

What Makes You a Child of God?

The Word of the Lord from Luke 15: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I. Two Sons with the Same Sin

"There was a man who had two sons," and they couldn't be more different from one another in our parable. And yet, despite so many differences, they are both guilty of the same sin. Do you know what it is?

The younger son is the wild one, and working the family fields is not his cup of tea. Neither is the Fourth Commandment, what with its demand to honor father and mother. He approaches his father with the most disrespectful of requests: "Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me." While his father is very much alive and well, he asks for his share of the inheritance. It's a bit like saying, "I really can't wait until you're dead, for I value my share of the inheritance more than I value you. I want it now."

Crazily enough, the father consents. The son takes his share of the estate and goes on his merry way. He squanders all that he has on prostitutes and reckless living, and then there's nothing left. Worse yet, famine strikes and he's in dire need; and the best job he can find is feeding the pigs. Pigs—unclean animals. He'd gladly eat the carob pods that he feeds to the pigs, for no one is giving him anything.

He's got nothing: he's lost property, family, home, self-respect, dignity. He's got nothing, and it's all his own fault.

So he hatches the plan: "How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, „Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.“" It makes sense: he never acted like a good son and he forfeited his place in the family. He's declared them dead to him, and vice versa. So it follows that his best shot is to go back and say, "I don't deserve to be your son anymore, so hire me on and let me earn my keep."

Plan made and speech rehearsed, the son heads home; and while he is still a long way off, his father sees him. He feels compassion deep inside, and he runs to his son, embraces him and kisses him. The father loves that boy so much that he sacrifices appearance and dignity to be reunited. When the embrace is done, the son begins his speech: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." And that is as far as he gets. His father cuts him off and doesn't let him go any farther. Instead, he tells his servants, "Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

The celebration begins, for the younger son is home again, saved and sound. You can make a list of the sins of which he is guilty—the disrespect, the lack of compassion, the sloth, the immorality. But do you know the sin that he shares with his older brother?

The older son has been in the fields, helping his father while worthless little brother has been away. At the end of this long day, he draws near to the house to hear music and dancing. He asks a servant about the unplanned party, only to hear that his father is celebrating little

brother's return. The older son refuses to go in—he doesn't want to be near his brother (shouldn't that be "ex-brother," anyway). So the father makes the first move, comes out to invite him in. His older son vents: "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!"

You can make a list of the sins of the older brother too: resentment, anger, lack of love, bitterness, a refusal to forgive. But what sin does he share with his brother?

It is this: both sons believe that they are sons because they earn the right to be sons by their works. It is not so. They are not sons because they've earned the right. They are sons because they were born into the family—not by their work, but by the working of God and the love of their father and mother .

The younger son betrays this theology when he says, "I've lost the right to be a son because my actions have been so awful. My father could never love me. The best I can hope for is to be hired on as his servant, to be in the house by earning my place every day." That's the gist of his rehearsed speech, but his father won't let him get away with it—look where the father interrupts his son! The son gets to say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." The father lets him confess his sin and unworthiness, because all of that is true; but he doesn't let him ask to work his way back into the family because that isn't how the father runs the family. A son is a son, even if he's been a complete jerk of a son for a while; but now that he's back at home, the father can take care of him again. No son of his is going to work for a place in the house, because he's not a servant or a slave. He's a son.

Now he has a ring on his finger, shoes on his feet and the best robe on his back—given by the father's command. If he insists that he must work to earn his father's love now, he will only insult his father and his love.

The older son is guilty of the same sin, just from the other side. His tirade essentially says this: "I'm your son because I've been working so stinkin' hard in the fields all this time. By all the sweat and all the labor, I've earned the right to be your son. How can you call that other guy your son when he's done so much to hurt you and shame the family?" But the older son isn't a son because of his work in the fields; he's a son because he was born to his father. The whole time he's been working in the fields, he's been in his father's house and in his father's care, safe and sound. But to say that his father should only love him because of all of his works and efforts is to insult the father and his love.

The father's love is unconditional. To both his boys he says, "I love you because you're my sons, and you're my sons because I love you." Both boys deny that love, because both say, "Our father can only love us when we've earned it."

Jesus tells this parable as "older brothers" are squaring off against "younger brothers" around Him. The Pharisees are upset, muttering because Jesus is spending His time eating with tax collectors and sinners, the sorts of folks around town who really haven't put in much effort to live God-pleasing lives and follow the rules. If Jesus really is the Messiah, why is He spending time with the likes of them? Shouldn't He be spending His time with the Pharisees? They're the ones who have been trying to please God the Father in heaven. They're the ones who have been doing the hard work of trying to keep religion and society together. Haven't they

earned the right to have God's favor and attention—especially over tax collectors and sinners, the people who waste God's gifts on prostitutes and reckless living?

But the Pharisees are just like the older brother in the parable. They say, "God must love us because of the work that we do." In doing so, they insult the Father's love. They deny that God's love is unconditional, that His mercy endures forever, instead saying that His love is "pay as you go". But God doesn't love them because of their works. God loves them because God is love. He earnestly wants them in His house forever. But, like the older son, as long as they believe that God is being unfair by loving sinners, they're going to refuse to go into the house.

