

# **GRASPING THE GRANDEUR OF GOD'S GRACE**

» A SERMON SERIES BY TIM BRISTER «

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## Grace-Motivated Hospitality

### Luke 5:27-32

#### INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest challenges we face in life is grasping the concept of grace. We live in a day and time when most people know the lyrics or at least could hum the tune of “Amazing Grace” but the striking reality is that many have never truly **experienced** grace. Grace is truly amazing, but it is amazing to me that so many people can sing the song “Amazing Grace” having never experienced how truly amazing it is!

Grace can be simply defined as “**unmerited favor**” or “**giving you what you don’t deserve.**” Another way grace has been defined is through its acrostic, namely **God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense**. By thinking on these definitions, we can begin to see why grace is so hard for us to grasp.

First of all, at the very core of our sinful nature is a **strong sense of pride and self-sufficiency**. We convince ourselves that we are good and do what we can to protect that self-image in presenting it to others. Pride has as its ideal of self-sufficiency, that you don’t need anyone else for anything else. **You can do it on your own**. You can make it because you are entirely competent and capable in whatever it is you set out to do. Pride leads you to believe that you are more right than wrong and more strong than you are weak.

In addition to pride, we are in our sinful nature **self-righteous**. We build our lives on what we believe to be good works. We seek to perform to the highest degree of morality and virtue we can on our own, attempting to be honest, good, upright, and fair. Our self-righteousness carries on two wings: **confidence in our own religious** performances and efforts and also **convincing ourselves in pretending that we are not that bad to begin with**. Through pretending not to be bad and performing to be moral and good, self-righteousness is securely lodged into the core of our sinful being.

One of the major implications for being a prideful and self-righteous person is that **you function as a legalist**. You create your own set of rules and standards by which you define your self-righteousness and then you pride yourself in your ability to keep them. But not only that, when those rules and standards are not by others, they come the grounds on which you look down upon and judge others. You succeed and they fail, and that fact further confirms your self-righteousness as you pride yourself that you are not like them. You perform better than they do, and therefore you are better than they are. **You identity becomes grounded in your good works**.

In everyday life, what happens, whether we realize it or not, is that **we welcome people in our lives who meet or exceed the rules and standards we live by**. If people are as self-righteous and moral as we are, then we invite them as friends. The end result is very clear: **we end up with people in our lives who are just like us and marginalize everyone else who do not measure up to our own standards**.

This is normal fare for how people operate in this world, and this is fundamentally why people cannot understand and grasp grace. Everything I just explained to you militates against God's grace, and so **what Jesus comes to do when he brings His kingdom is to call us to repent.** By calling us to repent, he is symbolically turning over the tables of our religion and with a whip driving out our pride and self-righteousness. This sounds harsh, but it is exactly what we need. Here's the reason why.

**Grace is God giving you what you don't deserve.** But pride and self-righteousness has convinced you that you do deserve it, because you have told yourself that you are moral, upright, and good and can back that up with your religious performances. **Until you get to the place where you understand the only thing you deserve is hell and the wrath of God's fiery judgment, then grace will resonate in your prideful heart.** You cannot receive grace that God gives because prideful people don't receive anything because they don't **need** anything. **A self-righteous person prefers his own righteousness** than the righteousness that God provides in the perfect, sinless life of His Son Jesus Christ.

But that is exactly what you and I need! And the only way we can get it is by understanding first that we are altogether unrighteous, vile, dirty, wretched worms whose best offerings are in his sight nothing but filthy rags. Grace is unmerited favor, yet the prideful person is convinced that their supposed good behavior and performance has earned for them the favor of God. They think they have merited God's acceptance based on how well they have done, especially in comparison to others. And as long as that line of thinking is lodged in your mind, **you will consider grace unnecessary and certainly not amazing.**

[T/S] All of these issues come to a head in our text for us this morning, and I want us to jump into it to discover one main thing:

### **how grasping the grace of God sets us free to show grace to others.**

Turn with me to the gospel according to Luke, chapter 5 as I want to read verses 27-32. In this text, we find Jesus calling to Himself one of His disciples, Matthew and what happened immediately afterwards that infuriated the religious leaders of his day. Beginning in verse 27, we read:

**27** After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, "Follow me." **28** And leaving everything, he rose and followed him. **29** And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. **30** And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" **31** And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. **32** I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

Luke 5:27-32

There are two invitations in this text. **Jesus invites and calls Matthew** to follow him, and Matthew's response was unconditional and immediate. He left everything. The second invitation was **Matthew's great feast** with a large company of fellow tax collectors. This scene, though ordinary and typical, had extraordinary implications about the life and mission of Jesus.

## 1. Reclining with Sinners

In the beginning of chapter 5, Luke records Jesus calling disciples to Himself, beginning with Peter and Andrew and James and John. Jesus is on a mission, and according to Luke 4:43, it was to **preach the good news of the kingdom of God**. The good news is that the King is here, the long-awaited Messiah of Israel. Given that the King of Israel is here, what kind of disciples do you think he would choose? Certainly he would pick **the most religiously qualified with the purest Jewish pedigree**, right? That's what everyone expected, but the kingdom of God turns every other kingdom upside down. Instead of calling the religious elite, he goes after enemies of God and calls them to be His friends. It is a shocking reversal and cultural nonsense to those who witnesses what Jesus was doing. Jesus was showing them that in the kingdom of God, everything changes. Everything.

Jesus calls Levi (Matthew) to Himself. He doesn't do this at **the synagogue** or the Temple. He does tell the people to **come to Him and set up an appointment** to meet with Him. Rather, Jesus shows up at Matthew's tax booth and said, "Let's go." That's it. No drama or fanfare. No long speech. No explanation of who he was or why he was calling him or how he would take care of him. Just, "Follow me." Strikingly enough, Matthew left everything to follow Jesus based on **two words of a complete stranger**.

The next thing that happens is Matthew throws a party, a great feast, in his house. The party guests comprises of "a large company of tax collectors and others". To get a feel for what is going on here, you have to understand something about the place of rabbi's as well as tax collectors in society.

Tax collectors were **traitors** of their own people. They **volunteered** to work for the Roman government to exact taxes from their own people, amassing a fortune themselves, as they often demanded more than necessary to make a large profit. Jewish people did everything they could to **avoid tax collectors**. In their minds, they were worse than cheaters or traitors, they were enemies of God's people, keeping Israel suppressed under the yoke of Roman rule. In that culture, once a tax collector always a tax collector, to be hated by your own people and forever banned from the synagogues as those ceremonially unclean. In sum, they were **socially hated, religiously defiled, and politically corrupt**.

*And Jesus has chosen to sit down and enjoy a feast with a large company of them!*

Eating meals and enjoying the company of others was a huge part of Jewish life. One New Testament scholar wrote:

"It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of table fellowship for the cultures of the Mediterranean basin in the first century of our era. Mealtimes were far more than occasions for individuals to consume nourishment. Being welcomed at a table for the purpose of eating food with another person had become a ceremony richly symbolic of **friendship, intimacy, and unity**."

[T/S] By reclining with these tax collectors, **Jesus was inviting them into His life and treating enemies as friends. Those whom the Jewish people would flee from, Jesus sat down and enjoyed an intimate dinner with.** Those who were considered companions only with robbers and murderers now had a companion with the Holy One of Israel. Jesus' behavior is entirely undignified and scandalous to the religiously-minded Jew. Those who were "righteous" must rebel against such behavior.

## 2. The Rebellion of the "Righteous"

The problem here is not the party. The Pharisees knew God's kingdom was going to be a party. **Their problem was the guest list**, namely tax collectors. You can imagine what the protectors of religious purity and laws thought about this scene. Jesus had been preaching in synagogues all across Judea, but now **He has broken all rabbinic laws** by eating with God's enemies—the tax collectors. You can hear them now approaching the disciples, "Hey guys, don't you know that the only people allowed to associate with tax collectors are robbers and murderers? What is your rabbi doing? Doesn't he know he is making himself ceremonially unclean and therefore unfit to perform religious duties in the synagogue? Doesn't he realize that these people deserve nothing but our hatred and condemnation? What is he doing accepting them and enjoying a feast with them? This is totally unacceptable of him to be doing this!!!"

You see, there's so much more to this scene than Jesus reclining with sinners. Meals in all cultures represent **boundary markers**. They mark boundaries between different levels of intimacy and acceptance. This reality is heightened all the more because of the Jewish food laws. In fact, the food laws made it nearly **impossible for Jews to eat with Gentiles**. If you are to be a faithful Jew in the dietary regulations, the sphere of people you are allowed to enjoy fellowship with are only those who were just as faithful to the cultural regulations as you are. So the way you treated food determined who were your friends.

Notice that it is the Pharisees that bring up "sinners" in this scene. Luke simply calls the dinner party as "tax collectors and others." It is the Pharisees who call the "others" as "**sinners**." They are sinners in their minds because **they have ceremonially disqualified themselves**. They have not lived up to the cultural standards imposed upon them. They were speaking with **contempt and rebellion** that Jesus and His disciples who act so unrighteously, breaking every standard of purity and associate with sinners and not with those who cared so much about the purity of Israel.

Indeed the sides had been drawn. **It looked like the Pharisees sided with religious purity and the integrity of Israel while Jesus sided with traitors and sinners.** To add insult to injury, the Pharisees tried to shame them in their feasting. Check out the following verse (v. 33). The disciples of John, they said, often fasted and said prayers, but all you guys do is eat and drink. This slam was intended to humiliate Jesus and His disciples.

[T/S] Yet this rebellion of the so-called righteous **could not stand in the coming of the kingdom of God**. Jesus responds with a powerful rebuke—a rebuke full of divine mercy.

### 3. The Rebuke of Divine Mercy

Jesus' rebuke is symbolic of a **great reversal**. It is not only **providing a seat at the table for sinners**, it is the **turning over the tables of the self-righteous**. His first response is a rebuke. "You think you are important? **I did not come for you**. I'm not talking to you. I'm not interested in you." Jesus is saying, "You think you are so qualified because you are so righteous and ritually pure. I'm telling you that **you are eternally disqualified by your self-righteousness**. You think you are not sick, but you don't realize how sick you really are! The fact you believe you are accepted by your religious performance shows just how far from the kingdom of God you are. The King is here, but you have missed his message and his invitation of grace."

The religious system the Pharisees developed was exclusionary. It excluded the **Gentiles** by dietary restrictions, and it excluded the **poor** because they could not afford to ceremonially cleanse themselves. Therefore, the Pharisees became **a class unto themselves**. As good legalists, they allowed into their lives only the people who lived up to their standards, and most if not all people could not live up to it.

Then Jesus comes on the scene and makes a most startling statement. In Matthew 5:20, he says "**unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven**." Jesus just upped the ante by placing the entrance of the kingdom of God out of reach of even the most religiously devoted people on the planet. You've got to be more righteous **than them**. And, of course, the point is that **there is only one person who ever lived who was truly and utterly self-righteous, and that is Jesus Himself**. And the only way you are going to find entrance into the kingdom of heaven is not by the way of the religious system of the Pharisees but by **the way of abundant grace for those who understand they are sinners desperately need in righteousness they themselves could never provide**.

