



Celebrate?

Believers can celebrate God's restoring forgiveness.

LUKE 15:20-32

Reunions are special. We love watching videos of soldiers returning home to their families. If we have children away at college, we may look forward to the holidays, spring break, and the summer more than they do. There is nothing like being face-to-face with family. But what if the separation came as a result of wrongdoing or a break in trust? Reunions then take on a different kind of intensity and emotion. Jesus told of the reunion between a man and his family to illustrate the joy we should share when God welcomes home a wayward child.

What do you enjoy about witnessing a reunion? Why should we celebrate reconciliation between people who have been at odds with each other?

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

LUKE 13:22–16:31

Luke 9:51 marked a transition in the Gospel account; Jesus has begun His journey toward the cross. As He got closer to Jerusalem, the drama increased. The Pharisees were doing all they could to trap Him. They invited Jesus to a banquet for that very purpose, seeing if He would heal a sick man on the Sabbath.

We find several parables in Luke 13:22–16:31. Some of these stories were directed to Jesus' opponents, exposing their sinful pride. Other stories pointed to God's love for people and His searching for those who needed that love. He told of a lost sheep separated from the flock, of a woman turning her house upside down in search of a lost coin, and of a son who abandoned his father.

The focus of this week's study is the story of a father who had two sons. The younger of the two asked for his inheritance, even though his father was still living. He took his share and left for a distant land. He squandered all he had and then endured a famine. Not having any other option, he went to work tending pigs, a job no respectable Jewish man would ever take on. The son finally came to his senses and began the trek back home, hoping to simply be allowed to labor as a servant for his father. The son did not expect his father to treat him as a son; he knew he did not deserve to be treated as such.

Read Luke 15:20-32 and notice the contrasts between the reactions of the father and older son. How does the father's reaction compare to God's response to those who come to Him in repentance?

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

FORGIVENESS GRANTED (LUKE 15:20-24)

²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. But while the son was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion.

He ran, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him.²¹ The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I’m no longer worthy to be called your son.’²² “But the father told his servants, ‘Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.’²³ Then bring the fattened calf and slaughter it, and let’s celebrate with a feast,²⁴ because this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ So they began to celebrate.

VERSES 20-21

We pick up the story as the son took action. His money was gone, and the famine only made it worse. He had nowhere else to go. Jesus stated in verse 17 that he came to his senses. It’s amazing what hitting rock bottom will do to a person.

Jesus indicated that the son **got up and went to his father**. He was turning from his life of rebellion and turning back to his only source of hope. So hungry that he would have eaten the pigs’ slop, the son recognized how far he had fallen. His turnaround is captured by the simple phrase *he got up*.

While the fact that the younger son *got up* referred to rising physically, it also can be seen as a metaphor for his spiritual condition. He reached the lowest point of his life, morally and spiritually. He *got up* in repentance and started home.

The **father saw** the prodigal long before he reached the house. Perhaps he had been constantly looking down the road his son had taken when he left home. In any case, **while the son was still a long way off**, the father reacted decisively.

DID YOU KNOW?

In ancient Jewish culture, distinguished men did not run but always walked in a dignified manner. Running was considered degrading.

The father’s heart was **filled with compassion** at the sight of his boy. He probably could see his son’s ragged appearance but didn’t need explanations. Knowing his son had returned was enough. The father **ran**

to meet him. Understanding that the father in this parable represents God, we observe the only time God is portrayed as rushing.

The story paints a magnificent portrait of God's love as the father **threw his arms around his neck**. He was not repulsed by the smell of swine on his son's clothing, he only cared that his son had come home. The form of the verb **kissed him** suggests the father repeatedly kissed his son. The father did not have to hear an explanation. Love and compassion flowed from his heart.

True to his plan, the son spoke the words he rehearsed in the pig pen (v. 19). He did not try to rationalize or excuse his behavior but confessed that he had **sinned**. With the phrase **against heaven**, he admitted his ultimate sin was against God. Some prodigals try to blame others when they take the wrong road in life. The returning son refused to put responsibility on anyone but himself.

