

Introduction:

- A. Illus.: The famous author, Ernest Hemingway, grew up in a very stern Christian family in Oak Park, with parents who showed precious little grace, and he walked away from Christ, never to return. He wrote a short story set in Spain entitled, “The Capital of the World.”

That short story has a short, short story within it about a Spanish father and his teenage son with the very common name of Paco. The father and son had a very violent quarrel, and Paco ran away from home.

Two years passed and the father began a search for his son, which led him to Madrid. There he took out this ad in the *El Liberal* newspaper: “PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY. ALL IS FORGIVEN. PAPA.” The next day, in front of the Hotel Montana, 800 Pacos showed up.

- B. Who doesn't love that story! Well, judging from the very similar story that Jesus told, perhaps the responsible, overlooked brothers and sisters who never fought with their father and who never ran away from home. That's who.
- C. Turn to **Lk 15**. Last Sunday we were drawn into Jesus' most beautiful story—the wastrel son who squandered his father's wealth and found himself starving among pigs in land far, far from home with no one to give him anything. Have no other options he started for home simply hoping to get a job as a servant, for they at least had enough to eat. *“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”* I think that right there is where that son's heart changed. Because that's how it is with sinners. God runs to meet them and then they find themselves caught up into the arms of grace. Jesus continued: **vv.22-24...**

- D. I began our series, *ChurchHome*, with this story because what makes our church a home is the presence and grace of God. And our church is at its best when we celebrate God's grace. We are a church who celebrates when our Father finds our lost brothers and sisters.
- E. But that last point isn't always easy for good people. Listen to the rest of Jesus' story in **vv.25-32**... That brother reminds a lot of people of a line from Mark Twain: "*he was a good man in the worst sense of the word.*" Jesus told this story because, according to **vv.1-2**, "*Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'*" There are your elder brothers begrudging the grace Jesus was giving to prodigals.

But, of course, this is a stern warning to all of us. John Ortberg picked up on something **Sheldon Van Auken** wrote, "*The strongest argument for Christianity is Christians, when they are drawing life from God. The strongest argument against Christianity? Also Christians, when they become exclusive, self-righteous, and complacent.*" So let's do a self-check because...

I. THE ELDER BROTHER HAS AN EXTENDED, SOUR-FACED FAMILY

- A. Look at how this guy keeps score (v.29): "*All these years.*" "*I've slaved.*" "*Never disobeyed.*" We're kin of the elder brother if we think what matters to God is how long we've worked, how relentlessly we've slaved, and how completely we've kept his rules. The Pharisees were exactly like that. And they were really good at it. "*Good in the worst sense of the word.*" I don't have to tell you how often that score-keeping, slavish attitude has infected people who represent Jesus. Some of you have known whole churches like that and some of us wince to see the resemblance to ourselves.

- B. The angry son says in **v.29**, *“You never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.”* First of all, his brother wasn’t partying with his friends. It was the father’s party and I suspect the found son was pretty pie-eyed and speechless through much of it. And I doubt he had many friends left.

But the real issue here is how the elder son saw his father. We’re kin of the elder brother if we think God owes us his favor for our good behavior. My friend Steve wrote me this week. We were interacting about some of life’s hard struggles. He wrote, *“I’ve come to call one pernicious part of our human leaning, “gumball theology.” Of course I always knew it was false, but there’s a human, lingering, graceless belief that if I put in my quarter and twist the knob, I expect a gumball to roll out. I did everything I thought was right, where’s my gumball, God?”* **The real surprise to the graceless is that the gumball goes to the guy who put in nothing.**

- C. **V.30:** *“But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”* He saw that party as the prodigal’s reward. We’re kin of the elder brother if we cannot distinguish grace from reward. God doesn’t welcome us home with singing *because* we squandered his wealth but *because* we were lost and in coming home to him, we were found; *because* we were dead and in coming home we came to life.

SUMMARY: Kent Hughes wrote of this guy, *“Imagine what would have happened if he had encountered his returning brother first.”* Elder brothers like that can’t win others to Jesus

The story ends in **vv.31-32:** *“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘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.’”*

And then what happened?? I'm guessing that almost no one thinks this story might turn out well, with the two brothers in a family hug with their father. Shoulder punches; "*Come here, you!*"; like that. Most of us picture that graceless brother skulking perpetually outside the father's door in his self-righteous huff.

