

Knowing and Being Known

We understand the parable of the prodigal son is a lesson on ***repentance, mercy, and restoration***. It's unmistakable, and Jesus taught this lesson to a bunch of scribes and Pharisees precisely because it is so unmistakable. They were grumbling and felt scandalized because Jesus was hanging out with a bunch of tax collectors and prostitutes—the real lowlifes and degenerates of society. ***How dare He do such a thing! True men of God just don't do that!*** These pieces of human debris had done **NOTHING** to merit mercy from anyone, especially from someone claiming to be the authority on all things God.

The scribes and Pharisees knew and firmly believed that in order for mercy to be shown, you first had to ***earn*** it. Your “repentance” consisted of showing proper contrition and sorrow for doing the wrong thing, and then working hard to make things right. That hard work, coupled with your contrition, merited you mercy. With enough sorrow and hard work, you might even be able to fully restore yourself to original standing...but it would take a tremendous amount of hard work and dedication. Sadly, they didn't understand mercy or repentance. ***If mercy is earned, then it's not mercy, is it?*** Mercy is **not** getting what you deserve. However, the worker deserves his wage. If you have to work for and earn mercy, then it's not mercy that you're receiving; it's the wage that's due to you. This is an important point to make because had Jesus finished teaching the parable at the point when the prodigal son resolved to return home and confess to his sins and offer to make full restitution by becoming a hired hand, hoping to work off his sins and earn his restoration to sonship, the scribes and Pharisees would've applauded such moralistic teaching. *“Amen! You're preaching to the choir. Why don't you tell the riff-raff you're eating with?”*

But the parable doesn't stop there, does it? There's a whole lot more to the story. And that brings us to a couple of very important questions that we need to consider: ***Why did the prodigal son return home to dad? How did he know to return home to dad?*** The answer to both questions, on the surface, seems simple enough. He knew his father. He saw how his father had treated everyone while growing up. *“The hired servants even have more than enough bread.”* He knew his dad. This is how he knew to go home. This is why he went home.

But here's the thing: ***He really didn't know his dad as well as he thought he did.*** Based on his own words, his whole plan of “repentance” consisted of working out a deal with dad. Dad would hire him on as a servant, and after a while he would be able to make restitution and ***earn*** his way back into sonship. ***But...that's not how dad worked.*** Dad never stopped loving his wayward idiot of a son. He never stopped watching for his son to return. And when that idiot

finally appeared on the horizon, dad did the unthinkable: he abandoned all **dignity and propriety** and ran out to embrace the jerk and welcome him home. Even then the son still doesn't understand the unconditional love of his father. Dad is trying to hug him and kiss him, and this idiot launches into his **rehearsed** speech. *"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."* But before he could mess it all up and puke out the part about getting hired on as a servant and earning his way back, the father cuts him off and tells the servants to fetch the finest robe and ring and shoes and put them on his once-dead-but-now-alive son. *"Kill the fatted calf! It's feast time! My son is home!"*

The son really didn't know the father, did he? The same can be said for the older brother, who threw a royal temper tantrum when he discovered that dad was throwing a feast for his idiot brother. This guy, who claimed to be the "good" son; who claimed to be the one who knew and did the father's will perfectly (unlike his idiot brother), was **shocked** to find out that his father was merciful and gracious. *"I've done all this over all these years, and you never did a thing for me (which obviously wasn't true). This idiot finally decides to trudge home after making a mess of his life and wasting all your hard-earned money on prostitutes and loose living (something which this guy couldn't have known, so now he's slandering), and you kill the fatted calf!"* This guy's own words confess the fact that he, too, only did what he did all those years because he was trying to earn his father's love and goodness. There isn't a hint of joyful obedience; only reluctant servitude. This guy's own words confess the fact that he didn't know his father either.

This is why Jesus spoke this parable to the grumbling scribes and Pharisees. ***They were the proverbial older brother.*** They couldn't stand the fact that mercy and grace could **possibly** be shown to someone like a tax collector or a prostitute. Where were the good works that would merit such gifts? *"What about us? We've kept the Law perfectly, and we don't even get a parade or a feast. We get nothing. To top it all off you want us to celebrate with these nasty reprobates?! Never! Not my god!"* They really didn't know their heavenly Father, did they?

