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Congregation: **Bethel United Reformed Church**
Calgary, Alberta
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Title: **How Well Do You Know Your Father?**

Text: [LD 46 Luke 15.11-32 \(View\)](#)

Occasion: [Regular Sunday](#)

Topic: [Prayer](#)

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Order Of Worship (Liturgy)

* Song of Praise: "Praise God, O Servants of the Lord" # 113B
 God's Holy Law
 Assurance of Pardon
 Song of Response: "The Tender Love a Father Has" # 103D
 Congregational Prayer
 * Song of Preparation: "Day by Day and with Each Passing Moment" # 255
 Service of God's Holy Word
 Scripture Reading: Luke 15:11-32 Lord's Day 46 (Q & A 120)
 Sermon: "Do You Really Know Your Father?"
 Prayer of Application
 * Song of Response: "How Deep the Father's Love for Us" # 351
 Offering: Eternal Life Mission
 * Benediction
 * Doxology: "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow" # 568

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Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, how well do you know your father? What can you tell me about your father? Boys and girls, how well do you know your father? Maybe you could tell me what your father does for a living, what he does for a job. Maybe he's a carpenter, or a policeman, or a doctor, a lawyer or a businessman.

Or perhaps you could tell me what your father likes to do with his free time – maybe he likes to hunt or go skiing in the winter or go biking or hiking. Certainly, all those things would help me understand more about your father and what he likes to do.

But there's more to your father than that. What is his character, his nature? Is he kind? Is he thoughtful? Is he patient? Is he trustworthy? Is he caring and gentle? Those are the types of qualities and virtues that really reveal what a person is like, and most of all, it really helps to endear the heart of a child to his or her father.

Now, I want to ask those same questions about the heavenly Father. How well do you know your heavenly Father? What is He like? What can you tell me about his nature and character? And, what is it about the heavenly Father that most attracts you and endears you to Him?

The reason I'm asking is because A. 121 of the catechism teaches us that we are to approach our Father in prayer with a childlike sense of reverence and trust (the previous version used the word 'awe'). But that reverence assumes something. It assumes that we know something about our Father that warrants this kind of reverence and trust and awe!

Now, we may know a lot *about* the Father theologically. (Who He is/what He does). He is the eternal Father of his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. He's the Creator God. He's the sustainer of the universe. He's the giver of every good and perfect gift. He's the one who provides our daily bread, who protects us and watches over us. This is all part of what the Father does, and some of who He is. And this is all very important to know -- but that is only part of who the Father is.

But notice, (according to answer 121) our reverence and trust for the Father is to be grounded upon something else as well, something even more amazing and glorious about the Father. Our reverence and trust is to be grounded in the Good News of the Gospel; it is grounded in the glorious doctrine of adoption – that through Jesus Christ, God has become my Father.

Above all other things that we may know about God, above all other things that God has ever done, nothing is more glorious, nothing is more amazing, more mysterious, more marvelous and majestic than this: that we wretched sinners have been given the right, the privilege, the honor to call God our heavenly Father! This above all else is what draws the hearts of his children to the Father!

That is why I chose to read this passage from Luke 15. Here, in this parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus reveals the gracious nature of the Heavenly Father. Notice these two points:

1. His Two Lost Sons

2. His Determination to Save

1. His Two Lost Sons

I know that when we read this passage, our attention is usually focused on the one we call the “prodigal son”, the “lost son”. To be sure, much of the parable is devoted to the actions of the younger son – and how he demanded his inheritance from his father, then went off to the far country to squander his wealth on wild living, on partying and prostitutes until he was both broke and broken.

But what can be easily overlooked is that Jesus **also** calls our attention to the other son, to the older brother in this parable. As it turns out, the state and condition of his heart and soul is also in peril – as he is angry with his father, and jealous of his brother. So you seem both sons were lost, and both sons need saving.

The reason we know this is true of this parable is because of what we read back in the first two verses of chapter 15. It says: *Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered “this man welcomes sinners and eats with them”.*

Two groups of people had gathered around Jesus. The first group was the tax collectors and sinners. They gathered around Jesus with a genuine desire to hear what Jesus had to say – to hear the Gospel. They were like lost sheep and Jesus was the Good Shepherd calling out to them; going after them to find them; and gathering them to himself. They were represented by the younger son in the parable.

The other group of people who had gathered were the proud, entitled, self-righteous Pharisees and teachers of the law. They had no desire to hear the Gospel because (in their minds) they had no need to be saved. They were already righteous in their own eyes. They had the law and Moses.