Now what's that story say to our church? That's an interesting question because Village Church has a lot of elder brothers and sisters who are *not* like the one in the story. I'm not talking about age. I'm talking about all the people in this church who have been straight arrows, people who have long loved the Lord, who are serious about obeying God, but—*unlike this guy*—who do *not* begrudge others God's grace, and who gladly celebrate when Jesus saves and blesses other sinners. Of course, there are others here who would quickly tell you how far they once were from God, how much they squandered, and how extraordinary it was when Jesus saved them. So let's look again at this story from another angle:

II. AT VCL WE'RE JUST THE RIGHT PEOPLE TO CELEBRATE GOD'S GRACE!

- A. Illus.: When I was first here there was a wonderful guy whom everyone loved. Warm, earnest, smiling, gifted, and successful. But inside, where none of us could see, he was dealing with explosive anger. As I recall, when it finally got the best of him he saw a Christian counselor who led him into God's grace. The poor man was simply exhausted by all his efforts to be good—to do everything expected of him—everything *he* expected of himself. Even though he was a Christian he had lived his whole life like that because he thought that's what God required. But when he grasped the loving, embracing grace of Christ he just broke inside. Tears often came to his eyes. He was a man astonished. Like a blind man who received his sight he walked around blinking at the beauty of God's grace. He began to heal. He'd talk about grace every chance he got.

The good news for elder brothers and sisters is that we can stop slaving for God. Just look at that prodigal son

wrapped in the arms of grace. He brought nothing. He did nothing right. He only headed for home because there was nowhere else to go and he was starving. And his father cannot stop hugging him! His father sings and dances and employs all his servants in the celebration. So stop slaving to get into God's good graces. Jesus says to you, *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."* Mt 11:28

Imagine what it is like for someone whose life is all pressure and burdens, who is weary to the bone, to come into a fellowship of people who have found the rest Jesus offers. That's the kind of home we want to be. Illus.: Maybe you've noticed the calligraphy out in the foyer of the Michael Card song I often sing for you, "I Will Bring You Home." The calligrapher is Timothy Botts and if you look very closely you'll see a rocking chair behind the words. The home I grew up in had a front porch and the front porch had a rocking chair. It's a great symbol of home. We want our fellowship here at VCL to say, *"Sit down here with us and Jesus and take a load off your soul. Relax. You're home."*

- B. Here's another benefit for elder brothers and sisters who love God's grace. Sometimes celebrating what Christ has done for others is the only way we begin to see our own prodigal hearts. This son was content in his righteousness—smug, even—till his father started celebrating his kid brother's homecoming. We're not righteous if we cannot celebrate God's grace to others. **Sooner or later, when elder brothers and sisters hang around the grace of God we come face to face with just how graceless we can be.** We begin to see the sins buried beneath our self-righteousness and that our arrow isn't so straight after all. Being in the presence of God's grace makes proud people as uneasy as a fat man at a fitness club. **A good church grace-izes her people.** This church has done that for me.

Nothing does us more good than exploring the vast dimensions of God's love in Christ. That's why Paul prayed in **Eph. 3:17-19**, *"I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."* **When someone comes into the orbit of a church like that they meet Jesus.**

- C. Another benefit: We are richest when we join Jesus in giving grace to others. This sour brother figured that he'd been cheated but the father reminded him just how rich he was. I read this several times before I realized God was saying this to me. **V.31**, *"My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours."* Those who have loved the Lord a long time know how privileged they are. We don't regret a single day we have been under God's care. As long as we have been with Jesus we have never wanted for any good thing. Everything is ours in Christ.

What's more, no one who ever squandered God's best, or who tended pigs, or whose heart was once starving, ever thinks, "Those were the good old days." No prodigal welcomed home by God *ever* thinks those who grew up following Jesus missed out.

But for all the privileges of our faith in God, we would miss God's best if we did not celebrate our salvation stories again and again. V.32... Remember how this sour brother complained in **v.29**, *"you never even gave me a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends."* (What a fun party that would be!) You want a party? Join God and the angels of heaven when they rejoice over one sinner who repents. We may not be all that exuberant around here but we really do rejoice every time Jesus brings a lost brother or sister home and we are grateful for every redemption tale we hear.

Conclusion

People choose churches for all kinds of reasons, but people need a church for one reason: this is where we celebrate God's grace with his family. Never underestimate how hungry people are for God's grace—for the Father's forgiveness and Savior's rest for their souls, for a place to sing and a family where they are safe. Never forget how deeply people want to go home. And Village Church is a wonderful home.

So step into the celebration of God's grace here at VCL. Give yourself to these brothers and sisters. Don't stand on the outside looking in.

Then, **invite people to come home with you.** God meets people here. **So invite them home with you.** Our heavenly Father throws his arms around people here. **So invite them home with you.** God uses former prodigals and hypocrites like us to celebrate his grace. **So invite them home with you.**

Here, we are his sons and daughters.

We are always with him.

Everything he has is ours.

Here, we just have to celebrate and be glad, because brothers and sisters of ours were dead and are alive again, were lost and now are found. **So invite people home with you.**