

Communion Service

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[0 : 00] We're going to return now to Luke's Gospel in chapter 15. The parable of the prodigal son, parable of the lost son, parable of the two sons, parable of the wonderful father.

And tonight, having thought about the father and thought about the son this morning, and in fact last night as well, let's think a little about the older brother and his relationship with the father.

So that really comes from verse 25 to the end of chapter 15. We read in verse 28, the older brother became angry. He became angry when he heard that his father had received his younger brother, who had squandered the inheritance, back home and welcomed him.

He became angry. Now let's recap where we've got to so far over the last three messages that I've preached. We've been thinking about the way God does things.

that God values things in a different way to what we value them. He values us coming to him like little children.

[1 : 28] And he values us coming like that because of the kind of God he is. He has a particular character. He's not just some kind of figure with an indistinct and changeable nature.

He has a personality. He has a very particular persona, character and psychology, if we could use that term.

He is, as we have seen, the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God. This is Exodus 34, verses 6 and 7.

Who is slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness. Who maintains love to thousands.

Who forgives wickedness, rebellion and sin.

But also, who will not clear the guilty. That's God's character. And we know that for many reasons.

[2 : 33] We know it because He tells us Himself. He gives us His own character reference. He says, this is what I'm like. We know it because Moses, who knew God face to face, as it says in the Bible, loved God.

And tells us to love God because of what he knew God to be. We know it also because Jesus Himself delighted in the Father.

Father, whatever is your good pleasure, He said, as we saw on Friday night. That's wonderful to me, says Jesus. And Jesus, of course, Himself has the same character as the Father.

The Son is us the Father. Whatever we see in Him is true of the Father's character as well. And for you and for me, our highest and greatest happiness will always be in seeing and knowing God clearly.

In accurately knowing God's character and relating to Him accordingly. That is where we'll be happiest. When we know God most clearly and fellowship with Him most closely.

[3 : 46] We saw this morning that the prodigal son, the younger brother, he couldn't do this. He couldn't come close to the Father who represents God in the story.

Because all he saw were the rules. That his father wouldn't let him do things. And it was only when the younger son was willing to turn from his determination to break the rules.

That he discovered and learned what a wonderful father he actually had. He discovered the compassion of his father. And the love of his father.

And the forgiveness of his father. And he found that it was actually through him really slapping his father in the face with his behavior. And provoking his father and hurting his father.

That he discovered when he came back to his father. The wealth of his father's love for him. And the older brother is not in that position.

[4 : 52] And as we'll see, he just does not appreciate his father at all either. But for different reasons. We see sin stops us from seeing God clearly.

If we want to go our own way. And we know God says that's wrong. We resent God. We resent whatever it is about God that we feel is saying no to us. And saying don't do that to us. And so we distort our picture of God. We say I don't like that bit. And we have this picture of God which makes us feel that he's being unreasonable. We're the ones that have the rights. We're the ones that see it clearly. And he's not being very nice to us. But when we put away our pretensions and our sin and our willfulness. And we just come to God as we are and say Lord. Lord, please accept me and receive me as I am. I want to turn now to your ways. Then we see that he was right. [5 : 58] And he was good all along. And he had our best and our highest at heart all the time. And we discover the wonder and glory of his character. And it's delightful. And that's what the younger son has.

What a great party he's having in the house with his dad. And his friends that haven't seen him for a while have come around. And the servants. And they're all having a great time. There's music. There's singing. There's dancing. It's just such a lovely time of happiness. Because a man who was dead is alive. He was lost. And he's found wonderful. And you can just see that younger son sitting there dazed in the wonder and realization of how good his father is. That's how we should be as Christians all the time. Oh, God is so good. But we don't see it often because we're trying to push in a direction that he doesn't want us to push in. We only see God clearly when we see how evil sin is. [7 : 00] How evil it is to go against God. And how wonderful it is to go his way. Now, the older son does not rebel against his father.

