

What moved God to compassion

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[0 : 00] That's Luke 15, verses 11 to 32. And he said, There was a man who had two sons, and the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the share of the property that is coming to me.

And he divided his property between them. 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. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into the fields to feed pigs.

And he was longing to be fed with one of the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. 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. I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.

[1 : 16] I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants. And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

And the son said to the father, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.

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, and bring that fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. And they began to celebrate. Now, his older son was in the field.

And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called to one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he received him back safe and sound.

[2 : 33] But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him. But he answered to his father, Look, these many years I have served you.

I have never disobeyed your command. Yet you never gave me a young goat that I may celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.

And he said to him, Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead and is alive.

He was lost and is found. Morning, everyone.

Do please keep Luke chapter 15 open, and let's pray together for God's help as we look at his word this morning. Heavenly Father, we rejoice that you are a God who speaks, that you are the one living and true God.

[3 : 51] And we pray this morning, please would you help us to understand your word and take it to heart. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, my aim this morning is for us to grasp what true repentance looks like, and the warm, arms-wide-open welcome that God gives to repentant sinners.

Our key verse is verse 24. For this my son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. And they began to celebrate.

Now, I imagine that a number of us parents know what it is to lose a child, if only for a few minutes. We last lost one significantly on holiday in the States.

We were on top of one of those big skyscrapers in New York City, enjoying the fantastic views. There were different observation levels on different kind of floors, so there's plenty of scope for losing people.

And we lost a person. I thought Jemima was with Rachel. Rachel thought Jemima was with me. Until, that is, Rachel and I bumped into each other, and we both said simultaneously, where is Jemima?

[5 : 12] Well, thankfully, she'd had the sense to tell a security guard that she had lost her parents, and within a few moments, we were reunited. But those minutes felt like hours.

It was a very long time indeed, and then, inevitably, we were overjoyed. Well, how extraordinary that the Lord Jesus uses exactly that picture of the joy of being reunited with a lost child when someone repents and turns back to God.

At a stroke, it removes any idea we may have of God being remote, or aloof, or uncaring, or unapproachable, or only welcoming those who deserve it.

It's this, above all, Jesus says, causes God to rejoice. As he says back in verse 10, just before the reading that we had, just so I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

As I said last week, this parable is very much a parable about repentance. Last week, we saw the kind of repentant sinners that God welcomes.

[6 : 26] Anyone? Do listen online if you missed it. Today, we see what repentance is, and the kind of welcome that God gives.

I've got two headings. If you've got the outline with you, you'll see them there. The first one is genuine repentance. Genuine repentance. The younger son, having turned his back on his father, has sunk very low indeed.

Just have a look at verses 14 to 16. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need.

So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

And then comes the first of two wonderful significant buts in our passage. The first, verse 17. But when he came to himself, he said, how many of my father's hired servants have more than love bred, but I perish here with hunger.

[7 : 43] In other words, genuine repentance involves, first of all, an awakening to our situation. And it's clear from what the younger son then plans to say in verse 18, that it's an awakening, not simply about the mess that he's in and the consequences of his sin, but the very heart of sin.

that he has rejected God and turned away from him. As he says, Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you.

Now, plenty of people turn back to, or turn to God, or turn to the church when their life is a mess. But sadly, so often, all they can be looking for sometimes is simply the help to get life back on track to where it was before.

And when, if that happens, if God is gracious to them, and that happens, then they simply go back to their old ways and continue to live in the way that they were doing previously.

Now, that is not repentance. That is, God, please help me get my life back on track and live how I was previously. But for the younger son, this awakening, can we see, is much more than that.

[9 : 01] It's much more even than my life is a mess. Hence his clear admission of guilt in verses 18 to 20. As he says, I'll arise and go to my father, and I'll say to him, Father, I've sinned against heaven and before you.

I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants. And he arose and came to his father. Do you see what he's saying?

I've lived my life completely the wrong way. I've sinned. I've rebelled against God. I lived my life on my own terms.

His regret, not simply for the mess that he's in or the money he's lost, but what he's done and who he has done it against. Not just I've sinned, but I've sinned against heaven and before you.

In other words, to pick up on what we were thinking about last week, he repents not only of his sins, the things he's thought, the things he's done, the things he hasn't done, but also his sin, his heart attitudes, his rejection of his father, but also supremely of God.

[10 : 18] There is an awakening. There's then an admission of guilt. Guilt. And finally, verse 20, he takes action as he then heads home.

Again, I think of a number of people who have been to Grace Church over the years. There's been that kind of awakening. There's been some kind of admission of guilt and a clear understanding that they need to repent.

And yet, sadly, they've never done anything about it. And yet, the fact is that Jesus Christ is Lord and therefore, you can't follow him as Lord or believe in him as Lord or have faith in him as Lord without personal repentance.

Perhaps, like me, one or two of us have had the experience of stepping on the bathroom scales in the aftermath of Christmas. There was the moment of awakening.

