

The title of this morning's sermon is, "*Be Imitators of God the Father Toward....*"

On Sunday mornings we're working our way through Luke's gospel verse by verse and we find ourselves in the middle of the parable of the prodigal son. Please stand with me for the reading of God's Word. We will start at **verse 22...**

**Luke 15:22 But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. 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.

In our last sermon we finished **verse 23**, and this morning we will look at verse 24.

Let me begin by sharing something with you that I could have shared with you last week...

I was wrong about my earlier understanding of the prodigal son's condition. I said the first two parables were about unbelievers, but the prodigal son represents a backslidden believer.

But now I'm convinced the prodigal son is as much a picture of a repentant sinner being saved as the lost sheep and lost coin that are found.

And I wanted to have a lesson that makes this clear...

**Lesson One: The prodigal son represents repentant sinners passing from death to life.**

Part of the reason I came to this interpretation is because of last week's sermon and everything the father gave to the son. You might remember I said...

*What the father did with the prodigal son pictures what God the Father does with repentant sinners:*

- *He makes us sons and heirs.*
- *Everything the prodigal son receives symbolizes what we receive when we become God's children.*

The other reason I am convinced the prodigal son is a picture of conversion is verse 24...

**Luke 15:24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.'** And they began to celebrate.

The father called him **my son**, even though he said he was no longer worthy to be called a son and requested to be nothing more than a hired servant.

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Notice the father's description of his son's experience:

- He was **dead** and then **alive**
- He was **lost** and then **found**

He was never physically dead or physically lost. He was physically away, but we know where he was – Gentile territory – so he wasn't lost. So, it is clear we have moved beyond the physical to the spiritual:

- He was spiritually dead and is now spiritually alive
- He was spiritually lost and is now spiritually found

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Up to this point we have repeatedly seen the imagery of being lost and then found:

- The **lost sheep** was found
- The **lost coin** was found

But this is the first time we have seen the imagery of being **dead** and then **alive**, which is frequently found elsewhere in Scripture...

**Ephesians 2:5 even when WE WERE DEAD in our trespasses, [God] MADE US ALIVE together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.**

**John 5:24 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but HAS PASSED FROM DEATH TO LIFE.**

The prodigal son **passed from death to life**. It wasn't just finding a lost son or lost sheep; it was getting a son back from the dead.

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Consider this familiar verse...

**John 14:6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”**

There are beautiful parallels between the prodigal son coming to his earthly father and us coming to our Heavenly Father as Jesus described in this verse:

- **Verse 24** says the prodigal was **lost** and Jesus says **I am the way**
- In **verse 17** he looks ignorant – he had to come to his senses – and Jesus says **I am the truth**
- **Verse 24** says he was **dead** and Jesus says **I am the life**

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Now over the last few weeks I have committed sermons to God's compassion, forgiveness, and grace. I hope this parable has given you a better, more affectionate view of our Heavenly Father.

But with that said something has been nagging me and I want to make sure we address it before moving on. And this brings us to lesson two...

### **Lesson Two: Forgiveness doesn't mean no consequences.**

The father received his son back so readily with no probationary period or consequences that it could lead us to think there are no consequences for our sins as long as we repent. Or worse, because the prodigal son was lavished with gifts, we might even think we will be rewarded after we repent.

Imagine someone reads this account and concludes...

*“If I confess my sin then God will treat me like the prodigal son's father treated him. He will lavish me with gifts. I will be given the best robe, a ring, shoes on my feet and there will be a big celebration for me.”*

Then the person repents but doesn't experience any rewards, and instead ends up suffering consequences for their sin...even though they are forgiven.

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So let me be clear about what this parable is and is not intended to communicate...

The parable is intended to communicate that when sinners repent, God the Father has compassion on them and wants to forgive them and receive them as readily, lovingly, and graciously as the father in the parable received the prodigal son.

But the parable is not intended to communicate that:

- There are no consequences for our sins, even when we are forgiven
- Or that we would be given gifts – like a robe, ring, or shoes – when we are forgiven

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A couple months ago I told you that the Christian life is largely a pursuit of avoiding ditches. We tend to find ourselves in one ditch or the other. Then if we are fortunate enough to climb out of one ditch, instead of heading to the middle of the road we overcorrect and put ourselves in the other ditch.

Regarding forgiveness and the consequences for our sins, there are two ditches we can fall into, and I want to make sure we avoid both of them...

One ditch is we can think that because we are forgiven there are no consequences. This is false and there are multiple examples in Scripture of God forgiving people, but then those people suffering because of their sin. David is a great example. Nathan told him that God had taken away his sin, but then he also told him that the sword would never depart from his house.

The other ditch is we can experience consequences from our sins and think we are NOT forgiven.

How many people have been forgiven, but still suffered because of the decisions they made and then thought that meant God hadn't forgiven them?

That is an understandable, but tragic, belief that I want all of us to avoid.