Tax collectors and sinners will often be guilty of the same sin as the Pharisees, just from the other side. Apart from Jesus' preaching to them, they will say, "We're just too far gone. We've led lives that are just too sinful for God to love us now." Such words declare again that God loves because of works. But God loves because God is love. He earnestly wants those tax collectors in His house forever. But, like the younger son, as long as they believe that God only loves those who earn it, they won't believe that God could forgive them.

But God doesn't love because of their works. God loves because God is love; and God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life...in the Father's house.

II. The Parable Applied

So which are you? Younger son or older son? Sinner or Pharisee?

Your past and present can testify for you, and different people will tilt toward different sins. Those who lean toward the sins of the younger son are those who say, "I am going to do what I want to do. Life is to be enjoyed, even when it means departing from God's Word to enjoy it. That may mean departing from God's Word by indulging in all sorts of sins for the eyes, ears and the rest of the senses, or defying God's Word for that which brings you feelings of comfort and security. It may mean departing from God's Word by leaving it behind, by ignoring the Lord's Word and Sacraments for things you would rather be doing during the same time slot. It won't feel all that bad for a while when you tilt toward the sins of the younger son: you'll get the praises of friends, the world and your own self-satisfaction. That's a good feeling.

The sins of the older brother are attractive to others. These are the sins of pride and contempt. For many, it is a constant temptation to measure their Christian life by the good that they do, by the offerings they give, by the sins they abstain from. So we all ought to do good, give offerings and abstain from sin; but unchecked sinful pride eventually leads to contempt for those who do not do as much, and a feeling of self-righteousness that sees no need for Christ. At the extreme, such a one will say, "Forgiveness is for sinners, and I think I've shown that I don't need it." It won't feel bad for a while when you tilt toward the sins of the older son: you'll get the praises of other law-and-order types, and you'll even be held up as an example of one who works hard in service to others. That's a good feeling, too.

But note this truth about both kinds of sinners: they are both outside of the Father's house. They are both outside the Father's care. Neither of them is open to the Father's love. If you pursue the sins of the younger son and delight in all sorts of pleasures, you will eventually be brought low—on your deathbed, if not before. And apart from faith, you will only say, "I have sinned too much to be forgiven. God couldn't possibly still love me and forgive me, now that I've wasted my life and have no time to make amends." That sin is a far worse sin than all

the others that got you there, because it is blasphemy: it accuses God of not keeping His promises. It accuses Jesus of not having died for all of your sins. That is what keeps you out of the house: it is not all the other sins that eroded your faith along the way, and it is certainly not that God has no love or grace left for you. It is simply that you do not believe that Christ would forgive you.

If you pursue the sins of the older brother, pride and self-righteousness will gradually wear away your faith, too. You eventually will be brought low, as well—on your deathbed, if not before. At that time, despair will not be the final temptation, but vanity. It is then you will say, “I am not afraid of death, because I have lived a good-enough life for God to welcome me in.” But that is blasphemy, too: it calls God a liar as it denies your sin, and it denies also that you needed Christ to die for your sin.

Just like the parable, sinners run away from the Father, and Pharisees don’t want to go into the house—not on the father’s terms, especially if He’s letting sinners in.

We should note, too, the very real danger of being a combination of both sons—the prodigal Pharisee, if you will. This would be to say, “I indulge in this sin and that sin, but I’m still good enough for God to let me into heaven.” That confession is complete, asinine nonsense. Far more than the extremes, however, it is also most likely what your sinful nature claims each day.

What to do? Along with examining yourself for all of those sins of indulging the flesh, pride and self-righteousness, be especially aware of the sin that Jesus warns against in this parable: it is the sin of believing that God loves you because of the good work you do. If you believe that God loves you because of the good work you do, then when you sin you will believe that God doesn’t love you; and when you manage to keep a command at least on the outside, you’ll believe that God loves you more than He did before. If you believe any of that, you deny the Gospel.

The truth is that God doesn’t love you because of the good work you do. God loves you because of the good work that Christ has done. Namely, because God would hold all of your sins against you and declare you unworthy to be His child, Christ has borne your sin to the cross. On the cross, God declared His Son to be the unworthy sinner and damned Him for your sin. On the cross, God the Father forsook His Son—and His Son was taking your place when He was forsaken.

Because the Son has suffered God’s wrath for your sin, God the Father is now your loving Father, the one you see in the parable. He runs to you in His Word and Sacraments. He runs to you! You honestly confess, “I am not worthy to be called your son,” and He cuts you off right there. He doesn’t negotiate a contract with you so that you can make things right and earn your keep. Instead, He puts a ring on your finger and shoes on your feet. He clothes you in the best robe, for as His beloved child you wear Christ’s own righteousness. Rather than count against you His gifts you have wasted, He declares to you, “You are always with Me, and all that is Mine is yours.”

The kingdom of heaven is yours because you are a beloved child of God. You are not a child of God because of your good works this day: in families, children sometimes obey and sometimes disobey, but either way they remain children. So also you: you are not a child of God because you have earned it by your obedience, and you have not forfeited being a child because of some sin. Your sonship does not depend upon you, but upon the Father’s love for you in Christ.

It is a matter of faith, not works. You are a child of God because, for the sake of Jesus, God has adopted you as His own. You are a child of God because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen