

## FORGIVENESS IS NOT ABOUT ME – LUKE 15:1-3, 11-32

PASTOR COLIN RIEKE ~ MARCH 15, 2015

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. <sup>2</sup> But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” <sup>3</sup> Then Jesus told them this parable: <sup>11</sup> Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup> “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. <sup>14</sup> After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup> “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup> “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. <sup>25</sup> “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. <sup>27</sup> ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ <sup>28</sup> “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup> But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ <sup>31</sup> “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”



[Skit Guys – The Prodigal Drama. A preview can be found at [skitguys.com/videos/item/the-prodigal](http://skitguys.com/videos/item/the-prodigal).]

Forgiveness is \_\_\_\_\_. The skit ended with the word “forgiveness.” Our gospel this morning was about forgiveness. The topic this morning is about forgiveness. How would you define it? Forgiveness is \_\_\_\_\_. Think about it for a moment.

Sometimes I think there’s some value in incorporating different senses into a sermon. It’s probably something that I don’t do enough. But right here and right now, I think this fits. It can bring the story of the prodigal son to life, it certainly did for me. And it demonstrates forgiveness perfectly. So how would you describe it? Have you thought of an answer yet? Forgiveness is\_\_\_\_\_.

While there's many different correct ways you can answer that, but one way that I think summarizes the point is this: FORGIVENESS IS NOT ABOUT ME. FORGIVENESS IS NOT ABOUT ME. We see that theme repeat itself throughout the story of the prodigal son. FORGIVENESS IS NOT ABOUT THE SON. The son doesn't come home expecting to receive forgiveness. FORGIVENESS IS NOT ABOUT THE FATHER either. The Father isn't thinking about himself when it comes to forgiveness, he's only thinking about his son. FORGIVENESS IS NOT ABOUT THE OBEDIENT SON either. His envy over his prodigal brother blinded his need for forgiveness. And just as FORGIVENESS IS NOT ABOUT any of the characters in the parable, the rest of the Bible shows us that FORGIVENESS IS NOT ABOUT ME either.

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The relationship between the prodigal son and the father is much of what this parable focuses on. And we can see why Jesus shared this parable with his listeners. He had been accused by the Pharisees and teachers of the law of **"welcoming sinners and eating with them."** He had been eating with the prodigals of society. But Jesus had to remind the Pharisees that he came to find what was lost, to heal what was sick. The tax collectors and sinners knew their way was not the way God wanted them to live, they were reminded of that by the Pharisees every day. They needed Jesus, and Jesus was there for them.

The tax collectors and sinners fit the picture of the prodigal son from the story. Whether or not they purposefully squandered their inheritance as God's children, they recognized that FORGIVENESS WAS NOT ABOUT THEM. They could not go to Jesus expecting that he should forgive them, just like the prodigal son couldn't expect forgiveness from his father. And Jesus pointed out very clearly that FORGIVENESS WAS NOT ABOUT HIM EITHER. He didn't ask himself, "What am I getting out of this deal?" he said, "What is best for them?"

Surely we have seen ourselves in the place of the prodigal son. Maybe it isn't so obvious how we have rebelled against our Father in heaven, maybe we have not obstinately stuck our noses up in his face by living in an obviously sinful way. But the Bible describes very clearly who we are. It describes us as sinful from birth, sinful from the time our mothers conceived us. It describes us as dead in trespasses and transgression. It calls all our righteous acts like filthy rags. We did not turn into that prodigal son by some actions that we took, we have been the prodigal son since our birth, we were born as that prodigal son. The prodigal son deserving nothing good from our Father.

As that prodigal son, we found ourselves in the same state as the tax collectors and sinners, realizing our wicked ways, and laying ourselves at the mercy of God. But even this is not what forgiveness is about. FORGIVENESS IS NOT ABOUT US! For when we were still a long way off, God saw us, he ran to us, he forgives us, he does not bring our sin up anymore, we are once again his children.

Of course we know from the rest of Scripture the reason for this forgiveness. The forgiveness is not found in our saying sorry for our sins, or God merely brushing them aside. The forgiveness is only found in that perfect life and death of our Lord Jesus Christ, once again showing FORGIVENESS IS NOT ABOUT US. We are not Christians because we just expect to be forgiven. We are Christians because we recognize how unworthy we are, but believe God when he says, **"it is by grace you are saved."**

(2)

But there is another part to the parable as well. A part that sometimes gets overlooked. Yes, the Father laid out a banquet feast for his prodigal son who was lost and is now found, but there was the

elder brother too. And we learn a little bit more about forgiveness from him. The elder brother did not have a good grasp on forgiveness, and I think we can see why. He didn't think it was fair that his younger brother who had been so wicked could be forgiven so easily by his Father. But FORGIVENESS IS NOT ABOUT ME. Which is what the elder brother did not understand.

But the father showed the same heart, the same attitude toward the elder son as he did the younger, calling out to him, reminding him of the love he had always enjoyed from his father. Sometimes we think of how ungrateful the elder son was, not even going in to see what the commotion was about, but instead finding out the information from a servant. And yet, I think we can understand the elder son's perspective. Because we have had that perspective also. For those of us who have been Christians our entire lives, it can be very easy to take for granted the love God has always shown us and say a new Christian doesn't deserve the forgiveness that God gives.

The unfortunate truth is we have acted as both sons. We have all been the prodigal, the rebellious son, and we have all been the proud, the elder son. And both sons were lost, both sons were in no control of their own forgiveness. And yet, thank God that even though we have acted like both sons, even though we have acted in rebellion to our Father in heaven, he extends his arms out to us – not in an “I told you so” way, but in a loving way, wanting nothing more than to gather us into his arms.

FORGIVENESS ISN'T ABOUT ME. Forgiveness doesn't ask for anything in return. But the result of God's forgiveness in me is then reflected in our forgiveness of others. Sometimes when we are given an opportunity to forgive, we might act more like the older brother than the father, trying to see what we can get for our forgiving of others. But we are reminded that even our forgiveness should not be conditional, because once again, FORGIVENESS IS NOT ABOUT ME. We are reminded of the words in the Lord's prayer, “forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.”

There are a number of different ways we can describe forgiveness. But first and foremost we must remember that FORGIVENESS IS NOT ABOUT ME. Neither God's forgiveness of us, nor our forgiveness of others. Amen.