

Today we're looking at Jesus most famous parable, the story of the prodigal son which he told to two groups: sinners and Pharisees; Israel's most hated and Israel's most self-righteous. And most people interpret it as a feel-good story to comfort the sinners—and it is that. But that's not the main point. This is a story to shake the Pharisees' understanding of religion. And Jesus does that by reframing Christianity not as a religion of rules, but as a celebration. So the father in the story actually two different times says, **"Let's have a feast and celebrate!"** and both times it shows God's amazing grace. Let's read the story. I'll be the narrator and you be all the characters.

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.'*

The son would get an inheritance after his father died, but to ask for it while he was still alive, was to wish that he were dead. The father could have kicked him out with no inheritance! But instead...

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. He turns his back on any advice he got from his father.

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.* In Judaism feeding pigs would make him ineligible for worship or social life. He's saying I hate my church. I hate my culture. Jesus told this parable surrounded by prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners, all people who turned their backs on their families, their religion and their culture.

Of course sinners still gather around Jesus. You don't have to run away from home to know the feeling of the younger brother. Whether you indulge in laziness, or gossip, or sex, or substance abuse, there are 360 different directions you can run away from home, until you hit rock bottom.

¹⁷ *"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. 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 men.'* ²⁰ *So he got up and went to his father.*

Notice that his turn around is not just from hitting rock bottom, he also remembers his father's love. That's true of repentance too. Millions of people struggle every day without being Christians. Struggle alone can't make you a Christian, but struggle plus knowing God's love can. That's why Jesus is reframing Christianity as a feast and a celebration.

"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.'

Before the son could lay out his plan for paying his father back, the father kissed him, welcomed him back into the family, and planned a party. You can know how God feels about you even if you're not sure how you feel about him. To be blunt, God doesn't want your plan for earning his love. He doesn't want your list of good deeds. He wants you. What makes God celebrate? *"This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate."* This is where every storyteller would end his story. But Jesus loves self-righteous people too much to end his story. So he goes on.

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.'" You don't have to be a psychologist to understand that this is the greatest day in the father's life. But... ²⁸ The older brother became angry and refused to go in.*

Can anyone help him? Does he get to go into the party?

So his father went out and pleaded with him. Here the word translated "pleaded" is actually means to go alongside someone. Picture the father with his arm around the son.

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!'*

You can hear his resentment; he doesn't even address his father with a proper title. You can hear his judgement; he second guesses everything the father does. You can hear his superiority; he thinks he deserves a feast but his brother doesn't. And in almost every situation he'd be right. If you work hard at school, you'll earn better grades. If you work hard at your job, you'll earn a promotion. If you work hard in your social life, you'll win more friends. But the father poured out blessings on a son who didn't follow the rules, and in his heart the older brother is hates it. The Pharisees hated that Jesus loved tax collectors. Every human heart finds it hard to believe that God loves bad people. That's why every philosophy has a list of rules to follow to earn a better life. From Hammurabi's code to the US Constitution, from the 4 noble truths of Buddhism to the 5 pillars of Islam, everyone knows if you do good stuff you get good stuff, because that idea is hard-wired into the human brain and reinforced in everything we do.

Here's how that older-brother philosophy plays out in religion: If you keep the 10 Commandments people will think you're a good person. If you pray and read your Bible more, you will feel like a better Christian. If you come to church every Sunday, you can pat yourself on the back for doing your duty. But if you think that is why God loves you, then

Jesus is your example, your life-coach, your boss; but he's not your Savior. If you think God is good to you because you are good, you're thinking like the older brother. You don't have to run away from home to be lost, just like the older brother.

But Jesus says that the older brother is wrong. Every logical conclusion about how we serve God is wrong. Every idea anyone else has ever thought up about how to get right with God is wrong. Jesus is saying that Christianity is not rules, it's a celebration and an expensive one.

The reason no one could ever think up Christianity is because no one could ever imagine what Jesus did. The older brother was right to think that God couldn't ignore his brother's sins, so God did not ignore sin. He focused all the world's sins into Jesus. If the concept of free forgiveness is hard for you to swallow, like it was for the older brother, think about what that grace cost God. God gave up his own son, so he could earn forgiveness for us. With Jesus death he paid for your entrance into heaven, and with his resurrection he punched your ticket to eternal life. It's not about you. It's about Jesus.

That is why the father invites the rules-obsessed son into the celebration. That is why Jesus invites the Pharisees into the celebration. That's why God invites you, no matter which son you resemble, in his family.

Let's read this together: 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.'*

The end. Wait? What? How did the son respond? Jesus doesn't tell us because he wants to hear your response to his love.

You know Jesus' story has one son who's always rebellious and one son who's always self-righteous but reality is more nuanced than that. There are times when you'll feel like the younger son and you'll feel so ashamed. There are times when you'll feel like the older son and you'll be angry. There's a hymn that says **"I'm torn in two directions, now prodigal now Pharisee, O God be merciful to me. Who else but you can help me?"** Whether you've been rebellious or self-righteous, there's only one solution—It's God's amazing grace. By God's amazing grace I was lost but now I'm found. Could God save a wretch like the younger son? He has, and his name is Nate Wordell. Could God save a wretch like the older son? He has. His name is Nate Wordell. Now I can't tell you what this means for your life, but I can show you how to figure it out what it means. When you feel tempted to rebel like the younger brother you're comparing the fun of your favorite sin against the feast of living with God. What does that decision look like for you? When you feel superior like the older brother, remember that it cost God just as much to save your hide as it did to save the worst person you know. What should you do about your relationship then? And when you feel ashamed and guilty know that you can return to your father with your head bowed, and before you can even look up, he'll be running to meet you with a ring, a robe of righteousness, and brisket on the smoker.

Brothers and sisters, God's grace is amazing. Would you celebrate with me? Would you be a part of my family growing in Christ? Would you gather with me on Saturdays and Sundays and Mondays not to beat ourselves up about our sins but to admit them so that we can hear that Jesus has taken them away. Would you come to Bible study with me, not to fill our heads with data, but to get to know our Father? And would you sing with me? Would you sing to celebrate God's amazing grace?

**Amazing grace how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost but now am found
Was blind but now I see.**

Amen.