

“I Spread Out My Hands”

In the name of him who set us free from the curse of sin and made us the children of God, dear friends in Christ: I'm sure you are all well acquainted with the parable Jesus told about the Prodigal Son. It's a favorite for a lot of Christians because every one of us can closely identify with the younger son who rebelled against his father, demanded his share of the inheritance, and then went away to far country where he squandered his precious birthright on a short-lived spree of excess and immorality. We do the same thing every time we consciously decide to do something we know to be a sin against God. When you sin knowingly and deliberately, you despise your heavenly Father and take the great inheritance you've been given in Christ and waste it for a moment or two of pleasure. It places you far from your true home in spiritual bankruptcy and starvation.

And this is why we can take such comfort in this parable: it paints a portrait of an open armed father who is always on the lookout, scanning the horizon for any hint that his wayward son may return. The father's heart is every moment aching to receive again and restore his lost child. The parable shows that this is our heavenly Father's unvarying attitude toward us. What he wants more than anything is for his children lost in sin to come to their senses and return home so that he that they can live again in his forgiveness, his grace, and his love. And so the parable reminds us that no matter how far we stray and what terrible sins we commit, the one constant is that our Father, who didn't want us to go away to begin with, is always eager to have us return home. When we come to him with repentant hearts, he is overjoyed to clothe us again in the righteousness of Jesus who gave his life for us.

In today's Old Testament lesson, the prophet Isaiah is telling a slightly different version of the story. It's a storyline developed throughout the long book of Isaiah – we heard just a portion of it. But like I said, there's a twist – and I don't think the prophet would mind too much if I retold his story in a contemporary way. In the parable of the prodigal son, the rebellious boy leaves home to pursue his lusts and work his way toward ruin out of the sight and supervision of his father. In Isaiah's telling of it, the son rebels; but he does it in the comfort of his father's home.

So, to bring the story up to date and make it a bit more personal, let's imagine that you have an eighteen-year-old son living in your home. (If you'd like to substitute a daughter, go ahead and mentally make the adjustments.) Anyway, he dropped out of school several years ago because he just didn't want to be bothered with it. Nevertheless, he expects you to feed, clothe, and shelter him, prepare his meals, do his laundry, clean up after him, take him to the dentist for regular checkups and to the doctor if he gets sick and buy whatever medicines he needs. He expects a sizeable allowance so that he has plenty of spending money, and that you provide him with a decent car together with all the gas, maintenance, and insurance that goes with it. He demands that you keep him supplied with his own unlimited use cell phone, a computer with *unsupervised* high-speed internet access, and that you provide him with all the other new techno-gadgets that every kid that age feels he must have. Basically he expects a free and comfortable ride all the way around.

Ah, but he doesn't feel that he should have any obligations imposed upon him: no regular chores, no expectation that he keep his room in order, no rules of the house whatsoever to obey. Quite the contrary, he wants to be free to come and go as he pleases, do whatever he feels like doing, hang out with whomever he wants, and, in the privacy of his own room (which is off limits to you, of course, unless you happen to be bringing a snack which you are welcome to leave at the door) be allowed to drink alcohol, use illegal drugs, and have any number of girls of

doubtful virtue spend the night with him. Oh, and if he gets in any trouble with the law, he expects you to bail him out, pay his fines, and spend every penny you've got to move heaven and earth in order to keep his precious little tush out of jail.

Got the picture? This is your son. He's behaving in all the ways I've mentioned and worse; has been all his life. And whenever you, in loving concern for the boy's future, express any kind of disapproval with him or his behavior, he sneers in your face, makes fun of you, and tells you in language not suitable for me to repeat to mind your own business and leave him alone. Then he redoubles his efforts to pursue even more creative ways to ruin his life and makes yours miserable.

What, I ask, should you do with such a son? What's the *loving* thing to do? (And hopefully no one is thinking, "Please, hurry up and tell me, because that sounds exactly like my child and *I don't know* what to do!) The answer (and I'm sure most of you are way ahead of me here) is to give the kid a heavy dose of reality. You grab him by the scruff of the neck and toss him out of the house. If you're feeling generous, you might drop by his room, stuff a pillow case with a few selected items carefully pried from the top layer of the hard crust of dirty laundry lying about, and toss that out beside him so that he'll have a couple of changes of clothes. And you tell him he's on his own, that he needs to find a job and a place to stay. Either way, you make it clear that you're not going to tolerate his behavior and encourage him in it by your support even for a second longer.

