

Mercy, Not Merit—The Father's Heart

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****Scripture Reading:**** Luke 15:11–32

****Anchor Verse:**** ***“The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”** —
Psalm 145:8

Introduction: The Performance Trap

Have you ever noticed how obsessed we are with *earning* things? We live in a world that operates entirely on a system of merit. It’s a giant transactional machine. You put the effort in, you get the reward out.

If you work hard at school, you get the gold star. If you hit your targets at work, you get the bonus. If you behave yourself, people like you. We are conditioned from the nursery to the nursing home to believe that our value is directly tied to our performance. Performance equals acceptance.

And because we’re completely soaked in this way of thinking, we do something incredibly foolish: we try to apply the exact same rules to Almighty God.

We set up a spiritual spreadsheet in our minds. When we’ve had a "good Christian week"—you know the sort: read the Bible every morning, prayed for at least ten

minutes, didn't lose our temper in traffic, and smiled at the neighbors—we stride into church on Sunday feeling rather pleased with ourselves. We think, *‘‘God must be thrilled with me today. I’m definitely in the black.’’*

But if we’ve had a bad week—if we’ve snapped at our spouse, gossiped at the water cooler, or haven't opened our Bible since last Sunday— we slip into the back row hoping God won’t notice us. We look at the floor because we assume God is looking at us with crossed arms and a furrowed brow, waiting for us to pay off our spiritual debt.

It’s exhausting, isn't it? Living like you’re constantly on probation.

But Jesus came to completely dismantle that mindset. In Luke chapter 15, He tells a story to show us what God is *actually* like. It’s famously called the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but frankly, that’s a terrible title.

It’s not a story about one bad boy; it’s a story about *two* incredibly broken sons and one astonishingly radical Father.

Through this story, Jesus screams a brilliant, liberating truth to every single one of us:

* **Our relationship with God is not based on our merit, but on His mercy.**

* **Our relationship with God is not based on what we deserve, but on His extraordinary grace.**

Let's look at this story together through five simple points, and let's see how the Father's heart can set us free from the exhausting treadmill of spiritual striving.

1. Relationship is Rooted in Mercy, Not Merit

The story kicks off with the younger son doing something that, in the ancient Middle East, was the absolute height of disrespect. He walks up to his father and says, **"Father, give me my share of the estate now."**

Do you know what he was actually saying? In that culture, you only got your inheritance when your parents died. So, translated into modern terms, this boy was saying: **"Dad, to be perfectly honest, I wish you were dead. I don't care about you; I just want your money."**

It was a public, scandalous slap in the face. By all the rules of the day, the father should have kicked him out of the house with nothing but the clothes on his back. But

instead, the father incredibly grants the request, divides his wealth, and lets the boy leave.

The boy goes off to a distant country and throws a massive party that lasts until the money runs out. He squanders everything on wild, reckless living. Then, a famine hits, and he ends up utterly destitute, working in a pigpen. For a Jewish boy, this is the absolute rock bottom. He is so hungry that the pig food is starting to look appetizing.

Sitting in the mud, he comes to his senses. He decides to go home, but look at his mindset. He writes a speech. He rehearses it: *"Father, I have sinned... I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."*

Notice what he's doing. He is still trying to use the merit system! He thinks, *"I've ruined my status as a son, so I'll go back as a employee. I'll work hard, I'll earn my keep, and eventually, I'll pay Dad back."*

But look what happens when he finally approaches the house:

> *"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."* (Luke 15:20)

This is magnificent. In the ancient world, dignified Middle Eastern patriarchs did not run. It required them to hitch up their robes and expose their ankles, which was considered deeply humiliating. Why did the father run? He ran because he knew the village rules. If a Jewish son lost the family inheritance among Gentiles and dared to come back, the village elders would perform a ceremony called the *Kezazah*. They would smash a clay pot on the ground and declare the boy utterly dead to the community.

