

Saved By Grace Lutheran Church  
Sermon by Pastor Tim Bartels

Trinity 2, 2014  
Luke 15:11-31<sup>1</sup>

Part I

One thing parents often ponder is how their children can be so different. Just think of your own family. No two siblings are alike though they are from the same parents. One might be compassionate and thoughtful; the other might be intellectually gifted and talented; still another might be outgoing and social.

We see that sort of thing in today's text. A father has two sons...yet the two sons are as different from one another as night is from day. Though that is true, they both have a Father who loves them.

Part II

First, there is the younger son. The younger son asked his father for his share of the inheritance. No sooner did he get it from his father, than he left for a far away country. Away from his father's home, the younger son's motives became apparent. He wanted to be free and independent from his father. He lived life how he wanted; a life without constraints.

When we think of the younger son, we think of *obvious* sinners. They are *those* who live life in the fast lane; the drug and alcohol addicts, the promiscuous and perverted, the greedy and filthy rich. They like living independent of our heavenly Father.

...but what about you? Are *you* like the younger son? You are everytime you want to be free of your heavenly Father; to be independent of him. It all began with our first parent, Adam. He wanted to be free of God. So he struck out on his own and ate the forbidden fruit. Cut from his cloth, we do the same thing. We do everytime we *don't like* what our

---

<sup>1</sup> References to the text (NKJV) will not be cited in the sermon

heavenly Father has to say about sin – disobeying mom's rules, picking at a coworkers faults, grumbling about how bad we have it.

We don't like what God has to say about sin, *because* it hits too close to home. We don't want to give it up. So, we set out on our own; do our own thing; make our own way. We want to be our own captain. After all, the argument goes, “I just want to have a little fun. Life in the fast lane is more exciting.”

Life in the fast lane, though, ends up in the gutter. That's what happened to the younger son. He ended up penniless; taking the lowest of jobs; dying of hunger. He was not in a good place and he knew it.

So he decides to return home. When he gets there, he plans, first, to admit his sin. “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; and am no longer worthy to be called your son.” *Second*, he plans to bargain with his father. “Make me like one of your hired servants.” Perhaps he can work his way back into his father's good graces.

That's just how far we have fallen in Adam's sin. When we become aware of our sinful condition, our flesh, too, thinks that it can work *its* way back into God's good graces.

It's the popular way of thinking about Christianity. That is, many think of Christianity as a self improvement program. If you follow some outlined steps, you can improve your life. If you stick with the program, you can better yourself. If you change your behavior for the good, you are worthy of heaven.

Now, please don't misunderstand me, bettering yourself in this life is a worthy goal...but turning *the faith* into a self-help program is not the gospel. The gospel gives God the credit; self help religion gives man the credit. Man can take the credit, but he can't save himself – no matter how hard he tries.

It all goes to say that this son is *lost* – lost free and independent, living on his own; lost in his attempt to work his way back into God's good graces.

### Part III

So, the younger son heads for home. When the father sees him, he recognizes him. He does even though he is afar off; even though his clothes is torn and tattered. Now, the father could have stood at a distance with his arms folded, face frowning; could have put his son in his place, demanded he pay up. Instead, the father does something *beneath* his dignity. He runs out to him, embraces him, kisses him – no questions asked.

...and, when the son begins his planned out speech, the father cuts him off *before* he can bargain with him. Instead, he restores him to full status as a son. He gives him his best robe; puts a signet ring on his finger, shods his feet with sandals. He dressed him from head to toe. He did in his best of his wardrobe.

You, too, have been dressed in the heavenly Father's best. He did - for “all of you who have been baptized have put on Christ.”<sup>2</sup> That is, God exchanged your filthy rags *for* the righteous robe of his dear Son. It is the robe Jesus spun for you by his perfect life and sacrificial death. Wrapped up in it, the Father dressed you from head to toe.