I need to stress that this is the *loving* thing to do. Something has gone terribly wrong in this kid's understanding of the world. He has, up to this point, interpreted your patience for permissiveness, your compassion for license, and your forgiveness for approval. And on top of it all, due to in part to your over-protection, the boy has never learned the important lesson that evil actions have unpleasant consequences. It's time he learned that lesson, and the only way you can teach it is by exercising some tough love.

It's *necessary* that you do this not just for the benefit of your rebellious son, but also for your other children living in the household. After all, they're watching to see how you handle the situation. By allowing it to go on as it is you're sending them the message that it's okay for them to pursue the same course. And there's more involved: the kid's drug habit could get your whole house confiscated leaving you, your spouse, and the rest of your children homeless. And too you have to consider what potential damage you're doing to society at large by raising a kid in such a way that he's most likely to make his mark in the world as a dangerous felon. It's the loving thing to do all the way around to put him out of the house to face the world on his own.

Of course, your decisive actions will not likely be interpreted as being very loving by your son. From his perspective, it will seem terribly out of character, cruel, heartless, and mean – and he'll tell you so loudly and bitterly. And right before you close the door behind him (the locks for which you had the good sense to change in advance), he'll likely say something like, "Fine! Have it your way! You don't love me, you never did. And I don't need you anyway. I can make it on my own. You'll see." And then he'll stand there for some time waiting for you to reopen the door, say you're sorry for getting upset, and let him back inside.

But if you're smart and if you truly love your son, that won't happen. And then the learning will begin. Junior will soon discover that getting by in life on his own is a lot harder than he imagined. He'll begin to appreciate all the things you've been doing for him that he has long taken for granted. And by God's grace, maybe he'll begin to understand what a self-centered, disrespectful, rebellious brat he's been to you – and he'll be sorry for it. He may even want to tell you so.

But here's the trouble: with the story of the prodigal son, the boy leaves home knowing that his father didn't want him to go away in the first place. So, even when he's made a wreck of his life and feels he's not worthy to be called a son any longer, he knows his dad well enough to know that he's not going to let me starve. He thinks, "Dad's sure to allow me back as one of the hired hands at least." But the son in Isaiah's version of the story doesn't have that sense of assurance. The last thing he heard from his folks was, "I've had it up to here with you. You're out. Hit the road." The questions he has are: Do my parents still love me? Can they forgive me? And if I repent and agree to change my ways, can I come home?

Now, at this point, it's possible that a few of you are thinking, "Hang on here, Pastor, but I've read the book of Isaiah, and I sure don't remember this story." In response, let me say first that the story *is* there, though, like I said, I've updated it a bit. And I did make a substitution. In my retelling, it's the story of a single wayward son. In Isaiah's original, he's talking about the entire nation of Judah. As a people they were rebelling against the Lord. Oh, they wanted to go on living in the Promised Land and enjoy the all the blessings of the inheritance they had received – that land flowing with milk and honey the Lord so graciously gave them – but they didn't want to recognize the Lord or honor him in any way. Quite the opposite, they went out of their way to provoke him to anger. The passage we heard mentions some of their practices: "A rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices ... sacrificing in gardens, making offerings on bricks, sitting in tombs, and spending the night in secret places, who eat the flesh of pigs, and drink the broth of tainted meat." These were occult practices of the pagans and had to do with the worship of idols, ritual prostitution, and witchcraft. And when the prophets of the Lord tried to warn the people against such things in order to steer them back to the right worship of the Lord, they had the monumental gall to tell them, "Keep to yourself, don't come near me, for I am too holy for you." That is, their minds were so twisted that they thought through their wicked behavior they'd made themselves holier than the Lord himself.

