

**MINISTRY BY MAIL**  
**Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship**  
[www.lutheranlccf.org](http://www.lutheranlccf.org)  
**Fourth Sunday in Lent, April 3, 2011**

✠ ✠ ✠

(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 331, 318:1, 326, 325, 36.

Lessons: Isaiah 12, 1 Corinthians 1: 18-31, Luke 15: 1-10.

Sermon Text: Luke 15: 11-32 Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

In our Gospel lesson, the verses immediately before our sermon text, Jesus told two parables. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law – those who taught the Bible to the Jews – murmured and grumbled that Jesus was spending too much time with wicked people. And it is true, as the scriptures say: *“the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear him.”* Jesus was not approving of any sin, but he had messages, he had ‘preaching’ that people who realized that not everything was right in their lives were anxious to hear. Yes, Jesus was telling them about more than their wickedness. He was also telling about God’s forgiveness for repentant sinners.

Both those parables show God’s joy over repentant sinners.

Then Jesus tells the parable of our sermon. For many, this is a familiar parable of Jesus. The traditional title of this parable is ‘the prodigal son’. That title comes from the Latin word for prodigal, and is a word used in the old Latin translation called the Vulgate. The section heading given to this by the translators of the New International Version is “the parable of the lost son”. The King James Version does not give this section a heading, and we have often reminded you that the headings found in the New International Version are not inspired by God. They are words used by the translators.

Today let’s look carefully at

**JESUS’ PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON, OR**  
**HIS “PARABLE OF THE LOST SON,” OR**  
**PERHAPS EVEN “THE PARABLE OF THE FATHER’S LOVE”**

1. **Me the prodigal son? Certainly Not!**
2. **...or am I?**
3. **The greatness of the Father’s love.**

So we are talking about a son who is “prodigal”, or “lost”. What does the word prodigal mean? It means ‘given to reckless spending, wasteful, profligate, extravagant’. Many other words could be used to help explain the word, but let’s look at the thoughts, words, and life of the younger son for a good definition of “prodigal.”

He decided that he had had enough of his father’s household and way of life. With his eye on earthly wealth, he demanded what he thought was due him: his inheritance, his share of the estate, even before his father had died and willed it to him. So the father *“divided his property between”* his two sons.

*“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. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. 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!’”*

Here was a young man who appeared to have everything. And he wasted it. No doubt in the eyes of the wicked world, his wild living was a good way to spend money and live – to really live it up! He probably had many wicked, evil friends while his money lasted.

We think: How could he be so stupid? He had learned, as a child, the difference between right and wrong. We might even think of him as having once been a church-goer. And he wasted all his wealth! He blew it. He used up all his money in wild, wicked, evil living. And now he was reduced to feeding pigs, an animal the Jewish religion recognized as “unclean”. Could he have fallen any lower?

Could I do that? Certainly not! No way! I’m not a wicked person. I’m not wasteful. I’m more like the older son: ***‘Look! All these years I’ve been [working for the benefit of others] and never disobeyed your orders.’*** The older brother is saying what a good person he is.

When we see all the wickedness and evil in the world, and I don’t have time this morning to list it, we are horrified. Every commandment shows just how evil people in the world are! We can’t imagine how we could stoop so low as to end up starving, or in prison, or friendless. Me the prodigal son? No Way! I am a pretty decent person!

But what does God say to us in his Word? ***“There is no one who does good, not even one.”*** Psalms 14:3

Are you thinking: Wait a minute, pastor. Didn’t you quote those same verses last Sunday or the Sunday before? I heard that all once. Yep. I quoted them recently. We were sinners last Sunday and we are still sinners today, aren’t we? Couldn’t we even add many more Words of God to remind us how sinful each of us is? How about Psalm 51:5: ***“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”*** And then we also must remember James 2:10: ***“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.”***

Then we dare not forget the result of sin: ***“For the wages of sin is death.”*** Romans 6:23

Me, the wicked, wasteful, evil, sin-loving prodigal son? No Way! Certainly Not! Or Am I? Certainly. Yes. We must admit that fact: in the thoughts, words, and deeds of our lives we sin daily and much and indeed, deserve nothing but temporal death and eternal punishment!

