

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. ✠

Christ our Lord begins this parable as he's speaking to the Pharisees and Scribes who grumble at him and say, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." Is it not this same complaint that drives all of church history to ask the question of justification? Is it not this complaint that drove Luther to question the doctrines of the papacy? Is it not this question that we, as the Christian church here in this place, must also struggle with?

How is it that God receives sinners and eats with them? How? How can a holy and mighty eternal God receive such as these? How can an eternal and mighty omnipotent, omniscient God receive such as you, a poor, miserable sinner? But not only that, how can he deign to eat with you, to come down and be present with you in, with, and under the bread and wine, and you are not consumed by fire and the holiness of God. To this point, Christ tells the parable of the prodigal son, which we all know rather well. The son goes off, having told his father, it is better off that you were dead to me. Simply give me my inheritance, that I might go and live my life. I want nothing to do with you, father, but only that which you have given me. Only that which I see as mine by right. This is the state of natural man. This is how we are in our flesh, that we do not desire the things of God. We do not desire to be with God or near God or have anything to do with him. We simply want the things that he has given us. We simply want the good gifts of family and creation and food and drink and house and home and good weather and all the things that the Lord desires in his Fatherly divine mercy for us to have. Simply give us these things. And be gone. We want nothing to do with you. Such is the state of natural man. Such is the state of sinners. And we see where this gets us. Man goes off, and for a time, all is well. He's eating, drinking, and partying with friends. Everything is going and coming up aces. Everything's going exactly how he wants it to. He has no problems. Until it all changes. Until that day comes when there's a famine in the land and his money has run dry and he is forced to eat with the pigs, to care for the pigs, and he desires to even eat the slop that the pigs and the pods that the pigs are eating. What he realizes is that the things that he has asked for from his father, he has taken from the father, will not satisfy. They will not justify. They will leave him wanting, and they will leave him in death. Amongst the pigs, amongst the swine, really no better than the animals he cares for. Being reduced to nothing more than his base desires.

How then could the father ever eat with his son again? The pigs are not welcome at the table, much less this one who would dare to call himself a son. For he indeed is no better than the pig, for He does not care for His Father nor trust in Him for good things. Likewise, the unregenerate sinner does not care for his Heavenly Father, neither asking nor trusting Him to provide what is good and proper for life.

But still seeking his own care, his own gratification, his own justification, thinks, I will go, and I will earn back my place. Maybe I will never be a son again, but I will pick up the burden of a servant in my father's household, for my father knows how to give good things. He knows how to care for those who serve Him. He desires, again, earthly and temporal relief and goods. He seeks that which cannot justify, that which cannot restore him back to sonship. Hear the words of this first son. How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger. I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.

This is what we do when we lose the doctrine of Justification. When we seek to add our own works and lives to it. When we slip into the errors of Rome, or modern evangelicalism, or the orthodox, and say what Christ has done was good, but not enough. That His atoning work of the cross was a good start, but we must bring it to completion in our own lives. Those who do this are no better than the son apart from the Father. They neither know the scriptures nor the power therein, for they do not know the nature and character of the Father.

For the son realizes that his own actions have disbarred him from sonship, that his own actions have removed him from his father, have broken the bond that is there. That his own actions have put him into this terrible mess, not at the behest or the desire of the Father, but out of his own sinful flesh. He has brought condemnation upon himself. And so he says, I cannot be restored. I will work, and I will strive, and I will justify myself to the Father, but what was once there could not be restored.

I will pick up the heavy burden of works righteousness. I will pick up the heavy burden of proving myself through righteous living, through careful service and humble obedience to the Father. And thus earn back a modicum of what I once had. He recognizes nothing he can do will ever bring him back to the Father, nothing he can do will ever restore him to his place as son.

The best he can hope for is to be a servant. His inheritance is gone, he has nothing left. And that is no way to live.

If all you have in your life is your work, the best you could ever hope for is to be a slave. Your inheritance is gone. If it depends upon you, you are no better than a servant or a slave. You are not a son. You will never be a son. Try as hard as you want. Live as perfectly as you dare, as perfectly as you can, but you will not be restored. For you have cut ties with the Father. You have wished for his death, and you have brought eternal hell and condemnation upon yourself by the sin inherited from Adam and the sins you have committed since.

The papacy preaches it is your works of love that garner your favor with Christ, the Orthodox speak of the life lived through the church that makes you holy, and the modern evangelical church

sees Christ as little more than a source of self-help; the best you can expect is to be a servant and a slave, sonship is not on the table.

But Christ's parable does not end there. For while the son is on his way, while the son, even seeking to justify himself to his father, seeking to restore at least a partial reality of what he had once lost, while he's still a far way off, the father comes looking for him.

The father is searching for him, and is out in the field looking for him. The father had compassion upon him, ran to him, and embraced him. He calls for his servant. Put upon him the best robe, the best ring, and most importantly, the fattened calf to be slaughtered. For the son who was once dead is now alive, and something must take its place.

If the son is to be restored, then the calf must die. If the son is to be restored, there must be a sacrifice. If we are to take something from death, then something must go into death. And this is the great beauty of the atonement. This is the great comfort that we have as Lutherans. You indeed are a son. You may have rejected God, walked away from him, but the Father has found and restored you. You are the son for whom the fattened calf of Christ was sacrificed and killed, so that you might be restored. Christ offers himself as a sacrifice upon the cross, so that the wrath of the Father might be paid. He offers himself not to the devil, but to the Father, so that you might have His place, His inheritance, His Sonship, that what was lost by sin might be restored by righteousness.

In the sacrifice of Christ, by the very blood of the sacrificial lamb. The lamb who is sacrificed so that you might be welcomed into the heavenly kingdoms, so that you might be welcomed into heavenly mansions, the angels might rejoice as the Father calls together the saints to celebrate over even one sinner who repents. By this cross, by this blood, by this animal, this death, this Christ, sin, death, and the devil are defeated. Christ has taken your place and at the same time trampled and destroyed death, that you have no need to fear it, that you might know that you are a son forever. So that you might know that you might have eternity with him.

And so we come back again and again and again to this heavenly banquet. Notice, the father sends and throws a banquet. They might eat and celebrate for the son who was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. And they began to celebrate, to eat, to feast upon that which was slain. And you gather here this day as the sons, as the daughters who were far off and brought in by the love of the Father to eat and celebrate and rejoice, to partake of the sacrificial offering that won you back, that restored you, that declared you righteous and just before the Father, that presented you to him blameless and without error. So let us rejoice, dear brothers, and answer that question of how this man can receive sinners and eat with them. Let us answer the question of how Christ receives and eats with us. It is by the blood of Christ. It is by the blood of Christ. It is by the cross. It is by the atonement that we are justified. That there, the blood of Christ declares us righteous. That here upon

the altar, this body, this blood cries out not for vengeance, but for peace. Because the wrath of God has been satisfied. It has been satisfied by the willing obedience of Christ, who has taken our place. who has atoned for our sins. And has declared you to be a son and daughter of God. That you might have a full inheritance with him.

✠ In Jesus' name, amen. ✠