So, surely then, the older son sees clearly what his father is like. But the answer is no, he doesn't. But for different reasons. See, there are many different kinds of wrongdoing and many different kinds of sin. Sin is not just what's called here while living. It's not just consorting with prostitutes as this younger son has done. It's not just spending a fortune and wasting your family inheritance. Sin is not just turning your back on your family and dragging their reputation in the mud. That's bad. But it's not the only kind of sin. And sometimes Christians can forget that. We think that it's the while living that's the real problem. Actually, there are other sins which can be just as problematic. [8 : 11] And while we think that this parable was told for the sake of what it says about the younger brother, in the context in which it was spoken to a Jewish audience, it was told for the sake of what it says about the older brother.

The older brother is actually the one Jesus is emphasizing because his audience are the older brother. His audience are the ones who don't like it because the immoral people of their society are becoming followers of Jesus. And Jesus is addressing the parable to those onlookers, those Jewish onlookers, who are in their attitude like the older brother. He comes in from the field. He hears the music and the dancing. And he says to his servant, what's it about? And the servant says, your brother's home. And your father's killed the fattened calf. And the older brother says, oh, that's just wonderful. I'm just dying to see him. Let's go in and join the party. Well, of course, that's what you feel he ought to say. [9 : 29] That's what you want him to say. You want him to be happy in the happiness of his brother. You want him to be happy in the happiness of his father. You feel that's the right thing.

But that's not what he does. Instead, he refuses, verse 28, to go in. And this refusal is very significant. Because what he's actually doing is he's refusing to go to the place where his father's compassion and love and forgiveness are being celebrated. He is refusing to celebrate compassion and love and forgiveness. He is refusing to celebrate the character of his father, who is compassionate and forgiving and merciful. And because he's refusing to celebrate his father's goodness, it means that he is not willing to show that goodness himself. [10 : 35] And this too is sin. While the younger son resented, when he wanted to go away to the far country, he resented his father's standards, his father's rules.

The older son resents his father's forgiveness. They both resent aspects of the father's character, but different aspects. And that's interesting because all of us will have particular issues with God that we don't like the way he does things in some situation.

We don't like that way that he doesn't sort that problem out or that he doesn't let us do that or that he treated that person in that way or whatever.

And we don't like that. We've all got our issues. We're all different. And we've all got our issues with God. And because of that, we all fail to see God with perfect clarity.

And so it is with the older brother. He will not rejoice in the father's forgiveness. And that's sin. And you can see how deeply it goes with the older brother.

[11 : 48] We read in verse 28, He's angry. He became angry. There's a seething anger that's been simmering before that. It doesn't just suddenly spring up.

He's obviously, you can see him, he's out in the field every day and he's saying, if I ever get hold of my younger brother, he's at it in his mind all the time.

He's angry. So his anger just flares up. This is his father he's speaking to, his venerable, his revered, his honourable father. He refuses to go in.

We read the way he addresses his father in verse 29. I've been slaving for you, he says. That's not very nice. He says, you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.

He disowns his brother, he says. Verse 30, the son of yours. I'm not calling my brother. He's your son. And when he comes home, you kill the fattened calf. You see the resentment that's overflowing there.

[12 : 51] And it's a resentment of the father's love and forgiveness and compassion. And this is sin. It's the sin of self-righteousness.

It's the sin of someone who feels that he or she themselves do not need God's compassion, God's mercy, God's forgiveness.

And looks down on others who aren't doing so well morally or spiritually as them, as they are doing. And who resents when others who are lower on the scale than they are get lifted up by God through receiving God's forgiveness and God's mercy.

The sin of self-righteousness. A little story in one of Floyd McClung's books. A book about fatherhood.

The fatherhood of God. He tells us, he says, you know, in one of my travels, he said, I met a man who had never sinned. He'd never sinned. And I said to him, you're the man that's never sinned.

[14 : 16] He said, yep. I've never sinned. He said, that's remarkable. You've never sinned? No. Never sinned. Never said a bad word?

No. Never said a bad word. Never told a lie? No. I've never told a lie. Never sinned? You've never stolen? No.

Never stolen? Never cursed? Sworn? No. Never said that? Never gossiped about anyone? No. No. No.

No. That's remarkable, says Floyd McClung. I have never met a man like you. Never sinned? No. Never sinned? You must be very proud of that, he says.

Oh, yes. I am very proud that I've never sinned. Ah, says Floyd McClung. You've just committed your first sin. And that was his blind spot.

