

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Elated joy. Have you ever experienced it before? The military spouse returns from a tour overseas, safe and sound, now out of harm's way. And the reaction of the spouse left back home? Elated joy. A family, especially the bride and groom, the wedding ceremony complete, the "I do's" said, now excited to celebrate the reception. I would say that's elated joy.

How about when you find something that was lost? Does that call for elated joy? We see examples of it in Scripture, the shepherd who rejoices when finding his one lost sheep, out of a hundred. Or the woman who turns her house upside-down, looking for one silver coin, out of ten, and when she finds it, she's so excited she calls her friends and relatives over to celebrate.

On the road to the cross, there's celebration. We rejoice in the love of God, shown through his Son's death for us, but we're not the only ones. That road to the cross is cause for celebration for our Father, who found what was lost.

It should have been a cause for celebration. Jesus was preaching, as he normally did. But in the crowd there were some tax collectors and sinners, so probably prostitutes and addicts and lowest of the low. Those, lost in sin, coming in repentance to hear the message of their salvation, a reason to rejoice! But there were also some Pharisees there, and they just couldn't stand to be in the presence of such unworthy sinners, and they were disgusted that Jesus would knowingly associate himself with them. And they made those feelings known by their muttering.

Was that the right attitude to have? Listen to Jesus' parable and see the answer.

It was really a sad situation. This man had two sons, and, as it seems to be with every family, there was a bad apple in that bunch. It was the younger son, not unlike your typical rebellious teenager. He was getting tired of mom and dad, and he was getting tired of living under their roof and under their rules.

So he did the unthinkable. He went to his dad and asked for, demanded, his share of his inheritance. Definitely something out of the ordinary, even at that time, and in that culture, to get the inheritance before the parent was even dead.

What was the father going to do? Whether he gave his son the money or not, the son was dead-set on leaving. So, lovingly, he gave him his inheritance, and with that, the son was off, planning never to see his parents, any of his family again.

Now, as foolish as it was for the young man to demand his inheritance, what he did with his share was even more foolish. He went to another country, and there, well, we hear he squandered it all. Didn't have the smarts to put it into the bank or make some wise investments. But just wasted every last penny. And it's not like he spent it on lots of toys, like a new car, a huge house, an X-box and tons of games for it.

What he did was even worse... "squandered it in wild living." Wild living...any guesses what that probably entailed? Later on in the story, his older brother claimed he had used some of his inheritance

on prostitutes. I'm sure that's just scratching the surface of the trouble he got himself into, possibly drugs, drinking, gambling, addictions, what have you, and it wasn't before long his sinful lifestyle caught up with him and left him penniless, homeless, and a long, long ways from home.

He had nothing and obviously still had needs, so he went and landed the only job he could find, on a farm feeding the pigs. And how he yearned to even have a bite of what those pigs were eating, and he couldn't. What an embarrassment, this young man who had it all, wasted it in sin, and now, the ultimate disgrace, being lower than pigs, an animal the Jews, his own people treated as unclean.

You can bet he was at the lowest point in his life, and that's where reality, or really, God, slapped him in the face and woke him up. At his father's house, the hired hands were treated like royalty, at least compared to where he was now. But even they never went hungry or homeless or shirtless.

So the young man set his plan in motion. He would go home and confess his sins. He would say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven (against God) and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men." Maybe his father would have mercy on him and take him back. So, with repentance in his heart, the son journeyed back home.

He was still a ways off when his father saw him, and no, he didn't run back to the house to grab the shotgun to ward off this rebellious boy. He ran to his son, and before the son got a chance to speak, he threw his arms around him and they embraced for what seemed like a lifetime. The son tried to confess and ask to be a mere servant, but his father would have none of it. He ordered the very best, all the best clothes to clothe his son, all the best food for a feast, a celebration, for "this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

Well, then we hear about the older brother, and he was none too happy about what had happened. His rebellious brother, wasted everything, so sinful, had gotten what he deserved, and now his dad threw him a party? When he, the older brother, had been nothing but faithful to his parents, and had gotten not even so much as a goat to slaughter for a party with his friends. His father might have been quick to forgive, but he refused. This was ridiculous, and he voiced his displeasure. But the father would not listen. "We had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

So, can you see who the Pharisees are in this parable? Who the tax collectors and "sinners" are? It's easy to see the comparison between the Pharisees and the older son, who hated to see his brother return from such a grievous sin and be forgiven without any questions or stipulations and then have his repentance celebrated. Likewise, it's easy to see the tax collectors and sinners as the younger son, who had a sinful past, a pretty dark past, but had turned in repentance to the father and were lovingly forgiven. And it's easy to see which brother, or which attitude Jesus prefers here.

