

## Unconditional Forgiveness

**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. Luke 15:20.**

It's done and can no longer be changed. No matter how much you regret it, how much guilt you feel, or how many apologies you offer; it can't be undone. At night, you lay awake replaying the moment and wishing you could reach your fingers back in time and have that moment to do again. All you can do now is brace yourself for the consequences which are sure to follow. You await the loss of your reputation, your job, a dear relationship, or worse. To varying degrees, all of us can identify with the feelings associated with committing a seemingly unforgivable sin.

Jesus knew his audience as he told the parable of the lost son. A crowd of tax collectors and sinners had gathered around to hear Jesus teach. Shunned by the upper echelons of Jewish society because of their sinfulness, they were familiar with guilt. To these lost sons and daughters, Jesus preached a beautiful parable about forgiveness. These "sinners" weren't the only ones present in the audience that day, however. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law had also gathered to criticize Jesus' association with such low-lives. Here too Jesus knew his audience. The illustration of the older son was intended to crush the self-righteous attitudes of these leaders and bring them to repentance.

As we hear Jesus teach us in this parable, we see ourselves in both sons. We identify with the rebellion of the younger son just as well as the pride of the older son. We lull ourselves into the false belief that our actions somehow merit good things from God. We wonder how people around us can be so evil, when our own sinfulness is capable of the same. Yet, this parable isn't really about the sons. It's about the father. Take a moment and read this familiar parable found in Luke 15:1-3, 11-32. Read it slowly and let Jesus' words wash over your guilty conscience or your prideful unwillingness to admit sin. See a picture of our heavenly Father's unending, unconditional, love for sinners. Listen as Jesus paints a picture of God's love for you and me.

God's love never ends. The younger son in the parable had basically told his father that he couldn't wait for him to die. He valued only his father's money and didn't want to wait to inherit his share. He demanded his inheritance and then squandered it on sinful living. And yet, in spite of the son's hateful actions, the father's love never stopped. He continued to search the horizon, waiting for his lost son to return. We find the evidence of this in verse 20. *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.* How often have we rejected our Father to pursue our own sinful interests! But God never stops searching the horizon for us. He loves us with an everlasting love that moved him to send his only Son Jesus to die for us while we were still in our sins. "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8).

God's love demands nothing in return. Think of how the son planned his return journey to his Father. He approached it as human reason approaches a relationship with God. If I do this right, then God will love me. Listen to the words of verses 17-18. *When he came to his senses, he said, "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: 'Father I have sinned against heaven and you.'" The son no longer expected to be treated as a son. Instead, he expected to work his way back into his father's good graces as a servant. But, the father threw his arms around him and kissed him before the son had the chance to make his case. The father didn't remind the son how he'd been hurt; scold him for wasting his money, or put conditions on his return. Instead, he brought his son a robe, sandals and a ring and restored his position as son, no strings attached. Our heavenly Father is no different. He offers us his forgiveness: free and in full. Now we can exclaim with John, "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!" (1 John 3:1)*

Finally, God's love is enough. The devil tries so hard to dig up those skeletons in our closet and throw them in our face time and time again. He puts our failures before us and tells us we are not worthy of God's grace. And yet, God's love is enough. God's love covers over every sin. Every single one. No matter how great it may seem to us or in the eyes of the world, God forgives it. Jesus promised us that himself as he proclaimed from the cross. "It is finished!" As soon as the father in the parable restored the son's condition, he threw him a feast to celebrate. He didn't wait to see if the son was really sorry, or how his son behaved. He threw the son a feast! We too, await the feast that our Father has prepared for us in heaven.

As we read this familiar story, may we humbly fall on our knees in repentance speaking the words with the lost son, *Father, I have sinned against heaven and you*. Then, may we rise and go in joy and peace, confident of the depth of the Father's love for us and assured of our forgiveness.

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