

When Jonathan was a toddler, he was given a toy piano. He loved it, and would carry it by the handle from room to room to serenade us. When his brother Stephen came along, he became enamored with it as well. So at 3 years old and 6 years old, and 4 years old and 7 years old, they would fight over whose turn it was to play with the toy piano. One night, Stephen ended another argument over the piano by grabbing it by the handle, yanking it from Jonathan, and running upstairs. As he got to the top of the stairs, Jonathan wailed “*Mom he took my piano!*” Since it was Jonathan’s toy, Sandy told Stephen to give it back. Stephen responded by looking down the stairs at his brother, yelled “*Here, have your piano,*” and in anger used the handle to hurl it down the stairs. The piano hit Jonathan in the face, and sent him to the emergency room for stitches.

The Bible begins with an explanation of how the world was created. Then it explains how sin came into the world through Adam and Eve. After that, it describes how sin led to the evil act of Cain killing his brother Abel. Their fight wasn’t over a toy piano. And they were much older than my boys when they had their deadly fight. But the result of both incidents was the same: the sin of one of God’s children led them to the evil of harming another, and their fathers grieved.

As we worship God today, we are still immersed in the muck of that reality. God has lovingly created every person who has ever lived, calling them His children. God has looked after each of them like a good parent, treating them as His children. And God has done everything He could to make every one of His children’s lives better, showering them with unconditional love. But along the way, our Heavenly Father has grieved again and again as His children have bickered, fought, and (worst of all) harmed His other children. We see this repeatedly in the Bible.

In hospitality, Lot brought visitors home to lodge with him for the night, his neighbors tried to harm them, and God grieved. Sarah developed hatred for Hagar, had her and her young son cast into the wilderness to die, and God grieved. Jacob and Esau fought for their father’s blessing, Jacob stole Esau’s birthright, and God grieved. And on and on it went: Joseph and his brothers, the Egyptians and the Israelites, David and Saul, and in every generation to the time of Christ. And in every one of those generations, God grieved at how His children allowed their sin to lead them into evil acts of harming one of God’s other children.

As we turn to the 15th chapter of Luke’s gospel, we heard what typically has been called “the Parable of the Prodigal Son.” As we do so in light of knowing how God’s children have allowed their sin to lead them into evil acts of harming one another, we see that Jesus wasn’t making up this parable out of thin air. He was illustrating the plight God’s children have been in since sin first entered the world and His children began to bring Him grief through their evil actions.

Not that the plight of those standing there with Jesus was something that applied only to those in ancient world. It applied to the people of the Middle Ages. It applied to the people of the modern world. And it applies to us, and to the issues occurring in our country right now. This is because each of us, like every person who has ever lived, is a sinner. And because of our sin, we are all tempted to give in to the evil of bickering, fighting, and (worst of all) harming our brothers and sisters, even when we know it grieves our Heavenly Father.

Fortunately, we do not have to remain in that horrid situation. The chaos our fallen and sinful world so often finds itself in does not need to exist inside us. And the turmoil so often swirling around us in our fallen and sinful world does not have to reign in our hearts. This is because our Heavenly Father not only grieves when sin leads His children into acts of evil, He also offers to save His children from the sin that leads then into evil. He offers to give His children insight so they can see how He wants them to avoid the evil. And He offers power so they are not “*overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*” We see this in chapter 15 of Luke’s gospel.

As I already stated, this parable typically has been called “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” And in the typical way it has been taught and preached, the emphasis has been on the sins of the wayward son. Sometimes, the older brother would get thrown in, and a lesson about his sins would be taught or preached. But if we look at the context in which this parable sits, we see that there is probably a very different reason Jesus told it than to speak about the coming home of a wayward son, or the anger of an older brother. We see this when we notice that this parable occurs in a section of Luke’s gospel where Jesus was telling the crowds about the love God has for us, where Jesus was showing how much God loves us by healing those who were ill, and where Jesus was embodying God’s love by speaking and eating with those whom the religious leaders of His day not only ignored, but openly despised.

