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# HOW TO RECEIVE GOD'S ABUNDANT MERCY

Luke 15:11-32

By

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Luke Lesson 72

## How to Receive God's Abundant Mercy Luke 15:11-32

Most parents of young children have had the experience of putting their child in front of a mirror. At first the young one does not realize that it is his own reflection he is seeing there. He thinks it is another child. But then he begins to notice that when his hand moves, the hand in the mirror moves. It slowly dawns on him, "That is me!"

The Bible is like that mirror. At first we look into it and think that we are reading stories about others. It's interesting to see how they are portrayed. We may chuckle at their antics or shake our heads in disbelief at their stupid ways. But the longer we look, the more we begin to notice that those characters in the Bible look more like us! Gradually, we begin to realize (with some embarrassment), "That *is* me!"

The parable of the prodigal son is like that mirror. At first it just seems like an interesting and touching story. But the more you look, the more you begin to see your own heart either in the prodigal or in his older brother, or in both.

But the Bible not only reveals what we are like, it also reveals what God is like. This is important, because we cannot know what God is like apart from His revealing Himself to us. We can speculate on what we think God is like, but such speculations don't mean anything, because they are just our opinions, not based in fact. Jesus Christ reveals to us what God the Father is truly like. While it is not a comprehensive picture, the father of the prodigal son gives us an important aspect of God's character, namely, His abundant mercy toward all who will repent of their sins.

To interpret the parable correctly, you must see it in light of Luke 15:1-2. The tax gatherers and sinners were coming near to Jesus to listen to Him, which caused the Pharisees and scribes to grumble, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." Jesus told the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost (or prodigal) son to affirm that the charge was correct and to show the

proud, self-righteous Pharisees why it was proper for Him to associate with sinners. Also, to interpret this and other parables correctly, you must keep in mind that they are designed to illustrate one central truth, not to give comprehensive doctrinal instruction. For example, just because there is no mention in this parable of the shed blood of Christ as the necessary means of forgiveness does not imply that it is unnecessary. It's just not the point of this story.

Also, it is a mistake to infer that the sons represent believers, since they are sons of the father. The household is not the household of faith, but of Israel. The prodigal represents the sinners who were repenting and coming to Jesus; the older brother represents the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling about Jesus receiving the sinners. But both groups needed repentance.

Each of the three parables illustrates God's abundant mercy toward repentant sinners and His great joy when they are reconciled to Him. But while they all illustrate the same truth, there are different emphases. The first two parables focus on God's seeking lost sinners and rescuing them and on His great joy in saving them. The emphasis in the parable of the prodigal son is on God's great love and mercy, but also on the necessary human response to experience His mercy, namely, repentance. Each of the three main characters reflects different lessons. The prodigal shows us the devastating effects of sin and the nature of true repentance. The father shows us God's great mercy toward repentant sinners. The older brother shows us the ugliness and danger of the self-righteous pride that lurks in every human heart. The entire parable teaches us that ...

God welcomes repentant sinners with abundant mercy, but the self-righteous exclude themselves from His mercy.

1. The prodigal son: Jesus shows us the devastating consequences of sin and the nature of true repentance.
  - A. Jesus shows us the devastating consequences of sin.

Jesus does not go into detail about the tension that must have led up to this rupture, but surely it had been there. The younger of this man's two sons asks his father for his share of the inheritance. There is debate as to the significance of this request in light of the Jewish culture, but some say that it was the equivalent of treating

the father as if he were already dead. Certainly, it was not the common practice, and it must have hurt the father. The boy was cutting off his relationship with his dad, rejecting his dad's way of life, and heading off to go his own way. We don't know if the father first attempted to reason with the boy and dissuade him from going. Jesus just reports the final action: the father granted the son's request and divided the inheritance.

