

“WHAT GOD THINKS OF YOU”

Luke 15:11-32

THEME: The lost son. The father loved the son because of who he was, not because of what he did.

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In the last few weeks Liz and I drove through Wisconsin, Minnesota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Nebraska, Iowa, back to Illinois—15 states, a whisker under 6,000 miles in 17 days. *We’ve been everywhere, man.* Some people might say we are crazy. We already knew that.

We visited dear friends along the way; we saw Mount Rushmore, the Crazy Horse memorial, Yellowstone Park with Old Faithful, Lake Coeur d’Alene, Seattle, the Coastal highway with its hair-pin twists and turns from just South of Tacoma all the way to San Francisco through majestic, soaring coastal redwoods, visiting some of our favorite places from when we lived out west; once again doing the cable car thing and eating Dungeness crab at our favorite San Francisco restaurant, Scoma’s on pier 47. We spent time with our son and daughter-in-law in Reno, and visited Lake Tahoe the day before the fires broke out (I promise you we had nothing to do with it). On the highway called the Loneliest Road in America, highway 50 in Nevada, I put our car up to 127 mph, but then I had to slow down because I came up on some doofus poking along at a mere 85. I confess to exceeding the speed limit. (I also exceeded the feed limit). If you think I don’t deserve to be a pastor, you’re right. It’s always been only by God’s amazing grace.

Liz and I marveled at the splendor of God’s handiwork. We love the desert, we love the mountains, we love the ocean. We loved the hours together in the car, talking, laughing, crying, praying—for ourselves and for you. It was exhilarating and refreshing.

Let me tell you what we experienced many times every day—at every turn: undeniable evidence that God really, really loves us. God our Father gave us more than we asked him for. When we arrived anywhere that it was as if we were expected, even if we hadn’t made reservations. For example, I had a dental crown that came loose and needed to be re-cemented. We prayed to our loving Father about it. When we pulled into our motel, right across the parking lot I saw a dentist’s office. It seemed as if they were expecting me. In no time flat they had the sucker back in my choppers—for \$113.

We are so precious to our loving Father, it’s almost more than we can contain. Our cup overflows (Psalm 23:5). We have returned with a joy and peace in our souls that nobody, anywhere will be able to squelch. I want you to know this!

My heavenly Father thinks I’m okay—more than that, he thinks I’m superb and delightful. And you know what? It’s not because of anything I have done. It’s just because I belong to him.

- Did you know that most Christians struggle with fear, denial, guilt because they feel that God’s approval of them depends on their performance? I don’t have statistical proof; I just know it from 34 years as a pastor.

Let’s get this straight. None of us can perform well enough to get a nod from God, let alone applause.

No one, except Jesus Christ. His performance was more than enough. By putting our faith in him God identifies us with Jesus, and we look so good to him that God’s pleasure in us is greater than we can comprehend.

- We talk about “doing church”—and that’s not all wrong. Churches are supposed to “do”. But the main thing is to “be the church.”

When I was a young pastor in Indianapolis, the chairman of our elders used to end our elders’ meetings by looking at all of the elders and pastors and saying, “Go and be the church in the world.”

- Perhaps the most dangerous—and most common—spiritual problem among Christians is attempting to earn God’s approval. Know this—it ’aint gonna happen!

How do I know this? The Bible tells me so. In lots of places. But let me read one of the ways Jesus told us.

¹¹ *Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons.*

¹² *The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.*

¹³ *"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.*

¹⁴ *After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.*

¹⁵ *So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.*

¹⁶ *He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*

- ¹⁷ *"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!*
- ¹⁸ *I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.*
- ¹⁹ *I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'*
- ²⁰ *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.*
- ²¹ *"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'*
- ²² *"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.*
- ²³ *Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.*
- ²⁴ *For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.*
- ²⁵ *"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.*
- ²⁶ *So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.*
- ²⁷ *'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'*
- ²⁸ *"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.*
- ²⁹ *But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.*
- ³⁰ *But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'*
- ³¹ *"My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.*
- ³² *But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"*

A parable has one great central message. What is it in this parable? It's all about what God thinks of people. If you ever wonder if God could love someone who is as wicked and corrupt as you, just read Luke 15—starting at the first verse.