It's all because he embraced you at the cross. At the cross God did something considered beneath *his* dignity. God ran out to sinners; sinners, like you and me lost on our own. So it was that at the cross God fell on your shoulders. There he embraced you and kissed you in his Son's death – no strings attached. All is in the past. Your sins are forgiven!

...and what a festive banquet there is heaven! After all God says, “My son who was dead is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

### Part IV

...but not every one is in a festive mood. The older son was not happy. When he learned what was going on, he would not go into the feast. He wouldn't because was burning up with anger at his father. So, for

a *second* time the father does something beneath his dignity. He goes out to this son, too. He pleads with his son. He wants him to join in the celebration.

The older son, though, would not bend. He told his father “These many years I have been serving you; I have never transgressed your commandment at any time.” *Never? Really?* He wasn't being honest. What's more, he accuses his brother. He accuses him of wasting his money on harlots. We don't know that. We are never told what the younger son's specific sin was.

When we think of the older son, we think of the *hypocritical* sinner. They are *those* who rewrite morality and at the same time criticize God's moral code; who condemn intolerance but are intolerant themselves; who call others hypocrites not realizing they are hypocrites themselves. They feign obedience to a perceived god, thinking they are better than others.

...but what about you? Are *you* like the older son? You are when you compare yourself with others...and who of us doesn't? We do when we see the speck in our brother's eye but miss the plank in our own eye.<sup>3</sup> So, we see the obvious sin they have fallen into. We put it under a microscope. They have lived openly sinful lives...but not us. We don't get into vices, they do. We live a clean life, they don't. We are better than than. We are family oriented, good neighbors, hard workers.

Though we may be outwardly blameless, our hearts are not so blameless. That is true, because we often do the right thing feeling we *have* to. We don't do it because we *want* to. We do it because God will punish us, if we don't. Or, we do it because we think that by doing good we are more deserving. It give us a false sense of pride. After all, we have done our best to stay out of trouble.

It all goes to say that *this* son is lost, too. He's lost in blind hypocritical pride.

## Part V

...even so, the father does not give up. The father calls the older son to see the error of his way and back to him. He does so by telling the older son, "All I have is yours." It is *not* because he's better. The older son is not as good as he thinks. No. He isn't. All the father has is his, *because* of his status. It's his status as a son. He did not choose to be a son; did not make himself worthy as a son. He was a son because the father *gave* him life.

That's true for you, too. There is nothing that you and I can hold over other sinners. We are not as good as we think. We are God's children *not* because of our behavior. We are God's children *because* he made the choice in spite of us.

So it was that God gave you birth in baptism. He did without you contributing anything. He buried your hypocrisy in Jesus' death. It is all gone; forgiven. He raised you to new life in Jesus' resurrection; alive, he wrapped you in Jesus' righteous robe. It is the only righteousness that gains God's acceptance. Grab that righteousness firmly in your hands and pull it tightly around you.

In other words, it is all by grace; grace shown us at the cross. The cross says, "You are forgiven, not because you are more deserving. There is no one deserving but Jesus. He merited forgiveness for you. Baptized into him, I have found you even as I find other lost sinners."

## Part IV

Found by the Father it all goes to say that the Father loves his children. We need to know that when bad things happen to us. It is then that faith can be shaken; that we fall into a tail-spin; that we find ourselves at the end of the rope. It is then that it can be hard to understand that God loves us; and in that state, we are in danger of being lost, again.

Yet, this same God, who humbled himself; who fell on your shoulders; who embraced and kissed you in his Son's death; who dresses you in the best from his wardrobe, will not abandon you, his child. He

will not. He cannot. He loves each one of you, different as you are, with all his heart. He gave his life on it.

#### Part IV

To sum it up, our heavenly Father has two types of sons, if you will. One of them wants to be independent of him and the other thinks too much of himself. You and I are both of those sons at different times, lost in our sin. Yet our heavenly Father sought us; and he did something beneath his dignity to find us. He sent his perfect Son, Jesus, who wrapped his arms around us at the cross and has found us in his word. That is something worth celebrating. Amen!