**RESTORATION SUNDAY**

**CELEBRATING THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL**

**Luke 15:11-32**

**INTRODUCTION**

It is once again a special privilege and joy to preach to you this morning. Last week, it was the joy of preaching at Pastor Timon’s ordination. Many of you commented that it was the first time you had seen an ordination. Today is also going to be a first for most, if not all of us, as we celebrate the restoration of Mikayla Simpson to the Lord Jesus Christ, and to our church here at Sovereign Grace.

One of the reasons why restoration is rare is because church discipline is rare. A person can only be restored to the church after they’ve been disciplined by the church. We live in a time when church discipline is rarely practiced, because it’s easier to turn a blind eye to unrepentant sin rather than address it.

I don’t know all the reasons why churches fail to practice church discipline since it’s so clearly laid out in the New Testament. But I can imagine that many of them do it in the name of grace. “We don’t want to embarrass or shame people”, they say. Or “We don’t want to publicly air people’s private sins.” Or “It doesn’t matter how people live. Everyone’s welcome at our church.”

These are all important considerations. We don’t want to embarrass or shame people either. We want people who don’t know Christ to know that they are welcome here. The church isn’t a country club for saints. It’s a hospital for sinners. It’s a place where people who are burdened by the guilt of sin and enslaved by the power of sin finally find relief at the cross.

But when a member of the church persists in living in such a way that they have rejected Christ by their words or their actions, it has to be addressed. As a professing Christian and a member of a church, you’ve committed yourself to a standard of belief and conduct that is grounded in the exclusive authority of Scripture. You’ve committed yourself to believing the gospel, trusting in Christ, and living a life worthy of our Saviour. That doesn’t mean you’re going to be perfect. Every Sunday we come as freshly convicted sinners in need of freshly provided grace. But it does mean that you’re committed to constantly turning away from sin and turning towards the Saviour.

Church discipline happens when a member abandons that standard. It happens when they refuse to change after rejecting multiple appeals but they insist on living by their own standard rather than God’s. When that happens, a church has the authority and the responsibility to tell the person that they can’t be part of the church, because they’re not right with God.

The Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5 that church discipline is a form of judgment. The church collectively pronounces judgment on the person with grief and tears. But unlike judgment pronounced in a courtroom that is meant to punish, judgment in the church is meant to save. Its purpose is redemptive, not punitive. A person is removed from the spiritual protection of the church and made vulnerable to the spiritual attacks of the devil so that they would return to Christ and be saved.

The reality is that when you’re walking through church discipline, that seems like an impossible outcome. It seems impossible to believe that this person, who has become so hard hearted and is so far from the Lord, could ever turn back to Christ and his church. But Jesus gave us the parable of the prodigal son to assure us that sometimes, prodigals do come home. That is what we get to celebrate today.

This text is commonly known as the parable of the prodigal son, but it’s more accurate to call it the parable of the two sons, because it’s just as much about the older brother who stayed as it is about the younger brother who left. It’s about how younger brothers need grace, and how older brothers need to respond to grace. It’s both an invitation and a warning: an invitation to those who have left home to come home, and it’s a warning to those who stayed home to not resent that. Most importantly, it’s about a father who gives his grace freely to all, so that whether we left or we stayed, we would receive his love and feast with him at his table.

The title of this sermon is **Celebrating the Return of the Prodigal.**

We will have three points today:

1. The Reckless Son
2. The Rejoicing Father
3. The Religious Brother

(1) **THE RECKLESS SON**

Let’s begin with the context:

**1** Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. **2**And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

The religious leaders of the day weren’t happy about the company that Jesus kept. Jesus was spending more time with the cheaters, traitors, prostitutes and adulterers of the day than he was with the spiritually elite. They weren’t happy about that. They thought that it was unbecoming for a religious teacher like Jesus to receive and welcome sinners.

In response, Jesus tells them three parables to explain why it is that he’s not only receiving these sinners, but rejoicing that they’re coming to him. The first is the parable of the lost sheep. He opens with a question:

**3**So he told them this parable: **4**“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? **5**And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.

Jesus opens the parable with the question because the answer would have been obvious. Of course they would go out and find the lost sheep and rejoice when it was found. Jesus tells the second parable in a similar way:

**8**“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? **9**And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’

Jesus is giving them two obvious examples that they can relate to in order to illustrate why he’s receiving sinners and tax collectors. If they rejoice at finding a lost sheep or a lost coin, how much more should he rejoice at finding lost people?

The third parable is the one we’re studying today. The first thing you notice is that Jesus doesn’t open with a question. He doesn’t say, “What man of you, having lost a son to reckless living, wouldn’t rejoice when he returned?” He doesn’t do that because the answer isn’t so obvious. Would they rejoice at the return of a prodigal son who squandered all their hard-earned money? Would you? Probably not. But Jesus is saying that, if we rejoice at finding a lost sheep or a lost coin, we should absolutely rejoice at finding a lost son. It doesn’t matter what he’s done or how he’s lived. He is so precious, and so loved, that he would be joyfully welcomed back into the family.