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So, over the years as you reread this parable:

1. Be encouraged by how joyfully God the Father wants to receive our repentance
2. But don't believe that when we sin and are forgiven that there will be no consequences...or worse that we will be rewarded like the prodigal son was.
3. And when we do experience the consequences of our sins it does not mean we have not been forgiven in the first place.

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Now let me go in a different direction for a moment that will end up relating to the parable...

If even a few of you have never heard this before it's worth me sharing just to help you avoid the false teaching of the cults.

The cults do not hold to a Trinitarian view of God largely because the New Testament mentions God and Jesus separately. So they see them distinctly from each other and deny that Jesus is God.

But when the New Testament mentions God, most of the time it is referring to God the Father, and when it mentions Jesus it is referring to God the Son.

So don't ever read the New Testament and think that Jesus is not God. Instead, understand when it mentions God it usually means God the Father and when it mentions Jesus it means God the Son.

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Now as we have read this parable I have focused on God the Father, because the father of the prodigal son serves as a picture of Him, and I wanted us to learn what we could about Him.

But listen to these verses...

**Ephesians 4:32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.**

This is an example of God the Father and God the Son together.

**Ephesians 5:1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children..**

This means imitators of God the Father.

This parable gives us a wonderful view of God the Father and I want us to consider how we should imitate Him based on what we have read.

And this brings us to lesson three...

### Lesson Three: Be imitators of God the Father toward (Part One) repentant children.

We can learn a lot from the father in the parable to apply to our relationships with our children.

What he does NOT do, is as impressive as what he does do. After the son repented, the father never said:

- “What were you thinking?”
- Or “How could you be so stupid?”
- Or, “Yeah, you should be sorry.”

When our children humble themselves and repent, they should be encouraged and loved, not reminded of their sin.

But what if our children are NOT repentant? What if they are still prodigals?

I’m not sure there are many things more painful for parents than having prodigal children. If you find yourself in this situation, you can look at the father’s behavior toward his son before his repentance while he was still a prodigal and this brings us to the next part of lesson three...

### Lesson Three: Be imitators of God the Father toward (Part Two) prodigal children

After the father gives his son the inheritance in verse twelve, we don’t see the father again until verse twenty. And when we do see him, we get an idea what he was doing while the son was gone. Briefly look back at verse twenty...

**Luke 15:20 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.**

The father did two things we can learn from:

1. First, he saw the son **while he was still a long way off**, because he was waiting for him, and we can wait for our prodigal children.
2. Second, it is evident the father never gave up on his son even though he was far away, and we should never give up on our prodigal children even if they seem far away.

One commentator put it this way...

*Letting a child go doesn’t mean giving up on that child.*

Obviously, we all know we should pray for prodigal children, but I would like to offer one more encouragement while you’re waiting and praying...

Be encouraged by **Proverbs 22:6 Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.**

Proverbs is not filled with promises or guarantees. Instead, it is filled with generalities, so in this verse:

- God is not PROMISING that if we train up our children the way they should go when they are old they will not depart from it

- But God is saying that GENERALLY when we train up our children the way they should go when they are old they will not depart from it

And this should give us great encouragement while we pray and wait for our prodigal children to return home.

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And there's one more way I believe we can learn from the father, and this brings us to the last part of lesson three...

### Lesson Three: Be imitators of God the Father toward (Part Three) repentant sinners.

The way the father responds to his son is also a good example of the way we should respond to repentant sinners. The father received his son joyfully and lovingly following his repentance and we should receive repentant people joyfully and lovingly following their repentance.

Let me illustrate the importance of this by showing you the danger if it doesn't happen. Please turn to **2 Corinthians 2**. We won't turn back to Luke.

Here's the background...

When I think about the Corinthians, I think they tried hard. I found four verses that called them zealous: **1 Corinthians 14:12, 2 Cor 7:7, 11, 9:2**.

But the danger with zeal is it can lead us to be extreme and this was the case with them.

We know we should be loving and gracious, but they went to an extreme that ignored sin. There was a man in their church who was sexually immoral, but instead of confronting him they were proud of how tolerant they were.

They removed the man from the church, he repented, but then – in their zeal again – they swung the pendulum too far and wouldn't receive him back.

Look at verse five...

**2 Corinthians 2:5 Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you.**

His sin caused the church **pain**. If you've ever been part of church discipline, you know the person's sin **pains** the whole church.

**2 Corinthians 2:6 For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough,**

Notice the word **majority**. Church discipline only works when the **majority** support it. If half the church is on board, but the other half treats the person like nothing's wrong, we can almost be guaranteed the discipline won't be effective.

I was part of another church and a young lady was put under church discipline, but half the people in the congregation treated her as though she hadn't done anything wrong. They thought they were being loving, but it hurt her spiritually.

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The word **enough** refers to the discipline they carried out against him.

I think this means two things:

1. First, what the disciplined man has been through has been sufficient; it wasn't too severe. Paul wasn't looking back, feeling like they overreacted or his instruction was cruel.
2. Second, Paul means it can come to an end, because it was sufficient to bring about repentance.

