

**+ Luke 15:1-3,11-32 + A Time for Giving Up Self-Righteousness + 4th Sunday in Lent + 10 March 2013 +**

Do they deserve it? A movie wins Best Picture, but there were better movies nominated. Does it deserve it? A professional athlete gets a big contract and his critics ask, "Does he deserve it?" A co-worker gets a promotion at work in spite of the fact that she doesn't work hard. Does she deserve it? A classmate doesn't study anywhere near as long as you do, but still pulls off the best test score in the class. Does he deserve it?

Whether it's on the playground, in our homes, at work, or at school, every one of us has wondered if someone really deserved a blessing they received. Sometimes we're justified in asking the question, especially if cheating or underhanded dealing is involved, but so often our resentful questioning only proves how undeserving we really are.

You see, looking down your nose and resenting a person happens quite often to Christians like you and me. We enjoy all these wonderful blessings of God's rich grace—forgiveness, life, hope, peace, joy, purpose, and salvation. We want everyone to enjoy these blessings until those blessings reach someone we think is "undeserving". Perhaps it's because of the way they act or talk or look. Perhaps it's because of what they've done in their past or where they come from, but who are we to question who deserves God's grace and blessing? In doing so, our hearts only betray our own self-righteousness. So let's go with Jesus to the cross where we can **give up self-righteousness** and embrace God's mercy this Lenten season.

To some self-righteous Pharisees, Jesus once told a story of a loving father who had two sons. He provided all their needs and more. He raised them to follow the true God. Godly order and discipline prevailed in their home, yet from servant to son, everyone enjoyed the father's generous kindness.

Still the younger son wanted "freedom" away from the watchful eye of dear, old dad. The longer the younger son stayed, the more he wanted to get away and do what he wanted. So he came up with a plan, a very poor plan, but if he was going to get away, he had to go through with it.

One day, **"the younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.'"** It was an offensive request. The father could divide his estate before he died, but think about what the younger son was really telling his aging father. "Dad, I gotta get out of here. I have no intention of helping you when you get older. Let my brother do that, and to be honest, you could drop dead for all I care. So give me my share of the inheritance and I'll be out of your hair." The heartless request crushed his father and left his older brother shell-shocked. "How could he say such a thing?"

...But what was dad going to do? What else could he do? He couldn't demand his son's love. He couldn't force his son to stay. So the father divided up his property, and soon **"the younger son got together all he had"** and **"set off for a distant country..."** The young man wanted to get away so desperately that he abandoned his family, his people, and his God.

Finally free of his father's "unreasonable" discipline in a distant country, the young man abandoned himself to his so-called freedom. He was a careless fool. He squandered every last penny. He lived wildly with friends only money could buy and indulged in disgusting acts. In thinking he had found freedom, the young man found himself a slave to guilt and emptiness. Pretty soon his pockets were as empty as his heart. His "friends" were gone, and a severe famine had caused food prices to skyrocket. The young man soon became so desperate that he **"hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs."**

Now you might think, "At least he has a job!", but for a young Jewish man, things couldn't get any worse. Pigs were unclean. You didn't touch them. You didn't eat them. You didn't feed them, but that was the only job he could find and it didn't help. He got so hungry, that he was willing to eat the indigestible carob pods that he was feeding to the pigs. Even though he longed to fill his stomach with food, **"no one gave him anything"**.

Finally he **"came to his senses."** He remembered how his father had cared for his hired men, while in shameful filth he was **"starving to death"**. The young man realized he had rejected his father's love, and had sinned not just against his father, but God himself. He didn't deserve to be called a "son", but hoped he could convince his father to make him a hired hand. **"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men."**

The young man dropped his bucket of slop and started heading for home. His clothes were rags. His sandals were torn. He was filthy and smelled awful. As he turned over his speech in his mind again and again, he hurried home. He was ready, **"but while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him."**

You see, Dad's love for his son had never stopped, even though his son had so rudely offended him. The aging father had watched the horizon every day, hoping his beloved boy would come home. That love hurried the father's

steps until he threw his arms around his filthy son and kissed him. Neither the smell nor all the time spent in wild living mattered to the father. Did the young man deserve such a demonstration of love? It didn't matter.