The Pharisees and Tax Collectors didn’t like that, which is why Jesus inserted the older brother into the parable. If the younger brother represents the tax collectors and sinners, the older brother represents the Pharisees and Scribes. The question for us is, which one are we? Are we more like the younger brother or the older brother?

To answer that question, we need to understand the parable, beginning with the younger brother:

**11**And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. **12**And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’

This is a bold young man. He doesn’t want to wait until his father dies for him to receive his inheritance, so he demands it. “Father, *give me* my inheritance.” He doesn’t ask for it. He doesn’t inquire about it. He directs his father to give his hard-earned wealth to him even though he had done nothing to deserve it.

Surprisingly, the father complies. It’s surprising because we imagine what we might have done if we were in his shoes. We would have scolded that young man, rebuked him, perhaps even cut him out of the will because of his disrespect and presumption. But this father gives him what he wants. It’s shocking. But when we consider what Scripture teaches us about what God is like, we shouldn’t be surprised. Romans 1 says that when people exchanged the Creator for created things God gave them up to the lusts of their hearts. He set them loose to live how they wanted to as a form of judgment, so that they would taste what life would be like without him.

The young man wastes no time in wasting his new-found wealth. Verse 13 says:

**13**Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.

In the blink of an eye, his father’s wealth is gone. Squandered. Wasted. Spent on reckless living. The wealth that his father had spent a life time accumulating for his son, and his son’s children, and for every subsequent generation, had been spent on parties and prostitutes. As the world would say, “He lived it up”. He “seized the day”. He “lived as if there was no tomorrow”, and he did it all with someone else’s money.

In normal circumstances, he may have been fine. Perhaps he would have been able to find a job, or his friends would have taken him in, or he would have settled down with his girlfriend, and he could have become a responsible citizen in that far off country. But then something happened that he wasn’t expecting.

**14**And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need.

A severe famine didn’t just mean no food. It meant no jobs and no friends, as everyone retreated to their own land, their own wealth, and their own inheritance to take care of themselves. That’s what life is like. It doesn’t turn out the way we planned, because even when we do everything right, a famine hits, or a pandemic hits, and suddenly all our plans go out the window.

That’s why they feel like a curse. They disrupt and disorder how we imagine that life is supposed to be. But in God’s providence they can be a gift, because they are the very means he uses to shake us out of our reckless, wasteful slumber.

That’s what it did for this young man. He realizes that he needs to find some way to survive, so he accepts the only job he could find. Verse 15:

**15**So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs.

As a Jewish man, this would have been humiliating. Not only is he the servant of an unclean gentile, but he’s feeding his unclean animals. Pigs weren’t part of Jewish society. Eating or touching them would make you ritually unclean and separate you from society. But this man is desperate. He is desperate to get paid, but he wasn’t getting paid enough. Verse 16:

**16**And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

This young man had gone from living the dream to living a nightmare. No more money, no more friends, and no more fun. He is left alone, unknown and uncared for in a foreign land.

It’s a striking illustration of what it’s like to leave Christ for the world. The world may offer you glamour, pleasure and prestige for a time, but at the end of the day, it’s nothing more than a pig sty.

This young man is beginning to realize that, and he starts feeling the urge to return home. Verses 17-19 say:

**17**“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! **18**I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. **19**I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’

This bold young man has become a broken young man. He doesn’t presume on his father’s generosity anymore. He doesn’t come with a list of demands. He comes with sorrow, contrition, and a willingness to do anything to make it right.

He’s even willing to work as a hired servant, because he owes his father a debt. He squandered his father’s property in reckless living, and now he wants to pay it back, even if it takes a lifetime of labour.

(2) **THE REJOICING FATHER**

How will the father respond? Not with coldness, or anger, or “I told you so”, but with joy. That leads to our second point.

Verse 20:

**20**And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

This is a shocking moment. We may have felt anger when he squandered all his father’s wealth in reckless living. Perhaps we even felt a sense of satisfaction when he ended up in the pig sty. But when the father sees him, he feels compassion. He was literally “moved in his inward parts”, which were seen as the seat of the emotions. He didn’t respond with anger, or bitterness, or even indifference. He responded by being deeply moved at the sight of his son’s return.

And so he runs. He runs to his boy and holds his mud-stained, pig-smelling body in his arms and kisses his filthy face. He doesn’t even allow his son to finish his rehearsed speech before he calls to his servants and says,

**22**…‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet.’

Just as the son wasted no time leaving home, the father wastes no time welcoming him back. He clothes him with his best robe, covering his shame like God clothed Adam and Eve in the garden. He gives him a ring to adorn him, and shoes to comfort him, and then he calls for a feast:

**23**And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. **24**For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

The father’s first instinct isn’t to lecture, or scold, or demand an accounting from his son. It’s to feast and celebrate! His compassion has turned to joy as he welcomes his son home. He doesn’t complain about how the inheritance was wasted. He doesn’t hold him back at arms’ length and say that it’s going to take time to rebuild their relationship. There is only joy, because his son who was dead is alive again; he was lost, and is now found.