[15 : 18] God's grace. He's proud that he's a man who's doing well. He can see others are not doing as well as he is.

And because of that, he's proud of himself. he certainly doesn't feel that he needs God's forgiveness or God's mercy.

No, he's quite happy for God to deal with him just as though he's an upright man and for God to kind of meet him as an equal and for him to say, well, God, I've done this and I've done that and you must be pretty impressed.

He refused to go in, it says here.

He refuses to go in to where the forgiveness of his Father is being celebrated. Now, if you were here this morning and you saw people at the Lord's table, maybe you, yourself were not at the Lord's table and there could be a myriad of reasons for that.

[16 : 37] Maybe it was right that you weren't. It's possible, though, that you were looking at people that were at the Lord's table and you were saying, well, I am just as good as they are.

You may be saying to yourself, moreover, how can that person be at the Lord's table? Lord's table because I know something about their life. Maybe you're looking on and saying, that person ought not to be there because they have done me harm.

They've wronged me. You may have been at the Lord's table and looking across at someone else and saying, you know, I don't really think he should be there.

you know, what I know about her makes me think she shouldn't be there. And that person whom you are judging and with whom you are comparing yourself may very well be sitting at the Lord's table just thanking God for his mercy and that he as a father wonderfully receive them even though they've made all the mistakes that you know about and they are certainly not deserving of being there.

And you're right if you're sitting there thinking, I'm every bit as good as that person. You probably are. You're probably a lot better. But that doesn't make you good enough.

[18:12] And if you're actually sitting in judgment upon this person resenting the fact that they have actually received the mercy of God, you're in a bad place because you're refusing to go in where God's mercy is being celebrated.

And if you're refusing to go in where God's mercy is being celebrated, you are saying that you don't need that mercy yourself. And my friend, you need God's mercy. You may not be as bad as that person that was sitting there or that person that was sitting there at the Lord's table this morning. You may actually have lived a better life. You may be more upright than they by human standards, but you still need God's mercy because it's not a case of how high we stand above other people. It's a case of how low we are below God. All have sinned and fall short of God's glory, Paul says. We need God's mercy to lift us up.

It's not for us to exalt ourselves over other people. It's for us to look up to God and ask Him to exalt us in His mercy. Do not be like this older brother who refuses to go in because if you refuse to go in, you're refusing to enter the Father's house.

[19:36] You're refusing to be with the Father. We read also that He's concerned about how in verse 29 He's been slaving, He says.

I've been slaving for you. Now, you might say that says something bad about the Father. Is the Father a tyrant?

Well, you know, it's a funny thing about human nature. you can slave for an employer or you can slave for, in this case, well, it was a sort of employer but a father.

You can slave for someone without them actually requiring it of you. You can slave for that little voice in your head, that little voice of disapproval that you grew up with that says, you're not good enough, son.

The voice perhaps or your father that said, you mean you want to go and study that, son? But you could do much more with your life than that, son. And you live with that all the days of your life.

[20:44] I never quite made it. I was never good enough. And you go try and prove in yourself all the time, you're slaving. Or it might be your very house pride.

And every time there's a little bit of dust, there's a little motherly voice saying, oh, we can't have that. And you're slaving. You're slave to keep standards which are not required of you.

And Christians can slave for God. Christians can be hard at like Martha.

Luke chapter 10. I love Luke's Gospel because it's full of stories that the other Gospels don't have. Very, very powerful stories of God's grace. And there's two sisters and one of them has just said, ah, forget the housework.

Let's just... The Lord's here. Let's sit and listen. And the other one says, oh, no. Jesus is here. And that means twelve other guys as well.

[21:52] Oh, time to provide some dinner for them. What can we do? And she's dashing about the kitchen. And eventually she comes to Jesus and says, Lord, don't you care that my sister's left me to do all this myself?

Jesus is Martha. I'll paraphrase it. Martha, you're slaving. But did I ask you to slave? Well, no, Lord. But you know, I feel I should... Martha, did I ask you to do it? But you know the standards. You know what they expect. You know the customs. Did I ask you to do it, Martha?

Are you slaving for Jesus today? Are you thinking that becoming a Christian, you would have to slave for Jesus? Jesus. Many of us have had more than a little experience of legalism in our backgrounds.