As a result, as the portion of Luke’s gospel our English Bibles label chapter 15 begins, he tells us that people the religious leaders scornfully called ‘sinners’ gathered around Jesus. He also tells us that “*the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘this man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’*” Luke then tells us that Jesus responded to them by telling a parable about a shepherd who lost a sheep, and how he left behind 99 others to find it. He also tells us Jesus went to say that when the shepherd found the lost sheep, he called his friends and neighbors to join him in celebrating. Luke then says that Jesus told those listening - including the muttering Pharisees - “*I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.*”

As the section our Bibles label as chapter 15 continues, Luke tells us Jesus kept talking, telling a parable about a woman who had ten coins, lost one, and found it. He tells us Jesus went on to say that when the woman found the lost coin, she called her friends and neighbors and invited them to join her in celebrating. Luke then says Jesus told those listening - including the muttering Pharisees - “*in the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*” But according to Luke, Jesus wasn’t done speaking to those listening, including (and maybe particularly) the muttering Pharisees.

Luke tells us Jesus kept talking, telling a parable about a son who demanded his inheritance, deserted his father, and headed off to waste his money in some “*foreign land.*” Luke says Jesus then told those listening - including (and maybe particularly) the muttering Pharisees - that the son made a mess of things, fell on hard times, and finally “*came to his senses.*” In what our Bibles list as verse 15 of chapter 15, Luke tells us Jesus then said that he “*got up and went to his father.*” But in that same verse, Luke says Jesus told those listening - including (and maybe particularly) the muttering

Pharisees - *“but while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; [so] he ran to his son.”*

The fact that the father ran to his son would have been shocking to those listening, including (and particularly) the muttering Pharisees. The patriarch in a family did not run. It was seen as undignified. And a father would not welcome back a prodigal who had insulted him with open arms. In the ancient world, elders were respected, and the son had violated that expectation.

So, those listening, including (and particularly) the muttering Pharisees, would have thought it was bad enough that the son had pretty much told his father he cared more about his money more than he cared about him. They would have thought it was bad enough he left his father and brother to do the work without him. And they would have thought it was bad enough that he had violated every bit of Torah his father would have taught him, ending up in the blasphemous position of working with pigs.

But now, he wanted his father to overlook those transgressions. And that was something everyone listening, including (and particularly) the muttering Pharisees would have expected the father to refuse to do. Which may be why Jesus then said the son prepared a speech, saying *“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.”* Which is how they would have expected the son to come groveling back. But then Jesus upset their expectations.

Jesus didn't say the father said *“You made your bed, now lie in it.”* Nor did Jesus say he softened enough to take him back like a hired hand. Instead, Jesus told everyone listening, including (and particularly) the muttering Pharisees, that while the prodigal son *“was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; [so] he ran to his son.”*

That would have confused those listening, including (and definitely) the muttering Pharisees. For the son did not merit compassion. The prodigal didn't deserve affection. And the wayward child wasn't even worthy to live like one of the father's hired men. What he did was despicable. But the focus of the parable wasn't the son. The parable was about the loving father! So Jesus told those listening, including (and particularly) the muttering Pharisees, that *“while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; [so] he ran to his son, THREW HIS ARMS AROUND HIM AND KISSED HIM.”*

And if that wasn't enough, Jesus went on to say the loving father told his servant *“Bring 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 have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”* And then Jesus probably paused, looked at those listening - including (and particularly) the muttering Pharisees - and said *“so they began to celebrate.”*

This is because Jesus knew the Pharisees in particular didn't see God as a loving Father. Jesus knew they - like many people today who say they believe in God - were content to believe God was not grieved by His children being separated from Him by their sin. Jesus knew they - like many people

today who say they believe in God - were willing to picture a God who was not grieved by how His sinful children so often participated in evil acts of harming their brothers and sisters. And Jesus knew they - like many people today who say they believe in God - had no problem believing God was not grieved when His children allow evil to go unchecked.

As a result, Jesus went on to tell those listening - and not only the Pharisees but us today - how the older brother reacted in anger and would not join the party. And He did so because He wanted them - and us - to know that God is a loving father, and invites all His children to not only be reconciled with Him but also with their brothers and sisters. Which is why He then told them, and us, that the father "*went out and pleaded with*" the older brother.

For He loved the older son just as much as the prodigal son. And he did not want to be separated from either one, or see either child harmed. Which is why Jesus then added that the father declared to the older brother that "*everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.*"

On this Father's Day, God calls us to realize that He is indeed a good, good father. He calls us to understand that in His goodness He loves His children unconditionally. And He calls us to honor Him by not only recognizing the good human fathers in our midst, but also allowing Him - as our Heavenly Father - to help us make this world one in which all of His children are treated with dignity, shown kindness, and given the opportunity to live life "*abundantly.*" For that is part of what it means to pray "*our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name.*" It is part of what it means to pray "*thy kingdom come, thy will be done.*" And it is especially part of what it means to pray "*lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*"