A short time later, the boy gathered his things and left for a distant country, where he squandered his estate with loose living. Then a famine hit and the young man began to be in need. The friends who had helped him spend his money were in need themselves, so they couldn't help him out now. The only job he could find was feeding the pigs for a local farmer, but that didn't provide enough for his basic needs. He was so hungry that he wished he could eat the pods that he fed to the swine. Since for the Jews pigs were unclean animals, this boy had sunk as low as you could go.

The prodigal's rebellion and downward course illustrate the terrible toll of sin in human lives. Sin always alienates the sinner from fellowship with the loving and merciful Father. We sin because we stupidly think that it will bring us lasting happiness and fulfillment, and for a short time, it seems to deliver. But rebelling against God and plunging into sin is like buying things on credit when you have no money to pay. At first, it's fun. You can go to Europe, stay in first class hotels, eat at the finest restaurants, and live like a king. But then the bills start coming due and it isn't fun anymore. Invariably, a famine hits in the far country. The worldly friends who told you that you were the greatest when you had money start avoiding you when the famine sets in. You're left alone, down and out, with seemingly no where to go.

But, thankfully, there is a way to go, namely, to repent or turn back to God. Thus, ...

B. Jesus shows us the nature of true repentance.

The prodigal finally comes to his senses and realizes that even his father's hired hands have it better than he does. So he determines to go back to his father, confess his sin, acknowledge his own unworthiness to receive anything from his father, and yet appeal to his mercy so that he could become like one of the hired

men. He had left demanding his rights; he returned in humility and brokenness. So he got up and went to his father, probably not quite sure how his dad would respond.

The prodigal shows us a number of things about true repentance. It always begins by seeing our true condition for what it is: "He came to himself [or, his senses]." He realized what he had done. It took him a while to come to this awareness. We don't know how long he was slopping pigs before he realized how low he had sunk, but finally his eyes were opened to his true, awful condition and he thought, "What am I doing here?" He thought about the fact that even the servants in his father's house were happier than he was. He determined to return to his father.

That is the next thing about repentance, that it is a turning from our sin to God Himself. No one else can help. "I will get up and go to my father." His friends had abandoned him. He had run out of his own resources. As long as you have anything in yourself that you think will meet your needs, you will avoid going directly to God. If the young man had thought, "I'm going to turn over a new leaf. I'll get a better job. I'll save some money. I dug myself into this pit; I'll pull myself out by my own bootstraps!" he would not have gone back to his father. If he had clung to his own pride, he would have thought, "I'm not going to let him see me in this condition. I have too much dignity for that! I'll return to my father after I've cleaned up and gotten a new suit of clothes."

The gospel always brings us to the end of ourselves, our resources, our schemes, and everything else that we rely on, until we must come directly to God Himself. All we can plead for is His mercy. We can't come and show Him how well we've done without Him. We can't splash the cologne of our good works over the stench of the pigsty and hope that He doesn't notice how badly we smell. We can't send a friend or a gift to try to patch things up. We can only come directly to the Father in our wretched condition and appeal to His mercy: "I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Repentance must be directed personally toward the God whom we have sinned against.

True repentance includes an honest confession of our sins, without any excuses. "I have sinned against heaven and in your sight." He didn't say, "I wouldn't have sinned if you hadn't been

such a demanding and insensitive father.” “I wouldn’t have gotten into trouble if you hadn’t given me all that money when you knew that I wasn’t mature enough to handle it properly.” He didn’t blame the fact that he had to live in the shadow of his high-achieving brother. He said, “I have sinned.” True repentance always involves accepting responsibility for what we have done.

Implicit in the prodigal’s repentance is also a measure of faith that the father would show him mercy. If he had thought that his dad would beat him black and blue and order him never to set foot on his property again, he wouldn’t have bothered to go home. He had a hope, however slim, that his father would grant his request that he become like one of the hired men. If you come to God with just an inkling of faith that He will receive you because of His great mercy, He will not disappoint you!