So, if you had to choose from this story who you are most similar to, which would you be? Which son would you be? Maybe the better question to ask is how have you and I been like both of the sons?

Like the younger son? Now, it wouldn't likely be a direct comparison, you demanding an inheritance from your parents and then spending it frivolously on wild living, like drugs, drinking, sexual promiscuity, and the like. Or maybe that does sort of describe how you were in your younger years.

But you and I have all found ourselves steeped in sin, taking our inheritance from God, his love, the precious name of being his children, and we've trashed it. Like with the thought, "I'm God's child, an heir of heaven, so that gives me the freedom to sin. I can do whatever I want because I know Jesus forgives me." And so we curse, we tell lies, we gossip, we harbor hatred against others, along with so many other impure and indecent acts.

And our attitude behind that? One of smugness because we think we're safe, that we can't possibly be held accountable for our actions, so we'll drag that inheritance of love from God through the mud and expect no harm to come from it. That may not be what you really think you're doing when you're sinning, but that's the attitude our actions show. Obviously not the way God wants us to respond to his gift of love.

Or, maybe you've been like the older son, more of the self-righteous type. Where you see someone else sinning, and you just shake your head in disgust because "I would never ever do something like that."

"I worship God regularly, I faithfully use the gifts he's given me, I'm respectful towards everyone...and as for those unruly sinners, I'll avoid them like the plague and turn up my nose against them to show how much I disapprove of them." "And, as for forgiveness? There are just some people who don't deserve it...I'm talking about those ungodly sinners."

Maybe I haven't gone to that extreme before, but I've had that pharisaical attitude, and God does not like it. Now, whether you're like one or the other or both of these sons, none of that is cause for celebration. Rather, they are all cause for concern because they are all cause for our condemnation.

Do you think that's what the father wants? To watch both of his sons have unloving attitudes and walk that road to condemnation? Fathers, parents, is that what you would want for your children? To not spare any love from them, but then to see them turn the other way and fall into a sinful lifestyle?

Is that what our heavenly Father wants from us, his dearly loved children? To turn against him, disobey him and by our sins spit in his face over and over again? Or to take our name of righteousness and hold that position over everyone else, judging sins of others without seeing the plank in our own eyes?

Of course not. He wants us to show love all the time. He wants us to obey his commands. He wants us to live sinless lives. So, when we failed, he didn't just wait for us to hit rock bottom and eat slop with the pigs. He came after us.

He did that through his perfect Son, Jesus, who I wouldn't compare to either of the sons in this parable. He was superior in every way because he was faithful to his Father, but he also cared deeply for you and me.

You know how much? So much he walked the road to the cross. We've seen how dark and lonely and painful that road was. But it was the only way. There, he paid for our sins of self-righteousness, for our lack of forgiveness, for wild living, for squandering our inheritance of love, took them all away.

And he rose. Jesus came back to life. That showed his work was done. That meant we got a second chance at life, a new life, one where God our Father throws his arms around us in his grace, his undeserved, unending love, and celebrates our forgiveness.

You know how he does? His celebration of absolving us, far more beautiful than how Jesus pictures it in our verses here.

He washes us in the blood of Jesus, cleansing us from our sins. He throws Jesus' white robe of righteousness over us, as the apostle Paul writes, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."

He gives us the crown of eternal life. He puts his name on us, as John writes, "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" And to top off the celebration, he prepares a feast for us, the wedding banquet, held in heaven, seats reserved for all of us, with a spread of God's love that will fill us for all of eternity.

All that, because he found us who were lost in sin and couldn't find our way out. All that, because he made us alive, we who were dead in our transgressions and sin. All that, because he loves us who were so unlovable. What an amazing celebration!

You know who God wants us to be from this parable? He wants us to be the lost son who found his way back. We can't be perfect, but he wants us to return to him in repentance because when we do, his forgiving arms are still open.

Make no mistake. Sin is still a big deal. God doesn't want us to do that. But God can forgive every sin because every sin has been paid for in full. We remember that as we walk the road to the cross during Lent. And in that, we celebrate. And not just in our forgiveness, either. But, like the father in the parable, just like our Father in heaven, we also rejoice in the forgiveness of others. And we look forward with joy to the celebration feast we will partake of with all those forgiven children of God, in heaven, celebrating the eternal love of our God, praising him forever, as he rejoices in us with elated joy. Amen.