They were there simply to find fault with Jesus, to find a reason to discredit his teaching. We can see how offended and angry they were that Jesus (this popular and respected Jewish Rabbi), would welcome tax collectors and sinners. Look back to what Luke 5.29-30 says (this is right after Jesus called Matthew who was also called Levi, to follow him as a disciple): *Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"*

These Pharisees and teachers of the law are the older brother in this parable. They are the older brother who would just as soon forget about the younger brother, who simply wrote him off as a lost cause. They had no capacity (no heart of mercy) toward lost sinners. They could not fathom how God could be merciful and gracious and patient with sinners and outcasts – and that's precisely because they never saw themselves in that light.

They never saw themselves as unworthy sinners. They had no sense of their own sin and depravity and lost condition! Essentially, they had no capacity to show grace and mercy because they themselves had never experienced grace and mercy in their own hearts and souls. That's true for everyone by the way. If you have never experienced God's grace, mercy and forgiveness, then you will have no idea (no sense) of how to express that grace and mercy and forgiveness to others.

This explains why they are filled with moral outrage and indignation that Jesus would welcome sinners and associate with them.

So, it is obvious then that the Father in the parable in Luke 15 has two lost sons, not one. And the parable is about both sons, both groups of people. But it is also and equally about the Father – it is about His love and patience, his grace and mercy towards BOTH of his sons, as we shall see.

And to one degree or another, we still have both groups of people in our world today. Both groups are sinners. Both groups are lost. Both need salvation. But, one group of sinners is drawn to Christ; to his message of love, and hope and salvation; to his message of forgiveness and second chances, of being invited in and welcomed and included in the family of God.

And these are they who “hear and obey” the voice of Christ when He calls out to them (John 10:27 – *my sheep hear my voice*); they come to Christ in all their brokenness, in all the messiness of their sordid lives, in all their unworthiness, in all their shame, and disgrace and indignity. And they find in Christ a Savior who loves and in the Father, a father who forgives and embraces and accepts.

And then there is everyone else. That **everyone else** refers to everyone in the world who (in their sinful pride) are offended by Jesus, who are offended and infuriated by the message of the Gospel, at the mere suggestion that we are sinful and fallen creatures who need to look to God for forgiveness.

That everyone else can also refers to those in the church who (like the older brother) have an entitlement mentality. We are the chosen ones. We are not like the lost sinners out there – and we definitely don’t want sinners like that in our church -- so we’re content to circle the wagons; to cut ourselves off from the world; we mark ourselves “safe” from the cesspool of sin all around us and simply sit back, and wait for Judgement Day, the coming of the Lord.

But, what Christ calls us to see in this parable in Luke 15, beloved, is that every fallen sinner must see himself or herself as the younger brother; we must see ourselves as someone who was lost in sin, dead in sin, sold as a slave to sin and separated from the father -- until (by God’s grace) brought us back to our senses, and called us to come back to him, to be embraced by Him, forgiven by Him, and welcomed into his household.

If we don’t understand this, then we won’t understand this parable; and worse yet, we won’t understand the Gospel! That is the reason Christ came. He came to bring us back from the distant country, to call us from our sinful bankruptcy and brokenness and shame, and to back to the Father, to give us the gift and privilege of sonship once more. Christ did that when he gave himself

up on the cross for us; when he laid down his life for his sheep – so that we could be saved; so that we could be brought back into the safety of the sheepfold once more.

Do you believe this is true for you beloved? Do you see yourself in this parable? If so, which of the two brothers are you?

2. The Father's Determination to Save

Secondly, let's observe the Father's determination to save. Christ's paints such a beautiful portrait of the Father in this parable – one that has actually been painted. In one of Rembrandt's final works before his death in 1669, the great Dutch artist captured *the emotional moment* that the prodigal son came home and fell at the feet of his father, and the father embraced him in love.

But in our own mind's eye there are so many other beautiful images that we see here, that are drawn by Jesus. We picture the image of a father who is patient, long-suffering, and faithful. He waits. He often stands outside for many hours, his eyes fixed on the horizon, looking in the same direction that he saw his son go when he left home. There the father watches and waits, longing for the moment he sees a tiny figure appear on the distant horizon – the moment his lost son returns.

The reason that is such an important and deeply moving image is because it so accurately reflects the patience and longsuffering nature of our God. Anyone who has ever drifted away from God, anyone who has come to faith in God later in life, or anyone who has a son or daughter or grandchild who is not currently walking in the faith, knows how deeply significant and personal this image is. All praise be to God, we pray to a Father who will not give up, who is patient with us; whose heart is large and whose grace is irresistible! We pray to a Father who waits for us foolish sinners to come to our senses and return to him!