Of seeing people who were Christians having to jump through all kinds of hoops and cross all kinds of hurdles and dot I's and cross T's and mind their P's and Q's and all sorts of cliches like that because they had to appear to be doing what they thought other people expected of them and they thought that that was serving God.

[23 : 14] And so you think becoming a Christian is about taking on all that baggage. It's about slaving. But you see, in this situation the father did not require slaving of his son.

The son chose to slave for whatever reason. He had this view of himself and of his father which was wrong. And in order to justify himself, in order to feel that he was good enough and acceptable, he's slaving.

Instead of simply discovering the goodness, the compassion, the love, the grace of his father which is very evident here in this story which he could have enjoyed because the father says, look, actually son, everything I have is yours.

You're always with me. You don't need to slave. I'm your father. And I love you. When you become a Christian, often you need to really learn this very deeply and many Christians spend their whole lives trying to get to grips with this.

Because you are children, Paul says in Galatians 4, because you are children of God, he says to Christians, God sent the spirit of his son into your hearts by whom you cry, Abba, Father.

[24 : 45] The spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God. That's Romans 8, isn't it? What I'm trying to remember is Galatians 4, 6.

Let me just look it up. Let me look it up. Get it right. Because you are sons, God sent the spirit of his son into our hearts.

So you are no longer a slave, but a son. And since you are a son or a daughter, God has made you an heir of everything.

You are no longer a slave, but a son. No longer a slave, but a daughter. That's what becoming a Christian is.

God has no slaves. Just children. Who he loves.

[25 : 53] But let's hear a little more from this older brother. I've been slaving, he says in verse 29, you never gave me. Even a young goat. Forget a fatty calf, you didn't even give me a young goat, you never gave me.

You never gave me. And you have to ask a simple question. Well, did you ever ask? You know what James says?

You do not have because you do not ask Christians. Did you ever ask the father for a young goat? Because I think it appears here that if you had, he'd have given it to you.

But you never asked. I wonder why you never asked, older brother. I see. You're very proud of your earning ability, older brother.

You feel it's a kind of ethic with you that you only have what you've worked hard for. You earn what you have. You take no handouts.

[27 : 03] That's pretty laudable, older brother. But we're not here talking about employment. We're talking about family. This is your father that you're talking about here.

Or have you lost sight of that? Being a Christian is about having God as your father. And first and foremost, as we've seen, he's compassionate.

He's gracious. You don't come to God and say, well, look, only give me what I can earn.

Do you? Do you? Father, can I have that kid, that young kid, we're going to have a party, but let me pay you for him.

That's his attitude. That is not the way it is with family. And it certainly should not be or is not the way it is with the family of God.

[28 : 06] God is our Father. You do not earn anything from God. At no stage will you ever receive anything from God because you have earned it.

You might be very used to earning in other contexts and that's only right and proper. You might have worked very hard for your pay packet at the end of the week.

You might have worked very hard for your mark and your exam and you feel you have earned it. But that is not to be applied to your relationship with God. God does not give to us because we have earned what he gives.

He gives only on one condition. He gives in love. He gives grace, gifts, favor, undeserved.

We can never earn from God. What do you think God needs from you? What do you think God hasn't got that you can supply? Do you think that God is somehow deficient and that you can come to him and say, God, look what I've done for you.

[29 : 23] I think you owe me one now. And yet, as Christians, often that is our attitude. God never, ever gave anything to anyone because they earned it, except he gave our salvation to Jesus because he earned it.

God, but that's a different thing altogether. It's because of what Jesus has done that God can shower and lavish gifts upon you.

Remember what Paul says in Romans 8, 32, he says, God, who did not spare his own son, but delivered him up for us all. How will he not also with him freely give us all things?

The argument is simple. Look, if God has prepared us a matter of gift, us an undeserved gift to give his son for you, do you think you're going to have to earn something else or anything else, any small gift, forgiveness for this or help for this?

Or indeed, forgiveness for your life and salvation and eternal life? No, says Paul, God only gives gifts to people.

[30 : 39] He doesn't give wages unless you want simply to stay with the wages of sin. The wages of sin is death.

