lowliest role you can think of. I don’t deserve to be taken in by you, but even if you treated me like a hired worker instead of a son, that would be okay with me.”

And what did the father do for you? He let you go. He let you waste what he had worked so hard to attain. When you came back, he didn’t demand payment. He didn’t even let you give your plea bargain. He didn’t wait arms folded looking for an apology. He didn’t say, “I told you so.” He was watching for you to return, hoping and praying that you would, like a father who stays up at night waiting for his rebellious daughter to return. When the father finally caught a glimpse of you on the horizon, he ran to welcome you back. He embraced you, kissed you. He spent even more on you than what you had wasted. He lavished you with his blessings. He called for a celebration. He forgave your sins, regardless of how many more you piled up and then gave you even more blessings.

Our Father in heaven is a prodigal father. He spares no expense when it comes to us. He even lets us waste his blessings. He lets us look down on his forgiveness. But when we come to our senses and realize how good God was to us, he takes us right back. He gives no thought of having us pay him back for how we have wronged him. He welcomes you, embraces you, forgives you.

We all have been the prodigal son at one point in our lives, a time when we have recklessly wasted God’s blessings as we walked away from them and did our own thing. You can identify with the prodigal son, but can you identify with the older son?

When the older son heard that his father’s son – not his brother – had returned and that they were celebrating with a great feast with the fattened calf, he “became angry and refused to go in.” (verse 28) He held his brother’s debt against him. He owes me. He left me here to do all the chores, which I have faithfully done since the day he left to waste my dad’s money on wild living until he finally returned, broke and destitute. Now he gets a party?! He owes me! He owes dad! I didn’t waste what my father had given me.

The older son represented the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who grumbled that Jesus would associate with these sinners and tax collectors. They viewed themselves as the faithful ones. They didn’t wander away and lead despicable lives like these sinners. They faithfully, carefully followed God’s laws. These sinners owe you. They owe us. They have not been obedient like us!

Are you holding on to a debt? Do you feel like someone owes you because you’ve been good while everyone else has wandered off and wasted God’s grace? If you’ve been wronged, do you refuse to speak to that person until you get an apology, refuse to forgive them until you hear an, “I’m sorry”? If you’ve been wronged, do you refuse to go in, rejoice, and worship with your brothers and sisters in Christ? Do you withdraw because you are hurt?

Yet the prodigal father spares no expense on you as well. Just like he told the older son, "You are always with me, and everything I have is yours," (verse 31) God reminds you that you are already dwelling in the blessings of the Lord. You have forgiveness. You have all those same gifts that the prodigal son received upon his return. And now the father is spending time away from celebrating the fact that his lost son is now found to implore you to give up the debt you hold. The debt your brother owes is not against you, but it is against the Father. God the Father have forgiven the debt. It was his choice to give him all those blessings. It was his choice to run out and welcome the lost ones back. It was his choice to put the best robe on him, to give him the ring, the sandals, to hold this bounteous feast with the fattened calf. God the Father spares no expense on rejoicing when the lost return. Why should we behave any different?

Regardless of which son you identify with, we have the same prodigal Father in heaven who spares no expense on us, lavishly blesses us, allows us to even waste his blessings, but still spends his days looking to the horizon for us to return to him. Our Prodigal Father never once demands repayment for our wasting of his grace. Instead, he footed the bill. He paid it in full through the suffering and death of God the Son. He spared no expense to save us.

While God the Father rejoices over the one who was lost but now is found, he calls you to do the same. Don't hold on to any debts or grudges. Spare no expense with forgiveness because that's what our Father in heaven has done for us and we get to share that with others. If there is someone you know who is holding a grudge, feeling like something is owed to them and are staying away because of it, show them the prodigal father who spared no expense to forgive that debt.

In the end, we have all been both sons in this story. Thanks be to God that we have the same father as they did, a prodigal Father who spares no expense in rejoicing in our forgiveness, who pays all of our debts and continues to richly bless us. Rejoice that the lost have been found and that all our debts are completely paid by our Father in heaven. Amen.

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