Spurgeon tells of being in his garden when he saw a dog amusing himself among his flowers. He knew that the dog was not pulling weeds and since it wasn’t his dog, he threw a stick at it and yelled at it to chase it away. Well, the dog very quickly made Spurgeon ashamed for treating it so harshly. It fetched the stick and, wagging its tail, dropped it at Spurgeon’s feet. He says, “Do you think I could strike him or drive him away after that? No, I patted him and called him good names. The dog had conquered the man.” Then he applies it: “And if you, poor sinner, dog as you are, can have confidence enough in God to come to him just as you are, it is not in his heart to spurn you” (*12 Sermons on the Prodigal Son* [Baker], pp. 105-106).

Also, note that the prodigal’s repentance was not just thought, but action. He didn’t just sit there in the pigsty thinking, “I should go back to my father some day.” He didn’t just feel bad about what he had done, although he must have felt terrible. But he didn’t just sit there feeling depressed. He got up and made that long journey back. Some say that repentance is merely a change of mind. It *is* a change of mind, but not merely a change of mind. It is a change of mind that results in our turning from our sin to God. In going back to his father, the young man was leaving his friends and his loose way of life. He put a great deal of distance between himself and those old temptations. Repentance involved the action of leaving his sin and returning to his father.

This story shows that no matter how low you may have sunk into sin, there is hope if you will turn from your sin to God. If you say, "No, I'm too far gone," you are only making excuses and you're not believing the invitation that God extends to every guilty sinner. If you are living a life of sin, Jesus is saying to you, "No matter how awful, defiant, and wretched your sin, if you will come to the Father in true repentance, He will welcome you."

2. The father of the prodigal: Jesus shows us God's abundant mercy toward those who truly repent.

This is one of the most moving pictures of God in all the Bible. "While he was still a long way off, his father saw him" (15:20). It was not an accidental sighting, since the boy was a long ways off. The dad was up on the roof looking for his wayward son, as he did many times each day! The instant he saw him in the distance, he did something that no dignified father in that culture would have done: His compassion moved him to *run* to him, to embrace him, and to kiss him over and over again.

Think of how the father *could* have acted. He could have seen the boy in the distance and said, "It's about time! Here comes that no good son of mine! I'm going to let him crawl up to me on his hands and knees and beg for mercy. Then I'll tell him to go clean up and make himself presentable before he sets foot in my house. I'm going to put him on restriction and lay down the rules! He's going to have to toe the line from now on!"

Even though the boy must have smelled like a pigsty and though he only wore the tattered clothes on his back, the father ran toward his returning son and lavished his affection on him. He didn't even let his son get out the full speech about becoming one of the hired hands. While the boy was in the midst of making his confession, the dad called his slaves and told them to get the best robe. He stripped off the boy's rags and put the robe on him. He put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet to show that he was not just a hired hand, but his son, with the full privileges of family membership. He told the slaves to kill the fattened calf, which was reserved for very special occasions. He hired a band and invited everyone he knew. There was food and music and dancing as they celebrated the return of his son who had been dead and had come to life again; who had been lost and now was found.

What a picture of the abundant mercy that God pours out on repentant sinners! He doesn't just parcel it out a little bit at a time. He dumps the whole load all at once, instantly. The repentant sinner is totally, freely forgiven. All of our sins are blotted out. You don't have to brace yourself for the big lecture about how stupid you've been. There is no finger wagging or "I told you so!" There is only grace and mercy and love poured out on us as we are welcomed into God's presence as His children. He clothes us with the robe of Christ's righteousness and gives us the full privileges of sons and daughters, sharing in the best of all that is His. He lets us know that He is not only glad—He is overjoyed—that we have returned to Him. That's how God responds when you turn from your sins and come to Him!

You would think that the story would end there, on that happy note: "And they all lived happily ever after." But there is a third character who reveals a necessary lesson:

3. The older brother: Jesus shows us the ugliness of self-righteous pride, by which we exclude ourselves from God's mercy.

The older son comes in from the field and hears the music and dancing. He doesn't go inside, but he calls one of the servants and asks what is happening. When he finds out that his no-good brother has returned and that his dad has thrown a party to celebrate, he explodes. Whenever anyone blows up like that, it is not just a spur of the moment thing. You're seeing all of the pent-up anger of the years boiling over. He refuses to go in and when his dad comes out to appeal to him, he unloads.

