

*And this is eternal life, that we know You the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom  
You have sent. (RISE)*

***Glo - ry be to Thee, O Lord!***

**Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 (NKJV)** — 1 Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. 2 And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, “This Man receives sinners and eats with them.” 3 So He spoke this parable to them, saying: ... 11 “A certain man had two sons. 12 And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.’ So he divided to them his livelihood. 13 And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living. 14 But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. 15 Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. 17 “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, 19 and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.” ’ 20 “And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22 “But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. 23 And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; 24 for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ And they began to be merry. 25 “Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 27 And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.’ 28 “But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. 29 So he answered and said to his father, ‘Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. 30 But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.’ 31 “And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. 32 It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.’ ”

*These words are written that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that  
believing, we may have life in His name.*

***Praise be to Thee, O Christ!***

**PRAY:** Let the words of our mouth and the meditation of our heart be acceptable in Your  
sight, O LORD, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

**The Father Says: "Let Us Celebrate!"**

1. He receives us by grace rather than works
2. What was lost has been found

Dear pilgrims of the heavenly pilgrimage, elect according to the foreknowledge of the Father, sanctified by the Spirit, and sprinkled with the blood of Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace be multiplied.

For the community of Israel in Jesus' day, house meals had religious significance. Being welcomed into someone's house or being invited to dinner was a sign of acceptance and fellowship.

***2 And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, "This Man receives sinners and eats with them."***

When they use the term "tax collectors and sinners" they refer to those who are outside of the fellowship of God's people. This term is the opposite of those they would term "the righteous." Sinners were the ritually unclean; those unworthy of a seat at their table. To welcome and eat with such people would bring ceremonial uncleanness on oneself.

Jesus addresses this situation with a parable. His listeners would have understood this younger son as exactly the type of person to be classified a "sinner" or a "tax collector." This is someone who has abandoned the covenant. The type of banquet celebration that the Father hosts on behalf of the son indicates reconciliation and restored fellowship with the family. The older brother refuses to join this meal of reconciliation.

In Jesus' presence, sinners are received and reconciled. So the Father says: "LET'S CELEBRATE!"

**1. He receives us by grace rather than works**

This request for the inheritance is a great insult. It is perhaps the greatest of insults anyone could level against a father. First of all, the inheritance is something given, never to be asked for. Secondly, the inheritance would not normally be given until the death of the father. The son asking for his portion of the inheritance is, in essence, considering His father dead. As a result, the son is also dead to the father.

Jesus' listeners would have pictured a Jewish family and would have understood "the far country" as a journey to a Gentile community. The son is leaving the care and fellowship of his father and family. That is, he was forsaking the covenant.

The word “prodigal” means “wasteful.” It doesn’t take long before the father’s inheritance is gone. So here we have, a Jewish son, separated from his family, his community, and his security. He has been lost in self-indulgence.

For this son to offer himself as a bond-servant to a Gentile would have been considered most disgraceful. And added is the job of feeding pigs – the most unclean of animals according to Old Testament Law.

This is exactly how the religious leaders viewed “tax collectors and sinners.” They had strayed from the fellowship of the covenant. Whether it was prostitution or collecting taxes for the Romans, these had become unclean and were not welcome within the Jewish religious community.

The son began to be “in want” – that is, in need, lost, hungry, alone. Self-indulgence can drag anyone of us to this point – not just physically, but more so spiritually. Consider what is truly being wasted; it is the Father’s inheritance. Looking back in our own lives, we can all see those moments where we asked for the inheritance only to turn around and waste it on sinful things, to waste it on ourselves.

By this I mean – there are those times we have asked forgiveness for a specific sin, yet how long is it before we fall right back into that same wasteful living. There are those most dreadful moments when our flesh premeditates sin; those times when we know we are doing what is not right, but we do it anyway. We think prodigal thoughts ... “I can’t help it” or “God can’t help me” or “I can always ask for forgiveness later.”

Repentance is rightly pictured in terms of being hungry and lost. Sin leaves us alone, broke, in need. We come unworthily to our Father.

*18 I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, 19 and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.” ’*

In many ways, the Pharisees could agree with this statement. For them, repentance was two-fold. First, you were to realize what you have done wrong. Second, you were to make the situation right by meeting the ritual requirements. You work it off.

Reconciliation was not considered an act of faith, but an act of the hired servants. That is how they treated those who had sinned and wished to be restored to fellowship.

“I have sinned against heaven.” The words echo Psalm 51. “Against You, You only, have I sinned.” A sin against heaven is not something we can simply work off. It is not as if we have hit a baseball through the neighbor’s window and will spend the summer mowing their lawn. Sin against God is spiritual, not material. Notice, the Father says that outside of His family, the son was dead. Death is the payment, the consequence of

abandoning the heavenly gifts of God. How can any outward work restore the loss of eternal life. According to our works there is no hope, we are left to the swine.

