

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

The Pharisees have never liked the company that Jesus keeps.

“This man receives sinners and eats with them.” (Lk 15:2)

For them, everything could and should be measured and controlled.
Everyone was broken down into labels and categories and classes.

Rich and poor, men and women, Jew and Gentile, righteous and sinner, living and dead.

Those were the categories that mattered to the Pharisees—
but not to Jesus.

Jesus exults the old widow who puts in her mite.
He chats with a Samaritan whore by the well.
He blesses the Canaanite woman, a gentile, for her great faith.
He asks poor Lazarus to come out even though he was 4 days dead.
And here, it's the tax collectors and sinners who have gathered around Him.

In Christ the labels and categories and measurements all fade away.
In Him there is neither marriage nor celibacy, slave nor free.

And the Pharisees hate it—
or better, they hate *Him* for it.

He's ruining their lives.
All that work they've done and put in, where's it all now?
Jesus shows no regard for their claims of getting it right.
He refuses their power game, their class warfare, their boast in living.

What matters to Jesus is the dying.

And that's what this parable of the Prodigal Son is all about.
It's about the lost, the forlorn, the despised, the dead—
it's about those with nothing to give, but everything to receive;
and so it's a parable of Grace.

It starts with a certain father who has two sons.
The younger son comes to the father and says,
*“Dad, I wish you were dead. I hate you.
Give me now what I can't stand to wait around here for.
I want my inheritance. You're dead to me.”*

As the story goes, the Father doesn't say a word (*He's dead*).
“And he divided his property between them” (15:12).

Did you catch that?
He divided it between *them*.

The father dies.
The inheritance gets divvied up.
Each gets what is fair and right.
And the younger son runs off—no word to his brother at all.

This younger son then gathers together all that he received, and then scatters it abroad.
Notice how polar opposite those two terms are:
gather together ... scatter abroad.

The son does with his inheritance what his father probably did winnowing the grain.
It's uncontrolled spending—worse than any shopping spree or Vegas trip.
Our text calls it *reckless living*.
The Greek actually has the word for *unsavable living*—
that is, living in such a way you can't get yourself out of this mess.

That's why we call him the *Prodigal Son*—but maybe a better translation would be:
the unsavable son.

But then comes the scene where we all naturally feel bad for him.
The effects of his squandering behavior catch up to him.
He had fallen. He had nothing. He was a Jewish pig-farmer—
who's ever heard of that?

He longed to eat the what pigs left behind—
a bit like that Canaanite woman longing for the crumbs that the dogs get to eat—
but no one let him have even that.
He was *unsavable*.

But hard-hearted as we are, even we want something better for him.

And so we're thrilled when he comes to himself, recognizing that there's a better life for him.
We love that sort of resolute change.
That strong will that will fight against all odds.
We cheer him on as he pulls his life up from the bootstraps and marches back home—
to his father, with a plan:
*"I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him,
'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.
I am no longer worthy to be called your son.
Treat me as one of your hired servants.'"* (15:18-19)

That's the stuff we love.
A change of heart and mind, a plan of action, and the goal of working our way back.

But like we said earlier—
that's not at all what this parable is about.

It's not about changing our wills or minds or hard work or rags to riches.
It's about death.

The father was left for dead.
And the son now thought he could make it up to him.
What the son doesn't know yet, is that he's dead too.

It's not until he makes his way up the trail—
while he's still a long way off (15:20)—
that he realizes any of this.

It's not until the Father, full of mercy,
runs to him, throws his arms around him, and kisses him over and over,
that what his father is all about.

His original plan of working his way back—first as a hired hand, and eventually as a son—
is thrown out the window.

There's no plan.
No agenda.
No working his way back into favor.
Nothing.

The son realizes he, too, is dead—*unsavable*.

That is, he's got no bargaining chips, nothing to put on the table, no worth, no merit, nothing.
"I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (15:22).
Full stop.

But the father shouts to the servants with joy:
*"Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him,
and put a ring on his hand,
and shoes on his feet.
And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.
For this my son was dead, and is alive again;
he was lost, and is found"* (15:22-24).

And they began to celebrate.

That's how it is with the father.
He throws parties for the *unsavable*, for the rejects and has-beens, for the poor and undeserving,
for the drunks and prostitutes and addicted—
oh yeah, and even the tax-collectors and sinners.

But, the father's party is only for the dead.

That's why the older brother is so ticked off.
And the Pharisees are squirming in their shoes as well.
And you can relate to them both.

We love the stories of redemption—
but hasn't he gone a bit overboard here?

Shouldn't he have to do some time?
Get on a payment schedule to work his debt off?
Or at least be categorized as half-brother?

The best robes, the ring, the calf—what's with all the wedding garments and feasting?

And the older brother bit stings our hearts,
because we know we think and feel and say the same things all the time:
*“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.
But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes,
you killed the fattened calf for him!” (15:29)*

He was ticked.
Angry.
Furious.
It's not fair.

He hasn't measured up.
He hasn't put in his time.
He ran off on his own.
He hates you.

But I've been here all along.
I've done the work from the beginning.
I've stayed.
And though I may have hated you in my heart, I never said I wish you were dead.
Not 'til now.

The older brother wanted nothing to do with the party because it wasn't fair.

Here's a little trick.
When you're reading Scripture, and something isn't fair—
you know God is doing things in the way of the Gospel, by grace—
completely undeserved, unfathomable, uncountable, *grace!*

The older brother, as well as the Pharisees, and we too, find ourselves stuck under the law.

We think God ought to give according to our works, to our intentions—
or at least on a scale in comparison with others.

But He doesn't.

He dines with tax-collectors and sinners.
He throws a feast the *unsavable*.
For those that can't contribute to the meal, or off-set the cost.
He parties with the rejected and the despised.

That's what our Father is like.

He's utterly reckless.

That's what forgiveness is like.
That's what comes to you in the Absolution.
That's what feeds you in the Supper.

It's the fattened Calf of His Son Jesus,
who like the calf waits in the stall until the Father says it's time for the party.

He waits to die.
He goes to Jerusalem.
He suffers willingly—
so that you could feast.

So feast with abandonment.
Feast without measures or labels or categories.
Feast without trying to earn your way back.
You can't.
You're *unsavable*.

But it's only the *unsavable*, that our Lord throws His arms around, clothes with His majesty, and puts the wedding ring on.

And it's all because the father was himself willing to be dead in order to raise him up.¹

Just as the Prodigal Son was raised from death to life, so are you.
Your sin is put away.
Your death has died in Christ.
You live.

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¹ Capon, 296.