

Ash Wednesday

1 Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. 2 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." 3 Then Jesus told them this parable:

4 "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? 5 And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders 6 and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' 7 I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. 8 "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' 10 In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

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."

I'm reading a book called, "The Year That Changed the World." It tells about the Fall of the Berlin Wall, and subsequent fall of communism as we knew it. Actually, I thought I knew that story, and to a certain extent I did. But, this book is trying to tell me there is much more to that story. We'll see.

Many people think they know the story of the Prodigal Son, beginning with Luke 15:11. But, actually, there is much more to that story! This year we are looking at "Surprising Stories of Jesus' Forgiveness" during Lent. There is more than one surprise in tonight's story.

People think this parable is about the prodigal son, the forgiveness of the father for his worldly and rebellious second Son. To a certain extent it is. Jesus was eating with the tax collectors and sinners or prostitutes. He wanted these people to know His forgiveness and the love of God.

But, what caused this chapter of 3 parables was the accusation of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Jesus was eating with people lost to God, showing them God's love. The Pharisees and teachers of the law criticized Jesus for eating with sinners. It was their criticism that caused Jesus to tell these stories

He told the story of the lost sheep - the shepherd cares for the lost as much as those who stayed at home.

He told the story of the lost coin. The woman was not willing to give up on the lost coin.

Then He told the story of the lost son. The sons were different . . . but Dad loved them both! Let's picture the sins of each son for a moment.

The younger son gave in to the desires and emotions of his heart. Whether he resented getting a smaller portion of the inheritance because he was younger; whether he could never live up to his older brother; whether he just wanted to have fun and didn't care if he hurt his dad, he did what he knew was wrong. Horribly, in taking his inheritance (you've heard me say this before) he was telling his father, "I love your things more than you. I wish you were dead. Why not just give me what will be mine now?" Then he spent it on parties, wasting what his dad had earned in a lifestyle his dad did not believe in. He had forsaken and hurt His father horribly.

So, are there times you have willingly rejected God? You know what is right, but you just want what you want. The heck with God. Can you imagine a perfect and holy God forgiving someone so sinful? That is exactly what Jesus is saying in this story. The love and forgiveness of God is a surprise.

The older son had his own issues. Whether he thought dad was always giving the younger son an undeserved break; or whether he actually loved the things of the estate more than his brother; or whether he thought he deserved them, and the younger brother did not; the older brother did not love his younger brother. But, the dad loved both. He loved the older son and the younger son, and so the older brother should have too. Not only did the older brother miss out on loving his younger brother, he missed out on the fact his dad loved him. And when dad came pleading to him, he

rejected the Father, at least at the end of this parable . . . notice it is unfinished.

How about you, are there times you trusted your own goodness, your own accomplishments so much that you didn't think you needed God? Are there times you were so taken with yourself, there was no room for anyone else? What does God, who loves the whole world, think of your idolatry of your self?

There are many surprises concerning the forgiveness of Jesus in this chapter. The surprise to the tax collectors is they were forgiven. The surprise to the Pharisees is that they needed forgiving. The surprise to us all should be that the Holy and sinless ruler of the universe loves and forgives all His people, even you and me. Surprisingly he considers himself our . . . father!

But, there is an untold surprise here. The reason the Father can forgive his unloving older son, or his unfaithful younger son, is that there is a third son in this story. That son is Jesus. He is not sinful. So the perfect son died to pay for sins he did not commit, so that the Father can hopefully receive back his sinful sons.

In the story, the son who admitted his sin receives forgiveness. I don't know which child you are right now. My prayer is That tonight and always, the love and forgiveness of God for you in Jesus is a surprise, a surprise that causes you to go to your Father who loves you and receive His forgiveness. If you know His love, you'll love Him. If you know His love and forgiveness, you'll love others.