Notice how before the son has said anything, the Father is running to embrace him. The father is first to kiss him with His grace. Notice when the son confesses his sin, he doesn't repeat the phrase "Make me as one of your hired servants." There is no place for our merit in the presence of God's salvation. His kiss is the kiss of grace with no strings attached. The gospel has restored to you what you could never hope to work off. God receives us by grace, not by works.

Remember, this parable is drawn from the controversy: "this Man receives sinners and eats with them." It is in the presence of Jesus that we are reconciled to the Father. Jesus has not come to cast us off to the swine; nor has He come demanding that we work off our debt.

Already in chapter 5 of Luke, the Pharisees are found taking issue with Jesus' practice of eating with sinners. Jesus dines along side many tax collectors. *Their scribes and the Pharisees complained against His disciples, saying, "Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."* (Luke 5:27-32)

There are no strings attached to the gospel. It comes for sinners, not the righteous. It asks nothing of us, makes nothing contingent on us. (cf. Romans 5:1ff) What comfort would there be if, upon our return, God stood there, tapping his foot: "now get to work, you've got a lot to make up for?" In the Word, God runs to you; greets you, proclaiming Christ crucified; kisses you with full forgiveness before you can even say a word.

**22 "But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet.'**

You have received the robe of Christ's righteousness – a sign of the son's restored relationship in the family and place of honor at the banquet. The gospel has placed the ring of sonship on us. The ring shows authority is being restored. Sandals indicate you are more than just a hired servant. The sandals of His Word guide you into the way of peace with God, a seat at the celebration.

We are the sinners who draw near to hear Him. For here in the service of the Word, you aren't hearing my words, you are hearing Jesus. He is here truly present among us, receiving us. Only in the presence of Jesus is restoration with the Father found. As Isaiah writes: "All we like sheep have gone astray, and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all." The desertion, the times we've strayed, the times we've squandered His love – these have all been given to Jesus. So Paul also says, "He has become sin for

us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” He reclines with us here today; giving you the forgiveness of all your sins, and welcoming into the Father’s banquet.

***23 And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry;***

A better translation would be: “Let us eat and celebrate!” Because we have been saved by grace and not lost in failed works, we are able to join the Father’s banquet. As He says: “Let us celebrate!”

## **2. What was lost has been found**

We like to be treated fairly. Our whole society is built on this premise. If you work hard, you deserve your reward. So also our natural way of thinking is to gauge each other on the same basis. If I have worked harder, been more dedicated, accomplished more, then I deserve a greater share. This was the thinking of the older brother; this is the teaching of the Pharisees. And sometimes, this becomes our thinking too.

***28 ... he was angry and would not go in.***

The older son wants recognition of his works and loyalty in comparison to the one who squandered the inheritance. Notice how the older son does not refer to the younger as his brother. Rather: ***30 But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.***

Now let’s take this to the heart of our spiritual relationships. It could be a family member, it could be fellow Christian, it could be John Doe off the street. How do we view those who have strayed, those who are wandering, those who have not been to church in a while, those who don’t contribute financially, those who are not here on church work days, those who, after receiving forgiveness, return to a sinful lifestyle? Think of the older brother’s attitude. The older brother was not sorrowful when his brother left. Are we? He did not seek out his brother. Do we? He did not welcome him as a brother, but says to his father “this son of yours comes...” How do we receive those who have returned in repentance?

Our heavenly Father is the One who has received insult, not us. Yet, what does He say upon His son’s return? “It is right that we celebrate. What was lost has been found.”

You may have noticed that we passed over several verses of chapter 15. He there describes a man who has 100 sheep, but loses one. That shepherd leaves the flock to go after the one which is lost. Jesus compares the joy of finding that one lost sheep to the joy being expressed in heaven when one lost soul is found. *I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance. (Luke 15:7).*

We should see such joy in every gathering here at Ascension: a celebration, a banquet feast. For we all come to the Father unworthily. But you and I and all the world of sinners are just the people God is searching for. Here we are “drawn near” to hear Him who receives sinners and eats with them.

Only in the presence of Jesus is such a reception possible. Only through Jesus’ sacrifice is can the dead be made alive. No matter if there is one or ninety-nine, this gathering is a celebration of our Lord’s resurrection. Only in the living robe of Christ’s righteousness are we worthy of God’s banquet. There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. What is lost has been found.

The presence of Jesus is the Father’s embrace. God here is sharing the very best He has to offer, counting us as His dear sons and feasting with us. He clothes us as heirs of eternal life. Yes, the Service of the Word and Sacrament are the gifts of God’s eternal inheritance. Here the heavenly feast dwells on earth. Next week you will draw near to receive the presence of our Lord, His body and blood in bread and wine. This is God’s heavenly banquet celebration. This is the forgiving embrace of our Father’s presence in Christ. So come, again and again. Even though we may, at times, squander it, His heavenly inheritance never runs out. He says to you yet again today: “Let us celebrate!” AMEN!