Look at verse seven...

**2 Corinthians 2:7a so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him,**

They should be doing the opposite of what they're doing. Instead of disciplining, they should be not just **forgiving**, but also **comforting**.

And why's that?

Think of how repentant people would be feeling upon returning to fellowship:

- *What does everyone think of me?*
- *Do people wish I wasn't back?*
- *Are they upset with me?*

The repentant person would be uncomfortable returning, so he needs to be **comforted** so he feels welcome.

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Someone might say, *"If people repent you need to treat them like you treat everyone else in the church."*

That's not true. We need to make extra effort with repentant people! Not everyone in the congregation needs to be comforted, but repentant people do.

I'd assume this looks like saying:

- *We've missed you.*
- *I'm so happy to see you again.*
- *We're glad you're back.*
- *Praise God for what He's done in your life.*

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Now look why this is so important...

**2 Corinthians 2:7b or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.**

**2 Corinthians 7:10** says **godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted.** This was the sorrow that led to his repentance.

But there can also be too much sorrow.

**2 Corinthians 2:8 So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. 9 For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything.**

Notice the words **obedient in everything**. This isn't an encouragement or recommendation. This is an issue of obedience or disobedience.

**2 Corinthians 2:10 Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ,**

The words **in the presence of Christ** means the forgiveness takes place with Christ's approval, or possibly even with His authority. The NLT says **I do so with Christ's authority for your benefit.**

The same principle seems to be discussed in **Matthew 18:15-17**, which are the most well-known verses about church discipline. Let me briefly read them to you...

**Matthew 18:15** “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. **16** But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. **17a** If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.

Sometimes people think this is the end and the person is removed from fellowship once it’s told to the church. But that’s not true. The church is told so that THEY can also reach out to the person to hopefully help them repent.

But if that doesn’t happen...

**Matthew 18:17b** And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

This is the point at which people would officially be removed from fellowship.

Now listen to the next verse...

**Matthew 18:18** Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

I take this to mean heaven recognizes what happens in a biblically ordered church:

- When the gospel is preached in the church and people are saved, heaven recognizes that
- And when people are put under church discipline and removed from the church, heaven recognizes that too

That is incredibly sobering!

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People might be put under church discipline and then say, “*I don’t care what the church thinks. I only care what God thinks.*”

But the point seems to be that God agrees with the church about the person’s condition.

All that to say, church discipline is an incredibly serious issue, both when people are put out of the church and when they should be received back.

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And I know many people take church discipline seriously, because one of the more common questions I have received is...

*How should I behave toward people who have been put under church discipline?*

Please turn to the right to **2 Thessalonians 3**. Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians.

Look at **verse 14**...

**2 Thessalonians 3:14** If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed.

So, it looks like we have nothing to do with the person, which agrees with the other church discipline verses:

- **Matthew 18:17b** If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.
- **Romans 16:17** I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.

- **Titus 3:10 As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him**

But look at the next verse...

**2 Thessalonians 3:15 Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.**

First it said have nothing to do with them, now it says to warn them...which means having something to do with them. So which is it?

I think this is one of the most important verses regarding finding that right balance with church discipline...

We don't seek the person out. The times to do that were the earlier steps in **Matthew 18:15-17** when the different people and finally the church sought them out.

But we also don't completely avoid them. We don't go the other direction or ignore them if we see them.

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And if we run into them, we **warn** them. This means reminding them of the consequences of their sin both in this life and the next...

*"We miss you. We love you. We hope you'll repent. The church misses you. Think about your eternity and your relationship with the Lord."*

The most important thing is to encourage repentance.

But at the same time there's no chit-chat or small talk, because that would communicate everything is okay when it's not.

We're not rude, but we're not overly friendly. We don't say, *"How are you doing? How's work? How's life?"*

We know how life is and we know how they're doing: they're living in unrepentant sin, they're separated from church, and their soul is in jeopardy. We don't ask about any other things because they pale in comparison to these issues. It's all business.

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Notice we don't view them as an **enemy**. The devil, the world, and the flesh are our enemies, but people under church discipline don't become our **enemy**.

Instead, it says **as a brother**. This doesn't necessarily mean the person is a believer. The supplementary passage in **1 Corinthians 5:11** says **bears the name of brother**

- **NIV claims to be a brother or sister**
- **NKJV named a brother**
- **NASB so-called brother**

Because we are dealing with someone who will hopefully be back in fellowship with us in the future the **warning** should be done with a brotherly attitude. This type of attitude can more easily allow for later reconciliation.

But if the person is treated like an enemy, reconciliation following repentance would be more difficult.

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Let me conclude with a good motivator for our action toward others, and it's the Gospel. Going back to the earlier two verses...

**Ephesians 4:32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.  
5:1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.**

So we should be **imitators of God the Father** toward others – **kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving** – because that is how God the Father has been toward us through Christ.

Let's pray.