



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

SERMON – 4TH LENT

LUKE 15:1-3, 11-32 & ISAIAH 12:1-6

MARCH 27, 2022

“WHAT IF GRACE LIKE THAT WAS REAL?”

What would it be like if the sort of grace on display in the parable of a “*Father and His Two Sons*” were to prevail? Why does it seem so hard to live under grace – you’d think it would be the easiest thing of all – yet it seems almost as hard to receive as to offer? Martin Luther, wrote “*grace and peace constitute Christianity...grace involves the remission of sins, and gives peace.*”

Psalms 32 says “*when I kept silent my bones wasted away, through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me, my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.*” The Bible is full of metaphors, the Psalms in particular, as you might expect of poetic language, but in Psalm 32 the language used to describe unconfessed sin is particularly vivid. It’s described as a wasting away of our very being!

Science will be quick to tell you sin doesn’t lead to osteoporosis, and our own faculties tell us we can sin and still get a good night’s sleep. Nevertheless, the expression “*my strength was sapped*” describes well the situation of one who we’ve come to call “the prodigal son.” Luke 15:13 says the younger son “*squandered his wealth in wild living.*” The word translated as “*wealth*” in this verse can also mean “*property*” – not much of a distinction there, but the root of the word comes from the Greek verb “*I am, or “to be*”. It can therefore mean “*he squandered his being*” or “*he squandered his very self.*”

I know we think of sin as acts or attitudes that betray our identity as Christians, but it really is the cause of our death, plain and simple. Not the particular circumstances mind you, but sin is our death knell – sin is a wasting away of our very beings. “*Because you have done this, you will surely die*” God said to a cowering Adam and Eve in the garden. Sin is in our bones. The strength of the younger son in our story from Luke was evaporating, like as in the heat of the summer our bodies, or selves, without water, would eventually die.

But back to my original question – what would it be like if the sort of grace on display in this parable were to prevail? What if we could accept this kind of grace, and offer at least some lesser version of it? Luke 15 presents grace from the perspective of a father and his two sons. But first, what caused a son to leave his father and live such a way that eventually, his very being was squandered – wasted – dried up as in the heat of summer. There are three aspects of the young man’s sin to consider.

First, he wanted rights without responsibility. Under Jewish custom, the father could have given him his inheritance – it was his right after all. But not without the provision that he uses the inheritance to support his father (as well as himself) until his father died. That was his responsibility. He chooses instead to take the property, cash it out, and leave. Sin insists on our rights without giving much thought if any to our responsibilities to God and one another.

Second, the young man wanted his freedom apart from relationships – without commitment, which is very common today. Community and our duties to it and the joys of being in it are eroding before our very eyes. I matter...that which asks of me but may not further my interests less so. And third, he wanted his future without waiting for it. Notice I didn't say working for it - we're not talking about a young man just starting out in a career and ambitious to succeed. Our subject matter is an inheritance, a gift. Sin lacks the ability to trust in tomorrow – that it might possibly reveal to us in its own way a greater pleasure or good God has prepared for us. Sin is in a hurry, it wants tomorrow...today.

If that is sin, what is grace? Some would accuse it of being a doormat that puts up and shuts up about transgression. Don't ever think of grace that way. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the 20th century's foremost spokesmen on the subject, would hardly conceive of grace that way. That sort of grace does not, indeed cannot resist the evil he faced. Grace, however, is patient. In this story, the father not only isn't like the son, his actions reverse those of his son. That's what it is!

The son wanted rights without responsibility – the father took responsibility for their relationship and surrendered his rights. He gave up his dignity, his authority, heck, he gave up a third of his estate. He could have resisted, but he didn't because he loved his son. His son wanted freedom at the expense of relationships, spurning not only his family but his entire community. His father risked a good deal of his personal freedom in order to try to maintain the relationship. He put his son's request before his own rights and security – his commitment to his son deemed greater than the freedom to manage and enjoy his property as he saw fit.

The son wanted tomorrow, today, not trusting tomorrow. The father risked his future by trusting his son. His own future he placed in the hands of his boys. What would they do with a love like this? Well, what would you do? And so, the story goes, the son "*comes to himself*", but only when all he concludes "*his life*" was ebbing away. Yet what we are is not what we have – no story in the Bible makes that clear more than this one. And thus having "*found himself*" the young man concocts a way to work his way home. Of all the things he did to his father, this might be the unkindest cut of them all!

Can grace be bought? Please don't ever let me see you nod in the affirmative to that! And so back to the question of previous weeks, repentance – what exactly is it? Can there ever be pure repentance among any of us? Do we not rather all prefer to do a little something to gain it. Not that repentance doesn't mean a change in the direction of our lives – by definition that's precisely what repentance is, a turning around. But it must be more than just "*I'll make it up to you*" – so much more than some deed first refused later done, an unkind word smoothed over with a bouquet of flowers, or a shrug and a tepid "*let's move on*" – if it's repentance to whom we must truly repent that is.

But grace is a father cinching up his gown and running after a sinner before that sinner can say a word or do a thing. So...what would it be like for that sort of grace to prevail? And is there anything better than to know that it has? AMEN