

***“The Loving Father”***

Have you ever seen something that was restored? It might be a boat, a car, furniture, antique guns, or even artwork? It's amazing to see a "BEFORE" & "AFTER" photograph of something that has been in the hands of a MASTER.

**RESTORATION has two parts:**

- Removing the past – the old – the effect of non-use, use, abuse, neglect and time.
- Restoring to like new condition – where ‘the imprint of what has been’ is no longer visible. Where the old is now able to be what it had been before!

I want to tell you that Jesus Christ, our Savior, Our Lord, is in the RESTORATION BUSINESS: He can take shattered dreams and breathe life back into them – restoring them once again into dreams filled with vision, hope, and future. Jesus Christ can remove the tarnish, the blemish and whatever is covering up what was great and makes it real and new again! Life in a relationship with Jesus Christ is a life that is truly restored.

In today's Gospel lesson – Jesus tells his followers a parable about a man who thought that life without his father would be better than life with his father. There are some, who, for whatever reason, have tried to live their life without God. It is not important whether it is just for a moment, a day, a month, a year, years, or a season of your life – but it is long enough to have learned that something is not right – life is not working out like you planned.

This rich and wonderful parable of today's Gospel has 3 main characters that most of us can relate to:

The Father - Father is God.

The Son that ran away – often called the Prodigal – well, that could be you and me.

And then there's the Son that stayed and gets mad at the Restoration – That also might also be you or me!

This entire parable – both parts of it – is about restoration and love.

The youngest son – that ran away, takes his inheritance and leaves home. He took the money and ran. Since he was the younger son – we was entitled to one-third of the estate – but not until the death of his father. We don't know why he wanted the money or why he wanted to leave – but he did, despite the shame and heartache that it brought to his father, his family, and to himself. By his taking the money – he was declaring his father dead – and taking the property and money for himself.

He wasted his entire inheritance on partying...he blew it all. He was left with nothing! The Gospel tells us he went to another country. The country where he was living was struck with a severe famine – leaving him penniless, destitute; let's face it - he was not just in want – he was desperately in need.

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The money and the blessings that this young man squandered were possible only because of his relationship with the father. The life that he had led before demanding his inheritance was all because of being in relationship with his father. When it all ran out – he was left with nothing – especially his father – since he had abandoned that relationship by demanding his portion of the estate. The relationship with his Father came to an end and this son set out relying on other things and not on the love of his father – and so he felt the consequences of not being with Him. You know the old saying “You reap what you sow!”

While seeking pleasure and fortune, this young son ended up being far away from home. Any country that he would live in that was not Israel – would most certainly be non-Jewish – or Gentile. We know that the people couldn't be Jews because they raised pigs. He was a poor, outcast foreigner who was so far from his father it was as if they were on opposite poles of the earth. He was at the point where even what the pigs were eating looked appetizing to him. I would say that he was not receiving a decent wage – having to eat with the pigs!

His dreams are tarnished and they are not shiny anymore; they are gone, like a mist or vapor. He had gone from palace to pigpen! He had hit rock bottom! The bottom is – where an awakening happens and you see the huge difference between – where you are and where you are supposed to be!

- Where you see the break in your life – because of living without the Father
- Where you decide to get back to where you belong - with the Father
- Where you decide that you have had enough... that you have lost enough
- Where you get up and begin the Journey to the father...

While he was at the bottom – he realized "I've sinned!" He realized that his sin cost him more than he ever could have imagined. The Gospel tells us that he came to his senses, realizing his sin and that he longed to be made “*as a servant*,” willing to take the lowest place and even do the nastiest work. It was as if he once said “**any place rather than home**,” but now was saying – “**there's no place like home!**” When things are NOT going as planned – It's a great time to ask – why not?

As he walked back toward home – his expectations were low – hoping only to become a servant in his father's house. He made his way toward his father's house – and fortunately for him - his father didn't see it that way! He didn't even have to complete the trip because when the father saw his son coming – he RAN to meet and greet him.