What about you? How well do you know your heavenly Father? Unlike these two proverbial brothers, we do know that our Father is gracious and merciful. We know that He shows us mercy, not giving us what we do deserve, and that He also bestows upon us His grace, giving us what we don't deserve; what we could never merit or earn. We know that all of this is ours because of the all-redeeming work and person of the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. We don't earn any of it. It's a free and unmerited gift because of Christ.

Here's the thing: **HOW** do you know all this? Is it because you can see it? The prodigal knew what he knew about dad (which wasn't correct) based on what

he saw. Like Paul says in Romans, everyone can look out at the world and see that there is a god. ***But what do our eyes tell us?*** Look around at the world we live in. There is a whole lot of suffering going on in our day and age. ***How can this be? How can our loving God permit such suffering?*** Maybe He doesn't care. Maybe He's not as almighty as He says He is. We look at the world we live in and we see evil getting ahead and good getting crushed. We see people who deserve to suffer instead prospering, and we see good people suffering. Based on all that we see, we should be able to rightly conclude that material blessings and prosperity is **proof** of God's love and approval, while suffering and hardship is proof that God is angry.

Of course, there's also the issue of what we hear. Two big concerns here, though: ***A) What are you hearing? and B) Where are you hearing it from?*** The devil, the world, and our sinful flesh all tell us that we can and should try to win God over with our works and our deeds. We are hearing from all over, and even from within our own sinful hearts, that we should, like the prodigal son, try to strike a deal with God. Sadly, this deal-striking quite often isn't even focused on regaining God's righteousness and favor (which is impossible). It's focused selfishly on ***regaining prosperity lost***. Life hits the skids and we turn to God and try to strike a deal so that we can attempt to regain and recapture what we lost; what we feel entitled to. ***"God, tell you what I'm gonna do. If you do this for me, I'll do this for you."*** Sound familiar? It should, because we're all guilty of it from time to time.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: How do you know all this blessed Truth about your heavenly Father and His undeserved mercy and grace and love for you? ***You know it ONLY because He Himself has told you.*** You hear Him and His Word, and through the working of the Holy Spirit in that Word, your ears and your eyes are opened to hear and to see these blessed realities. It's only through the eyes of faith that we can look to this cross and see the Father's prodigal love. (To be prodigal isn't a bad thing. The word actually means "to be lavish, recklessly extravagant, to spare no costs, to withhold nothing.") ***Your God and Father withheld nothing for you. He spared no costs.*** He gave His only-begotten Son to die for you. The rest of the world looks to this and sees only defeat, if they see anything at all. Many refuse to see. Many see only myth or legend.

By God's grace, through faith, we see things for how they really are. We see God's wrath against sin. We see the wage for our sin paid in full. We see the Son of God doing for us what we could never do for ourselves. We see God's mercy in action; ***us not getting what we do deserve.*** We also see God's grace (***us getting what we absolutely don't deserve***). Because of Christ's all-redeeming sacrifice, we see God's love in this bloody display. We see a love so deep and

incomprehensible that it was will to die for us so that we might be restored to sonship in the Father's heavenly household. We hear the Lord Himself proclaim this loving restoration from the sacrificial altar this is His cross: "*It is finished!*" The work of restoration and salvation is complete! ***And restored we are!*** Because of Christ's all-redeeming sacrifice, we have been returned and restored to the Father. In and through the waters of Holy Baptism our Lord comes to meet us where we're at in our sin and degradation. He comes to us and He breathes His gift of life into us and He clothes us with the royal robe of Christ's righteousness. He restores us to His heavenly household. He puts His name upon us and makes us co-heirs with Christ; sons and daughters of the Father.

Through these eyes and ears of faith we see and hear the blessed reality of the ***never-ending feast*** that our Lord brings to us; the feast of victory. He still bids us to come to the feast table and eat and drink. Our Lord comes to us, and we, in turn, come to the table, not looking to make a deal or prove our worthiness or make a show of how good we are, but we come ***empty-handed***, offering the sacrifice of thanksgiving for all that our Lord has done and continues to do for us. We come and we humbly, joyously receive the free gift of God's grace. We receive what we absolutely don't deserve—the free and unmerited gift of God's total and complete forgiveness; the free and unmerited gift of His unconditional and unending love.

My friends: We know and believe all this because of God's own Word to us. May this same Word be on your lips and in your hearts and minds now and into all eternity. May this mercy, grace, peace and love of your heavenly Father ever guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

In His holy name...**AMEN**