The way of the Pharisees was everything I talked about in the beginning about the self-righteous and prideful legalist. The system they created was **religious** while Jesus' was gracious; it was **exclusive** while Jesus' was inclusive; it was **unwelcoming** while Jesus' was welcoming; their attitude was **grumbling** while Jesus' was rejoicing; they **focused on their fasting** while Jesus was focused on feasting. Why? Because the kingdom is coming and the King is on the scene. His kingdom is advancing, and it is not through outward cleansing of a culture but inward cleansing of forgiveness of sin made possible by the good news that someone was good on our behalf.

Jesus couldn't be clearer. "I didn't come for you. **I came for them**." He came for sinners, to call them to repentance. These are people who are in touch with their depravity and have an understanding if there is any hope of heaven, it will not be because of anything good they have done. They are hopeless in themselves. To put it in Jesus' terms, they understand themselves as "**poor in spirit**," that is, **morally bankrupt of anything that could commend them before a holy God**.

**Jesus came for sinners.** He came to seek and to save the lost. The first person he healed was a leper who no one would dare touch. Yet Jesus touched him and the disease of leprosy lost its power under the cleansing touch of the Messiah. **When Jesus comes, instead of getting leprosy, the leper gets mercy.** That leper is a picture of you and me before God. If the world knew how wicked and sinful you are, the world would have nothing to do with you. The same is true for me and everyone else in this room. But Jesus came for spiritual lepers who know they need to be cleansed. **He loves to show mercy and compassion** to those who know they have nothing to cling to but an all-sufficient Savior.

[T/S] The tax collectors at this feast were in a far better position to grasp the grace of God because they grasped the reality of their sinful state. The Pharisees attempted to cover up and ignore the reality of their sin by turning their focus away from been seen righteous before God to appearing righteous before man. **By placing their confidence in their good deeds, they showed no need to cry, “Have mercy upon me, a sinner.”** By looking down on the substandard religious performances of others, **they deceived themselves into a life where repentance was not required.** At the end of the day, the sinners are the ones who are accepted and the self-righteous who are rebuked and fail to enter the kingdom of God.

#### 4. The Radical Call of Grace

Why is this? How is it possible? It is possible because of **the radical call of grace.** When Jesus called Matthew, it was not a call based on his credentials. It was an **unconditional call of free grace.** When Jesus called sinners to repentance, He did not call those who thought they were deserving or somehow qualified of God’s invitation. No. **It was a gracious invitation for the very people in society the religious people cast out.**

**Jesus did not come to add His kingdom to yours. He came to take over.** When I begin to grasp the radical grace of God, I understand that there is nothing that I can offer God except the sin that makes His grace necessary. **God’s grace is not to make bad people good but to call dead people to live.** It is only when we experience the transformative power of God’s gracious invitation to be accepted on the basis of Jesus’ law-fulfilling life, His curse-bearing death, and His death-defeating resurrection that we find **grace to truly be amazing.**

A failure to go there will only lead us to the slave market of our self-salvation projects. What am I talking about? I’m talking about a life **where we put the matters of our spiritual life in our hands rather than transfer trust in the sovereign hands of God.** Tullian Tchividian explains it this way in his new forthcoming book *Jesus + Nothing = Everything*:

“**Our rules** become our substitute savior, and keeping those rules become our self-salvation project, with Jesus safely outside the picture. With enough rules and regulations set up, we don’t need Jesus. After all, Jesus scares us—he’s so unpredictable, so uncontrollable. Jesus operating system—unconditional grace—is wild. It’s unmanageable, uncontainable. It unsettles everything by wresting control out of our hands, thereby putting us at the mercy of God. So we spend our lives trying to manufacture an existence that we can control” (46).

The sober reality is that some here are trying to manufacture an existence that you can control by not resting fully and entirely upon Jesus for your salvation. On the other hand, I fear that there is a real temptation for those of us in Christ to try to manufacture an existence that we can control by **putting a governor on God's grace**. Here's how Tullian explains it:

**"The biggest lie about grace** that Satan wants the church to buy is the idea that it's dangerous and therefore needs to be kept in check. By believing that lie, we not only prove we don't understand grace, but we violate gospel advancement in our lives and in the church by perpetuating our own slavery. The truth is, disobedience happens not when we think **too much** of grace, but when we think **too little** of it" (49).

Brothers and sisters, we are saved by grace, and we are sanctified by grace. There is not a step in the journey that God intends for us to make in our own strength or by our own efforts. **Every day, we are called to embrace the radical call of God's grace and be renewed in the power of the gospel** to transform our hearts and minds and conform our lives to the image and likeness of Jesus Christ. If we don't pursue the call of grace, **our default mode is to fall back into thinking that God accepts us based on our performance** rather than the performance of Jesus Christ who told us on the cross, 'It is finished.'

So...

To our attempts to make ourselves righteous before God, Jesus says, it is finished.  
 To our pride that prevents us from receive grace and repenting of sin, Jesus says, it is finished.  
 To our pretending that we can live one moment without God's mercy, Jesus says, it is finished.  
 To our foolish attempts of earning God's approval on our own, Jesus says, it is finished.  
 To our futile self-salvation projects based on our morality, Jesus says, it is finished.

Jesus has come for sinners. He is establishing His kingdom in the hearts of men and women who come to **grasp the greatness of His grace that surpasses the greatness of their sin**.

So...

To those who come to the cross with nothing but their sin, Jesus says, I have come for you.  
 To those who know they deserve God's judgment but plea for mercy, Jesus says, I have come for you.  
 To those who are broken and contrite in spirit, repenting of sin, Jesus says, I have come for you.  
 To those who know that no good thing dwells in themselves, Jesus says, I have come for you.  
 To those who long to be accepted by God and counted righteous in His sight, Jesus says, I have come for you.

*This is the radical call of grace.*

## CONCLUSION

One of my favorite movies is *Forrest Gump*. For those of you who have seen the movie, do you recall the scene when he first gets on the bus? Row by row, the kids tell little Forrest, “**Can’t sit here!**” Forrest was different. He was quirky. He stuttered. He had to wear crazy braces for his legs so that he could walk. Kids did not want him to sit with them because **he was not like them**. He did not qualify. The remainder of his life, Forrest spends time welcoming people who were entirely unlike him—people like Bubba and Lieutenant Dan, offering grace and acceptance that he was never afforded growing up.

I wonder if we were to take an honest look at our lives if we would find ourselves saying to people in our world, “Can’t sit here!” I’m not talking about us getting on a bus. I’m talking about our life in general. **How many people have we not welcomed because they perhaps did not measure up to our liking?** They were just too different. They made us feel uncomfortable. They just did not have anything in common with us.

What if Jesus took that line of thinking when it came to His mission? **If He came to link up and invite only those who were just like Himself, who would He have invited?** No one! Because there is no one like Jesus. None. If He used the excuse that we are just too different from Him, then no one would ever be saved. The tax collectors had nothing in common with Jesus, and yet Jesus welcomed them into His life. It had to be uncomfortable for these tax collectors to be sitting with a Jewish rabbi, but **Jesus apparently made them feel welcome and accepted in His company**. Jesus was demonstrating the way of grace in the way He welcomed people who were entirely unlike Him. It is a special kind of hospitality that **embraces others because we grasp first and foremost that we have been embraced by grace**.

Jesus has entrusted to us the mission of making His gospel known in our world. I’m talking about Cape Coral, Lee County, SWFL, and around the world. One of the most practical ways of assessing our ability to carry out that mission is **how we treat others**. You see, as I said earlier, those who truly grasp the grace of God will be set free to show grace to others.

Tens of thousands of people in our city alone need to be shown the grace of God. We have an opportunity to **show others the grace we have been shown in the gospel**. This means by going to people who are not like us because we were nothing like Jesus. We welcome them into our homes, into our lives, and into our hearts. I’m talking about our neighbors across the street, the coworker down the hall, the classmate sitting next to you, or the family at the park.

But not only that, I’m talking about **those who are far from God and have little to no access to the gospel**. I don’t know how many churches there are in our city, but I can tell you a safe estimate that **90% of our neighbors don’t know God**. And it is clear that the churches are not doing a good job of penetrating the darkness and reaching them. Perhaps the majority of them are not like us. Maybe they are politically liberal. Maybe they are homosexual. Maybe they are poor. Maybe they don’t speak our language, dress the way we do, look the way we look, or hang out at the places we deem appropriate. And so we convince ourselves that there’s not hope and there’s no use. We use all the differences as excuses why we won’t engage them. They make us uncomfortable.

The dilemma we face today presents us two options: **we can choose to accept those in our lives who are just like us, or we can demonstrate grace to others who are entirely unlike us and welcome them into our lives.** And by welcoming them, I am not talking about anything extraordinary. Actually, I'm talking about something **really ordinary**—like having them over for a meal and spend an evening learning about their lives. After all, we don't have to ask the question "What would Jesus do?" because that is **exactly** what Jesus did.

Jesus was ridiculed by the religious leaders as one who **"receives sinners and eats with them"** (Luke 15:1). In our pursuit of becoming like Christ, perhaps **this is something we have overlooked.** Jesus' critics said of him, **"Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"** (Matt. 11:19) But if Jesus was not a friend of tax collectors and sinners, you and I would have no hope of eternity.

So here's my encouragement and challenge to you church family today. I am asking that you join me in the practical application of grasping the grace of God like never before. I'm not talking theoretically. I mean **experientially**—both for our own souls as well as the welfare of others. I want to encourage you to **cultivate a gracious disposition toward others.** Doing this will make you uncomfortable. We are inclined to welcome and accept those who are just like us, people who meet our standards. Yet, when we live like that, **we are no different from the legalist and self-righteous who create boundaries to distance ourselves from the very people we are called to reach.**

**Jesus wants us to extend the radical call of grace to others.** The most practical way of doing this is by inviting someone over for dinner. I challenge you **over the course of this month to have a conversation with someone you know is not a Christian and invite them over for a meal.** No strings attached. Simply welcome them into your home and family and learn about their lives. You don't need to make a fancy meal or have a perfectly clean house. **Let your neighbors see you in real life enjoying the true grace of God that has set you free to love others the way Christ has loved you.** Imagine what would happen if those in our city whom the churches right now have no interest in become **the focus of our gracious efforts to welcome them?** Imagine what would happen if we spent our time and resources making the gospel known with people whose lives are littered by addictions and dysfunctions? Like lepers and tax collectors, prostitutes, and thieves? I think Jesus knows something about that.

**Don't succumb to a life that is devoid of the practical demonstration of the grace of God to needy sinners.** We are stewards. We have good news for fellow wretched worms like us. We don't have to live the life where we say to people, "Can't sit here!" but rather can extend a gracious invitation for them to come and feast with us, because Jesus was prepared a banquet table for sinners to share in together. We have in the grace of God everything we need to motivate us and inspire us to welcome strangers, accept the marginalized, invite the lost, and reach those far from God. After all, we worship a God who has reached down to us.

Let us worship Him now, and let us follow Him wherever He leads, out of our comfort zones, through our boundary walls, and into the fields of grace that are white unto harvest.

Let us pray.

