

# Letters to the Church



MARCH '24

## DEARLY BELOVED IN THE LORD,

*Ugh, why does that difficult person have to be in my church? Don't you know what they've done?*

As we come back into the Luke series on Sunday mornings, we will see that a key theme of the book is found in Luke 19:10, where our Lord says, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” It’s easy for us to quickly agree with this when we think of ourselves and how he sought and saved us when we were the lost sinner. However, how subtly the hypocrisy of the Pharisees slips in when we think of the difficult individuals we see every week **at 700 Market St.**

**Luke 15** is a chapter about the joy we should have when a lost sinner repents. Jesus shares the famous illustrations about the lost sheep and the lost coin, and then he proceeds with the lengthier discourse of what is commonly known as “the parable of the prodigal son.” Rightly, focus is usually placed on the merciful forgiveness of the father and the repentance of his son after finding himself at rock bottom. However, the father had two sons. As much as the parable is a lesson about the abundant grace of heaven toward sinners, it is also a warning against the harsh judgmentalism that can be found in the assemblies of saints here on earth.

The prodigal son had an older brother who never left the father’s house. And Jesus not only had tax collectors and sinners in his audience that day, but grumbling Pharisees and scribes as well. (**Luke 15:2**) Jesus shows that, in fact, there were two lost sons in the family. One who was far away, and one who was close by. Both drifted from the father. However, in the parable, we are only told of one son who was restored (and it wasn’t the one you’d expect).

When the prodigal son returns, the father could not have expressed greater joy. It is a beautiful picture of the “joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.” (**Luke 15:7**) He orders a celebration and for his servants to prepare the fattened calf for feasting. But when the older brother discovers what the father declared, he is displeased, and he refuses to join in. Then, just as the father had done for the younger son, he personally also goes out to meet with the older son. Both sons in the parable needed a personal meeting with the father and for him to give them a lesson in grace.

In the discourse that follows, we see the older brother refuses to acknowledge family ties to the prodigal. He says to the father, “this son of yours” implying he would have nothing to do

with that sinner, and that he is somehow more righteous than the father for this. In response, the father presses their relations. He refers to the eldest as his “son” and to the youngest as “your brother.” The heartbeat of the father yearned for both of his sons to be restored to him.

Jesus made clear that day and makes clear to us even today - that God is a seeking God and sent Jesus to accomplish this work. God seeks those who are far from him. Some may seem to be a long way away, and some may seem to be close by. But if we snub his graciousness to forgive sin, either for ourselves or for others, we actually show that we are very far from his heart and that we are the ones in need of restoration.

How easily we can be that older brother. Like him, we can feel that we have been so close to the Father for so long that we deserve more for our faithfulness and that others deserve far less. Jesus’ lesson was for both long-lost sinners and self-righteous Pharisees. We Christians are, ironically, somehow both. Unless we understand the grace of God and how we were all born into sin and, therefore, all deserving of the wrath of God, then we will never actually understand the Father’s heart of forgiveness. Whether we felt close by, or whether we felt far away - “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (**Romans 3:23**), and “none is righteous, no, not one” (**Romans 3:10**).

The older brother felt justified to call attention again to past sins that the father had already forgiven. He seems very concerned that the father forgot them. He even seems to exaggerate the facts of his brother’s sins. Who said anything about prostitutes? (**Luke 15:30**) The parable ends with the older son embittered against the father, and refusing to call his own brother, family. This is how ugly we can also be with receiving difficult people into our own congregation.

Dare to ask yourself the hard question: why do you struggle to celebrate that difficult person’s restoration? Perhaps the former nature of their sin was splashy and boastful, like the prodigal. Maybe there are aspects of their former lifestyle that still cling to them and offend you. Seek the father’s heart to seek and save the lost. Pray to share in the joy of heaven over that individual’s repentance. And remember, all sinners are Pharisees, and all Pharisees are sinners; the real question is, are you a repentant one?

*“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.”*

**YOUR PASTOR & SERVANT,**



SHAWN WEIR