

For a few weeks now, we've been in a series of lessons entitled the Red Letters. The idea of this series is based upon the words that came directly from the mouth of Jesus – and in most of our Bibles, we find these words written in red.

The idea of the red letters was derived by Louis Klopsch in 1899. Klopsch, an editor for the Christian Herald, was taken by words of Jesus in Luke 22:20 – *This cup that's poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood*. Impressed by the symbolism of blood, he came up w/ the idea of printing Jesus' words in red – and it took.

In our study, we've been focusing on some of the most prolific teachings of Jesus which He expressed in the form of parables. **A parable is a story w/ a point – an earthly lesson w/ a spiritual punchline. It is a story comparing something *unfamiliar* w/ that which is *familiar*.**

I want to take a few minutes to talk about possibly the most recognized parable Jesus ever uttered. Tucked w/in a series of parable on lost items – we find the parable of the lost sons – or what you might call the Prodigal Son. In actuality though, this parable is not about one, but two sons whose hearts are wayward from their loving Father even though one of them remained in close proximity. (Read *Luke 15:11-32*)

To appreciate this story, it's critical to recognize who the audience is – tax collectors and Pharisees. Jesus was talking w/ the tax collectors when the Pharisees interrupted. These two groups were like oil and water w/ no love lost b/w them. The tax collectors were considered the worst of sinners b/c they had prostituted themselves to Rome to do the bidding of Caesar while the Pharisees were the smug and self-righteous – who thought themselves better than the rest b/c of their religious convictions and adherence to the rules. Thus, as Jesus speaks, he offers both strong warning about grace.

In this parable, the Father represents God and the sons represent two types of people – the rebellious lost and the religious lost. The rebellious lost are those people who live indifferent to the will of God while the religious lost are those who live close to the truth but obstinate in their will. Yet while one was separated by physical distance, they were both far from the Father in need of forgiveness.

Today I want to clarify what is forgiveness and then explain the only pathway to both discovering and experiencing it.

I Forgiveness is a GIFT of God

There are a number of misconceptions about forgiveness – most of which end w/ a person thinking it is something they can earn – but in its basic form, forgiveness is a gift the recipient receives as a result of someone extending mercy.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. Ephesians 2:8-9

By definition, grace is a gift the recipient doesn't deserve and cannot earn. It is the result of receiving the unmerited favor of God as a result of His **INITIATIVE**.

Let me explain a very critical truth. No one has ever been nor will they ever be saved by FAITH. Yet there's a great misconception that faith saves us. Absolutely not true. If this were the case, then everyone w/ faith, no matter in what they placed they're faith – would be safe. But we're not saved by faith, but by God's grace. We're saved as a result of the initiative of God to do for us what we couldn't do for ourselves – atone for our sinfulness. It is only through the work of Christ on the cross that it is possible for our sins to be forgiven and for us to be reconciled to God.

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

Acts 4:12

In Christ (and Christ alone), we have redemption through His blood the forgiveness of sin. Ep 1:7

II Forgiveness Requires Man's REPENTANCE

Let me explain this truth through the story of the first son.

Realizing that both sons are far from the father, we learn that only the younger son had a repentant heart. In approaching his dad while he was still alive to request his portion of the family inheritance, the younger son was wishing his father dead. He was tired of living under his father's roof and under his father's rules – he wanted his share and his way – and his father allowed it.

Sometimes God gives us what we ask for even though it is not His heart and will for us. Be careful what you ask for b/c you just might get it!

Every day, every one of us faces a number of spiritual forks in the road that requires a decision to respond to God or rebel from God choosing a way that seems right to you.

CHOICE 1 RESPOND or REBEL

RESULT RUIN

Sin always takes you farther than you want to go, keeps you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you're willing to pay. The rebellious son found himself bankrupt, busted, and burdened as he sold himself out to the world.

CHOICE 2 RATIONALIZE or REALIZE

When you find yourself at the bottom of life incarcerated and enslaved to sin you have a decision to make. You can wake up and realize you've blown it or you can attempt to explain away your circumstances and decisions. You can face the music or find someone else to blame.

In our story, the son came to the end of himself and discovered the beginning of God. *He came to his senses*

But should you rationalize away your situation, it will only lead to deeper ruin and prolong your time in despair.

CHOICE 3 RUN or RETURN

Once a person takes the time to assess the situation they have yet another decision to make – run from God or run to God.

In the story, the son devises a plan of repentance and then got up and put it into action. This is important. Just b/c you have a plan of returning, returning doesn't occur until you get up and get going. *Repentance is an action not a concept.*

CHOICE 4 REFUSE or REPAIR

This is a willingness to make things right and seek to repair the earthly relationship affected by your actions.

Some might consider this to be making restitution. Yet any time you blow it w/ God, it has an impact on others. In such instances, it is necessary to go to those impacted by your actions to seek to repair the relationship. Should a person refuse to go to make things right, it is evidence that they were not truly repentant before God.

CHOICE 5 REPAY or RESIST

Beyond the debt, one must be willing to face the consequences. Resistance to owning the consequences reveals an unrepentant spirit. The Prodigal was willing to be disowned and treated like a servant to be under his father's authority.

RESULT RESTORATION

Reconciliation and renewal can be experienced to the person who is repentant and willing to repair and repay any damages incurred. God will kill the fattened calf, put a robe on your back, a ring on your finger – the relationship can be fully healed and restored – if you will walk through the complete process of repentance.

How can you know you've been forgiven? You forgive.

Let us go to the cross to learn how we may be forgiven, and then let us linger there that we might learn how to forgive.

A boy visiting his grandparents was given his first slingshot. He practiced in the woods, but could never hit his target. As he returned to grandma's backyard, he spied her pet duck. On an impulse he took aim and let it fly. He hit his target. The boy panicked. Desperately he hid the dead duck in the woodpile, only to notice his sister say him. Sally had seen it all, but said nothing. After lunch, Grandma said, "Sally, let's wash the dishes." But Sally said, "Johnny told me he wanted to help in the kitchen today. Didn't you, Johnny?" And she whispered to him, "Remember the duck!" So Johnny did the dishes. Later Grandpa asked if the children wanted to go fishing. Grandma said, "I'm sorry, but I need Sally to help make supper." Sally smiled and said, "That's all taken care of, Johnny wants to do it." And she whispered, "Remember the duck." Johnny stayed while Sally went fishing. After several days of Johnny doing both his chores and Sally's, he couldn't stand it. He confessed to Grandma that he'd killed her duck. "I know, Johnny," she said, giving him a hug. "I was standing at the window and saw the whole thing. B/c I love you, I forgave you! I wondered how long you would let Sally make you a slave."

Are you tired of being a slave to unforgiveness? Then come and confess your sin, and allow our God who is faithful and just to forgive of sin, cleanse you from all unrighteousness. As far as the east is from the west, He'll remember your sins no more. Though your sins have been like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.