## Grace Building Community Luke 7:36-50

### INTRODUCTION

Those of you who were here last week will recall that our text focused on Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners. The central truth was that **grasping the grace of God sets you free to show grace to others**. I also presented a challenge to you, our church family, to apply such grace by starting a conversation with a neighbor or coworker who is not a Christian and **invite them over to enjoy a meal with you and your family** as an opportunity to learn from them and welcome them into your life the way Jesus has welcomed us.

I want to continue with the focus on the grace of God this morning. While last week, the emphasis was to show **how grace motivates or inspires hospitality**, this week I want to emphasize **how grace builds genuine community**. Please take a copy of God's Word and turn with me to the gospel of Luke, chapter 7 and I want to begin with verse 36 and go down to the end of the chapter. In this remarkable scene in the life of Jesus, we find him once again with both a Pharisee and a sinner, just like last week in Luke 5. This time it is not a tax collector, but a **prostitute**. Beginning in verse 36 we read:

36 One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. 37 And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, 38 and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." 40 And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher."

41 "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." 44 Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." 48 And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49 Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" 50 And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Luke 5:27-32

Sometimes in the Greek text there are **temporal markers** or clauses that lets you know when there is separation between stories or scenes in the life of Jesus. In the text we just read, however, **there is no such temporal marker or clause** that takes us from the previous discourse to verse 36. What was the concluding thought of Jesus just prior to our text? It is this:

**“The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’”**

Jesus had been labeled as one who apparently likes to party and celebrate, and not only that, but to do it with the worst people in society—**tax collectors and sinners**. His lifestyle to the religious leaders in that time was undignified and scandalous because he did not adhere to the superstructure of religious rules they concocted to support their self-righteous standards.

**Jesus enjoyed the company of sinners, and sinners enjoyed the company of Jesus.** As we learned last week, sick people were attracted to the Great Physician who had mercy and showed them compassion, while those who were self-righteous and convinced they were well held Jesus in the kangaroo court of their own making, grumbling with contempt and scorn.

Jesus came to the earth to usher in His kingdom and over throw every other rival to this throne. Chief of those rivals is **the devil himself** who would deceive us into thinking that we are better off ruling and governing our lives than God. This is the **lie** he told Adam and Eve in the Garden. He convinced them it was better to undermine God’s Word in which He expressed His rule and question God’s goodness in His sovereignty over our lives. The devil tempted them to **self-sufficiency and independence from God**, and ever since the Fall of man, we have as sinners believed the lie that life can be enjoyed or experienced separated from God and independent of His grace. This could not be farther from the truth!

**The radical call of grace** is for those who know they are sick, dirty, vile, and filthy as sinners. Grace is for those who know they are not deserving of anything from God except His judgment and wrath against their rebellion. Grace is extended for those seeking for **help outside themselves** because they no there is nothing in them that they commend before a holy and righteous God.

And that grace that is **freely given by Jesus** does not only bind us in union with our Savior, but it also **builds in us deep love for God and others** who have been redeemed through His sacrifice on the cross. In fact, from our text this morning, I want to show this simple truth, namely that:

**The grace of God builds a genuinely loving community of forgiven sinners.**

As a church that bears the name Grace, it is especially fitting to see how we as a community of redeemed sinners consider afresh **how the grace of God builds us into a loving community**. If we are not careful, we may adopt a line of thinking that a **personality** or **philosophy** of ministry or certain kinds of **preferences** are what builds our church community. And what distinguishes the church from another other “society” in the world is that the unifying factor that unleashes extravagant love for others who are entirely unlike us. That unifying factor is the **amazing grace of God**. It is the grace of God **that tears down all cultural barriers** and defies **contemporary boundaries** and calls us into to enjoy radical diversity in the family of God because of **a deep understanding of the forgiveness we have experienced** in the cross of Jesus Christ.

[T/S] As turn and witness how this scene unfolds, I want to show you first that when Jesus comes to dine, grace comes to the table.

## 1. When Jesus Comes Dine, Grace Comes to the Table

Just a couple of chapters earlier, Jesus is at the party of a bunch of tax collectors and sinners, and the **Pharisees** rudely came in and tried to box Jesus into their cultural rulebook. In Luke 7, we find the tables turned. Now a Pharisee is having a banquet and a “**woman from the city**”, a term most likely used to describe a prostitute, comes to the table as an uninvited guest.

It is interesting that Jesus accepts invites from all kinds of people on the cultural spectrum— from the lowest of the low (tax collectors) to the highest of the high (Pharisees). And in every situation, **He did not change who He was to fit His audience**. Jesus was on a mission to usher in His kingdom by calling men and women, boys and girls to repent. Jesus was on a mission to rescue poor, lost sinners by accepting all who would receive Him solely on the merits of His righteous life and substitutionary death on the cross on their behalf. Jesus was on a mission to **give grace and mercy to the helpless and needy**, and this is true wherever He went.

The Pharisee who invited Jesus is named in the story as Simon. Apparently, he had not formed a negative opinion of Jesus at this point because he referred to Jesus as **both prophet and teacher**, demonstrating at least to some degree his interest in learning from Jesus. However, Simon’s treatment of Jesus was less than honorable. In fact, as we shall see in this text, he didn’t even give Jesus a proper greeting or demonstrate hospitality according to his own standards.

By this time, Jesus had become well known in the city of Nain for His unique teaching and miraculous healing, such as the raising of a widow’s son earlier in the same chapter. It is likely that Simon invited Jesus because **the city was set a buzz about Him**, and given the proclivities of Pharisees for being seen well in the eyes of men, having Jesus sit at your table would become **a bragging point**. You know what I’m talking about. You have seen the restaurants or places of commerce that have pictures or plaques of famous people who have signed their names and left notes expressing their appreciation for being there. . Having Jesus in his home would **elevated his desired status of prominence** of having culture’s elite influencers and leaders and made him the talk of the town. Jesus for all intents and purposes was being used, not being respected and treated like a rabbi much more the Messiah, the Son of Man.

The homes of prominent people like Simon had a big, round, **open courtyard** with a garden and fountain. And in times of warm weather, meals were shared in the courtyard, which was regularly accessible to the public. People in that day would **recline** at the table, meaning they would lay down propped up on their left elbow with their legs and feet lying behind them. Following the meal, **conversations** and even lively debate were common, and when a rabbi was invited, the custom was to allow people from the community to come in, hoping to listen and enjoy the fruit of his teaching.

While Jesus was reclining with Simon and his party of honorary guests, Luke tells us a woman of the city, a sinner, shows up after learning that Jesus was there. Luke is very right in calling his readers to “**behold**,” because what happens next is truly remarkable. First of all, the fact that she came into the courtyard with the Pharisees was **both a courageous and scandalous thing to do**. The Pharisees prided themselves in being the **guardians** of ceremonial law and **protectors** of national sanctity. Though the Promised Land was defiled by Roman occupation, they at least thought they could keep their homes pure and their bodies sanctified. Central to this cultural idealism is **the dinner table** where Pharisees were careful to abide by the strict rules for preparing and eating food. Of all places, the dinner table was to be sacred space.

The fact that this woman showed up in the house of Simon the Pharisee **immediately defiled** his dinner table. Pharisees identified themselves by being **entirely separated** from such people as prostitutes, and here is one who has intruded into the most intimate of settings. The Pharisees likened prostitutes to **an infectious disease**, and anyone that participates in their lives shared in their defilement and disease. For her to show up at his dinner table must have both **embarrassed** and **infuriated** a Pharisee like Simon.

But it gets worse. She proceeds to let her hair down. This was a **severe act of immodesty**, to be understood by the men at the table as **erotic** in behavior. When a young lady would be given in marriage, she would have her hair bound up never to be let down again. The letting down of her hair was **symbolic in their day of opposite of chastity and faithfulness**. Then for those watching, she began rubbing and kissing Jesus’ feet, again an erotic act **entreating a man for sexual favors**. It looks like things have gotten out of hand, and Simon cannot take it any longer.

But wait! What is Jesus doing? Let me rephrase the question. **What is Jesus NOT doing?** Why doesn’t He stop her? Doesn’t He know that she first of all shouldn’t be there? Doesn’t He know that she is making Him look like He is one of her clients? Doesn’t He realize that this is making everyone at the table **extremely uncomfortable**? Doesn’t Jesus understand that allowing this prostitute to treat Him this way **forces others to question His character, reputation, and credibility** as a rabbi concerned with the holiness of God’s people?

The fact that Jesus does nothing at this point shouts to the reader, “What?!” But you see, this woman came **because she learned that Jesus was there**. She went there because there was something about Jesus that she knew **she would be treated differently than any other man** she had ever met. Perhaps she heard about the dinner at Matthew’s house where Jesus was at the party with tax collectors and sinners. Perhaps she overheard Jesus just moments earlier saying that **He is a friend of tax collectors and sinners**. What we do know is that **Jesus demonstrated grace and acceptance** of her at that moment that totally did not make sense to those abiding by the cultural norms and standards of the day.

[T/S] Certainly those questions about had to be brewing in the minds of those gathered there. In fact, we have recorded in Scripture the inner thought processes of Simon, which leads me to my second point. While it is true that when Jesus comes to dine, **grace comes to the table**, it is also true that when the religious come to dine, **grace is put under the court of conventional wisdom**. Simon’s response was totally not out of the ordinary. In fact, his response would likely have been **the response of just about everyone in that day and time**. But while they put grace under the court of conventional wisdom, Jesus is about to vindicate her actions by **re-interpreting them through the lens of grace**.

## 2. When the Religious Come, Grace Is Put Under the Court of Conventional Wisdom

What we see in verse 39 is Simon thinking to himself. His thought processes represent the kind of interrogation Jesus received in the courtroom of conventional wisdom. The charge against Jesus was twofold:

(a) **Jesus cannot be who He says He is, because prophets have knowledge about such woman as sinners.** The disqualification of being a prophet lied squarely on the perception that Jesus was lacking knowledge. But what happened next. Scripture says that Jesus answered him. Answer his words? No. Jesus answered his thoughts! In that moment, Jesus was showing Simon that not only is he a prophet who can know right from wrong, **He is the True Prophet who can know thoughts and intentions of the heart!** He does not just have true knowledge. **He has total and complete knowledge!** Not only did Jesus know what was going on outside with the prostitute and her actions, **He knew what was going on in the inside of every heart**, including Simon's. Charge number one in the interrogation process of conventional wisdom shot down.

(b) **The second part of Simon the Pharisee's thoughts was this: if He is who He says He is, Jesus would care more about the ritual purity and holiness of His body as a prophet and rabbi than to expose Himself to such filthiness and disease as this sinful woman.** As I mentioned earlier, the prostitutes actions towards Jesus could easily have led those reclining at the table to think that He was one of her clients. But here's the deal. It's just the opposite. **She was one of His "clients."** She was a sin-sick woman needing the forgiveness and mercy that only God could give, and she in faith came to Jesus to be made whole.