- God loves people more than anything else in his vast creation. People are created in his image and for his glory.

But sin entered the world and corrupted God's creation. We live in a filthy, smelly, moral swamp. The Bible tells us the whole world is under the control of the evil one (1 John 5:19). By nature we all were like dead, decaying, rotten plants in a poisoned marsh.

That's why Jesus came—to set us free from the power of the evil; to cleanse us to give us new life. The swamp is still all around us. It's vile. But God looks down and he sees these beautiful flowers blooming in all their radiance in the midst of the mess of this world. And I believe God says, Yes! Those are mine. They are so beautiful. I see my likeness in them—and it's because the beauty of Jesus is seen in those who belong to the Lord.

We saw lots of wild flowers along the coast in Oregon and California. Some of you know that my favorite flower is a wild one—the California golden poppy. In the shade and at night its petals curl up into a tight spiral. But in the fullness of the sunlight the flower opens up in all its beauty. It's awesome to look at a hillside of them, or even a little cluster alongside the road.

That illustrates for me what God is looking for. As God's love for mankind shines over a corrupt world, he is looking for people who have opened up to his love in Christ and are reflecting the beauty of his image and likeness.

That's no pipe dream. The apostle Peter explained it: *'His (God's) divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.'* (2 Peter 1:3-4)

Our loving heavenly Father has given us everything we need to be free from the corruption in the world and to reflect his glory because he created us to participate in the divine nature.

Repentance of sin and sincere faith in Christ as Savior renew and restore the image of God in people—right in the putrid moral bog we live in.

Please pay close attention as I highlight two of the **most important facts** about God and what he thinks of you. It’s illustrated in the parable I read a few minutes ago.

- 1. It’s all about who you are; 2. You are never too far gone.

I. IT’S ALL ABOUT WHO YOU ARE.

In the parable Jesus told, why did the father love his ‘prodigal’ son?

Because of who he was.

If the father’s love were based on what a son did, the older son might have been the only son he loved.

The older son was the epitome of faithfulness. He had worked hard all those years to earn his father’s approval (v.29)

The older son’s whole life was all about doing instead of being.

The parable shows us that he was proud, and resentful and unforgiving, and he sulked.

- Have you noticed that a lot of evangelical Christians today are like the older brother? They are faithful.

A few weeks ago Liz and I watched Old Faithful geyser do its thing in Yellowstone Park.

Some Christians could put Old Faithful to shame. But they are unhappy, they are resentful, and they’re quick to condemn anyone who does anything they consider inappropriate in the church.

Years ago, probably as children, someone told them that God is watching what they do, and God will love them if they do what is right. They’ve grown up believing that what pleases God is “doing,” “doing,” “doing.”

They’re so fixated on doing stuff for the church that they don’t even think about “being .”

They’re missing out completely, even though they have been God’s children for 30, 40, 50, 60 unhappy years!

None of us can do enough to earn God’s approval. Jesus did it all for us.

- Do you know why some Christians don’t live a full life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—the fruit of God’s Spirit in them? They’re too proud of what they have done and are doing for the Lord.

But the plain truth is that you will never, never experience what it means to live fully as a child of God or experience the extravagance of his love if you are proud of what you do and how faithful you have been.

- When everything turned sour for the young son in the parable, what kept him from going back? Did he think his father had rejected him?

No! It was his own pride. It kept him living like a pig.

Then he came to his senses, as we read in v. 17. When he came to his senses, he knew his father wouldn’t reject him.

But he didn’t expect to be received as a son.

He had never learned that there was nothing he could do to destroy who he was.

