

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Everybody likes to be warmly **welcomed**. When we go to a restaurant, we **like** it when the hostess warmly **greet**s us, and seats us at a table. When we start a new **job**, or go to a new **school**, we feel very **uneasy** until someone **welcomes** us, and makes us feel **at home**. But is there anything which can compare with the welcome that **God** gives us? Do you ever think about how **wonderful** His welcome is, or what it would be like if He **didn't** welcome us? What is it that makes **God's** welcome so **special**? The parable in our sermon text today really illustrates for us how **blessed** we are to have God as our Father, because this parable reinforces the fact that **The LORD Welcomes Sinners**.

In Jesus' parable we're told about a **father** who had two sons. The **younger** son had some **problems**. He didn't want to **wait** for his father to **die** in order to get his share of the **inheritance**. He wanted it **now**. So, as strange as it may **seem**, the father actually **divided** his property between his two sons - with 2/3 going to the **firstborn** son, and 1/3 going to the **younger** son. A few days later, the **younger** son packed up his bags, and **left** for a distant country - **far away** from where he had grown up. There we're told that he **wasted** his money in wild living, and became **penniless** and **despondent**. To make matters even **worse**, a **famine** broke out in the country, and he was barely able to **survive**. So, he hired himself out to a man who gave him the job of feeding **pigs**.

In our text this young man is called the **prodigal** son, but we would probably call him a **rude**, **foolish**, and **ungrateful sinner**. Fittingly enough, this young man represents **all** the sinners in the world - including **us**. The Bible says that "*We **all** have gone **astray** like sheep. Each of us has turned to **his own** way.*" That's the **problem** with our sinful **nature**. We get **tired** of being around **God**. We **resent** His **rules**, and we want to be on our **own**, so we can live **free** from the restraints of God's **commandments**. After all, the whole **world** is out there for us to **enjoy**, with all of its **worldly** pleasures and **easy** ways of living. We want so much to **fit in**, and be a **part** of it. So, all too often we unwisely choose to live **apart** from God. What a **terrible** mistake - but it's a mistake which is **easy** to fall into, because our minds are all **messed up** by sin. So, we **walk out** on our gracious **God**, and head down the path which only leads to **misery** and **condemnation**. That's where sin **always** leads us.

But in our **text**, we're told that this younger son finally came to his **senses**, and he decided to go back to his **father** in order to ask him for a **job**. He remembered that his father's hired men were well **cared for** - they even had food to **spare**. So, he said, *"I will get up, go to my father, and tell him, 'Father, I have sinned against **heaven** and in **your** sight. I am no longer **worthy** to be called your **son**. Make me like one of your **hired servants**.'* He got up and went to his father. While he was still **far away**, his father **saw** him and was filled with **compassion**. He ran, **hugged** his son, and **kissed** him. The son said to him, *'Father, I have sinned against **heaven** and in **your** sight. I am no longer **worthy** to be called your **son**.'* But the father said to his servants, *'Quick, bring out the best **robe** and put it on him. Put a **ring** on his finger and **sandals** on his feet. Bring the **fattened calf** and kill it. Let us eat and **celebrate**, because this son of mine was **dead** and is **alive** again. He was **lost** and is **found**.'*"

What a **generous** and **forgiving** father. Even though his wayward son had acted **foolishly** and **godlessly**, he had never stopped **loving** his son, and he was anxiously **watching** for him to **repent** of his sins and **return home**. Even before this wayward son had the chance to ask his father for a **job**, the father joyfully received him back as **his son**, immediately offering words of **forgiveness**, **mercy**, and **joy**.

That's the **nature** of our God. **The LORD Welcomes Sinners**. The LORD is our loving **Father**, and He **never** gives up on us. But instead, He continually **pleads** with us to come to **Him** with all of our **sins** and **burdens** in **sorrow** and **repentance**. He says, *"Come now, and let us reason together, says the LORD. Though your sins are like **scarlet**, they will be as **white** as snow. Though they are as **red** as crimson, they will be like **wool**."* Through Jesus, God **forgives** all our sins, and He **Welcomes Sinners** back into His family.