The very **body of Jesus** that Simon thought had become defiled would indeed soon become defiled as Jesus would become sin on the cross for all who would believe, including this woman. Jesus, the Holy One of Israel, perfect in every way, would be delivered up on a cross as a spotless Lamb. And **in His body on that cursed tree**, Jesus' body would absorb the wrath of God against sin as the Father turned His back on His own beloved Son. So rather than Jesus' body being defiled by her sin, **it was Jesus' body that would make this woman whole and perfectly righteous in the sight of God!** Charge number two in the interrogation process of conventional wisdom show down.

**[APP]** But I have to stop here for a second in this courtroom of conventional wisdom and ask ourselves a question. If you and I were witnesses there in that day, where would our thinking line up? How would we think and respond to what Jesus was doing? **Would we not more than likely resonate with the conventional wisdom of the day than the grace being shown by Jesus?**

Consider what Tim Chester, in his excellent book *A Meal With Jesus*, has to say about this:

“Luke seems to pick stories involving tax collectors and prostitutes. They exemplify **notorious sinners**. It’s as if he’s testing us. Have we grasped God’s grace? How do we react when a promiscuous woman kisses the body of Jesus? **Do we celebrate God’s grace, or are we scandalized?** The grace of God turns out to be **uncomfortable and embarrassing**. Jesus is socially disruptive; his radical grace disrupts social situations. And we don’t like church to be disrupted. We regard marginalized people in the church as ‘a problem’ to be ‘handled’” (40).

It’s like, “C’mon Jesus! Couldn’t you have picked people like a librarian or bank teller or office manager? Those kinds of people we are cool with. But all these dinner parties where the socially reprehensible sinners are really making me nervous?” But it’s like Jesus says to us,

“Yeah, and that’s the problem. You are picking and choosing the kind of sinners **you think** I’m going to save. And the people you are picking are the kind that **conventional wisdom** is comfortable with. But I don’t roll that way. I’m about saving sinners by sheer grace, and that means **I don’t look for respectable sinners** who are requesting moral refinement. I’m seeking poor, needy sinners requesting to be rescued from their sin.”

**We have to be very careful not to make Jesus into our own image.** We can accuse liberals for doing that when they dismiss the miracles He performed, but we conservatives can do it too by when **we smooth over the provocative edge that Jesus came with** as He often twisted the nose of religious elites and caused them to label Him a drunkard and a glutton. I sometimes wonder if the people Jesus allowed to eat off His plate and kiss His feet would receive entrance into our lives, even in the most minimal of ways?

**Jesus is not intimidated by the sinfulness of sinners;** he is, however, turned off the self-righteousness of moral people who think they are good, respectable, and honorable because of their moral refinement, sin management, and religious accomplishments. Should we seek to live with moral virtue and aspire to godliness and personal holiness? Absolutely? But the point is that **it is not moral virtue or godly or holy to shut yourself or to shut out and exclude those in society that we deem to be the “really bad” sinners. When we do that, we are not building a community by sovereign grace; we are building a country club by personal preference.**

Jesus wants us to view the world **through the lens of grace**, not through the lens of their sin or their past. When we begin to see people the way Jesus did, we can expect to be misunderstood the way Jesus was misunderstood. The only filter we should allow to enter our mind and color our perspective is “Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of which I am the foremost.” That perspective won’t be allowed in the courtroom of conventional wisdom, but **it will be vindicated in the throne room of God.**

[T/S] The way in which Jesus answers Simon’s thoughts is also gracious. He could have easily rebuked Him publicly, but instead, He invited Him to hear a parable. I would call it **the law of love versus the love of law.**

### 3. The Law of Love vs. The Love of Law

The parable is simple enough. Two people owed the same person money. On the one hand, **the debt was manageable** and could be paid back rather easily. On other hand, **the debt was massively crushing** and could never be paid back. Both debts were cancelled. Who would respond with greater love, appreciation, and thankfulness? The one with the greater debt.

Apply that to grace. **By God's grace in Jesus our sin debt is cancelled.** Colossians 2:13-14 puts it this way:

**13** And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having **forgiven** us all our trespasses, **14** by **canceling the record of debt** that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the **cross**.  
Colossians 2:13-14

Paul says that by the cross of Christ, sin debts are cancelled and forgiveness of sins is purchased. And this is for those who are **dead in trespasses and sins**, not those who think they are alive in their own self-righteousness. This cancellation is for those who **owe God the 500 denarii**, who feel the crushing weight of their sin debt against God. They are those who are **poor in spirit** and cannot pay God back by any attempts on their own. And for them, the exchange at the cross sounds something like this:

**9** For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet **for your sake he became poor**, so that you by his poverty might become rich.  
2 Corinthians 8:9

Jesus is rich in righteousness. Jesus is rich in holiness. Jesus is rich in mercy and grace. You are poor. The wages of your sin has amounted a debt crisis that could never be overcome on your own. The only way it could be removed is if there was **someone who was rich for you and could cancel your debts** by purchasing you back. And that is exactly what Jesus did when He forgave sinners who believe that on the cross, **He took my sin and I received His righteousness.**

Simon's problem, and the problem with the majority of the people in this world is **the idea that somehow he could pay God back, that his debt was manageable.** And if only he kept to the moral code of the day, the ritual and ceremonial laws prescribed for him, that he would be credited for his good works and have his supposed meager debt canceled. What is so tragic about this kind of legalism and moralism is that **you cannot even live up to your own standards.**

Notice how Jesus responded to Simon. He makes an object lesson with the law of love versus the love of law. You see, when anyone invited a guest into their house, there were three things that were lawful in **the rules of hospitality.** When a guest entered a house, the host placed his hand on the guest's shoulder and gave him **a kiss of peace.** The roads in that day were only dust tracks, and shoes were only sandals with thin straps across the foot. Feet were not only dirty but they were stinky as likely they would have stepped on animal dung on the road. So **cool water would be provided** to clean the guest's feet and comfort them. Also, **a pinch of sweet-smelling incense** was placed on the guest's head—all as good manners for anyone invited, but especially for a prophet and rabbi.

Jesus goes to Simon and explains to him that **he did none of these things for him**, showing that he broke his own rules of hospitality. **He was not only a terrible host, but he was a law breaker in his own right.** Then Jesus turns to the prostitute and makes an object lesson about the law of love. **What Simon could not do with the love of law, the prostitute excelled in the law of love.**

As a host, Simon should have greeted Jesus with a kiss of peace. The sinful woman greeted Jesus, not by kissing his head, but **by kissing his feet**—those dirty, stinky feet that received not water from the host became **the object of her affection.**

As a host, Simon should have greeted Jesus with a bowl of water to wash his feet. The sinful woman greeted Jesus, not with a bowl of water but **with the overflow of tears from her eyes** that dripped down her face. And then she used what is considered the glory of a woman—**her hair**—to wipe away the tear-stained feet of Jesus. The symbol of beauty in a woman used to clean the dirtiest part of a man. By the way, that's an object lesson within the object lesson. **God took the darling of heaven, the beautiful Savior, the glorious Lord, and made Him a servant and slave to wash the filth of our sin as He cried on the cross, pleading for our forgiveness.**

As a host, Simon should have greeted Jesus with sweet-smelling incense. The sinful woman greeted Jesus with **expensive alabaster ointment.** In essence, she gave all that she had—her tears, her kisses, her hair, and her costly perfume—because she was **overwhelmed by the forgiveness she found** in Jesus who accepted sinners.

So I ask the question: **who was the real host at the dinner party?** It was not Simon. It was the prostitute. She welcomed Jesus in every way Simon was supposed to but didn't. But she didn't just do it. **She did it extravagantly.** It was over the top. Excessive. Why? It was because the law of love that had overcome her heart. **Jesus reinterprets all those actions of this woman—actions that were perceived to be sinfully erotic and scandalous—to be actions of faith-driven love flowing from a heart that had experienced the forgiveness found in Jesus.** Jesus vindicated her actions because she was the true host who had a right understanding of who He is—namely a friend of sinners and forgiving Savior.

If I could boil it down Jesus' object lesson for us this morning, it would follow accordingly:

For the 500 denarii (sin debt cannot be paid back):

- (a) you know there is a great need
- (b) you believe Jesus meets that great need with grace
- (c) you experience forgiveness and inner transformation
- (d) extravagant love pours forth to Jesus for His grace

For the 50 denarii (sin debt is manageable):

- (a) you believe you are righteous, morally good, then you have no real need
- (b) Jesus is invited only on your terms for your own benefit, not for grace & salvation
- (c) you never experience forgiveness in the heart
- (d) instead of experiencing the law of love, you are only left with a self-love for the law

The former is a picture of the law of love. It is love that springs from forgiveness that springs from grace given to those who recognize they have a sin debt they could never pay back to God.

The latter is a picture of the love of law. It is moral refinement that springs from sin management that springs from convincing yourself the need is not that great and the debt can be paid back to God by being a good, religious person.

[T/S] But before I close, there is actually a fifth element that brings everything full circle for us.

#### 4. Grace Building Community

You see, it is really interesting how this story comes to a close. The tension is **not** fully resolved. Although Simon gave the right response to the Jesus' parable, **we don't know how he ended up treating the prostitute**. We don't know what how the rest of the party responded. All we know is that Jesus accepted her by grace, and the grace she received in the forgiveness of sins caused love for God to flood her heart.

I wonder if Luke leaves the scene open-ended like this to draw us, his readership into the scene itself and pose that question to us. **We can give Jesus all the right answers to the stories He presents us, but what about the real life situations where Jesus makes us uncomfortable?** We still have to make a decision as a community of God's people who we are going to welcome into our lives individually and into our fellowship corporately.

And I think that's a major take home for us. Let me make it very simple and clear. As the community of God's people, **we are called to welcome forgiven sinners to join us in our love affair with God**.

As I said from the outset, **the grace of God builds a genuinely loving community of forgiven sinners**. These sinners come from all kinds of backgrounds and sordid pasts. We are not defined, however, by our past sins. As Paul says, **"And such were some of you."** Rather, we are defined by who we are in Christ—forgiven, accepted, loved, adopted, and forever included in God's family to sit at His table of grace.

We should not be afraid to be made uncomfortable by grace. We are not intimidated by the sinfulness of sinners. After all, we know our own hearts. We are not embarrassed to have among us those whom society marginalizes and at best keeps at arm's distance. Why? Because we are **not** a company of people who owe God a manageable 50 denarii. We have **forsaken sin management** and the deceptive lie that God would credit us by our good works. We have abandoned the notion that we should accept morally refined sinners while discarding the messy ones. We are those who, having been forgiven the crushing debt of sin against God, **freely love sinners and display the grace of God that builds a community where Jesus is the host**.

## CONCLUSION

As Grace Baptist Church, we are . . .

A community built by grace where there is no pressure to perform and no need to pretend.

A community built by grace where needy people welcome needy people.

A community built by grace where we are harder on ourselves and merciful toward others.

A community built by grace where we love others not because they are lovely but because we have been loved by God.

A community built by grace where our conversations make much of Christ and the cross and draw little attention to ourselves.

A community built by grace where tangible love is demonstrated by acceptance and forgiveness rather than contempt and exclusion.

A community built by grace where the messiness of sinners does not discourage or deter us from meaningful engagement in the lives of people not like us.

A community built by grace where our posture is not at the head of the table but the feet of the needy, humbly seeking to serve others as Christ served us.

