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Sermon: February 13, 2011
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“FORGIVE US OUR SINS”
Matthew 6:12; Luke 15:11-32

□ Matthew 6:12a: **“And forgive us our [sins].”**

⊛ We need to be forgiven because we have sinned; and, {Mt 6:9} “Our Father in heaven” is the source of forgiveness. No doubt most of us affirm that both of these are true, as a general principle.

◆ But *can* the God before whom the seraphs cry: {Is 6:3} **“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty”** *forgive my worst sins? Can* he who says, {Ezek 33:18, 20} **“If the righteous turn from their righteousness and do evil, they will die for it”** *forgive me when I commit the same offenses again and again?*

■ Please turn to Luke 15:11-32. This is the Parable of the Lost Sons (better known as the Prodigal Son). I invite you to hear it as though for the first time.

◆ A Jewish man has two sons. The younger brother demands his inheritance, and his father gives it to him.

The kid runs far away and blows his fortune. Just then, famine strikes. He is flat-broke and the only work he can get is the degrading job of feeding pigs for a Gentile farmer. The pay is lousy. He is still so hungry that {15:16} **“he [longs] to fill his stomach”** with the slop; but his boss won’t allow it; the hogs come first.

The prodigal’s eyes are finally opened to the ugliness of his sins against the LORD God and his father. He decides to return home, throw himself at his father’s

feet, and beg to be hired on as a lowly servant. It is the best he can hope for, given his long list of spiritual and moral failures.

⊛ 1st, he has been feeding pigs.

→ Scripture {Lev 11:7-8; Dt 14:8} only forbids eating pigs and touching their dead carcasses. But over the centuries, they have come to embody all that is pagan and loathsome and the authorities have tightened the standards. In the 1st century it is said that {M. B. Qam 7:7} **“No one may rear swine anywhere”** and {b. B. Qam 82b} **“Cursed be the man who raises pigs.”** This sinner does not deserve to be forgiven.

⊛ 2nd, he has been immoral.

The narrative does not include the juicy details; but this is an impulsive, self-centered guy, most likely in his upper teens or early 20s, living in a far-away land without parental supervision or social restraint. You know he has been up to all kinds of mischief. Jesus does note that this lost boy {15:13} **“squandered his wealth in wild living.”** That says it all. This sinner does not deserve to be forgiven.

⊛ 3rd, he has immersed himself in pagan culture.

His foreign friends eat ritually impure food, indulge in nearly every conceivable perversion, and offer sacrifices to idols. Some people can maintain integrity even in the cruddiest environments; but let’s get real – this prodigal did not move to a {15:13} **“distant country”** with the intent of dispelling the darkness; he came to wallow in it. This sinner does not deserve to be forgiven.

⊛ 4th, he has significantly dishonored his father.

↓ He has dishonored his father by speaking insolently. To demand his share of the estate while the family patriarch is still alive is like saying, ‘Why don’t you hurry up and die already?!’

↓ He has dishonored his father by diminishing his wealth. {Dt 17:21} As the younger of two sons, his inheritance amounts to 1/3rd of the estate. When he got his share he shrank his father’s holdings by 1/3rd.

↓ He has dishonored his father by rejecting everything he stands for. His actions are tantamount to repudiating Judaism. This kid has been one step away from forsaking biblical faith and worshiping false gods.

This imaginary son represents us at our scandalous worst apart from God. We {Ro 3:23} **“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”**

He knows that he is unworthy to be forgiven, but he takes a risk and sets out for home anyway. On the way he rehearses his speech: **“Father, I have sinned against heaven and you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants”** (verses 18-19).

☆ {15:20} **“While he [is] still a long way off, his father [sees] him.”** That can only mean that he has been standing by the road, scanning the horizon. **“Filled with compassion” “he runs to”** him. This is surprising: {Snodgrass, p 126} **“older men”** in this culture [avoid] **running**” if at all possible, for **“it [is] ...shameful to show one’s legs and to appear so undignified”** – still, **“he runs to his son, [throws] his arms around him”** his reeking frame, **“and [kisses]”** his grimy face.