Jesus tells us that happened next in today's Gospel: (Luke 15:20-24) “*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. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. '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. Bring the fattened calf and kill it.*”

*Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate."*

It was beyond the dignity of an elderly Jewish man to run, but his love for his son took priority over dignity. Thinking of the normal clothing of the day, the father would have had to pull up his "skirt" to run. Can you just picture a grown man trying to run in floor length robes?

In a brief moment – he was restored! What happened next is remarkable.

- The best robe in the house that belonged to the father himself – would be signifying the return of his place of honor.
- The ring which was probably a family signet ring and it became a symbol of reinstatement to son-ship in his father's household.
- Slaves did not normally wear sandals, but they carried and tied a master's sandals. With this the father is saying, "No, I won't receive you back as a servant. **I'll receive you only as my son.**"

While he hoped for reconciliation with his father, he could not have imagined a full restoration of his previous relationship. **The father's actions spoke more loudly and clearly than any words possibly could have.** All of the tarnish on Him, the dirt from living and eating among pigs, the shame and the guilt was washed off him and removed. Immediately – His dreams were restored. He once again had a hope and a future. The past was removed and the future lay ahead of him. He had come full circle - from the pigpen to the palace! He had experienced restoration in full! His dreams were restored, dreams that were lost while living a life of sin. His hope was also restored. His relationship with his father was restored.

The beautiful robe, the ring, and the festive banquet symbolize the new life -- pure, worthy, and joyful -- of anyone who returns to God. That is the way that God the Father is with sinners. He will accept you as you are – with the stuff from your pigpen all over you, but He loves you too much to leave you that way!

- He will call for a celebration
- He will put His robe of righteousness on you
- He will give you His ring of royalty on you
- His will give you sandals of freedom from condemnation

All a sinner has to do is come home today – to repent and come back to the Father.

But that is not the end of the story – there is the eldest son's harsh reaction to his prodigal brother's return and to the lavish party his joyful father throws. The father who had been wronged forgave. But this eldest son was unforgiving, filled with contempt and pride. His resentment leads to isolation and estrangement from the community of forgiven sinners.

In this parable Jesus gives us a vivid picture of the character of God and what God is like. God is truly kinder than we could ever be. He does not lose hope or give up when we stray. He

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rejoices – all of heaven rejoices, in finding the lost and in leading them home. What a sharp contrast between the Father and the older brother who came home from working in the field and heard what was happening, and got angry. The older brother is a perfect example of the attitudes of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. They had the same attitude toward the sinners as the older son had toward the younger son. The Pharisees and teachers of the Law were angry with the message Jesus was proclaiming. They did not like the idea that people from outside their people group – outside the Israelites, including outcasts and sinners, were to be a part of God's kingdom. Like the older son who refused to go to the feast, the Pharisees refused to enter the kingdom Jesus offered to the nation of Israel.

Isn't it marvelous how the father went out and pleaded with the older brother to go to the feast? We see an example of God's willingness to reach out to sinners – if they just respond to His love. Didn't Jesus eat with Pharisees as well as sinners and tax collectors? Jesus did not want to exclude the Pharisees and teachers of the Law from the kingdom. The message is an invitation to everyone.

The father told the older son that he had the joy of being in the house all the time, and now he should rejoice with the father in his brother's return. The words, "*You are always with me and everything I have is yours,*" suggest to the religious leaders' that they were the recipients and guardians of the covenants and the Law (see Romans 3:1-2; 9:4). Rather than feeling angry, they should rejoice that others were joining them and would be a part of the Kingdom of God.

Such an amazing message from the Apostle Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 5:17, 21) "*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*"

In this parable Jesus showed

- The power of forgiveness.
- The danger of self-righteousness – of judging others
- The richness and humility that comes with repentance –

All because of the love, compassion and mercy of God who cares for you – unconditionally, enough to come running to you – by sending His Son to take your place. I don't look at this as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but I would rather call this the Parable of the Loving Father.