Humility and desperation can be heard in the young man's self-pronounced sentence: **I'm no longer worthy to be called your son**. He thought no father could possibly claim someone who behaved in such a notorious manner.

How does the attitude of the younger son portray the way we are to approach God? What attitudes are seen in the younger son that should be demonstrated by us as well?

VERSES 22-24

The son was about to ask to be made as one of the hired hands, but before he could complete his statement the **father** spoke. Perhaps the father was too emotional to address his son directly; instead, he spoke to the **servants**.

Joy flowed in the father's instruction: **Quick!** He commanded the servants to bring out **the best robe**. The robe likely was the father's own robe since *the best robe* in the house would have belonged to him. The father also commanded the servants to **put a ring on his finger** and **sandals on his feet**. Robes and rings indicated status. Recall that in the Old Testament, Pharaoh gave Joseph a robe to signify his royal authority, and he took the signet ring from his own finger and gave it

to Joseph, when he elevated Joseph from his prison cell to a position of virtual royalty in Egypt (Gen. 41:42).

The servants were to **bring the fattened calf and slaughter it**. This animal had received special care, prepared for exceptional celebrations. Preparing and cooking the animal took time. The young man would be able to bathe, rest, and recover from his journey before the **feast**. You can feel the father's elation as he involved the entire household with the phrase **let's celebrate**.

Perhaps tears of happiness flooded the father's eyes as he spoke of **this son of mine**. Nothing the son had done would cause the father to disavow him. The young man was **lost** in more ways than the father's not knowing where he was. The prodigal lost his way long before he left home. The word *lost* is a participle. The phrase could read, "being lost." The father did not minimize the son's sin, but now the **dead** was **alive again**. The *lost* had been **found**. The entire household, represented by the word *they*, joined in the father's happiness. **They began to celebrate**.

Christianity isn't "Clean yourself up and run to God." Rather, it's "Run to God, and He will make you clean."

As the son returned home, he found acceptance and grace. The grace the father showed the son was costly, but not in the sense that it cost the son. The father was essentially saying, "I am bringing you back at great cost to myself." The slaughtered animal was part of the family wealth. This is all grace. From the outset, this text reminds us that Christianity isn't "Clean yourself up and run to God." Rather, it's "Run to God, and He will make you clean."

What characteristics and actions are seen in the father that mirror how God responds when a person comes to Him in repentance?

RESENTMENT EXPRESSED (LUKE 15:25-30)

²⁵ "Now his older son was in the field; as he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he summoned one of the servants, questioning what these things meant. ²⁷ "Your brother is

here,' he told him, 'and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'²⁸ "Then he became angry and didn't want to go in. So his father came out and pleaded with him."²⁹ But he replied to his father, 'Look, I have been slaving many years for you, and I have never disobeyed your orders, yet you never gave me a goat so that I could celebrate with my friends.³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.'

VERSES 25-27

The father's **older son** was not present at his brother's homecoming. He was **in the field**, likely supervising laborers. As **he came near the house**, he heard **music and dancing**. Instead of entering, the elder son **summoned one of the servants**. At this point, he was not angry but inquisitively **questioning what these things meant**.

The servant referred to the prodigal as **your brother**. We can imagine that the servant reflected the excitement expressed by the father. His manner of response indicated he expected the older brother to have the same feelings of relief and joy as the father.

Most shocking to the firstborn son would have been the news his father had **slaughtered the fattened calf**. The use of the definite article *the* indicates this calf was unique. It was reserved for a special occasion. The servant supplied the reason for the celebration: **he** (the father) **has him** (the prodigal) **back safe and sound**. The father rejoiced not only because the prodigal had returned but because his son was whole again.