Yes, that prodigal son is me. How often have I wasted the gifts God has given me? Not only using the earthly gifts and abilities, the ‘time, talents, and treasures’ God has given me only for myself. But the fact that I daily sin much and fail to follow, to obey, to live and even to think his commands. Yes, the Ten Commandments aren’t just written to tell me what not to do and what to do, they are written to show me that I cannot in any way keep them. I certainly can’t keep them well enough – which must be perfectly – to earn my salvation from my sins. But the Ten Commandments are also written to show me that my heart is evil, that I am a sinner. The law serves as a mirror for my life, so I can see the wickedness of my heart, even if no one else can.

Yes, I am a sinner. I AM that son who turns his back on his loving father and goes his own, sin-filled way.

But did you notice that word LOVING in connection with the father?

In the parable, the outwardly wicked sinning son comes to his senses and repents. Scripture says: ***“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 against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ So he got up and went to his father.”*** And a few words later, when he comes to his father, he says, ***‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’***

What a remarkable change of heart! Elsewhere in scripture we read of how that happens: We confess and admit in Luther’s explanation of the third article of the Apostles’ Creed that “I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.”

Look at the tremendous love of the father in the parable, a beautiful picture of our heavenly Father through faith in Jesus Christ: When the wicked yet penitent son was on his way to his father’s house, we read: ***“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. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' '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. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.***"

The love of the father was such that he rejoiced to have a sinner repent and return to him. This overwhelming and undeserved love of the father made such an impression on the son that he was unable to speak the last words of his prepared confession. He omitted begging the father to make him like one of the hired servants, since the father had already accepted him again as his son.

Such human fatherly love is a weak picture of the strong love of God for sinners. The Father in heaven longs for poor sinners, the ones who have gone astray. A long time ago they have been redeemed by Christ, forgiving all their sins and wickedness. That happened on the cross of Jesus Christ. We have been redeemed. Believe that and be saved eternally! We must through daily contrition and repentance turn to God so that we may daily receive his assurance of forgiveness. We must not spend another day, another hour, another moment of seeking after the things of the world and our flesh.

So we dare not forget the whole of God's Word in Romans 6:23 which we partially quoted a few minutes ago: ***"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."***

But there is one more person we must take at least a quick look at: the older brother. We find and see the wicked, prodigal son in ourselves. We see him in our mirror. But when we don't see him, don't we find the proud, self-righteous older brother looking back at us from our mirror? Listen:

***"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 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. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 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.'"***

The older brother was indignant that the father forgave the wicked one. He, after all, was the good kid, the one who proudly thought that he observed all of God's commands. He was like the Pharisees, and the teachers of the law. He was like the people who looked good or put up a good show to other men and then felt fully justified in criticizing Jesus for spending time with sinners and tax collectors and telling them of God's love for them. And he was not about to join in joyfully celebrating the repentance of a sinner.

Jesus does not tell us whether or not the older son was persuaded and repented of HIS sins. The parable is open ended, inviting you, the hearer to respond: can we participate in the joy?

Some have called this the greatest of Jesus' parables. Who can fail to be moved by the boundless love and joy of this father who welcomes back his lost son? Such is the nature of our heavenly Father as demonstrated by his one and only Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior.

God, the heavenly father, loved sinners like us – in fact he loved US – so much that he sent his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ to redeem us from our sins, to shower us with the forgiveness of sins. In this parable of the Father's Love, we can see ourselves as the prodigal son AND as the older brother. And in response to our sins and our repentance, we see the boundless love of our heavenly Father, our Father through faith in Jesus Christ! Amen.