First he attacks his dad and justifies himself. "Look! For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a kid, that I might be merry with my friends." He is bitter, accusing his dad of being stingy and unfair. He is saying, "Just give me what I deserve for all my hard work!"

Then, he reveals his contempt for his brother, whom he will not call "my brother," but rather, "this son of yours." He didn't know for sure that the brother had devoured his father's wealth on prostitutes, but he assumed the worst. He despised his brother and

resented the fact that while his brother went off to party, he stayed home and got stuck with all the work.

In spite of the older brother's attack, the father responds with love and gentleness toward this son also. He tenderly calls him, "My child," and reminds him that he has always been with him and that all that the father owned was his. He explains why they *had* to be merry and rejoice, because "this brother of yours [not, "my son"] was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found." The father's love extended to both sons and he did not want either son alienated from him or from each other.

This part of the parable shows us that the sins of self-righteousness and pride can be just as fatal as sins of the flesh. Jesus is holding the older brother up as a mirror to the Pharisees, who prided themselves in their observance of the law. They looked with contempt on others who were not outwardly as good as they were. But, as Jesus so penetratingly shows, they were not keeping either of the two greatest commandments: They were not loving the Father and serving Him out of joy; and, they were not loving others as they loved themselves. If they had been doing so, they would have rejoiced to see sinners coming to Jesus.

There's a supreme irony in this story. The brother who was outside comes home and is welcomed inside to a feast. The brother who had never strayed, but who is probably hungry after working all day, remains outside, sulking. Everything that he needed was inside the house, but his anger and self-righteous pride kept him from the bounty and joy of the father's table. So, the first has become last and the last, first.

### Conclusion

Jesus leaves the story hanging, with the older brother outside. We don't know if he ever came in to join the party, in spite of the father's gracious and gentle appeal. Jesus leaves the story there to make us consider our own response. If we are like the older brother, if we pride ourselves in being good, church-going people, if we see ourselves as better than prostitutes and drug dealers and thieves and other obvious sinners, then we need to judge our self-righteous pride. We would be greatly wrong to go out and join in the sins of the prodigal, so that grace might abound. But also, we

would be greatly wrong to get angry at God for His grace toward such sinners and to demand that He give us what we deserve. *Never* ask God to give you what you deserve! We're all sinners, desperately in need of mercy, not justice. Perhaps we started laboring in God's field at sunrise and someone else comes in at 5 p.m. and gets the same pay as we do. Don't begrudge him; just be glad that God is a God of great mercy, even toward the proud if they repent.

If you, like the prodigal, have rebelled against God and have come to see your wretched condition, your response should be like his: Get up, leave your sin, go to the Father and appeal for His mercy. You will find it in abundance.

J. C. Ryle (*Foundations of Faith* [Bridge Publishing], p. 218) tells of a mother whose daughter ran away and lived a life of sin. For a long time no one knew where she was, but finally she came back, turned to Christ in repentance, and believed in Him. Someone asked the mother what she had done to bring her daughter back and she replied, "I prayed for her day and night." But that was not all. She went on to say how she always left the front door unlocked, even at night. She didn't want her daughter to come home in the middle of the night and find the door locked. And it just so happened that one night the girl came home, tried the door, found it open, and went in, never to go out and sin again. That open door is a beautiful picture of God's heart toward sinners. It's open for you if you will come back to Him!

### Discussion Questions

1. Someone could perhaps argue that it's better to be like the prodigal and sow some wild oats than to be like the older brother. How would you respond to this biblically?
2. Is a person who repents, but keeps going back into sin, truly repentant? How can we help such a person?
3. Is God's grace fair? Why/why not? What implications does this have for us in the Christian life?
4. Some say that if you emphasize grace too much, it will lead to licentiousness. Is this true? Can we emphasize grace too much?

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