God responds just like the father in Jesus' **parable**. When we come **crawling** back to Him in humility - **broken down** with **sorrow** and **shame** - He comes **running** out to us with His arms **wide open** - offering us His **love** and **forgiveness**. In fact, long before we even start moving toward Him, He's already **watching** and **waiting** for us. From all eternity He planned to send His Son, Jesus, to **save** us from our sins. And in the fullness of time, Jesus took those sins to the **cross**, and suffered the pain and agony of **hell** itself, as He paid **in full** for the sins of the world, bringing us **pardon** and **peace** with

God. So now we have the **full assurance** that when we confess our sins to our heavenly Father, He **receives** us, and **forgives** us. No matter **what** the sin may be, or how **often** we've committed it, or how far we've **wandered away** from Him, He's always **ready** and **willing** to forgive us.

The LORD Welcomes Sinners, and it's a very **generous** welcome. God calls us His **sons** and **daughters** - His dearly loved **children**. He dresses us in the robe of **righteousness** which was purchased for us by **Jesus**, so we can stand in His presence in perfect **holiness**. It's **great** to be welcomed by the LORD. It's **great** to be **clean** and **pure** - to be **sheltered** in the loving arms of our heavenly Father. How could we possibly turn down His loving **invitation** to **celebrate** and **rejoice** with Him?

But as we return again to Jesus' **parable**, we see that not everyone **does rejoice** at the father's actions. Again we read, "*His **older son** was in the **field**. As he approached the **house**, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. The servant told him, 'Your **brother** is here! Your father killed the **fattened calf**, because he has received him **back** safe and sound.'* The older brother was **angry** and **refused** to go in. His father came out and began to **plead** with him. He answered his father, 'Look, these many years I've been **servicing** you, and I never **disobeyed** your command, but you never gave me even a **young goat** so that I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours arrived after **wasting** your property with prostitutes, you killed the **fattened calf** for him!'"

The **younger** son wasn't the **only** one who had **problems**. The **older** son had them **too**. He was **jealous** and **unforgiving**. And we might even think **rightly so**. After all, he had **worked hard** for his father - he had never **run off** - and he was **obedient** - but what had it gotten him? The father never threw a party for **him**, but when the son who had messed up **everything** came back, he killed the **fattened calf**.

This **older** son reminds us of the **Pharisees** - a group of religious **experts** who were very **proud** of their obedience to the **law**. They looked **down** on everyone **else**. They **resented** the fact that Jesus was often seen associating with **sinners**. They felt that they **alone** were **worthy** of God's favor. They believed they were **acceptable** to God because of their morally superior lives.

Unfortunately, there is a little **Pharisee** inside each of **us**. It's the sinful **attitude** we all have - an attitude which thinks that God's love and forgiveness **can't** be for **everyone** - but only for people who have **earned** it - people like **us**. That sinful **pride** lives in **all** of us, and it needs to be put to **death**, each and every day.

But the **father** in our text (who represents **God**) was **different**. He was **forgiving**. Listen again to how the father **answered** the accusation of his older son. He said, "*Son, you are **always** with me, and **all** that I have is yours. But it was **fitting** to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was **dead** and is **alive** again. He was **lost** and is **found**.*" **The LORD Welcomes Sinners**. He wants us to learn that His merciful arms are big enough to embrace **all** sinners, as Jesus told **Nicodemus**. "*God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall **not perish**, but have eternal **life**.*" Or as Paul told the **Corinthians**, "*God was in Christ reconciling the **world** to himself, not counting their trespasses **against** them.*" That's how **broad**, and how **deep**, and how **wide** God's **love** is. God wants us to know that we've been **saved** by His **love** - a love which allowed the hands and feet of **Jesus** to be nailed to a **cross** - so **we** could receive **forgiveness**, and be **welcomed** into our heavenly home.

There are restaurants, and stores, and friends, and neighbors, who all do a great job of **welcoming** people. But nothing compares to the welcome we've received from our **God**. **The LORD Welcomes Sinners** - into His arms of **forgiving love** - into His **family** as dearly loved **children** - and into His eternal **home** in heaven. May we always **rejoice** in God's welcome, and **share** it with others. Amen.