

Take a moment and think back to a time in your life that was filled with grace. Maybe a watershed event that changed the course of your life, like becoming engaged or married or the birth of a child. Maybe a desperately needed reprieve, a debt or a wrong forgiven. Maybe a simple moment when someone you respect, without being asked, says they believe in you. Whatever the event that brought it to us, the grace endures in our hearts and in our memories, shining a ray of hope across the darker times that came after.

As transcendent as these grace-filled moments can be, they are only faint suggestions as to what their source, God's grace, is really like. While a full understanding God's grace is far beyond us, God never stops giving us these precious, tangible reminders of God's love and God's intentions for us. God has also revealed something of God's gracious nature through the words and deeds of God's son, Jesus.

While we are not wrong to think of Jesus's parables as timeless teachings about who God is, Jesus told them to specific audiences, as the Gospel writers consistently remind us. The parable that comprises the greater part of today's Gospel reading is framed with the statement that "All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So Jesus told them this parable."

Having this background in mind is crucial to understanding the parable that follows. In particular, pay attention to the word "so." This is a clue that Jesus is not *just* interested in enlightening the tax collectors, the sinners, the Pharisees, and the scribes with a new learning about God, but Jesus is *also* trying to intervene in a situation he finds unacceptable and get his audience to change their behavior. Although in general, what we know about God should change how we live our lives.

The parable focuses on the younger son. The action of the story begins with him demanding his inheritance from his father, even though he is still very much alive. In Jesus's day, such a request would be not just *distasteful*, but *disgraceful*, as basically the equivalent of the son telling the father, "I wish you were dead so I could get your money." Then we get an early glimpse into the father's character when he gives the younger son his share without a word, though we might imagine him wishing his son well, yet knowing exactly how things would unfold for him.

The younger son leaves and squanders the money, just in time for a famine. If you think our recent shortages and inflation have been hard, imagine food not being available for any price. We see the depth of the younger son's desperation when he is reduced to feeding pigs. This job symbolizes the ultimate indignity to Jesus's audience: pigs were not just ritually unclean, but also represented paganism and Roman rule.

So the younger brother is at his lowest point when he comes to himself. This is the turning point in the story, the key moment when God's grace begins to break in. Stopping to reflect on his life and his choices, the younger son remembers his father: his prosperity, his generosity, his simple goodness, the grace with which he had always lived his life. The son could not hope to regain his place in the household, but certainly his father would not let him starve.

We don't appreciate how radical the next part of the story would have been to Jesus's audience. A father in such a position would stand firm and wait for a full statement of repentance and contrition from the wayward son. Instead, Jesus tells us, "But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." Such a display would have been unthinkable in that culture, but it's good for us to remember that God is not like us, and can do the unthinkable.

The son does voice repentance to the father, but it comes across as only a brief delay in the father's celebration and generosity, which seem to be spiraling out of control. The father's celebration includes the symbols of sonship, not servitude: the robe, the ring, the sandals, and the calf all point to the complete restoration of the son's status in the household.

The elder son, that old sourpuss, shows up next. He is full of the resentment that only narcissistic entitlement can foster. Again the father responds with grace, even when he would be well within his rights to berate him: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." In a way the father puts the elder son in his place, but what a place, in one breath sharing all things and rejoicing, celebrating the imperative to put love above all else. Who wouldn't want to be put in that place?

The elder son seems to think of his relationship with his father as transactional, which isn't much better than the attitude his brother had at the beginning of the parable. But the father shows them that no, his love and his grace are freely and permanently available, not something his children have to earn.

And of course, since the characters in the story are symbolic, we can indeed hope that God will put us in the place of God's household. We can hold on to this hope because we know that God does not wait for us to make everything right but runs like a madman to welcome us home. God acts again and again to restore us to our right relationship, a place of honor in God's household that we feel we can never deserve. We're right that we don't deserve that place, but fortunately that doesn't matter. Only God's grace matters, and God is prodigal in sharing it.

So that's the story, but don't forget the story of the story. The audience Jesus was trying to reach, and to change. The sinners would have recognized themselves as the younger son, and the

religious authorities, as the older. The sinners needed to be reminded that as members of the house of Israel, God's chosen nation, they had received an inheritance of a special relationship with God that they had then squandered by persistent disobedience. The religious authorities needed to be reminded that they were greatly privileged to share in the leadership of this nation but their view of their role and of their God had become too narrow and rigid. And both needed to be reminded that God's is always working actively to reconcile all people to God.

What change did Jesus hope to make as a result of telling this story? Certainly a change of heart, for both the sinners and the religious authorities to come to themselves, and open themselves to God's reconciliation. While that would be cause for rejoicing, such reconciliation is not the end but the beginning.

The experience of reconciliation is literally life-altering. As Paul wrote, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God..." In the joyful light of this new creation, in our privileged role as God's sons and daughters, we can carry our rejoicing with us out into the world, performing works of grace with the same joyful abandon as the example God has set for us.

By God's grace, we can let go of transactional thinking and embrace a better way. No longer will we ask, as both sons did, when we will get our due. Instead, since we have received far more than we could ask or hope for, we can ask grace-filled questions: With how much grace can I live my life? How much grace can we bring to each other and to the world? How much grace will we reveal in every decision we make?

"Mercy embraces those who trust in the Lord. Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in the Lord; shout for joy, all who are true of heart."