The father ran so he could get to his son *before the village could judge him*. He took the humiliation on himself. And before the boy can even finish his prepared "let me earn it back" speech, the father interrupts him. He doesn't let him say "make me a hired servant." Instead, he shouts to the staff: *"Bring the best robe! Put a ring on his finger! Put sandals on his feet! Let's have a party!"*

The Apostle Paul summarizes this exact reality in his letter to the Ephesians:

> *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of

God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”*
(Ephesians 2:8–9)

Your relationship with God does not start because you finally cleaned yourself up, put on a nice suit, and proved your worth. It starts because while you were still stinking of the pigpen, the Father saw you, felt moved with an overwhelming love, and *ran* to you. It is entirely rooted in His mercy, not your merit.

2. Grace Trumps What We Deserve

If we are completely honest with ourselves, there’s a little part of us that reads this story and feels a bit uncomfortable. We look at the younger son—who has been rude, selfish, and wasteful—and we think, *‘‘Well, that’s not really fair, is it? He doesn’t deserve a party. He doesn’t deserve the best robe. He deserves a good telling-off!’’*

And you’re completely right. He didn’t deserve any of it. He deserved the consequences of his actions.

But that is the glorious difference between justice, mercy, and grace.

* **Justice** is getting what you *do* deserve.

* **Mercy** is *not* getting what you deserve (the father didn't punish him).

* **Grace** is getting what you *don't* deserve (the robe, the ring, the kiss, and the fattened calf).

The gospel is not a message of fairness; it is a message of scandalous, unmerited favor. If God dealt with us on the basis of what we actually deserved, none of us would be here today. The Psalmist tells us: *"If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?"* (Psalm 130:3). The answer is nobody!

Look at what Paul writes in Romans:

> *"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* (Romans 5:8)

Notice the order of events there. Christ didn't die for us *after* we promised to behave. He didn't lay down His life on the condition that we would turn over a new leaf. He died for us while we were still turning our backs on Him. He took what we deserved on the cross, so that we could get what we don't deserve—His total forgiveness and a place at His table. Grace completely trumps what we deserve.

3. The Danger of the Performance Trap

Now, the story shifts, and Jesus introduces us to the second character: the older brother.

The older brother has been out working hard in the fields all day. As he walks back toward the house, he hears music, laughter, and dancing. He stops a servant and asks, *"What on earth is going on?"* The servant says, *"Your brother has come home, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he's got him back safe and sound."*

How does the older brother react? Is he thrilled? Does he drop his tools and run in to hug his brother? No. He is absolutely furious. He refuses to go inside.

So, what does the father do? The exact same thing he did for the younger son. He leaves the warmth of the party, walks out into the cold dark night, and begs his older son to come in.

Listen to the older brother's response to his father, because it perfectly captures the sickness of religious performance:

> **"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. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"** (Luke 15:29–30)

Look at the language he uses. **"All these years I've been slaving for you..."** He didn't see himself as a son; he saw himself as a slave. He lived in the father's house, ate the father's food, and enjoyed the father's protection, but his heart was trapped in a transactional nightmare. He thought his good behavior earned him special rights.

When he sees his messy brother getting a lavish party for free, he gets angry because it exposes the fact that the father's love cannot be bought. If love is a free gift, then the older brother's pristine resume doesn't give him any extra leverage.

This is the great danger for those of us who have been in church a long time. It's the "older brother syndrome." It's the subtle, quiet self-righteousness that makes us look down on people with messy lives. It's the attitude that says, **"Well, I've been a loyal church member for thirty years, so I deserve better treatment than that person who just walked off the street."**

Paul had to address this exact issue with the church in Galatia. They had started by trusting in Jesus, but then they started trying to earn God's approval by keeping a checklist of strict religious rules. Paul writes to them:

> *"Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?"* (Galatians 3:3)

Are you caught in the performance trap? Do you serve God because you love Him, or because you're terrified of what will happen if you stop? Remember what the father said to the older brother: *"My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours."* The older brother didn't need to earn a goat—he already owned the whole farm! He was so busy trying to be a perfect employee that he forgot how to be a loved child.

4. Resting in the Unchanging Heart of God

One of the most beautiful things about this entire parable is that through all the drama, the father's heart never shifts by a single millimeter.

Think about what this father had to endure. He had to deal with the public disrespect of his younger son running off, and then he had to deal with the public

embarrassment of his older son throwing a tantrum outside his own banquet. Both of his sons broke his heart in different ways.

