

God is Filled with Compassion

△ **He patiently waits.** (vv.1-3,11-20)

△ **He eagerly forgives.** (vv.20-32)

In the name of the Great Three-in-One – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – dearly redeemed:

It was one of those days last Fall in China when the energy level kept cranking higher and higher until there just wasn’t much left. It demanded my best, but nearly proved too much for me. All day long I had been teaching 40-50 Chinese lay workers in a small classroom until my coworkers arrived. In about one hour we had to hurry to the airport. So we encouraged the rather shy students to share their questions. With one man the harder I tried, the more anxious the students became. Something wasn’t right. Finally, our Chinese deaconess stepped in to answer the man’s question. And then whole class clapped.

Later she explained what happened. My interpreter was new and did not translate his question clearly for me. When she gave my answer in Chinese, that too was unclear. The man had listened for three days and was still very afraid. He had fallen away from faith and feared that God would not take him back. Ting’s answer was the first half of Jesus’ *Parable of the Prodigal Son*. But that traditional title is not clear. The real focus of Jesus’ parable is the father: **God is Filled with Compassion**. First...

△ **He patiently waits.** (vv.1-3,11-20)

A wealthy father with two grown sons sounds fairly normal. But asking for your inheritance before your dad’s dead is not. This father did not bat an eye. ***“He divided his property between them.”***

One ancient Jewish proverb in the Bible says, ***“An inheritance quickly gained at the beginning will not be blessed at the end.”*** (Proverbs 20:21 NIV84) The younger son seemed hell bent to prove this is true. As far as he could get from his father was not far enough. You wonder where all that animosity came from. Sometimes loving parents just shake their heads, but there is no reasonable explanation. That’s because sin never makes sense. Sin always looks good in the beginning, but it bites in the end.

It took a pigsty for this boy to wake up. He finally ***“came to his senses”*** while starving in a severe famine. Tending pigs could not earn him some pig-food. From the bottom side of life he looked up and realized, “I don’t have to be here!” ***“How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare,”*** in overflowing abundance, ***“and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: 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.”*** So he got up and went to his father.

The sinful son had every reason to expect his father would be angry. He had wasted his father’s hard-earned wealth with prostitutes. We might be tempted to think, “That’s not me!” but haven’t we wasted many of God’s precious gifts too? Sometimes you need to go to a foreign country to find out how wealthy even the poorest Americans really are. Have we spent God’s wealth first on ourselves while neglecting the poor around us – not only their physical poverty, but especially the spiritual poverty of friends and neighbors who need to hear the Word of God? How many precious hours have we wasted on our own home while God’s house needs tender loving care: mowing, weeding, cleaning, etc.? What will it take for us to come to our senses? Haven’t we given God every reason to be angry?

You already know that the father represents God in this parable. Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the Triune God has all the characteristics of the father who **patiently waits**. Jesus shows us the heart of God. Like this father God keeps watching day after day, hoping his sinful son will come home. And while the sinner is still a long way off God’s eyes well up with tears. His heart fills with compassion. At last! ***“He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”*** When the son tried to give his repentant speech, the father interrupted and called for a party.

God wants us to realize we've given Him every reason to be angry because of our sins, wasting time and money, or not appreciating our job, our spouse, our church – or whatever other gifts of God we have squandered in ungrateful hearts and lives. God wants us to come to our senses and remember with that man in China, **God is Filled with Compassion. He patiently waits** for us and then...

△ **He eagerly forgives. (vv.20-32)**

The first half of Jesus' parable, this earthly story with a heavenly meaning, is for fearful hearts who want to come back. The second half is for church people who think they're already just fine the way they are. Remember the first verse of this "Lost and Found Chapter" said that *the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."* By nature we're too blind to see that we usually resemble the older brother. In the same circumstances, could we see ourselves objecting to our father's generosity? *"He answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'"*

It may be easy enough to accept that God forgives others as long as it's not too close to home. But have you even been jealous of someone else's health or wealth, family or marriage? Have you ever been too upset with someone to say, "I forgive you," even when they've said, "I'm sorry"? Have we earthly fathers failed to forgive our children or neglected to teach them God's forgiveness by word and example? Have we been too resentful to honor our children's mother? Or the other way around, have mothers failed to respect their children's father? Too much our lack of forgiveness is like the older brother.

Conservative church people often get stuck in the ruts of the older brother. For example, years ago a young pastor was called to an old congregation in Michigan. He was shocked at the attitude of his parishioners. Whenever he suggested some way to reach out with this Gospel of forgiveness in Christ, he got a cold shower of big brother attitude: "They know where we are. They can come when they want." Finally, the pastor told his wife, "There's only one solution for this." He went out into the community to find the sinners who knew they needed God's grace and forgiveness. When finally half the congregation was made up of adult confirmands, the rest caught the fire of God's Word and went to work. They started to worship the Triune God not just with their lips but with their lives.

When you appreciate that **God is Filled with Compassion** for you, it's much easier to celebrate the fact that **He eagerly forgives** us all. Since Christ died for all, all the sins of all people are all forgiven. My prayers are no more powerful than yours because the same God commanded you to pray and has promised to hear and bless beyond what we can ask or imagine. I don't have any more right to worship here than you – whether you're a member or not, whether you came from a good family or were just released from prison. Our attitude of gratitude will show itself best in the little things. In the way I go out of my way to greet the strangers God brings to hear the Gospel with me. In the way I move over instead of expecting others to climb over me. No matter how crowded our church gets, it's seems there's always extra seats up front. Wouldn't a heart **Filled with Compassion** from God who **eagerly forgives** leave the better seats for late comers and visitors who maybe come to church in fear and trembling?

This parable is not really about "the prodigal son." It's not about the self-righteous good boy that stayed home either. It's about the father who **patiently waits** for his sinful son to come home and then **eagerly forgives** his older son too. You can see forgiveness as he reaches out to his angry son. You can hear it in his voice as he pleads: *"My son, you are always with me, and 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."* I could see it in the eyes of that young man in China when he found out God really did want him back. You could hear in the clapping of the students when the Gospel of God's full and free forgiveness finally got through. **God is Filled with Compassion.** And so are God's people. Praise the Triune God! Amen.