

Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32
Fourth Sunday in Lent
Sermon Series: Seriously.
God Is Serious About Showing Mercy

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church
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Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ Then Jesus told them this parable:

¹¹ “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

¹³ “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered 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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

³¹ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

I use that greeting, or another like it, at the beginning of almost all of my sermons. And I'm not alone in doing that. Many pastors, not just in the Wisconsin Synod, not just in Lutheran churches start their messages with a phrase like that. Do you know why that is? The one I used today is a quote from the opening of St. Paul's first letter to Timothy. And it's only one of more than a dozen such instances where Paul or Peter or John open with a similar sentiment. It was their hope that, as their audience heard the Word of God, they would be filled with grace and mercy and peace. Today that same practice has carried over into our preaching as we expound on the truths of that same Word of God.

That's why those greetings are commonplace today at the beginning of a sermon, so the next question is, do you know what it means? Grace, mercy, and peace are not uncommon words to hear in a church setting, but what exactly do they mean? One of the easiest definitions for grace is that it is God's love for us. More specifically, we might call it God's *undeserved* love for us. Mercy, I believe, carries an even deeper sense. Because mercy isn't just undeserved love, mercy is love that is given when something other than love is deserved. Mercy is showing love to someone whom it is within your power to punish. Peace, then, is the emotion we feel when we know that we are the ones who should have been punished but instead have received love, and grace, and mercy.

As we continue looking at the serious messages God has for us in His Word we see that God Is Serious About Showing Mercy. Today, the world that we live in has another word for mercy or grace: stupid. It really comes down to that concept of *undeserved*. Today, if you give something to someone who doesn't deserve it, it seems pretty foolish and ignorant to a lot of people. And it's not just "people out there" we're guilty of this too.

Let me give you a hypothetical situation. John is a seventeen year old living in a loving home. But he feels like his parents are too restrictive so he acts out against them. He steals some money from Dad's wallet, grabs Mom's keys out of her purse and takes off with her car. He picks up a couple of friends and one them knows a guy who can buy them some alcohol so they get a couple cases of beer, get drunk, and then decide to go for a ride. John puts Mom's car into a tree and he and his friends wind up getting arrested. Mom and Dad come to pick up John from the jail, take him home and throw a pizza party for him and his friends, because "they're just glad he's home again and that he didn't get hurt."

Now, if we were to ask a hundred people what they think about Mom and Dad's reaction, how do you think it would poll? "Wow, what great parenting! They must really love little Johnny!" Probably not, right? Most of us would say something along the lines of "Really, a pizza party? He didn't deserve pizza! You've got to be kidding me, that's so stupid!"

This morning we heard a parable from Jesus about a father in a similar situation who threw a party for his wayward son when he returned home. Jesus told that parable because the Pharisees and the scribes couldn't wrap their minds around why Jesus would be associating and even sitting down to eat with the sinful people that were being drawn to him.

Now typically when we talk about this parable we refer to it as the parable of the lost son or the parable of the prodigal son. Prodigal, by the way, means wasteful or extravagant and refers to the way that son was living after he absconded with his father's fortune. Others call it the parable of the lost son, because it comes right after the parables of the lost sheep and the lost

coin. But the focus of all three of those parables I not really on the sheep or the coin or the son that was lost. The focus is on the love of the one who went to find them and the joy when what had been lost becomes found. In the parable of the lost son, we see the father's love not just for the son who went away, but also for the one who stayed behind.

Really, these two sons represent all of sinful humanity. Every sinful human being is going to go one of two ways. Half of them, like John from my story or the first son in Jesus' parable are the "free spirited" people. They live their lives in whatever way seems pleasing to them, doing whatever feels right at the moment. They're especially drawn to the highs and thrills this world has to offer them like fame, power, fortune, vanity, and money, or maybe the even more reckless thrills of sex, alcohol, violence, and drugs. Now some of those people might be living some kind of double life. People close to them may have no idea what kind of life they're actually living. Others though, may embrace their life choices and even boast in the fact that they aren't held back by the restrictions of religion. And where does that path lead? God makes it abundantly clear in His Word that a life of sin like that receives as it's reward, eternal suffering in hell.

The other side of sinful humanity are the ones like the second son in Jesus' parable. They are religious and they dedicate themselves to being moral, upright people. They give generously to charity; they work hard at their jobs or in school; whatever they do they give it their all. They even regularly go to church, or the temple, or synagogue, or mosque. They live their lives to fulfill their moral and civic duties, and they do it all to earn God's favor. The world looks at someone like that, someone like the second son in Jesus' parable, and says, "he's a great guy" or "she's good people." But for all that effort, that path leads to the same exact place as the first one, the eternal suffering of hell.

The only way to earn God's favor, is to live a life of one hundred percent adherence to God's will. One little sin—one selfish thought—is all it takes for those religious people to earn themselves the same damnation as those who openly spend their lives indulging in every kind of sin.

Everyone in the world follows one of those two paths. It isn't always just one or the other. If we take a look at our lives, we can probably all find times we've gone in both of those directions. There are times that we indulge ourselves in some sinful pleasure or another. Convincing ourselves that if no one finds out or if no one gets hurt then it can't be that bad. But eventually we remember that God does know and God is hurt and then we feel the guilt start creeping in.

And we've certainly all had times when we did the right thing for the wrong reason. We may not even realize at the time that we're doing what we're doing out of selfish motives. But when we don't get recognized for our work or worse yet, when someone else who didn't work even half as hard as we did gets recognized instead, that's when our true motives betray us and we get angry because "it's just not fair!" And that's when we see that no matter how good we try to be and no matter how many good things we may try to do we aren't perfect. And there's that guilt creeping in again.

Everyone in the world follows one of those two paths. They both lead to hell, and we've gone down both of them. That's a pretty scary thing to think about. But remember, the focus of the parable is not on the sin and rebellion of the two sons. The focus is on the father who is

serious about showing mercy. Jesus' point is that God comes to us and like the father in the parable said to that second son He says, **My dear child, everything I have is yours.** And just like that father did for the first son, God welcomes us with open arms, brings us into His home and makes it abundantly clear that we are His children whom He loves and has forgiven.

When you think about that, when you really stop to think about the reaction God has to our sinfulness—that He still offered us everything that He had, even the life of His own Son, Jesus, pouring out love and forgiveness on us despite all of our selfish rebellion and self-righteousness—it does not make a whole lot of sense. In the eyes of the world, it's pretty bad parenting; it's foolishness; it's stupid.

In our lesson from 1 Corinthians this morning (1 Corinthians 1:18-25), Paul tells us that **the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom.** God's plan of salvation for us, His mercy and His grace seem like foolishness to the sinful world and that's because our sinful minds simply cannot comprehend how anyone could love so unconditionally.

Praise God, then, that He has come to us in His Word and shown us the wisdom of His ways. His Holy Spirit leads us to cry out, **Father, I have sinned against heaven and against You, I am not worthy to be called Your child.** But He cuts us off, clothing us in the robe of Jesus' righteousness. He welcomes us to the feast as His dear children.

So what does that do to us? What effect does that mercy and grace of God have on souls that understand the gravity of their sins? It fills us with peace. It changes our entire outlook on life, strengthening to us to turn away from those temptations to indulge in sin, and opening our eyes to see doing God's will not as duty or an obligation, but as a joy.

Grace, mercy, and peace, from God our Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.