No, the scales did not need recalibrating. There was the moment of admission of guilt. Bad habits seem so much easier to justify during a Christmas lockdown than most other lockdowns.

[11 : 33] And then, there's the action that now needs to be taken. Well, obviously not today, but which now at some stage in the future needs to be taken.

Jesus is showing us what repentance is and what it isn't. It's not simply remorse or regret. It's not simply the shame of letting myself down or being caught.

There's no room for negotiation or self-justification. Complete repentance, genuine repentance, is humbling.

It involves a complete U-turn, a complete change of direction of my heart and my mind. What do you say?

What are the implications? Well, firstly, there's no genuine Christianity without genuine repentance. Last week, we looked, didn't we, at the final words of Jesus in Luke's Gospel as he commissions his apostles to take the message of the Gospel, to take the message of the risen Jesus to the ends of the earth.

[12 : 45] A message we notice both of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. At the beginning of Luke's Gospel, it's also John the Baptist's message.

In chapter 3, verse 3, we're told he went into all the region around Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And then after Pentecost, in Luke's second volume, the book of Acts, in the very first sermon that's preached by the Apostle Peter at the beginning of Acts, what does Peter say?

Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

John the Baptist, Jesus himself, the Apostle Peter, the early church.

For all of them, the forgiveness of sins and being at peace with God is at the very heart of the Christian faith. And yet, for all of them to receive forgiveness, repentance and a change of heart is required.

It follows, therefore, of course, that any version of Christianity without repentance has ripped the heart out of the message of the New Testament and is nothing short of false teaching.

[14 : 10] And yet, as I said last week, sadly, it's almost dropped out of our Christian vocabulary.

For example, again, I mentioned this very briefly last week, the Church of England is currently undergoing a listening exercise regarding marriage and same-sex relationships.

A study document has been released called Living in Love and Faithfulness. There will be a vote in General Synod, no doubt at some stage, possibly next year or so. And it's important that we're aware of it because as that date gets closer, then there will be more interviews which we'll be hearing on the radio and more opinion pieces in the press and so on.

And while there is rightly much being said about the need to give everyone a warm welcome, the thing to look out for as various church leaders are interviewed is whether there is a call to repentance.

If there isn't, of course, it must follow from what we've seen today that that is profoundly unloving because Jesus says that the big, arms-wide-open welcome that God gives to sinners for the forgiveness of sins is only those, only for those who repent in whom there is a genuine U-turn and a turning back to God.

So that's the first implication. The second implication is for those who have never repented. Now, we very much hope that Grace Church is the kind of church that anyone can come to and we work hard to make sure that that is the case.

[15 : 46] You don't have to be a Christian if you're looking on the Christian faith or if you're intrigued, even if you are skeptical, you are very welcome indeed. And yet, the fact is that for all of us, there is a point of decision and it wouldn't be loving of me if I didn't make that clear.

Jesus, if you've never repented, is calling you to come to your senses just like the prodigal son here and to repent and to put your trust in him and to receive the forgiveness of sins.

If you've never done that, please do come and talk to me afterwards or get in touch with me. In other words, please don't be content with simply coming to church because we long for you to repent and to experience the joyful forgiveness, the joyful forgiveness of sins that Jesus offers. Well, that brings us to our second point and joyful forgiveness because in verse 20 we get the second highly significant but of our passage and as I read it, it is just wonderful.

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, Father, I've sinned against heaven and before you.

[17:16] I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. 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 and bring the fattened calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate.

It is the extraordinary compassion of the father because just think for a moment, what should this father do? Well, surely at the very least, this son needs to be put on probation.

He does, in fact, need to be, as the son is going to request, simply made into a servant, a hired hand so he can be taught the value of a decent day's work. He needs to be given clear boundaries and certainly clear spending limits.

But instead, he receives a very different kind of welcome. and Jesus, who knows God better than anyone else, wants us to see the heart of God as we observe the welcome he receives.

As the father, we're told, saw him and felt compassion. How come? How come he saw him? Well, presumably because he was looking out for him, perhaps every day, watching from his veranda, hoping to see that familiar outline on the landscape.

[18:38] Every day, no doubt, it was the younger son's handwriting he was looking for when the post was delivered and the younger son's voice he was longing to hear on his phone.

Next, Jesus says, the father ran and embraced him and kissed him. Now, in the first century, that would have been completely unthinkable for a senior man to do that.

Imagine, perhaps for a moment, seeing the queen running, you know, to meet someone or to some engagement, completely the kind of thing you'd never see. And yet, this man, this father, perhaps in front of the neighbours, perhaps in front of the servants who knew exactly how badly this son had treated him, he runs out to accept him back and having met him, he embraces him and kisses him. what a humbling, costly thing to do. And yet, forgiveness does cost, doesn't it? And it costs God. Indeed, throughout the second half of Luke's Gospel, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where he'll be crucified, where he will take the judgment that we deserve for pushing God out of our lives so we can be forgiven and welcomed back.