At that point they were beyond reasoning with. Though they had been warned over and over again, the Lord's only recourse was to employ drastic measures. It was the only way to get through to them. So the Lord brought the armies of Babylon against the nation of Judah and allowed them to conquer his people. They had to learn the hard way what life without the Lord was really like. Too long had they taken for granted his forbearance, his forgiveness, his care, and his protection. They had lived so long in God's mercy that they'd forgotten that sin has frightful consequences. Frightful consequences indeed: thousands of God's people died horribly and slowly in the depravations caused by the long siege of Jerusalem. Thousands more were slain by the sword in a bloodbath of pillage and rapine when the city fell. Those who survived were taken away and sold as slaves or they were put in what were essentially concentration camps in far off Babylon. There they were made to serve their Babylonian masters. Then they were like the prodigal son on a national scale starving while feeding the pigs. But the difference was that they didn't wander there themselves while the Lord begged them not to go; instead, they were cast there by the Lord in a display of his righteous fury.

In the chapter before the passage we heard, Isaiah offers a prayer on behalf of these survivors. And the underlying theme of the prayer is the question: what is the Lord's attitude toward us? You threw us out. And you were right, we deserved it. But are we cast off forever? Have you turned your back on us for good? We're sorry! Will you forgive us? Can we come home?

The opening lines of the Old Testament reading are the Lord's response to Isaiah's prayer. He says, "I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me, ready to be found by those who did not seek me." The sense of it is the Lord is willing to receive even the vilest pagans who turn to him. How much more then, will he receive his own people when they repent. He goes on, "I spread out my hands all the day to you while you were in rebellion against me."

What he's saying is that he never wanted to send them away in the first place. He tried everything he could think of to avoid bringing disaster on them; but they refused to listen. So he did what he had to do. The point is that he never stopped loving them. Even in their darkest hours when they were suffering the worst abuses their captors could dish out, they were in the Lord's loving care. No, it didn't seem that way to them at the time; but sometimes we leave the Lord no choice but to express his love to us with severe forms of discipline. Sometimes the only way for him to get through is for him to beat some sense into us.

And that's the image he gives us when he says, "As the new wine is found in the cluster, and they say, 'Don't destroy it, for there is a blessing in it,' so I will do for my servants' sake." That may be difficult to understand, but the idea is this: when you're picking grapes and making wine, sometimes you come across a cluster that has a lot of damaged grapes. Some are bird pecked or bruised and getting a bit rotten; others are all dried up. You may be tempted to cast that bunch aside rather than throw it into the press to be stomped on with the others. But don't do it. There's still some juice in that cluster to be made into wine, so go ahead and throw it into the press too. That's what the Lord is saying about his people. *You were a bad cluster of grapes; but I didn't throw you away. Instead, I put you in the vat and I crushed you. I love you, and I knew I could still get some good from you – namely, your repentance. That's all I wanted. And now that I've got it, I forgive you. Now I can bring you home where I want you to be with me always.*

The lessons for us to learn are pretty straightforward. First, just as we can identify ourselves in the story of the prodigal son, so also we should see ourselves in this story as the kid who expects to enjoy the benefits of living at home without having to respect or obey his parents. We do it individually when we continue in the church receiving the blessing of God's Word of forgiveness – allowing him us to feed us with the body and blood of Christ – but we don't feel obligated to truly repent or change our sinful behavior. It's easy for us to take God's grace for granted. We can do it collectively too. There are whole denominations that have wandered from God's Word and freely allow what God condemns as sin to continue among them unchallenged. To be sure, many of them think of themselves as being more righteous for allowing what God calls an offense to him – and we are not beyond falling into the same kind of self-deception. Either way, we make a terrible mistake when we misinterpret God's forbearance and patience for approval. Just because he doesn't drop the hammer immediately, doesn't mean he likes what's going on. Instead, in mercy, he gives us time to repent.

And if that fails, he loves us enough to do something more drastic. It's never his first choice; but when he has no other alternatives he does bring calamity on his people to bring them to repentance. And when he does, and we find ourselves suffering, we should never question his love or his willingness to receive us again. As he says, "I spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people." It's the image he wants us to keep in mind: of the Father ready and eager to receive again his repentant child – even the child he had to discipline. But perhaps more to the point, it should remind us of the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who spread out his hands all the day on which he was crucified for our sins. If ever we doubt God's love and his willingness to forgive and restore us, we have only to look there – at the nails in his open hands – and see to what great length the Lord will go to ensure that we will have a place in his home forever. Therefore, keeping our focus on the cross, may we never doubt God's love as we live lives of repentance worthy of our heavenly calling. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!