The prodigal makes his confession, and it is true. He has {15:21} **“sinned,”** grievously. He is **“no longer worthy,”** not one bit.

An excellent dad might reprimand him: ‘Do you know what you’ve put me through?! I will take you back as my son – but I’m keeping my eye on you.’

A decent dad might take him on harsh terms: ‘No, you aren’t worthy! I will take you on as a field hand – but only on a trial basis.’

A bad dad might even verbally assault him: ‘After that little stunt you pulled, you are no son of mine. Get out before I give you the beating you’ve got coming!’

☼ Instead, this father dresses his son in the best robe, puts a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet, orders the fattened calf to be slaughtered, and throws a feast to celebrate the return of his boy who {15:24} **“was dead and is alive again.”** His response goes beyond forgiveness to reconciliation and restoration.

This imaginary father represents the real {1 Pe 1:3} **“Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”** in all his goodness. God is more than able and willing to forgive our sins!

◆ *But do we really need it?*

That sounds audacious; but though I often pray **“Forgive us our sins,”** I don’t always feel the need for pardon. Sometimes my attitude smacks of complacency. ‘Sure, I need forgiveness; but not as much I could – and definitely not as much as so-and-so needs it.’

The Parable of the Lost Sons speaks to this condition as well.

◆ Consider the older son. Compared to his brother he comes across as a saint, at least initially: the firstborn patiently waits for his inheritance, stays at home, works hard, conserves and multiplies his fortune, and conforms to religious expectation and social tradition.

Yet he is just as lost as the prodigal. His response to his brother's return exposes the terrible corruption of his heart.

☠ 1st, he is merciless.

↓ He refuses to join in the celebration, or even go into the house. He icily refers to his sibling as **“this son of yours.”** He cannot bring himself to say, *‘my brother.’* He judges his brother and finds him unworthy of forgiveness, much less reconciliation. Not only so, he assumes that the prodigal is not worth the effort of an angry confrontation, much less a polite greeting.

→ The Lord Jesus says: {Mt 9:13} **“Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’”**; but he has not taken the truth to heart. Have I?

☠ 2nd, he is prideful.

↓ How does he respond to his father's plea? **“Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.”** He makes two fatal presumptions: 1) that he is the standard against which his brother should be measured; and 2) that justice is better than mercy (that everyone should get exactly what they deserve).

→ The Lord Jesus says: {Lk 15:7} **“there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than**

over ninety-nine [supposedly] righteous persons who do not need to repent”; but he has not taken the truth to heart. Have I?

☠ 3rd, he is unteachable.

↓ How does he respond to his father's plea? Does he listen and obey because he recognizes that his father might possibly be right after all? No! Does he listen and obey because it dawns on him that he might not have all the answers? No!

→ The Lord Jesus says: {Mt 13:14-15} **“You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For [your] heart has become calloused”**; but he has not taken the truth to heart. Have I?

☠ 4th, he is disrespectful to his father.

↓ He refuses his father's invitation to come in. He answers with a harsh tone, and virtually calls him a slave driver. He blames his father for not giving him a party (even though he never asked for one). He actually criticizes his father for being merciful. The irony is that he dishonors his father as shamefully as his younger brother.

→ The Lord Jesus says: {Mt 5:17, 19} **“I have not come to abolish” “the Law or the Prophets” “but to fulfill them.”** That includes the commandment to {Ex 20:12} **“honor your father and your mother”**; but he has not taken the truth to heart. Have I?

This imaginary son represents us at our respectable best apart from God. {Is 64:6} **“All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.”**

We really need to be forgiven, even when others think we are such decent people who have it all together, even when we feel oh, so morally superior to the addicts and deviants and criminals.

Thank God! His gracious invitation for us to turn from our sins is always open. He stands at the road, scanning the horizon, watching for us, ready to run to us, throw his arms around us, “**And forgive us our [sins].**”

This is the word of the Lord.