Yet, his posture toward them never changes.

* When the younger son returns in rags, the father runs to him.

* When the older son stands outside raging, the father goes out to entreat him.

The father's love was completely independent of their behavior. It was grounded entirely in *who he was*, not in *how they performed*.

This is incredibly good news for you and me. God's heart toward us is totally stable. In our human relationships, love goes up and down like a roller coaster. If you treat me well, I like you; if you cross me, I pull away. But God doesn't play those games.

He tells us through the prophet Malachi:

> *"I the LORD do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not consumed."* (Malachi 3:6)

The only reason we aren't completely consumed by our own mistakes and inconsistencies is because the God we serve is unchangeable. His love for you isn't based on your daily performance score. He doesn't love you more on the days you do everything right, and He doesn't love you less on the days you get it completely wrong. His love was proved once and for all on the cross.

The writer of Hebrews describes this unchanging nature of God as a spiritual anchor:

> *"We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure."* (Hebrews 6:19)

When you finally realize that God's heart toward you is an immovable anchor, you can finally stop walking on eggshells. You can step off the treadmill of striving. You can stop pretending to be perfect. You can drop the mask, bring your real, messy self to Him, and simply rest.

5. Blessed to Be a Conduit of Mercy

Jesus ends the story with a massive cliffhanger. We are never told whether the older brother finally swallowed his pride, apologized to his father, and went inside to join the

party, or if he stayed outside in the dark, stewing in his resentment.

Jesus left the ending wide open on purpose. Why? Because He was speaking directly to the religious leaders of His day—the ultimate "older brothers"—and He was leaving the choice to them.

But it's also an open ending for you and me. Once we have experienced this incredible, radical mercy of the Father, we are faced with a choice: Are we going to keep it to ourselves, or are we going to let it flow through us to other people?

If you have truly understood how much mercy God has shown you, it will completely change how you look at everyone else. You can't look down on someone else's mess when you remember how much mud God washed off *you*. You can't withhold forgiveness from someone else when you realize how massive your own debt was.

Jesus gives us a very clear command:

> *"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."* (Luke 6:36)

Notice the standard there. We aren't told to be as merciful as the culture around us, or as merciful as is

convenient. We are told to be merciful *as our Father is merciful*.

And how is He merciful? He is patient with the rebellious. He is gentle with the self-righteous. He gives grace to people who don't deserve it. This means we are called to be a pipeline of that exact same grace to our spouses, our children, our coworkers, and our neighbors—especially the ones who deserve it the least. We don't show mercy because people have earned it; we show mercy because we've been given an ocean of it ourselves.

Conclusion: The Father is Waiting

As we wrap things up today, let's remember our anchor verse from Psalm 145:8: *"The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."*

That is the true heart of God. He isn't standing there with a clipboard, waiting to write you up for an infraction. He's standing at the gate, looking down the road, waiting to welcome you in.

Some of you here today might feel exactly like the ****younger brother****. You've made a mess of things.

You've made choices you're ashamed of, you feel dirty, and you think you've used up all your chances with God. Hear me clearly: the Father is looking for you today. He doesn't want you to fix your life before you come to Him; He wants to meet you right where you are and cover you with His grace.

Others of you might be like the ****older brother****. You've been doing all the right things, but you're dry, cold, and bitter inside. You're exhausted from trying to keep up appearances, and you've turned your relationship with God into a business contract. The Father is stepping outside into the dark to speak to you today, saying, ****"You don't have to slave for me anymore. Just come inside and be my child."****

Let's bow our heads and pray together.

****Prayer:****

Heavenly Father, thank You that my relationship with You is not based on my performance or my worthiness, but on Your amazing mercy and grace. Help me to rest in Your love instead of constantly striving to earn it. Draw me close to Your heart today, and help me to extend that exact same mercy to the people around me. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

📋 Questions for the Road

1. In what areas of your life are you still trying to "buy" God's approval through good behavior?
2. How does knowing that the Father runs to meet you change the way you handle your mistakes?
3. Who is the person in your life right now that you find hardest to forgive, and how can you show them the Father's mercy this week?