

In 1995 I went to a pastors' conference during which the question was raised whether Jeffrey Dahmer, a serial killer who converted to Christianity in prison, went to heaven after his death. The majority of the pastors there did not accept his conversion. At another counseling conference I went to, in one sharing group a woman said that she was expelled from her church for working for Planned Parenthood. She said that she felt called to minister to the broken women after they had abortions. Some were compassionate and encouraging towards her, but others still felt uncomfortable with having her in their group. In Luke 15:1-2 we see a similar situation, where the pious Pharisees were judging the irreligious tax collectors and sinners, and grumbling against Jesus for having fellowship with them. In response, Jesus tells the parable of the prodigal son in vv. 11-32. We can learn three lessons from the three main characters in this parable.

The first lesson is that forgiveness is always possible for those who repent and want to return to God. The Pharisees thought the tax collectors and sinners that Jesus surrounded Himself with were the worst of the worst. So Jesus describes the prodigal son as someone who disobeyed to the extreme, who went as low as he could go, in order to show that even such people can be forgiven. At the time, family was a person's ultimate identifier. Requesting one's inheritance early was like wishing for the father to die. It was breaking off from the family. The son would have been shamed by the community and forced to leave to a faraway land, an unclean Gentile land. Furthermore, he squanders his wealth and ends up in this unclean land working for an unclean farmer, hungering for the unclean food of pigs, which are unclean animals. The wayward son had no choice but to return to his father. Usually a father in such circumstances would have disowned his son irreversibly through a ceremony, which meant that if the son returned he could work for his father but not be reinstated as his son. We see that this son was the worst son, but the father still welcomed him home. Forgiveness is always possible. The only unforgivable sin is that of unbelief. The only way God's forgiveness and grace will be withheld is if you reject it, if you refuse to come to Him in repentance. For anyone who wants to change, God is ready to change them and welcome them back. As Corrie Ten Boom, a woman who

helped Jews escape the Holocaust, once said, “There is no pit so deep, that God’s love is not deeper still.”

Second, in every Christian congregation there will be those like the older son, those who begrudge God’s generosity to the most wayward sinners. The Pharisees, for whose benefit and instruction Jesus gave this parable, thought this way. That’s why Jesus includes the reaction of the older son in the story. This son complains and whines. He distances himself from his brother by calling him “this son of yours.” He exaggerates the younger son’s transgressions by saying he squandered the money on prostitutes. This is the attitude of the Pharisees, which they justified with Scripture. But though their effort in following the Law was noble, their idea of holiness was off the mark. Holiness doesn’t come by effort in obeying the Law, but by having a relationship with the holy Father. How often do we have this same hard heartedness. We believe in God’s grace, but often in daily life we live like God is keeping records of wrongs and weighing our good and bad deeds. We must remind ourselves that God gives grace freely, and that we do not do anything to earn it.

Finally, we learn that God in lavish love forgives the sin of rebellion against Him and the sin of a harsh spirit towards others, and wants us to do likewise. In this parable there are several unrealistic details that show how unorthodox and extreme the love of God is. The fact that the father consents to the younger son’s request is radical. Even after the son leaves, the father keeps watch for him so that he sees him in the distance when he returns. Then, in defiance of the cultural norm, he shamefully lifts his robe to run to meet his son. He doesn’t even allow his son to complete his repentance speech and fully reinstates him. Rather than a disownment ceremony, he hosts a lavish reinstatement banquet. And when the older son complained, instead of rebuking his ungratefulness, the father pleaded with him to celebrate. Muslims say that this parable shows that we can go to God for forgiveness and that Jesus is not necessary. But the father in the parable is both God the Father and the Son. The father’s self-sacrificial and self-humiliating acts of love reflect the self-sacrificial love of Jesus, which led to His humiliating death on the cross.

At the end of the parable, we don’t know how long the younger son stays repentant or if the older one changed his heart. But what matters is our response. Will you return to God and be

welcoming of others who desire to do likewise? Take the time to reflect on God's abundant love and ask Him to help you reflect this love to others.