[19:57] And so it is, you see, that this younger son, he comes back thinking it's completely impossible that his father would ever accept him back and reinstate him as things were before and yet that is precisely the thing that happens.

He doesn't even get to the end of his pre-prepared speech before the father restores him to true sonship again. He gives him his robe, the father's robe, the unmistakable sign of restored standing in the family.

He gives him his ring which would mean that he can act on his father's authority rather, I guess, like being given a family credit card, that kind of thing. And finally, the joy of the father as he orders a feast to celebrate.

Can we see what the father is saying? I'm not going to treat you as you deserve. I'm not going to wait until you've groveled. I'm not going to wait until you've paid off the huge amount of money that you've wasted.

You're not going to earn your way back. I'm simply going to take you back. I'll cover your nakedness, your poverty, your rags with the robes of my office and honour and you are restored to sonship again.

[21:19] And Jesus, who knows God better than anyone else, Jesus is saying this is what God is like. This is the warm welcome he gives to anyone who repents and turns back to him.

You may have spotted this in the news 18 months ago but in October 2019, Kanye West, the American rapper and fashion designer, revealed that he had become a Christian. And he said of his past, he said, when I was trying to serve multiple gods it drove me crazy.

The God of ego, the God of money, the God of pride, the God of fame. Whereas now, he said, I love Jesus Christ. Now there's been some discussion about whether he's genuine and yet one comment on social media said this, I don't know Kanye West but if he thinks that for one second that calling on the name of Jesus with a full heart will somehow forgive a lifetime of misogyny, blasphemy, profanity and sexual immorality, then he is absolutely right.

Just like the prodigal son of verse 24, for this my son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.

And they began to celebrate. It's a wonderful shaft of sunlight into God's heart for sinners.

[22 : 57] You can describe the natural state of each one of us before God as lost or dead as we saw in our growth groups in Ephesians 2 this week. And you can describe what happens when someone repents and put their trust in Jesus as being found or being made alive again.

It's a reminder, isn't it, that God does sometimes let people get very low, very far from him in order to bring them to their senses.

I guess that will be true for some of us in this room. We are very low, we are very far from him. But for parents, it can also be true for our children. Some of us will know the pain of a child who perhaps seem to profess faith in Jesus from a young age and then turn their back on God and ended up far away.

Now, of course, this parable doesn't guarantee that they'll come back. But it does surely show that they are not beyond hope. And if they do come to their senses and if they do then turn back to God, they are trophies of God's grace and kindness rather than trophies of our good parenting.

forgiveness. Because the fact is, of course, that none of us are good parents and none of us have good children. And it's a very wonderful thing when our children are trophies of God's grace and kindness rather than our good parenting.

[24 : 29] Because then, of course, all the glory goes to God rather than to us. Joyful forgiveness. forgiveness. What do you say? What are the implications?

Well, if one of the implications of our first point was that there's no forgiveness without repentance, one of the implications of this second point surely must be that there's no genuine repentance without forgiveness.

There's no genuine Christianity without the kind of joyful forgiveness and restoration that we see here. Because just as there are versions of Christianity which talk of forgiveness, forgiveness and never mention repentance, so too there are versions of Christianity which emphasize repentance and confession and yet know none of the joyful forgiveness that we see here.

Last week I mentioned Arsene Wenger, brought up in this kind of religious atmosphere of which he said you're never happy, you never do well enough.

A system of guilt. None of the exuberant joy that we see here in Luke chapter 15. Or perhaps if you're honest you're thinking to yourself well if I did come back to God, would God have me?

[25 : 49] In which case Jesus wants you to be in no doubt. Or perhaps if you have repented and come back to him, perhaps you imagine that now God is simply tolerating you, putting up with you and no more.

In which case be in no doubt as to the welcome that you've received. Which means the second implication surely is to rejoice.

Here's a question for us. When was the last time you rejoiced in God's compassion? After all, forgiveness is pretty thin on the ground, isn't it, in our culture.

I mean, just think of social media. It's a pretty harsh and unforgiving place. If you don't look perfect, everyone notices.

If you step out of line in what you say, you are publicly vilified. People are quick to expose you and unfriend you. And where was the last time you rejoiced in God, in the God who rejoices in us?

[26 : 59] the message of joyful forgiveness. It is better than anything else we will hear in this world. And it lasts far beyond anything else we'll hear in this world.

It outlasts the world. Let's pray that we would get it, that it would make an impact on us, that it would transform us.

Let me pray. for this my son was dead and is alive again.

He was lost and is found. Heavenly Father, we marvel at the wonderful welcome that you give to sinners who repent and turn back to you.

we thank you for the death of the Lord Jesus, for the forgiveness of sins. Thank you for the warm welcome restored as your sons for those who turn.

[28 : 06] And we pray, Heavenly Father, regardless of what else is going on in our lives at the moment, please would we rejoice and delight in the welcome that you give us. And we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.