There is another portrait here that is just as moving – if not more so. It is the image of the Father who does not wait for us to come to him, but he actually comes to us! Jesus describes the father's actions in verse 20 as running to greet his son. Here the commentators highlight how this was a cultural taboo – something that was unfit for a mature Jewish man to do; it was shameful and demeaning. It was beneath a Jewish man to do this!

But not for this father!! Jesus no doubt plays off this cultural taboo to heighten, to magnify the father's great love and compassion and longing for his lost son. The father does not stand on his porch, with his hands on his hips, staring at his son with that "I told you so" look or posture, or say: "It's about time you came to your senses!"

In fact, that's one of the most amazing aspects of this parable. The father is so filled with compassion that he runs to his son, he throws his arms around him in a loving embrace, and he kisses his son before one word is ever uttered by the son!

This kind of fatherly love, this kind of deep devotion and affection is unbounded and unrestrained. It goes beyond human convention and cultural norms! It truly is an unconditional love! ***This is how deep the Father love is for us – it is vast beyond all measure!***

This is how much the Father loves us, through Jesus Christ the Son! ***That he should give his only Son, to make a wretch his treasure!*** This is the love that should stun us, that should amaze us, that should humble us – even embarrass us – that the Father would love us like this!!

It should leave us speechless and bring us to tears. This is why we are to come before God in prayer with a sense of reverence and awe – because we are just blown away by the fact God our Father loves us like this!

But let's not forget that the father also sought after his older son. Look at verse 28. When the older brother became angry and refused to go in the banquet hall and join in the feast and celebrate that the younger brother had returned, it is the father who goes out once more. ***So his father went out and pleaded with him.***

The father's heart of love is demonstrated here as well because the father detects the coldness within the heart of his older son. The father sees that his older son despises him for the love and

kindness and grace that he extended to his sinful brother; and instead of celebrating that his lost brother has returned and been saved, he is angry and jealous.

The irony here, of course, is that the son who stayed nearest to the father, who did not leave the house to go off to the distant country and indulge in a life of revelry and rebellion -- this son's heart was no closer to his father than that of the younger son.

You heard what he said: all these years I have slaved away and never disobeyed orders. He was a Rule Follower! Outwardly, he was faithful. But inwardly, he was lost. He is what we would call a hypocrite – just like the Jews and Pharisees and teachers of the law.

And that's why Jesus directs this message to the Jews and Pharisees as well (and to us in Christ's church today!) They were the ones who were "nearest to God". They were Jews and the inheritors of the covenant promises. But their hearts were far from the father, They rejected the father's Son, Jesus Christ, and the message of salvation.

Yet, Christ still preached to them – calling them to repent, calling them to believe in Jesus Christ and be saved. They had to open their eyes and see that they were no more deserving of the Father's love and of the gift of eternal life than the most vile and wretched sinner in the world.

No one is entitled to the Father's love. No one is born into eternal life outside of Christ. We all have to come to the Father through Jesus Christ the Son. And if we don't do that, we will not be able to join in the eternal celebration and the wedding feast of the Lamb.

Beloved, my purpose in preaching this in connection to the opening words of the Lord's prayer is very simple. I want to impress upon your hearts and minds these images of the Father. When we pray to God, the first words out of our mouths are the words: "Our Father", and we are to call to mind everything the Father is to us – his love, mercy, grace, patience, kindness, etc.

Notice in verse 21 of our text (Luke 15): what is the first word out of the mouth of the prodigal son? He says: Father! “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.” One commentator noted: “The knowledge that this son had of who his father was, of what he was like, gave him the confidence, the hope, the assurance that he could come home again! That he would find grace and mercy, that he would be forgiven and restored once more”!

That’s the confidence and assurance we can have in God our Heavenly Father as well! Think of it this way: every time we go to God in prayer, it is like a homecoming for us as a child of the Father. I am reminded of the wonderful line from the hymn: “Father Again in Jesus Name We Meet.”

There, the hymn writer captures the essence of this entire parable in the third stanza: *“Alas, unworthy of thy boundless love, too oft our feet from Thee, our Father, rove; but now, encouraged by Thy love we come, returning sinners to a Father’s Home.”*

Did you hear that? ***Our every prayer is to be a homecoming of sorts!*** And with each prayer, it is the Father’s LOVE that encourages us to come, His character of love and grace and mercy invite us to come, it compels us to come -- unworthy and undeserving as we are!

Beloved, may our every prayer be like this – as we humbly throw ourselves at our Father’s feet, knowing that He will not refuse us; He will not turn us away; rather, He will receive us with His warm and loving embrace! Amen.

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