He was his father’s son. And the father would always receive him as his son.

- When he came to his senses, what happened? He admitted that he had sinned.

That’s how you can know when people have come to their senses. They readily admit that they have sinned. You don’t have to try to drag it out of them. They don’t say they’ve made a mistake and need to make a few changes in their lives. They confess that they have messed up; they are desperate before God; there are no excuses; they are to blame. They need mercy.

And to whom do they express this? Not to a priest or a pastor. To our heavenly Father—to God.

That’s how God receives each one of us. In our utter humility that accompanies genuine confession of sin and repentance, and through faith in Jesus Christ our Savior.

- Read the first ten verses of Luke 15 as well. There are two earlier parables Jesus tells about God our Father seeking what belongs to him and was lost.

[The second most important fact]

II. YOU ARE NEVER TOO FAR GONE

If the father’s relationship was based on what the younger son had done, he would have rejected him, and written him off.

The son had rejected his father. He took all he could get and said “I’m done with you.”

In that culture it was almost unthinkable that a son would do what this young man did. In his parables Jesus often used an extreme situation that would cause people to gasp and think, Wow! Could a son do anything more outrageously shameful?

Perhaps some of the elders of the clan even came to the father and told him he should consider the boy as dead—expunge the family records of his existence. They would be better off without the memory of such a reprobate. That’s probably what some of Jesus’ listeners thought.

But that sort of thing doesn’t happen with God.

- Most of us call this the Parable of the Prodigal Son. How often have you heard the word “prodigal” used apart from reference to this parable?

For many of you the answer is never. It’s not a common word today. We think “prodigal” means “a skuzzy, rebellious, immoral loser.”

The word actually means ‘extravagantly wasteful’ or ‘profuse in giving.’

Who do you think Jesus listeners would have considered more ‘prodigal’—the younger son, or the father?

I’m sure many would have said the father. He was recklessly extravagant in showing such lavish generosity to a rebellious, undeserving son.

- This is precisely the truth that all of us need to learn.

²⁰ *“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.*

He didn’t wait to see if the boy had learned his lesson and if he was prepared to grovel. The love and the welcome were unconditional.

There’s an old gospel song that starts with these words, ‘*Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me; see on the portals he’s waiting and watching, watching for you and for me. Come home, come home. Ye who are weary come home . . .*’ (Will L. Thompson)

It always makes me think of this parable, and of God waiting and watching for those he created in his image to be his children, to come to him through his Son, Jesus Christ our Savior, who said, ‘*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*’ (John 14:6)

- Jesus said when the father saw the son a long way off, he ran to him.

That’s how God our Father in heaven deals with people. He watches for them, and when they make that first sincere move toward God, he runs to them. Listen while I pick it up again.

²⁰ . . . *he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*

²¹ *“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’*

²² *“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.*

²³ *Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate.*

²⁴ *For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.*

Because God created you in his image, you are never too far gone for him to come running to welcome you—if you humble yourself and turn to him.

Have you come to your senses, or are you going to stay with the pigs, feeling too sorry for yourself, and too proud to come home to the Father who is waiting and watching for you?

God wants nothing more from you than to see you living with his love and peace and joy and confidence, and radiating his likeness that he created to be in you, and restores in you when you become a new creation by faith in Jesus Christ.

Does it matter what you do? Does God want you to be his faithful servant? Yes. Yes. But this comes out of being all he wants you to be as his child. You do it with all his energy that works powerfully in you.

- Have you ever had a spiritual party in your soul, being deliriously happy in the truth that God looks at you and thinks you are delightful, because you are his child and you know it?

Don’t miss out. Don’t stay with the pigs. Don’t stay with the bitter, miserable older brother.

- What I’ve shared with you this morning is rock-solid Bible truth. It has become fresh and thrilling to me this past month. Do you need a spiritual refresher like that? I just gave it to you. Please do something with it.