A community built by grace where we place the interests and needs of others before our own, recognizing that we are more blessed when we give than when we receive.

So brothers and sisters, **when you go about your life, what will your community look like? Who will you allow at your table?** How will you treat others in need of the mercy and forgiveness found in Jesus? The grace of God builds a community of genuinely loving community of forgiven sinners. Let us determine to be such a people for our city, for our world, and for the kingdom of God.

Let us pray.

## Grace Empowering Mission Luke 14:12-24

### INTRODUCTION

For the past several weeks, I have reinforcing the need to grasp **the profound nature** of the grace of God. I have been reinforcing this need because it is **so fundamental** to the Christian faith and yet **so contrary to our own nature** and normal means of functioning. To grasp the grace of God means nothing short of a rewiring of how we view ourselves and the world around us.

In all arenas of life, you can find what is sometimes called the **philosophy of meritocracy**. This is the practice where people are chosen or appointed to something based on their merits, whether it be the name they bear, intelligence, **credentials**, education, or any other standard of ability or **competency**. This ideology or philosophy **permeates our culture**. You can find it on the playground when children pick and choose whom they want on their dodgeball team. You can find it on a professional level in sports in draft days, as “blue chip” players are paraded based on their physical merits and accomplishments and value they could bring to an organization. On a practical level, you and I find it when job openings are available, and business owners are looking to hire the **most qualified** person for the job. By most qualified, they are talking about the person with **the best merits**, that is, education, experience, intelligence, personality, etc. In all of these examples, the thing that drives them all is this idea of meritocracy.

In a general sense, meritocracy has great aspirations. It encourages competition in the pursuit of excellence and strives to push the boundaries of creativity, ingenuity, and human skill. However, in a very real sense, **meritocracy is dangerous to the Christian life because it is damaging to the mission of God**. Here’s what I mean.

While the examples of sports and business are ones that we might relate to, **meritocracy affects us in everyday life** on a more basic level. This ideology teaches us to evaluate the people in our world by **how much value** they bring to our lives. We look at their “merits” and determine whether certain people are compatible to our wants and likes. For instance, if we value **money and wealth**, the tendency is to associate with those who have merits to justify such a friendship. If we value **beauty or physical appearance**, the tendency is to associate with those whose outer appearance merits a desire to have them in your life. Therefore, those lacking the merits are **marginalized and ignored** just like the kid on the basketball court who can’t dribble or the “C” average student applying for a job.

Because this ideology is so predominate in our culture, people spend their lives trying to help themselves, to increase their merits, and improve their standing and status in society. Anyone who can assist them in this **climb up the ladder of meritocracy** will be a rung on which they feel necessary to place their foot. And when it comes into the world of religion and spirituality, meritocracy is summed up in the axiom: **“God helps those who help themselves.”** After all, it is the merits of our spiritual credentials and religious performances God is looking for, right?

**Wrong.**

In all the world, throughout all ages, **there is only one person who has any merits to present to God**. There is only one person who, on the basis of merits, accomplishments, and credentials, can be recognized **as pleasing to God**. *That person is Jesus Christ*. In His sinless life, **He merited perfect righteousness**. He was, is, and always will be well-pleasing to God in heaven.

What that means for you and me who swim in the culture of meritocracy, **we** should be ignored and marginalized from heaven because **we have absolutely no merits with God**. Our life is **one big demerit**. The Bible calls that being sinfully depraved. We are deprived of righteousness. And so if anyone of us are ever going to know God or get to heaven, it is going to have to be **on the merits of someone else**—the only person who has any merits, any righteousness that God accepts. Therefore, **if God helps those help themselves, we are dashed into despair**.

Thank goodness **God rejects the ideology of meritocracy** when it comes to His mission. He does not help those who can help themselves. Rather, He helps those who **cannot** help themselves. Those who cannot help themselves recognize they need what they cannot merit on their own. The good news is that the help they need is **amply provided in the grace of God!**

So far, we have looked in the gospel of Luke to discover how grace motivates inspires hospitality and how grace builds genuine community. This morning, I want to continue in Luke's account of Jesus' life and expand the focus of grace and its relationship to the mission God has given us. Please take a copy of God's Word and turn with me to Luke chapter 14, and I want to read beginning with verse 12 down through verse 24. In verse one of chapter 14, we find Jesus yet again at the dinner table of a "ruler of the Pharisees." Beginning with verse 14, the Word of God says:

**12** He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. **13** But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, **14** and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

**15** When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" **16** But he said to him, "A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. **17** And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' **18** But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.' **19** And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.' **20** And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' **21** So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.' **22** And the servant said, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' **23** And the master said to the servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. **24** For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.'"

Luke 14:12-24

From these verses, I want you to lay hold of this central thought, namely:

### **Do unto others as Jesus has done unto you.**

The “do unto others” summaries **the mission** God has called us to.

“As Jesus has done unto you” summaries the grace of God we have received from Jesus.

When we **remember** and **rejoice** in the grace we have received in Jesus, we will be **empowered** to live on mission in a world needing the gospel of God’s grace. The world permeated with the ideology of meritocracy needs a new worldview, a new foundation, a new approach to life **not built on the merits of man but on the merits of the God-man, Jesus Christ**. The world might become temporarily better by the achievements of man, but **it will only be saved by the accomplishments of the God-man**.

[T/S] What the God-man shows us in our text is **how He overthrows the meritocracy** that the religious system had built. Jesus instead inserts a new kingdom ethic and approach to people not based on their merits but rather based on Christ’s merit for them. Let’s look first at this new kingdom ethic.

#### **1. New Kingdom Ethic (v. 12-14)**

Notice that when Jesus begins, He turns His attention to the man who invited Him. He wanted to address the host **directly**. But to be clear, Jesus was also addressing everyone at that table (the pronoun “you” in these texts are plural, not singular). He’s making this address because the host and those who attended that dinner had **bought into the philosophy of meritocracy**. And here is how it worked out.

Being invited to a dinner served as a **standard of prestige and power**. For the host, it was a way of cozying up with the “who’s who” in the community, bringing the wealthy, powerful, and elite to your house. For those receiving the invitation, it was an expression of **recognition and honor** that they would be invited. The host recognized the merits of having such persons at the table, and attending the dinner would **improve your standing in society**, as you would be surrounded by others with greater credentials and merits. And it would be these very people you need to climb that latter of prominence and power. Therefore, accepting such dinners would be **crucial to your reputation and clout in a community**.

For those who accepted the invitation and participated in the dinner, it was expected that you would return the favor by inviting the host to your house for a dinner as well. This reciprocal relationship was **the basis of their community ethic**. You only invite those who can invite you back. Therefore, the cycle would repeat itself over and over again, as the **upper echelon of society** would increase their status and prominence off the backs of one another.

Into this well-worked system of meritocracy, Jesus offers a **new kingdom ethic**. The religious elite, the rich and power would never invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Why? Because **these people had nothing they could offer them**. For one, they could not reciprocate by hosting a dinner of their own. Even more, **it would be embarrassing** to have lame or blind man at the table. They would be a detriment to their social ambitions. Instead of being a people of merit, **they were a people of demerit**.

But Jesus interjects and tells the host, “**You need a whole new guest list.**” And by saying that, He is really saying, “**You need a new kingdom ethic.**” The Pharisees invited people because of what they could offer them. The **reward** of their dinner was an invitation to another dinner during which they could advance their position in society.

Jesus tells them to invite those who cannot pay you back, to invite those have nothing to offer them. This is more than throwing a monkey wrench into the equation. **It’s an overthrow of their meritocracy.** Don’t bring on the merits. **Bring on the demerits!** Why? And here’s the basis of the new kingdom ethic.

Jesus says, “You will be blessed . . . you will be repaid in the resurrection of the just.” There is a **divine blessing** that awaits those who invite who invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. But notice how Jesus puts it. That blessing will come at the resurrection of the just/righteous. Not just a general resurrection, but **a resurrection reserved for those whom God considers righteous.**

Let me ask you a question. Who will God consider righteous at their resurrection? It will be those who are welcomed into heaven. And who are those that are welcome in heaven? Those who have been **given the perfect righteousness of Jesus on their behalf.** In other words, only those who have come to embrace Jesus as their sole righteousness and sin-bearing substitute on the cross for them. **The righteous or just ones are those made righteous through the gospel—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.**

Jesus says to the ruler of the Pharisees, “You offer a dinner to the wealthy and elite to improve your status. You offer a dinner because you want to be repaid by being invited at the table of more elite people. **But My people,** they offer a dinner to the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame because they don’t have to improve their status. They are already righteous. They don’t need to improve their status. In fact, **they can’t improve upon it.** So they offer a dinner not because they are hoping of being repaid but because **they know there is already a seat at the table in the heavenly banquet at the resurrection.**”

Do you see the drastic difference? On what basis do the Pharisees live their lives?

**Meritocracy.** On what basis do followers of Jesus live their lives? **The grace of God.** The new kingdom ethic is “do unto others as Jesus as done unto you”. What are we to do unto others? Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind into our lives and into our homes. Why are we to do it? Because that is exactly who we are before God! **We are** the spiritually poor, having nothing to offer for our salvation. **We are** the spiritually crippled, made powerless by our sin. **We are** the spiritually blind, unable to see the truth about Jesus apart from the Holy Spirit. **We are** the spiritually lame, unable to come to God on our own. So how is it that we are righteous and given the promise to eat at the heavenly banquet? **The sheer, sovereign grace of God!**

When we see ourselves as we really are in the sight of God, we will embrace a kingdom ethic empowered by the grace of God. You got the assumption Jesus made, right? Those who are righteous because of His life, death, and resurrection will be blessed precisely because of **how they life out that new kingdom ethic** in rejecting meritocracy and showing grace to others who have nothing to offer us. We go after the demerits and invite them into our lives because before God we are demerits apart from Jesus but have been welcomed by the grace of God.

[T/S] So before we go any further, let's do a little personal probing in light of what Jesus is teaching us about the new kingdom ethic. **Who is on your guest list?** Generally speaking, if your life was one big party, who are the ones receiving invitations? Are they the ones who have something to offer you? Are they the ones who have something or some way of paying you back? And more practically speaking, what's your relationship to the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind in our community? Jesus makes a direct connection that those who are made righteous in the gospel of grace **will be those who demonstrate grace** to the poor and needy. That's the new kingdom ethic. It is not if you have a dinner, but Jesus says **when**...

## 2. The Curse of Old Kingdom Idolatry (v. 15-20)

In the middle of this scene, an anonymous person pipes up with another pronouncement of blessing. Perhaps he thought he was tacking on to what Jesus was saying. He said, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" This man is **right** in what he was saying but **wrong** in his presumption. He was right because the event of which he speaks is the Messianic Banquet which had been prophesied specifically in Isaiah 25:6-9. The prophet Isaiah writes:

**6** On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples **a feast** of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. **7** And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. **8 He will swallow up death forever**; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. **9** It will be said on that day, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, **that he might save us**. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; **let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.**"  
Isaiah 25:6-9

The Pharisees and the religious elite **thought** they were guaranteed this blessing because of their lineage as descendents of Abraham, and of course, their noble status. **Based on their merits**, they pronounced blessing upon themselves with confidence that the heavenly feast would resemble their earthly feasts.