BIBLE SKILL: *Review the background of practices in biblical times.*

To understand the Jewish concept of the firstborn and the rights of inheritance, read about these two topics in a Bible dictionary. Review Bible passages noted in the articles. What insights about inheritance did you gain from these articles? How do these articles give you a deeper understanding of the older son's inappropriate response?

Allowing the younger son back into the family came at an expense not only to the father but to the older brother. To put it plainly, the cost of throwing a feast with the family livestock was taken out of the older brother's account. The older son lost a portion of his inheritance to bring the rebellious younger son back into the family.

VERSES 28-30

The elder son was not merely annoyed but was filled with rage. The reason for his anger is explained in verse 29. Three times in verse 29 he focused attention on himself: ***I have been slaving ... I have never disobeyed ... so that I could celebrate.*** When we are centered on ourselves, we judge everything in terms of how it affects us.

Use of the verb translated ***slaving*** means he thought he worked like one of his father's slaves. Having likely spent a hard day in the fields before encountering the party would have heightened the son's sensitivity to this matter. He had been faithful for ***many years***. He claimed to have ***never disobeyed*** the father's ***orders***. He was angry that the father had not acknowledged his faithfulness by even giving him so much as a ***goat*** to ***celebrate*** with his ***friends***. The elder son's bitterness can be heard in the way he would not acknowledge the prodigal as his brother but called him ***this son of yours***.

The elder brother represented the Pharisees and others who resented Jesus' attention to sinners. Like the elder brother, we can think God owes us something because of our faithfulness. The lesson of the three parables in Luke 15 emphasizes the way we should rejoice when people repent and turn to Jesus.

How might the attitude of the older son be expressed by believers today? Why might a believer question the repentance of some people and the grace God extends them?

REALITY DEFINED (LUKE 15:31-32)

³¹ “‘Son,’ he said to him, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.’ ³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

VERSES 31-32

You can almost hear the tenderness in the father's voice. First, he reminded the older brother that he was his **son**. Their relationship had not changed because the younger brother had returned. Second, the father acknowledged ***you are always with me***. Third, the father assured the older son that the legacy of the firstborn was intact: ***everything I have is yours***. His brother's return would not affect the father's responsibility to the elder son. When the younger son asked for his inheritance before leaving home, the father divided the inheritance between both sons, indicating that the older son already had ownership of everything that was left (v. 12). Ironically, even the fattened calf in essence belonged to the older brother!

Using the contrastive conjunction ***but***, the father wanted his son to understand that they both had reason to ***celebrate and rejoice***. While the older brother characterized the prodigal as *this son of yours*, the father reminded him of his filial relationship: ***this brother of yours***. As such, the older son should join in the joy of this homecoming. The father repeated the statement he made to the servants when the prodigal arrived. He had considered him to be ***dead***, but now he was ***alive again***; the ***lost*** had been ***found***.

We were all prodigals at one time. We were dead in our sin before Jesus gave us life. We were like sheep who go astray, but Jesus is the Good Shepherd who found us and brought us safely home to Himself. Just as the angels of heaven rejoiced over us, they also sing for joy over other people who come to Christ (Luke 15:7). We should join them.

What is the value of celebrating the salvation of a new believer to that new believer? To a maturing believer?

KEY DOCTRINE: *Evangelism and Missions*

The new birth of man's spirit by God's Holy Spirit means the birth of love for others (Acts 10:42-43).

APPLY THE TEXT

- God offers us forgiveness when we turn to Him in repentance.
- Jealousy can rob believers of the joy of others coming to Christ.
- Believers should celebrate the salvation of others.

Share about how you realized your need for God's forgiveness. If you have not sought God's forgiveness, review the information on the inside front cover to learn more about doing so.

Examine your life for jealousy you may feel toward another believer, perhaps because of their gifting or how God has chosen to bless them. Take time to confess your jealousy to God and ask Him to help you celebrate what He is doing in and through that person.

As a group, share stories of unlikely conversion stories that you have personally seen. How does celebrating these stories of grace help shape your heart to love what God loves?

PRAYER NEEDS
