

**Grace in a Flash**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**Luke 15: 11-32 (The parable of the prodigal son and his brother)**  
**3-6-2016**

Each noonday it's the same. A landowner makes his way to the top of a ridge that bisects his property. Atop this peak, he is able to inspect the activity of his entire estate. Orchards and fields are filled with workers tending to their daily chores. But it's not the orchards and fields that capture the landowner's attention. It's the road that leads out beyond the horizon. The landowner is waiting.

He's not just a landowner. He's a father. Some time ago, his youngest boy decided it was time to grow up, time to leave the farm for a newer, bigger, better adventure. The father complied, and gave his son his inheritance. Off his son went.

Each evening, the boy's father and mother struggle through sleepless nights. They wonder about their child's safety, wonder what's become of him, wonder what would have happened had they denied his request for an early inheritance. Restless nights give way to anxious days.

But the landowner lives with hope. Each day, just before noon, as he makes those last few steps up the ridge, he hopes beyond all hope, that he will one day see his son again.

Today, as he crests the hill, the father sees a familiar figure in the horizon. His son is walking home.

The father's pace quickens. A trot turns into a run. A gleeful father glides toward his son.

It's grace. In a flash. A son was lost, but now is found!

Way off in the horizon, a hot sun beats down on a dusty road, a road that is hard, and cracked, and relentless on traveling sandals. A young man struggles to put one foot in front of the other. He is hungry. He is exhausted. But most of all, he is ashamed. He thought he knew better. He thought he was ready for the world, ready for adulthood, ready for the adventure of a lifetime. He wasn't. It turns out the world was rougher than he thought. It chewed him up and spit him out. One minute, he was flashing coin from his inheritance, enjoying the fine linens and the fine wines. The next minute, his fortune was squandered, and he was working as a hired hand. And he was so hungry that even pig-slop looked appealing. How had he gotten to rock bottom?

Tail between his legs, he decides to come back home, beg his father for forgiveness, and be content to spend his days working as a servant on his father's estate. It won't all be rosy, but it beats the alternative of isolation and shame and despair.

During his long journey home, he has practiced the speech he will give his father. It's gonna have to be a good one. As he turns the bend, he is pleased to see his father's estate. And then, out of the corner of his eye, he sees a familiar figure, his father. And he's running. And he's smiling. And wow, the old man has still got some wheels on him! This is not the homecoming the long lost son expects.

It's grace. In a flash. A son was lost, but now is found!

Down in the fields, an older brother wipes his brow. He's a few hours into another tiring day of plowing and sowing, bending and pushing, swinging and chopping.

He's the good son. Always has been. The landowner never had to ask him to do something twice, and he's never once ignored his responsibilities to go carousing in the big city. He is duty-bound and loyal to his father.

Life has been difficult since his younger brother left. There's more work to do now. And the dinner table's not the same. His parents lament the void they feel in his brother's absence.

With each swing of his plowshare, the older brother is reminded of his extra workload. He's reminded that a third of his inheritance no longer exists. And there is anger and resentment, too. It's not fair when people ignore the rules, and yet still they are coddled. And there is grief. He doesn't want to admit it, but he misses his brother. How can someone just leave? No notice. No nothing. Just gone.

As he completes the last row of the day, he makes his way back toward the main house. There is lots of commotion. A servant tells him the news. "There is to be a banquet – your brother has returned!"

Grace. It came like a flash. A son was lost, but now is found! Ugh. Of Course he is.

When Jesus tells the parable of the Prodigal Son, he not only explains the nature and character of God's grace, he's comments on this world's reception of God's grace.

God waits for us like a father waiting for a son. But God not only waits for us, God runs toward us even in our pride, even in our shame, even when we fail to live into our potential. And God celebrates our return with lavish love: a robe, a ring, a fatted calf, a banquet, music, the whole nine – God wraps us in the loving embrace of a lasting, bigger-than-life kind of grace.

Jesus tells us that God's grace is not only miraculously extravagant, it is also infinite and fluid and patient.

But Jesus knows us all too well. Because in every age, we seek to make God's grace a commodity, a good to be hoarded and bartered.

The younger son receives grace upon grace from his father. He'd intended to sacrifice his privilege as the householder's son, and become a servant to make amends for his misdeeds. Instead, his father immediately restores his status. In just seconds, he's gone from the outhouse to the penthouse.

But I wonder, as he puts back on his fine robe, and enjoys the nice party in his honor, will he remember the desperation he felt as a hired hand? Does he realize the extra work he's created for his father's servants? Now that he's back to enjoying the benefits of privilege, will he still empathize with those who are hungry, those who are ashamed, those who have been cast out, those who are strangers, those who feel alienated? Will he offer others the grace that's been afforded to him? Or will he simply think, "Better them than me!"

The older son receives grace as well. He chastises his father for being generous and forgiving. He suggests that such mercy is an assault on his loyalty. It's not fair. Besides, there's not enough grace to

go around. Grace given to his brother must mean less grace for him. And what has his brother done to deserve his father's grace? Nothing!

But the father gently reminds him, "I have always loved you. What's mine is yours. But your brother has returned, and in his return, we are made whole. So come. Join us in celebration!"

And I wonder, will the older brother ever be able to accept a grace and love that extend beyond his own silo? Or is his spite more satisfying than mercy? Does he believe in a grace big enough for everyone? Will he stew outside the banquet, or will he come back to the party?

If we pay attention to this parable, really pay attention to this parable, we realize something: just like the two brothers, we seek to make God's grace a commodity. We demand that God's grace be fair and measurable.

But Jesus offers us a not-so-gentle reminder. God's grace is not fair. And God's grace is not measurable. God's grace is sufficient.

And a grace that is sufficient is the kind of grace that doesn't compute in Caesar's kingdom.

Want proof? Just tune into the latest political stump speeches.

Walls to keep out immigrants. Flight lists to ground Muslims. Penal systems designed to dole out double doses of retribution. Fascism celebrated. Racism tolerated. Civility abandoned.

If you listen to the rhetoric of Caesar's world, it will tell you that there's only so much goodness and mercy to go around, so you better stake your claim while you can, snatch it up with a tight grip.

But Jesus reminds us:

God's grace is sufficient. Therefore, we have no need of walls to keep people out.

God's grace is sufficient. Therefore, we have no need of documents to prove our righteousness.

God's grace is sufficient. Therefore God's banquet is big enough for all.

Friends, in this Lenten season, we wait for God's redemption. And Christ tells us, God waits for us, even longs for us, and will run toward us when we come.

The question for us to ponder this season is not when, or even if, we'll be recipients of God's grace. We have that grace. It's not in doubt. Ever.

The question is this: Are we willing to live in a world where we accept that God's grace is available and sufficient to and for all people? Period. No exclusions. No disclaimers. No expirations.

It's grace. In a flash. A son was lost, but now is found!

In God's kingdom, that's cause for celebration. What is it in the kingdom of your own heart?

Amen.