

## **A Shower of Grace**

### **Luke 15:11-32**

This morning we're going to be talking about one of the most important aspects of who God is and one of the most important aspects of living the Christian life, and that is grace. Grace is simply defined as unearned and undeserved favor, kindness, blessing – it's a gift, not based on working to earn it, but given freely by the giver. Grace is definitely not something new if you've been a part of Christianity for very long. It's something that we talk about a lot, there are lots of songs written about it, we name our kids after it, we name churches after it, we know that it's very, very important. It's at the core of the gospel – Eph. 2:8-10 starts with "For it is by grace you have been saved..."

But I also think that grace is something that's really difficult for us to truly experience because it's something that's very contrary to our nature. We often don't receive grace well and we don't live in it very well and the story that we're going to look at today is going to give us a couple examples of that, examples that most of us will probably be able to relate to.

We're in the dog days of summer and I remember about 30 years ago one summer I was working on my grandparents' farm doing demolition on their old barn that had blown over in a storm. (Picture) It was really hot out, the sun was shining, it was humid, and I had a fire going to burn the old, rotten barnboards. And I remember pulling apart boards from the barn and getting all kinds of dust and dirt and probably old rotten hay and manure dumped on top of me as I was working. By the end of the day I was sticky, slimy, and covered with dirt.

So when I got home, I had one thing on top of my priority list and that was to take a shower. Oh how wonderful that shower was! All that slime and grime and dirt was washed away and my whole body was cooled down and refreshed. It was like my mind and spirit were refreshed as well. I don't remember what I did after that, but I know in similar situations after getting all cleaned up and cooled down, I'm always ready to either rest well, or rejuvenated to move forward on the next thing.

That's a picture of what it's like to experience the grace of God pouring over you. It's a wonderful experience! There have been times where I've come face to face

with the amazing grace of God and felt such joy and freedom and life so that I was at a place where I could truly rest or was rejuvenated to move forward in living for him.

I wish I could say that's what my life is like every day, but it's not, and I think that's true for a lot of us. Experiencing and living in the grace of God is so wonderful but it's also often elusive and rare for us to find because it doesn't come natural to us and I also think we have an enemy who doesn't want us to live that way. He wants us to live under the weight of the slime and grime and dirt of sin or under the bonds and shackles of shame and guilt. And he's pretty good at convincing us that that's where we need to be.

So experiencing grace can be elusive, but today I'm hoping that we can be refreshed by God's grace as we look at a story Jesus told and I hope that by the power and grace of the Holy Spirit, we will not only see it but be able to experience it and taste it once again, and hopefully that will become a more regular occurrence in our lives.

We are in Luke chapter 15. The context is that Jesus was receiving complaints from the scribes and Pharisees because he was eating with and befriending tax collectors and sinners, people who had left the religious system of the Pharisees and were filled with immorality and self indulgence. They were outcasts in that Jewish society, shunned by the Pharisees and banned from worshipping in the synagogues. The scribes and Pharisees believed that by associating with them, Jesus was defiling himself and they couldn't believe that someone who was supposed to be a rabbi and maybe even the Messiah would be doing that. They had a much different view of God than Jesus did and they were living from that perspective and teaching others to do the same and it was completely wrong.

So Jesus told them three parables that reveal who God is, that he has a heart for sinners, and to reveal that the Pharisees were trapped in religion and legalism that was holding them and everyone else in that society captive. We looked at the first parable last week, the parable of the lost sheep. And this week we will primarily be looking at the third parable, which is known as the parable of the prodigal son.

In the parable of the lost sheep we saw how God cared very deeply about the sheep that went astray and weren't following the rules. He went after them and found them and rescued them and in his delight he carried them on his shoulders and brought them home, and that's why Jesus did what he did. That's why he ate with sinners.

The second parable is about a lost coin and is very similar to the first. The only real difference I could see was pointed out to me by Kenneth Bailey, the author of the Good Shepherd, who pointed out that in the story of the lost coin the woman didn't lose the coin in the wilderness, it was lost in her house, hinting that those who are lost aren't just the ones who are overtly sinful and wayward, but could also be those who were following the rules of religion in this society of Judaism. Whether Jesus was trying to point that out or not, he definitely does so in this third and last parable.