But Jesus is about to quickly show them that the kingdom of God is **a great reversal**. Those who are low will be lifted up, and those who are last shall be first. And in this next parable, those who were initially invited would be judged as those who will "never taste" the banquet of Jesus.

What verses 16 through 20 reveal is what I call **the curse of old kingdom idolatry**.

Jesus makes a parable similar to what they were actually experiencing. He talks about a host putting on a great banquet with many people being invited. As Jesus began, you could imagine the heads nodding in understanding. Then Jesus began to explain **a surprising turn of events**.

Great banquets or feasts required **double invitations**. A first invitation would be sent to honorary guests, notifying them of the banquet. The guests would RSVP so that the host would know how much food to prepare. Guests also needed time to prepare themselves, and it was often the case that guests would determine who else of prominence was coming to know to leverage that meal for securing status or prestige in the community. Once everything was ready, a second invitation would be given, calling all the guests to come join in the banquet.

It was at this second invitation, calling for the guests to come, that host began to receive excuses for not attending. Verse 18 says that **all the invited guests** made excuses, and they were represented in the three examples Jesus provided. The first excuse has to do with **business** (buying a field); the second excuse has to do with **possessions** (five yoke of oxen); and the third excuse has to do with a **relationship** (marriage).

Here's the deal. Business, possessions, and relationships are not bad in and of themselves. In fact, they are gifts of God. However, all of these become bad **when they become ultimate**. When the good gifts God gives you become **ultimate and preeminent**, then they become what the Bible calls **idols**. This is why I call it the curse of old kingdom idolatry. The people who turned down the invitation to the banquet presented business, possessions, and relationships as **preeminent over the banquet**. And the result of this is that they were cursed in the end.

While in verse 16, it was presumed that these people would be eating at the Messianic banquet, in verse 24, Jesus makes it clear that the **“none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.”**

Jesus is very clear that **all things should be brought in subjection to His reign and rule**, including money, wealth, possessions, and relationships. In the parable of the sower in Luke 8, there is a soil **characterized by thorns**, which grew up and choked the good seed. Jesus explained the thorny ground this way:

**“14 And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.”**

Luke 8:14

The heart of a person is represented by the soil, and Jesus is saying that when the cares and riches and pleasures of life captivate your heart, the good seed of the gospel will get choked out and never mature. Why? **Because idolatry has taken root in your heart**. Again, Jesus says in Luke 12:15 to **“take care and be on guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”** Furthermore, Jesus says in Luke 16:13 that **“you cannot serve God and money.”** When it came to relationships we see, for instance, later in Luke 14 that all other relationships in life, whether father, mother, wife, children, brothers or sisters—all other loves must appear like hate in comparison to the love we are to have for Jesus (Luke 14:26).

The excuses represented in these three examples summarize not just the rejection of the dinner invitation but even more **the host Himself**, for it was humiliating and degrading to be turned down, especially if it was the dinner guests who would bring you greater acclaim and approval in the community build on the practice of meritocracy. And in terms of Jesus, this was indeed the case when it came to His own people, the Jews. Listen to the prologue of the apostle John in his Gospel account. In John 1:9-13, John writes the following about Jesus:

**9** The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. **10** He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. **11** He came to his own, and **his own people did not receive him**. **12** But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, **13** who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.  
John 1:9-13

Jesus came to His own, but His own did not receive Him. Jesus was rejected by His own people. But there were some who did receive the invitation to believe. John says, **“but to all who did receive him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God.”** And this right was granted to them not based on their family lineage or personal merits or human effort. Rather, this privilege and right is **granted solely by God and on the basis of His grace**.

**[APP]** The same excuses used in the rejection of the invitation are the same excuses people employ today in their refusal to receive Jesus as Lord. Business, possessions, and relationships are **distractions from the doing business with one’s own heart** and treasuring Christ as the prize of heaven and entering into a relationship where we call God our Father.

Friend, if you at the sound of my voice, and in your heart you are making excuses why you won’t turn away from your idols and trust in Jesus, let me persuade you to give it up. You who have not ever truly embraced Jesus as your Savior, why are you eating the stale crumbs of this world when there is opportunity right now to feast on the Bread of Life? It is a curse to be the king in your kingdom, because the very things that have **captured** your heart in this life will **condemn** you in the life to come.

**[T/S]** But while the curse of old kingdom idolatry, Jesus continues in verses 21 through 23 to show there is also the blessing of a new kingdom mission.

### **3. The Blessing of New Kingdom Mission (v. 21-23)**

Jesus continues in the parable with yet again another drastic turn of events. Having been turned down by those who presumed they would eat bread in the kingdom of God, Jesus explains that the host commissions his servant to **“go out quickly to the ‘streets and lanes of the city’, and bring the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.”**

The host still had a great banquet prepared, and he is determined to have his house full, so he sends his servant on a mission. Notice who are the ones on the guest list. **It’s the exact same people found in verse 13**. The ones who will receive the blessing of eating bread in the kingdom of God are those who **never had the opportunity on earth** to eat bread at such a

great feast, because, according to the culture's standards, they did not qualify. They were not worthy. **They were the demerits** who could not repay or reward you with greater status or prominence.

But even after the servant fulfilled his mission, there was still room. So the master again commissions him to go out to the "highways and hedges" and compel people to come in. At this point, the master of the house was **indiscriminate with the invitations**. Notice the language Jesus uses here. Go out quickly. Bring them in. Compel people to come. Why would an invitation be enough?

The answer is because **these people would have never received an invitation and would not have believed they were invited to such a great banquet**. It was so unbelievable to them that it was required of the servant to bring them with him. He had to compel them with persuasion and pleas to accept the invitation. The servant had to work through the shock and disbelief among such people like the poor, the blind, the lame, or the crippled that they would be considered.

*Could be considered.*

Have you considered the composition of the kingdom of God? We commanded to consider our calling. Listen again, as I read 1 Corinthians 1:26-31.

**26** For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were **wise** according to worldly standards, not many were **powerful**, not many were of **noble birth**. **27** But **God chose** what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; **God chose** what is weak in the world to shame the strong; **28** **God chose** what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, **29** so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. **30** And **because of him** you are in Christ Jesus, who **became to us** wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, **31** so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

[T/S] God has a way of choosing that is totally unlike us. His choice is not motivated by a philosophy of meritocracy but by **a passion for His glory**. God is glorified when He is seen as the **bountiful provider**. God is glorified when we revel in **the sufficiency of Jesus** that swallows up our gaping depravity. God is glorified when we realize that **only** "because of him" we are "in Christ Jesus."

## CONCLUSION

So here's the deal. Here's how this all ties in together. I encourage you to stick this in your lunch box and chew on it for a while.

Verses 12-14 is all about **a new kingdom ethic**.

Verses 21-23 is all about **a new kingdom mission**.

Both of these are based on **the grace of God**.

***We are to do unto others as Jesus has done unto us.***

**The great blessing of heaven** is the privilege and sons and daughters of God to sit down and eat bread in the kingdom of Christ. Christians are those who have tasted the bread of heaven and seen that Jesus is good for sinners. Christians are those who, once spiritually poor, crippled, blind, and lame were invited by someone who went to them and compelled them to come to Christ, not because they had anything to offer, but **in spite of** the fact they had nothing to offer.

Christians know the dinner party Jesus is preparing for us right now **could never be paid back by their own merits**. Rather, our reservation is secure because Jesus' merits don't have an expiration date. The righteousness of Jesus will stand on our behalf for all eternity, and **there's no need to try to improve our standing** because we have been accepted in the bellowed, made joint-heirs with Jesus, and given an inheritance with all the saints. **It doesn't get any better than that!**

And what do we owe this to? Meritocracy? No! **Sovereign grace!**

And brothers and sisters, the connection between the kingdom ethic in 12-14 and the kingdom mission in 21-23 is **the list!** We who were once poor, crippled, lame, and blind **have received grace**. And now that we have received grace, we are also servants **who received a mission**.

Someone once said that evangelism is **"one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread."** How true is that? The commission stands for you and me. We aren't deserving. We aren't worthy. We have considered our calling and the fact that God chose us in spite of us. We are blown away that God would be so kind to open our eyes when we were blind, to open our ears when we were deaf, to bring us to life when we were dead in our sins.

And that grace beckons you to the mission: **do unto others as Jesus has done unto you**. Jesus has not treated you as your sins deserve. Jesus has not judged you based on your merits. Jesus has given you grace upon grace. Jesus has showered you with mercy and love. Jesus has smothered you with compassion and kindness.

And what Jesus has done for you should empower you to do it for others. Like the servant, you are commissioned by your Master to go. Go quickly. Bring others to the great banquet. Compel them. Persuade others. Plead with them to be reconciled with God by receiving the invitation to taste and see that the Lord is good.

Those **amazed by grace** will be compelling on mission. Persuade others because **Jesus preoccupies you**. Go quickly to the lanes and streets of the city because you know the day is coming soon when the Master of the house will say, **"Come, for everything is now ready."** Let it be known that we have fulfilled the Master's commission to fill His house because we have embraced the kingdom mission to bless others with the good news of Jesus Christ.

On this side of heaven, we may look like the little boy on the playground court who couldn't dribble and no one wanted, but in the resurrection of the righteous, we will sit with the King of glory as a kingdom of priests, ever praising the One who eternally blessed us with space purchased by grace.

Let us pray.

## A Celebration of Grace Luke 15:11-32

### INTRODUCTION

I have thoroughly enjoyed the past four weeks in preparing and sharing messages focused on the grace of God. It has been very good for my soul and I hope, good for your soul as well.

I want to conclude this mini-series of messages from Luke's Gospel account with a message that calls us as a church to **a continual celebration of grace**. The setting in each of our four texts had to do with a dinner meal, in which sinners were invited, accepted, and enjoyed intimacy with Jesus. At the same time, the self-righteous, prideful, and religious elites were rebuked and judged by Jesus.

In the first week, we focused on a dinner party provided **by a tax collector**, namely Matthew. In the second and third weeks, we focused on a dinner party provided **by Pharisees**. And this morning, we are turning our attention to a dinner party provided by neither tax collectors nor Pharisees. **This dinner party is hosted by none other than God Himself** as portrayed in most popular of all parables told of Jesus—the parable of two lost sons.

This parable often is called the parable of the prodigal son, but that title or label only tells part of the story, and if you were left only with the focus of one son, you will miss the point of Jesus' parable. That we will get to shortly, but let's begin by turning with me to Luke chapter 15, and I want to start reading at verse 11 and continue down through the end of the chapter.