Jesus is giving us a picture of God’s very own heart. He has the heart of a tender, compassionate father who welcomes prodigals home with celebration. We may be celebrating Mikayla’s restoration today with a special service and a feast that is still to come, but the real party is happening in heaven as God himself and the angels in heaven rejoice and celebrate. What we’re doing is but a week imitation of what God does himself when those who run to a far off country finally come home.

It’s far too easy to imagine that God is a dispassionate judge rather than the compassionate father, or that he’s a passive gatekeeper who grumbles as people walk into heaven rather than the one who runs to us to embrace us and kiss us. God doesn’t wait for us to arrive. He runs to us and walks us in with his arm around our shoulders so that we can eat at his table.

Mikayla, I know that you feel shame about some of the things you’ve done. You have come back to the church remorseful, broken, and needy. But God wants you to know today that he doesn’t see your shame. He sees you clothed in the righteousness of Christ with a ring on your finger and shoes on your feet, and he rejoices that you’re back.

You may feel that you have a debt to pay. Like the prodigal, you may feel that you have to work as a hired servant before you can become a beloved child. But God won’t hear it. He will stop you before you can finish your speech and summon the servants to prepare the feast, because your debt has already been paid. It has been paid in full by God’s faithful son, Jesus Christ. He died, so that you may live. He paid the price for your sins, so that you could be free. He entered the pig sty of this world so that you could feast with the Father.

There is grace for you, Mikayla. Unending, unceasing, amazing grace that flows from the fountain of God’s love. There is grace for you, and there is grace for every prodigal who returns from a far off country and comes home.

Now you have a chance to help those prodigals come home. David speaks about this in Psalm 51 after he lived like a prodigal with Bathsheba. He wrote:

**12**Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
    and uphold me with a willing spirit.

**13**Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
    and sinners will return to you.

You have a unique opportunity to do the same. You can tell people that the world isn’t worth it. Christ is enough. He is our greatest treasure. And he will always be ready to welcome prodigals home.

(3) **THE RELIGIOUS BROTHER**

But that’s not the end of the parable. Jesus still wants to address a group of people who may not leave home, but they are in just as much danger of being alienated from God. This leads to our final point.

**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**And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. **27**And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ **28**But he was angry and refused to go in.

Everyone likes to receive grace, but not everyone likes to see others receive grace. In fact, seeing people receive blessings that they don’t deserve can make you angry. That’s how the older brother felt. He refused to come into the party, because he resented how his father treated his younger brother.

As his father comes out to persuade him, he responds with just as much disdain and disrespect as the younger brother showed before he left. Verses 29-30:

**29…**but he answered his father, ‘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. **30**But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’

These are the words of a bitter man. He doesn’t address his father respectfully. He just says, “Look”, like we might say, “Look, *you*", because he’s upset. He’s upset that he didn’t get what he thought he deserved, and that his younger brother got what he didn’t deserve.

These are the marks of the older brother. They feel resentful at the grace that others receive. They have a high view of their own personal righteousness. They believe that God owes them for their many years of obedience. And worst of all, they don’t have any true affection for the Father.

The older brother shows us that it’s not just prodigals who are alienated from God. It’s the self-righteous, religious people who think that God is lucky to have them. These people grumble at grace that is shown to others. They expect blessings from God for their faithfulness. They refuse to celebrate when God welcomes undeserving sinners into his family.

The father simply says this in response:

**31**And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. **32**It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

He’s saying, “Son, don’t you see? Everything I’m giving to your brother, you already have. All that is mine is yours. The best coat, the ring on your finger, the shoes for your feet. It’s all yours, and you can enjoy it whenever you want.” But most importantly, he says “Son, you are always with *me*.” He doesn’t just have the gifts. He has the giver of the gifts, the father, and nothing is more precious than him.

That is how the parable ends. The reckless son is reconciled to the rejoicing father, but the self-righteous, religious brother is not. He would rather stew in his anger and jealousy than join the party and enjoy the father’s bounty.

**CONCLUSION**

Jesus told this parable to invite younger brothers home. But he also told it to warn older brothers about the dangers of self-righteous, empty religion. The question is, which are you? Have you been living far from God? Are you squandering the riches that God has given you? Are you living in a far country where you really don’t belong? Then hear the Father calling, “Come home. There’s no shame here, only joy. Come home and be washed clean by the blood of Christ and restored as a child of God.”

For those who have never left home, you need to search your heart carefully to see if you’re like the older brother. Do you grumble at grace? Are you impressed with your own self righteousness? Are you secretly resenting the fact that you don’t get a party?

Then hear the Father’s tender words. “Friend, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But right now, it is fitting to celebrate and be glad, because your sister was dead, and is alive; she was lost, and is found.”

The heart of Jesus is so generous and welcoming that he wants both younger brothers and older brothers to sit at his table and feast. He wants those who are tempted by reckless licence, and he wants those who are tempted by self-righteous legalism.

Whoever you are, God calls you to himself today to feast, to celebrate, and to enjoy his presence, but now and forevermore.