So I want us to look at the story of not just the prodigal son but of two sons and their father and I want us to see if we can relate to either of the sons and see if we've been able to understand and experience the kind of grace from God that the father in this story is a wonderful example of.

Luke 15:11-16

*And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.*

So here we see a son who has been part of his father's household and there's no indication that there was any problems or harm being done to him, only blessings, but in spite of all the good things he had he was discontent and told his father he wanted his share of the inheritance that was coming to him. The father gave him the inheritance and he soon afterward moved away and squandered everything on reckless living.

The younger son in this story represents the tax collectors and sinners. These were Jews but had turned away from God and religion to pursue immorality and self-indulgence. We often talk about the negative things related to the Jewish religion at that time, but there were many incredible blessings as well. Paul brings up a few of them in Romans 9:4: *“To them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.”*

Of all the peoples on earth, God chose to reveal himself to and through the Jewish people. He adopted them as his people, he revealed his glory to them in many powerful ways throughout their history, he established a covenant with them at Mt. Sinai where he gave them the law, the plans for worship with the tabernacle and priests, and many promises of blessings. No other nation was given these privileges. God poured out bountiful blessings on the Jewish people and anyone who belonged to that community was given access to all of those blessings.

The inheritance that the father gave his two sons in this story represents all these blessings. And what did the younger son do with them? He squandered them on reckless living. He craved the desires of his flesh, so he went after them in full force. This represents the waywardness, worldliness and immorality of the Jewish tax collectors and sinners that Jesus chose to eat with. They had been given enormous privileges from God by being born into the Jewish community, but they had wasted it all in their pursuit of self-indulgence. And God let them do it, he let them go their own way, just like the father let his son go in this story.

Now, what happened to the younger son, is the same thing that happens to all who reject God to try to find their own pleasure, happiness, and joy in the things of this world. They give themselves over to it thinking they will find happiness and fulfillment in them, and they get a brief season of gratification, but then it ends. It dries up. It never lasts, it's never enough. Rather than giving life, it sucks the life out of them, and they're left with nothing. A lot of people end up there, wasting their lives wallowing in the pigsty.

That's where the younger son was, but then something happened...

Luke 15:17-20a

*<sup>17</sup> “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! <sup>18</sup> I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ <sup>20</sup> And he arose and came to his father.*

When he was in the bottom of the gutter, he came to his senses and he saw two things: He remembered how good it was at his father’s house – even the lowest members of his household had more than enough food to eat. And, he saw the wretchedness of his condition – he was going to die of starvation! This alludes to the work of the Holy Spirit in a person’s heart to open their eyes to their misery and need for God.

And when that happened to the younger son, he made up his mind what he must do – he must go back to his father, confess his sins, admit his guilt and unworthiness, and take his place as a servant so he could earn his keep. No longer a son, but a servant. This was his idea of what salvation would be and it fell right in line with what the scribes and Pharisees believed. That’s the way of religion. That’s the way we naturally think we have to relate to God because of our sin. That’s what was happening in the religious system in Israel and that’s what happens in many of our hearts today. That’s the route the younger son was planning to take, so he got up and headed back to his father.

I’m sure this next part took the scribes and Pharisees by surprise, because it didn’t fit into their theology or idea of ministry, but it fit exactly into what Jesus was doing and why he chose to be a friend of sinners.

Luke 15:20b-24

*But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> 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.’ <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.*

The father didn't respond like his son probably thought he would. He didn't wait for him to come groveling up to him or shame him for wasting his inheritance. He didn't reluctantly accept him as a servant on the condition that he earn is keep and never screw up again. He probably surprised his son by an outpouring of grace. His son came covered with all the slime and grime and dirt of his failures and the father washed him with a life-giving shower of grace.

The Father responds with forgiveness, compassion, overwhelming joy – he was delighted to see his son returning home again and welcomed him home! He heard his son's confession but made it clear he had no interest in making him a servant. He didn't want a servant, he wanted a son! The robe and ring were signs of position and authority. The shoes a sign that he was free. The fattened calf was saved only for special occasions and this was it – his son had come home again! It was time to celebrate!

He didn't hold his son's sins against him. He didn't shame him for what he'd done. He didn't make him pay back the lost inheritance. He didn't make him earn his keep. He welcomed him into his household with all the position, authority, and freedom of a beloved son.