***“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son...”*** The father cut him off. Yes, he had a good idea what his son had done, but he would hear about it no more. There'd be no need for bargaining, no conditions, no strings attached. All was forgiven. The father ordered his servants to bring the best robe and a ring and sandals for his feet. It was time for a barbeque to celebrate his son's return. It was all so heartwarming, but did the son deserve it?

If you'd ask his older brother, the answer would be “No.” Imagine how much he resented his younger brother for the awful way he treated their father. While his brother blew the inheritance on prostitutes and carousing, this brother had worked faithfully for his father, tending the farm, seeing to dad's needs, overseeing the planting and the harvesting.

The son had been out on the back forty when his filthy brother arrived. He wasn't there to see his father's reaction to his brother's return, but he did find a party, and that didn't seem right. When a servant told him, ***“Your brother has come...and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound”***, the older son ***“became angry and refused to go in.”*** He didn't want to celebrate the return of that fool. Would you?

When Dad heard about it, he went out to plead with his older son to join the party, but the young man wouldn't listen. A celebration for the wicked was ridiculous. With a sad, ugly display of cold lovelessness, he told 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. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes came home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”*** “Really, Dad? He doesn't deserve it.”

We shouldn't be surprised by his response. In fact, you and I probably understand it pretty well, because we've talked and acted and thought like that too. Yes, it was understandable, but it didn't make his accusations right. In fact, they were just as offensive as his younger brother's demand years before. This son selfishly denied his father's goodness and arrogantly accused his father of being unjust, but the love of that father burned for this son too. Dad responded not with anger or hurt, but love. ***“My son...you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. Moreover we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”*** In love, the father corrected his son to win him back from his self-righteous attitude. That father had no need to justify himself. His elder son neither deserved an explanation nor merciful love, but the father wanted his son to rejoice in his brother's return.

You and I are often quick to condemn that older brother, but don't those same words come flowing out of our mouths? “He doesn't deserve it.” You might not come across as loveless and self-righteous as the older son, but every time you look down on someone because they're not like you for any reason at all, self-righteousness bubbles to the surface. It lurks in every one of us and tempts you any time you start priding yourself on being a “better Christian” than someone who is different from you. You and I are so convinced we have the market cornered on God's grace that when his grace reaches out to someone you don't think deserves it, the resentment just flows out. Such smug self-righteousness only separates us from our gracious God and makes us as lost as anyone committing gross sin.

The harsh reality of God's holy Law makes us realize that apart from Christ, we deserve nothing, but eternal death. Such self-righteousness is nothing more than willful rebellion against our loving Father, but in spite of us, our heavenly Father is eager and willing to forgive even sinners like us, whether ours is an extreme case of waywardness or one that few detect. Our Savior Jesus embraces us with his forgiveness and covers our filthy sins with a robe of his righteousness purchased with his blood on the cross.

You and I don't deserve it, but remember it was Christ's love for you that kept him going to the cross. It was his love that found you and made you his child through faith in him. God and all of heaven still endlessly rejoice over the repentance of every sinner—even you and me. For that reason, when you see the Savior show the same grace to anyone else, no matter who they are, you can rejoice in that unconditional love God showed you.

We don't deserve it, do we? Yet God still loves us. Extraordinary, isn't it? Praise God that he doesn't look down on us, but with nail-pierced hands he embraces you and me as his beloved sons and daughters—forgiven of our gross sins, forgiven of our subtle self-righteous sins, and clothed with God's mercy and grace. Leave those rags of your self-righteousness at the foot of the cross and see how extraordinary God's love really is in his own Son hanging on a cross for you. Then hear your loving Father declare over you, “My child, you are alive. You have been found. You are forgiven.” Amen.