**11** And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. **12** And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. **13** Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. **14** And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. **15** So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. **16** And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

**17** "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! **18** I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. **19** I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" **20** And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. **21** And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' **22** But the father said to his servants, **23** 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. **23** And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. **24** For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

**25** “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. **26** And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. **27** And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ **28** But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, **29** but he answered his father, ‘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. **30** But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ **31** And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. **32** It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

Luke 15:11-32

From these verses, I want you to lay hold of this central thought, namely:

### **God calls His children to embrace a continual celebration of grace.**

Before we dive into the text, I want to make the case from a larger, more macro point-of-view. When Jesus began His public ministry, He performed **His first miracle** at a wedding in Cana. Weddings are the most celebratory occasions in all of life. Yet in this case, the host family ran out of wine and was left to suffer the shame and embarrassment of failing to provide the means of celebration. Then Jesus does His thing and turns the water into wine. And not just any wine. The experienced host could only conclude that **Jesus had provided the best wine**.

Let’s not be naïve to think that the Son of Man did not have a purpose in using the context of a wedding celebration to reveal His glory. He was communicating that, when the King is revealed, **for those in the kingdom it is a time of celebration**. Jesus gives the best wine because *His parties are always better*.

That was the beginning. But what about the height of His public ministry? What about the time of His greatest popularity just before He set His focus toward Jerusalem in preparation to go to the cross? That time came while He was in Bethsaida as explained in Luke 9. Jesus **“welcomed large crowds and spoke to them of the kingdom of God and cured those who had need of healing”** (Luke 9:11). We know that at time it was at least 5,000 men and probably a crowd in excess of 15-20,000 people.

This time Jesus reveals His glory by taking five loaves and two fishes and prepares a banquet for this massive crowd. **As the host, Jesus provides a feast for the people so great that there were twelve basketfuls leftover**. Scripture says **“they all ate and were satisfied”** (Luke 9:17). But not only were they satisfied, there were enough basketfuls for each of His disciples to hold in their hands and behold first-hand the celebration feast Jesus serves up on His own accord.

At the end of His earthly ministry just before He would offer His body and blood as a sacrifice on the cross, Jesus had one **Last Supper** with His disciples and **employs a meal as a means by which they would remember the kingdom of their Lord**. And when Jesus appeared after His resurrection from the dead, Scripture reveals that it was through Jesus breaking and blessing the bread that they recognized Him.

In just about every major occasion in the life of Jesus, He is expressing the celebration and party that comes when the King is revealed. Whether it is providing the best wine or the superabundance of food or realization of His resurrected body, **Jesus is giving them a foretaste, an appetizer, of the greater celebration, the greater party that is to come when we dine with Him in glory**.

It makes sense, then, that His critics would summarize His life by saying “**the Son of Man has come eating and drinking**” (Luke 7:34). **Indeed, he ate and drank so much that they concluded He was a drunkard and glutton**. But not only that, in each occasion, the party Jesus attended always attracted sinners, tax collectors, the poor, and the prostitutes. And Jesus always welcomes them! Why? **Because with Jesus, it is always a celebration of grace**. When His kingdom comes, mercy comes to the marginalized and grace is poured out on those gripped by their sin and need of deliverance.

So then we come to Luke 15. Luke provides us the background in the first two verses. Notice what was happening in the real world. **Tax collectors and sinners kept coming to Him**. Jesus was like **a heavenly magnet** whose gravitational pull of grace continued to draw more and more sinners to Himself. And **not one of them** Jesus did **not** receive to Himself. In fact, the Pharisees and scribes grumbled, “**This man receives sinners and eats with them.**” He not only accepted them. Jesus feasted, celebrated, and partied with them. And this made them incredibly uncomfortable, frustrated, and upset. Why? Because Jesus was undermining their religious standards and at the same time overthrowing their belief system which they used to approach God.

Chapter 15 is comprised of three stories, with each story focusing on (1) something being lost and eventually found, and (2) the result being great joy in heaven as a result. **Heaven is characterized by a joyful celebration for repenting sinners. If, then, we are going to be a colony of heaven on earth, then we will bear the resemblance of the heavenly celebration in our community of faith**. That’s the point of each parable in general and the main point of my message this morning: **we are called to embrace a continual celebration of grace**.

**[T/S]** The story we are considering this morning has three scenes in it. The first scene is about **the younger brother**; the second scene is between the **younger brother and his father**; and the third scene focuses on the **reaction of the elder brother**. In the time we have together this morning, I want to point out to you three things and sum up what God is saying to us about Himself and His amazing grace. The three things are (1) the empty promises of sin, (2) the passionate love of the Father, and (3) the true and better elder brother.

## 1. Empty Promises of Sin (v. 11-16)

The two brothers in the story are intended to **parallel with the two parties** at the beginning of Luke 15. The younger brother is representative of the tax collectors and sinners, and the older brother is representative of the Pharisees and scribes.

In the story, the younger brother goes to the Father to demand his inheritance. He wants to be on his own, running his life his way, all the way, right away. To demand his share of his father's inheritance before his father passed away was not only **deeply disrespectful**, it was nothing short of **wishing that his father were dead**. The word "property" literally means "**life**", meaning the younger son wanted to take the life's work and blessing of his father and essentially **tear his father's livelihood apart**. This was because he did not want his father; he wanted his father's stuff. So the taking of his share in the inheritance was essentially saying to his father, "**I'm dead to you.**"

The son took what was his and left for **a life of self-fulfillment**, entirely independent and free. He wanted to "live it up" and experience the world, doing anything and everything that his heart desires. Jesus explains that the younger son squandered all of his inheritance in reckless living. He had **wasted everything**, and he was on the trajectory of wasting his life.

What was intended to be a life of self-fulfillment soon became **a life of self-destruction**. On the heels of his irresponsible and reckless lifestyle came a bitter providence as a severe famine hit the country. So the son had no other recourse than to hire himself as a servant to work the fields and feed pigs. As a Jew, working with pigs was forbidden because the law said, "**Cursed is he who feeds the swine.**" And to top it off, the son was so desperate he couldn't feed himself what the pods for the pigs. No one gave him anything.

This biographical sketch is a powerful picture of **the empty promises of sin**. Here is a young man who went from being **a son** enjoying the father's generosity to **a life of self-rule** leading to emptiness and loneliness to **a life of slavery** doing the work that could only be considered as a curse. Life looked so good and promising from his father's front porch, but in a short amount of time in the far country, the downward trajectory of sin and depravity led him from the promise of **freedom to slavery**, from **a rich inheritance to abject poverty**, from **eating the father's delicacies to longing for pods of the pigs**.

*All of this because he wanted his life his way, right away.*

Friends, this is the wages of sin. It leads to death. This young man was literally starving himself to death because of his sinful choices. And the tragic irony is that he thought leaving home he would truly live! **The life of self-fulfillment is totally emptying**. You cannot fill what your heart longs for, and every consecutive attempt to do that only leads you to more irrational and maddening behavior. How could a son of such stature find himself in such a condition? **He was left to himself.**

Sinful indulgence is a **locust** that devours. It is a **disease** that is deadly. It leads you to sow into the wind so that you **reap a whirlwind**. The pursuit of the empty promises of sin has led this young man to being lonely, empty, and stinky physically on the one hand, and fearful, shameful, and full of guilt spiritually on the other hand. The far country looks attractive from a distance, but once the devil lures you in close enough for you to find it empty, it's too late. You are enslaved. **The promise of a party resulted in a prison of your own making**. The outworking of this life left the prodigal physically and morally bankrupt.

But notice what happened to the son when he came to an end of himself. This young man went from **a longing to be free** (leaving his father's house with his inheritance) to **a longing to be fed** (stinky and starving), to **a longing to return to his father**. He came to the realization that the simplest of provisions as a servant in his father's house is better than all the empty promises of sin in the far country.

He came to himself. Literally, **he came to his senses**. The deception and lies had been exposed. When he came to the **dead-end road of self-indulgence**, he was left to a sobering moment of **self-examination**. His realization of what he had done led to an attitude of repentance and turning away from the life of sin which ended in a resolution to return home and pursue reconciliation with the father he had disowned. That's a picture of when God is at work!

Sin is irrational and keeps you from dealing honestly and realistically with your life. The freedom you pursue in sin is **a false reality**. You can only understand yourself rightly when you examine your life through the lens of God's Word. After realization comes repentance because you don't like who you are. You don't want to continue down the path you have charted for your life. You are in self-destruction mode, and you need to be rescued from yourself. But that repentance takes fruit in a resolution to turn to God in faith, seeking to be reconciled with Him.

From realization to repentance to resolution to reconciliation to restoration, **all of this is the work of God's grace** in awakening you to your need, supplying you the provision, and applying it to your life, and experiencing new life, a new beginning, a new reason for living.

My prayer is that even now this morning God work in some of you to arrest your mind and heart and cause you to repent and believe in Christ. **Life outside of knowing Jesus Christ does not make sense**. It is only when you "come to your senses" that you realize **the real party does not exist outside the Father's house but rather inside the Father's house**—a party that is a celebration of grace.

[T/S] So in the first scene we come to see the empty promises of sin in the bio sketch of the younger brother consumed by a life of self-fulfillment. But as he returns home, we discover a beautiful picture of the passionate love of the Father.

## 2. Passionate Love of the Father (v. 17-24)

You can imagine that the prodigal son was full of **fear and anxiety**. His father had every right to reject him and refuse any offer even to be a slave. After all, he humiliated his father and totally disrespected him to his face. Even the acceptance as a hired servant would have been better than what the prodigal deserved. At least as a hired servant, he could work and earn wages to **pay back the debts he owed his father** for squandering his wealth on reckless living. So the

prodigal began rehearsing in his mind what he was going to say, hoping the best but expecting the worst. What happened next is nothing short of stunning.

Jesus said that **the father saw his son** from a long way off. This means he had been anticipating his return. The father was a true watchman who waited for his son's return, looking for any signs as far as the eye could see. Before there was an explanation for his son's actions, the father felt compassion for him. **He was deeply moved by what he saw.** He was not moved in anger to kick his son but to **kiss** his son.

In those days, it was a sign of dignity for the head of the house never to run, because he would be showing his legs in public. When this old dad took off down that road, he became utterly undignified in his sprint. Can you see him now? When Jesus says the father embraced him, literally the father fell upon the son's neck in a passionate embrace. And the kisses. Not just a kiss on the cheek, but literally the Greek text means that **the Father kissed and kissed and kissed again.**

He wanted his son to know that, before a word was spoken from his mouth, **he loved his son.** He wanted his son to know that there is more mercy in the father than there was sin in his son. He wanted him to know that where sin abounded in the far country, **grace abounded all the more in the father's embrace.**

Charles Spurgeon has taken up the passionate love of the father expressed in the many kisses lavished on his son. Listen how the Prince of Preachers explains this "**prodigal love for a prodigal son**":

This poor young man, in his hungry, faint, and wretched state, having come a very long way, had not much heart in him. His hunger had taken all energy out of him, and he was so conscious of his guilt that he had hardly the courage to face his father; so his father gives him a kiss, as much as to say, "**Come, boy, do not be cast down; I love you.**"

"Oh, *the past, the past*, my father!" he might moan, as he thought of his wasted years; but he had no sooner said that than he received another kiss, as if his father said, "**Never mind the past; I have forgotten all about that.**" This is the Lord's way with His saved ones. Their past lies hidden under the blood of atonement.