But the gift of God is eternal life. If you want to deal with God in terms of wages, he'll give you your wages. And your wages will be separation from him.

That's what you deserve. No matter how good you are, separation from him because you are not good enough to be in his family in and of yourself and by your own work and your own effort.

You're in God's family on one condition only, grace. That is, that you accept that the only way in is that God receives you as a matter of mercy.

You don't deserve it, but still he gives it. You come to him and you receive his grace. grace. The final point I want to just dwell on for a couple of minutes and it's there in verse 30.

[31 : 59] The son of yours, he says. The son of yours. Your brother, the servant is saying, has just received forgiveness and has just received mercy, compassion from your father.

And the father comes out and says, I have just shown your younger brother the depth of my love for him. I'm so happy, says the father.

I'm so happy to have him back for his joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. I'm so happy, says the father. So happy that this son of mine, he was lost.

Your brother, he was lost. But he's found. He was dead. He's alive again. I am so happy. And the older brother says, I don't want to hear that.

Because I can't forgive him. And I can't show compassion on him. And I don't think you should either.

[33 : 23] Now this cuts very deep. I can tell even from some of the comments at the door this morning when I was speaking about fatherhood that it's something that touches people very personally.

That we all have people in our lives whom we need to forgive. And there are people in our lives whom God has forgiven, whom we may not have forgiven.

There are people in our lives whose forgiveness God is celebrating. That we may be resenting. in fact, it may be the case that God has forgiven you and you have become a Christian, but you have not forgiven yourself for something or other.

You refuse to celebrate your own forgiveness forgiveness. And be a happy Christian. Search your heart.

Is there anyone in your life, maybe it's yourself, someone else, God has shown them forgiveness that you have not forgiven.

[35 : 13] It doesn't really matter what your reasons are. You're maybe beginning to think, ah, but you know why I have not forgiven. It doesn't really matter. I'm not going to even touch on that.

Because God's word is the last word.

That's what I was saying this morning about conceding. The younger son had to concede. God was right. The father was right. We have to concede because God is always right.

If he's forgiven someone, then that is the last word and we have to accept that and rejoice in it. And it can be very hard if that someone is someone we find hard to forgive because we've been wronged by them.

We have to forgive. You see, it's really very serious. we've all said the Lord's Prayer. And in the Lord's Prayer there is that line, forgive us our sins just as we forgive those who sin against us. And if it happens that those who sin against us we cannot forgive, we are praying that God will not forgive us either. we're actually asking God not to forgive us.

[36 : 33] And if these are people whom God has forgiven, it's even more serious. We need to forgive. Let there be no one in here whom you have not forgiven.

it is not required that they come to you and say, please forgive me. Because it may well be that you don't even see the issues clearly that you are holding against them.

And they may not even think that there is anything that they need to be forgiven for. because we all have our viewpoints and none of us sees things half as clearly as we like to think we do.

If someone has been forgiven by God, then we have to accept that forgiveness and rejoice in that forgiveness for their sakes and for our sakes and for God's sake and for the kingdom of heaven's sake and for the unity of the church's sake.

We need to do that. Rejoice in every one of your brothers and sisters in Christ here if you're a Christian today. Rejoice that others are Christians here today if you're not yet a Christian.

[37 : 58] Rejoice that they are. Rejoice. See that there's a party going on. That there's a celebration of the Father's compassion and forgiveness and mercy.

Say isn't it wonderful what God has done for these people. I think I'd rather like to go in and join the party. I would quite like to celebrate forgiveness as well.

And maybe having that attitude, you would discover for yourself the riches of God's forgiveness to you. Because if you're happy in someone else's happiness, then maybe you can be happy in your own as well.

If God has shown someone else mercy and you're happy about that, maybe you can come to Him and ask for mercy for yourself and He can show it to you as well.

God has shown you to be happy in the gospel. It is in Luke's gospel that we read some of the stories of the most seriously sinful people in the gospels.

[39 : 03] love. And Luke is constantly making the point that there is mercy and there is forgiveness available for them and for you.

But don't preempt it by being like the older brother and resenting forgiveness for others.

Rejoice in it and receive it for yourself through Jesus. cause you people come from you in the rescue and'll see.

All right. Yeah, you have are the the key all right. You have