That is a beautiful picture of grace – God's grace – the grace God pours out on tax collectors and sinners – every unworthy person who comes to him. He gives grace when we first come to our senses, repent of our sins, and come to him. And he gives grace when we mess up and come to our senses again. He gives grace in ongoing measure every day of our lives to hold us, keep us, sustain us, and give us life and joy. We are always enveloped in God's grace whether we know it or not, because that's who God is for all who come to him.

He wants us to experience that grace so we experience who he is and show that to the people around us. He doesn't want us to get stuck with the mentality of thinking that we have to make up for past failures and sins or keep a standard of perfection to keep his approval. He's saved us to be sons and daughters, not slaves. And that's what we see in the story of this younger son.

But there's another story here as well – the story of the older son. The one who also received all the blessings and privileges of his father's inheritance at the

beginning of the story. We've seen what the younger son did with those things, what did the older son do?

Luke 15:25-32

*<sup>25</sup> "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. <sup>27</sup> And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' <sup>28</sup> But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, <sup>29</sup> but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' <sup>31</sup> And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup> It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"*

As you look at the details of this part of the story, you see that this son had never embraced the inheritance his father had given to him. When his brother came home he was in the field... working... serving... earning his keep... doing his job... being a good servant. But not being a son. He was so separate from the life of his father that he didn't even know his brother was home or that there was a big party going on until well after it had started. He was too busy working. He was so focused on work he didn't know his father and didn't know grace. In fact, when his brother came home and his father threw a celebration, he got angry. His brother didn't deserve it! He didn't deserve to even come home! He wasted everything on prostitutes and his father should put him in prison, not throw a party. His father's expression of grace actually angered him.

This older son never knew grace or his father. He only knew law and religion. Everything the father had was already his – he could have had a fattened calf with his friends every day of the week but he never did because he never knew his father. He was just as lost as his younger brother, even though he never left home.

He represents, of course, the way that the Pharisees were living and teaching the people to live. They weren't living as sons, they were living as slaves. They had all

the blessings of God, but they were so focused on religion, they never experienced them. Instead of living in them, they had restrictions on them. You have to earn them and keep earning them by keeping all the commands, following all the rules. God was holding them back and only giving out the little that was earned for that day.

He also represents many of us and our tendency to focus on our work and our effort for God rather than his bountiful grace and blessings he wants us to receive.

Both sons needed the same thing – something that was always available to them in their father – they needed grace. And we do too.

Where do you see yourself in this story today?

- Are you the younger brother who has everything you could ever want or need from your father, but you're just not content with that – you've got to try to find other ways to fill your soul on your own?
- Maybe you've taken that next step and you've left home and are in open rebellion – seeking life and gratification in your flesh and the ways of the world – hoping you'll find what you're looking for?
- Maybe you've been there for a long time and you've come to the realization that it just isn't going to work. You're empty, lonely, and spent and feel like you're in the pigsty. You just want to come home.
- Maybe you've been there and feel so much guilt and shame that you plan to come back to God to work off your debts, you promise to do better and to earn your keep. And that's what you've been trying to do.
- Or maybe you're the older brother who's been following the rules, living a moral life, toeing the line, but you realize it's all been about religion to you and not a relationship with your father. You know church and morality, but you don't really know Christ.

The father in this story represents our Father in heaven. He's always been full of grace toward you. He's always loved you. He longs to have a relationship with you, to have you come home. Whether you're coming from the pigsty of sin or the prison of religion, he just wants you to come. He wants to wrap you in his arms and kiss you and rejoice over you with singing. He wants you to know him and experience his grace. You don't have to earn it, and you don't have to pay



him back. He sent Jesus to die on the cross for that very purpose – to set you free from the burden of sin and shame and free from the burden of trying to be perfect. Just believe it. He doesn't want you to focus on all your failures or works of righteousness, he wants you to focus on him and who he is. He wants you to experience his grace and live in it every day.

By the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, may you experience a shower of his grace pouring over you this morning, cleansing you, rejuvenating you and filling you with the joy and fulfillment your soul has been longing for. And by his grace, may you go back to the well every day to drink deep and be filled, that you might know him, enjoy him, and glorify him with every breath of your life.