But then, perhaps, the young man looked down on his foul garments, and said, "*The present, my father, the present*, what a dreadful state I am in!" And with another kiss would come the answer, "**Never mind the present, my boy. I am content to have you as you are. I love you.**" This, too, is God's word to those who are "accepted in the Beloved." In spite of all their vileness, they are pure and spotless in Christ, and God says of each one of them, "Since you were precious in My sight, you have been honourable, and I have loved you. Therefore, though in yourself you are unworthy, through My dear Son you are welcome to My home."

"Oh, but," the boy might have said, "*the future, my father, the future!* What would you think if I should ever go astray again?" Then would come another holy kiss, and his father would say, "**I will see to the future, my boy; I will make home so bright for you that you will never want to go away again.**"

Whatever there was to trouble the son, the father gave him a kiss to set it all right; and, in like manner, our God has a love-token for every time of doubt and dismay which may come to His reconciled sons. Perhaps one whom I am addressing says, "Even though I confess my sin, and seek God's mercy, I shall still be in sore trouble, for through my sin, I have brought myself down to poverty." "There is a kiss for you," says the Lord: "Your bread shall be given to you, and your water shall be sure." "But I have even brought disease upon myself by sin," says another. "There is a kiss for you, for I am Jehovah-Rophi, the Lord that heals you, who forgives all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases." "But I am dreadfully down at the heel," says another. The Lord gives you also a kiss, and says, "I will lift you up, and provide for all your needs. No good thing will I withhold from them that walk uprightly." All the promises in this Book belong to every repentant sinner, who returns to God believing in Jesus Christ, His Son.

It is almost as if the father could not contain himself. He quickly called his servant to bring the **best robe**. Now who would have the best robe in the house? Why it would be the father's own robe. It would be a **sign of honor and royalty**. He calls for the **ring**, because that is a symbol representing authority and restored identity. He calls for **shoes** on his feet, because only slaves are without shoes. You see, his father is not treating the prodigal like a slave, though he deserves that. He is treating him like a son, replacing **acceptance** where there has been shame, **affirmation** where there has been depression, **compassion** where there has been apathy, and **joyfulness** where there has been fearfulness.

But to top it off, the father goes to extravagant measures to throw **the biggest welcome home party imaginable**. He calls for the fattened calf. Any ole' calf would suffice for a party upwards to 100 people. But the father wants the fattened one, reserved only for the most unique and special occasions. **For him, it does not getting any better than this; therefore, there is no cost that he is unwilling to pay.**

Why? The father says because my son was dead to me but now he is alive. He was once lost in the far country but now he is found and home safe and sound in my arms. Later in the story, the father tells the elder brother in verse 32 that **it is fitting for such a celebration**. But really, the text says it is necessary to have this party. In other words, the father is saying, "**What other response would be appropriate for such an occasion?**" The only right and proper course of action is to celebration, and to do so extravagantly!

This is the **picture of our Father in heaven**. Jesus is using this story to give us a glimpse into the heart of heaven when a repenting sinner comes to Jesus. God does not sit up in heaven and simply nod when a sinner believes in Jesus. God is not up there stone-faced and tight-lipped. No! God is rejoicing and celebrating! **When the pursuing love of God kisses the brokenness of a repenting sinner, the only appropriate response is a celebration of grace!**

God's passionate love was put on display when He put His Son on the cross. Scripture says that **"God demonstrated His own love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"** (Romans 5:8).

While we were **yet in the far country**.  
 While we were **wasting our life away**.  
 While we were **still weak and ungodly**.

Tim Keller, writing about the Father's love has this to say:

“God’s love and forgiveness can pardon and restore any and every kind of sin and wrongdoing. It doesn’t matter who you are or what you’ve done. It doesn’t matter if you’ve deliberately oppressed or even murdered people, or how much you’ve abused yourself. The younger brother knew that in the father’s house **there was abundant ‘food to spare,’** but he also discovered that **there was grace to spare.** There is no evil that the father’s love cannot pardon and cover, and **there is no sin that is a match for his grace**” (*Prodigal God*, 24).

God passionately pursued us in love and demonstrated it by sacrificing His own Son. And receiving that sacrificial love means that we have been brought into the presence of God. It is there that we **find fullness of joy.** It is there that we **experience pleasures forevermore.** We have a heavenly Father that is described in Zephaniah 3:17 as one who “rejoices over us with gladness” and “exults over you with loud singing.” Can’t you see that in this story, how the father leads the party in loud singing and shouts of joy? Such is the attitude of God in heaven toward His children who come home. *It’s a party like no other.*

[T/S] In most cases, the story ends here. But that is not how the story ends. In fact, the main point is not about the prodigal’s reckless life or the even the father’s radical love. Rather, Jesus draws the attention of the story to the reaction of the elder brother. In verse 25-32, we discover the reaction of the elder brother and how that leaves us longing for a true and better elder brother.

### 3. The True and Better Elder Brother (v. 25-32)

The other brother was home all the time with his father, but he was just as lost as his younger brother. While the prodigal was lost because of his **self-indulgent lifestyle**, the elder brother was lost because of his **moral conformity or rectitude.** He heard the music and dancing and thought if anyone deserved to have a party thrown, **he** should have been the reason. After all, **he** was the one who did not leave his father. **He** is the one working hard on the fields. Why should his brother who wasted his life get treated with such generosity and joy?

Unlike his father, the elder son in anger refuses to participate in the celebration, casting a vote of no-confidence in the compassionate dealings of the prodigal son returning home. “**A fattened calf, father?! All these years I have slaved for you and you would not even give me a goat! How dare you! How could you! How are you going to pay for these excessive party antics? From my two-thirds of the inheritance? That will NOT be happening.**” Can you hear the anger and frustration in the elder son’s voice? He would not even call the prodigal son his brother; rather, he calls him “this son of yours” and goes so far to say he devoured his inheritance on prostitutes when there is no evidence of that happening. He was simply painting his brother in the worst possible light while his father was presenting him in the best possible way.

The elder brother thought he had **earned** the father’s love and that he **deserved** the father’s attention and celebration. He had developed an **entitlement mentality**, and when he was not treated like he felt he deserved, he let that be known in his retreat from his father. In fact, he goes so far as to say that his all these years of being at home he thought of himself as a slave

and not a son. Because of his desire to **perform well in moral conformity**, he could not get himself to **party well in merciful celebration**, even though his father argued that it was the only appropriate and necessary way to respond.

The elder brother in this story is a picture of the Pharisees and scribes of the day who could not join in the celebration Jesus provided in welcoming tax collectors and sinners. They could only **grumble and complain** at the same time Jesus was **gracious and compassionate**. In this story, Jesus was using the elder brother as a **mirror** for these religious devotees to look into, entreating them to **renounce their confidences in moral conformity** and receive the grace of God for undeserving sinners entitled only to the wrath and judgment of God.

### *The True and Better Elder Brother*

We don't know how the story ends, and the open-ended conclusion of the story, especially as it relates to the elder brother, leaves us longing for a truer and better elder brother. Because you see, **how should have the elder brother acted in the first place?**

The first two parables give us a hint of what should have happened. When a sheep was lost, what happened? **The shepherd left the 99 and pursued the lost sheep**. When the woman lost her coin, what happened? **She diligently looked for it until she found it**. So when the younger brother is lost in the far country, what should have happened? **The elder brother should have spared no expense or time in searching out for his younger brother and doing whatever it took to bring him back home**. And when he brought him back, he should have said, **"Rejoice with me"** as in the two previous parables. But as we know, that did not happen.

The forgiveness and grace experienced by the prodigal son was free for him. But that does not mean it was not **costly**. There was a price to pay. The father determined that his prodigal son would not be a slave in order to pay it back on his own wages; rather, the father would absorb the cost, and **he did so at the expense and inheritance of the elder brother**. There was no other way. For the younger son to be restored and reinstated, the elder son needed to absorb the cost himself.

The failure of the elder brother to respond in this way creates **a longing for one that would**. The open-ended conclusion draws our hearts to **desire a true and better elder brother**. *Where will we find him?*

The kind of elder brother we need is one who does not just go to the far country but is willing to **leave the throne of heaven and come down to earth** on a rescue mission. We need an elder brother who will absorb the cost of forgiving and reconciling us to the Father not with a finite amount of money but at **the infinite cost of his own life**. We need an elder brother to pay the debts we could not pay.

We need an elder brother who would be stripped naked and sacrificed as a spotless Lamb so that we could be **fitted with the best robe in our Father's house**, the robe of perfect righteousness. We need an elder brother who could call upon the heavenly chorus of angels and say, **"Rejoice with me, for I have found the one that was lost."**

My dear friend, we have a true and better elder brother, and **His name is Jesus!** On the cross, He was treated as an outcast so that we might be **treated as sons by grace**. He drank the cup of God's wrath so that we might **drink the cup of the Father's joy**. Jesus Christ is our elder brother who doesn't simply hear of the dancing and singing, but He orchestrates it as the host of heaven, inviting us to **celebrate the loving embrace of our Father in heaven**.

[T/S] That's the point of this story. At every point where man has failed, Jesus has succeeded. The ways of the religious seemed right unto man, but in the end it leads to death. **The way of grace seems outrageous to man, but in the end it leads to life, and life abundant**. Life where the party does not come to an end. **The greater the grace, the greater the celebration**.

#### 4. Corporate Embrace in a Celebration of Grace (application)

As I wrap this up, let us not forget the request of the father. He said, **"Let us eat and celebrate."** The party does not merely belong to the repenting sinner coming home; **rather it belongs to the entire community**. We are all called to the corporate and continual embrace in a celebration of grace. The refrain from Luke 15 that beckons you and me is the three words **"Rejoice with me."** Will we rejoice with heaven?

Brothers and sisters, **the gatherings of redeemed prodigals should be the epicenter of exuberant joy in the community**. The world around us should hear of the singing and dancing and discover a party that is merely **a foretaste of living in the blessed kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ**. Whenever a repenting sinner is captured by the love of God, **it is not optional** for us to celebrate. The grandeur of God's grace has reverberated in the heart of a redeemed child of God, and the echo of that reverberation should chime us into vibrant jubilation, for our elder brother has yet again triumphed. **Grace has outmatched sin**.

Just think about it. **The Father** is pursuing sinners with His love. **The Spirit** is awakening sinners to their need, realizing, repenting, and resolving to be reconciled with God. And **the Son**, our elder brother, paid the price, absorbed the cost, to forgive, cleanse, clothe and heal. **With the Godhead actively at work among us, should we not expect anything less than a community characterized continual celebration of grace? Should we not be compelled to join in?**

Indeed we should! **We should be anticipating** sinners coming home from the far country the same way the father did. **We should be anticipating** the Spirit drawing and quickening sinners to see their sin and feel their need for Christ. **We should longing** to see those who are dead in sin made alive in Christ, to see lost people found, those far away brought home to the family of God! Amen?

Church family, I want this for us. I don't want us to simply know this to be true in our minds, but to use the words of Jonathan Edwards, I am pleading with God to give us **a genuine and profound sense of it in our hearts**. If we but would know the grace of God the way we should, heaven would fill hearts so much that indeed, **the only possible thing we could do is join in the celebration of grace**, for that, brothers and sisters, would be **a slice of heaven on earth**.

Let us pray.