

Forgiveness (1) 11 October 2026

1 Timothy 1:12-17, Luke 15:1-32

For this first Sunday in a series on Forgiveness Nick has chosen Luke 15 as our gospel reading. Now there's a lot in here but I shall concentrate on what it can tell us about God as regards forgiveness. Because that is where we start. We love because God has first loved us. We forgive because God forgives.

We're going to concentrate on the parable of the lost son, sometimes called the prodigal son, because he is wasteful and profligate with the money he gets from his father. But although the son features in every scene in this parable it is not really about him, except to complete the triad of lost things, a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son.

Jesus uses these three parables to show us something about God. The shepherd, the woman and the father all illustrate an aspect of God's character. He cares. Rather than being a God who is out to trip us up and condemn us for every little wrongdoing, as some people think, God is out to rescue us, to bring back the lost.

So these three parables all indicate the nature of the one who is the seeker for the lost. And we see this most clearly in the parable of the lost son.

There was a man who had two sons. That sets the scene, followed by the younger son demanding the share of the inheritance that will be his when his father dies, demanding it now please. Or maybe not please. It is tantamount to saying "I wish you were dead." Certainly it is throwing family connection and loyalty into the father's face. The father may care; the son does not.

Not long afterwards the younger son goes far away and wastes all the money he has been given in "wild living". No doubt he had a whale of a time doing so but eventually reality catches up with him. He has no money and no food. In fact he is starving to death whereas he remembers that the servants his father employs have more than enough to eat. Why not go back, eat humble pie and ask to be a servant rather than a son? So that's what he sets out to do.

But his plan comes to grief. He hasn't factored in his godly father. *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.*

Four things in this one sentence tell us about the father. First, he sees the son from a long way off. He has been looking out for him all this time, yearning for

the son to return. Second, when he sees this scrawny, filthy son, probably clothed in rags, his heart goes out to him. He feels for the son and all he has gone through. Third, the father runs. That would have been unheard of in the culture of the time – extremely undignified. But the godly father doesn't care. He just wants to welcome his son back into the family as soon as possible. And fourth the father throws his arms around his son and kisses him. He hugs this filthy, smelly son who has been caring for mucky pigs and has had nowhere to wash. He puts his lips against the son's filthy skin.

What reflection of God our Father do we see in this? We see a God who cares. A God who is not distant from us, who has not just created us and then left us to get on with it and maybe make a mess of our lives. He is watching all the time, yearning for us to be a part of his family. Waiting eagerly to welcome us to himself.

But he is also a God who does not care. He doesn't take into account where we have been and what we have been up to when we come to him and ask to be taken back. He does not care that we come to him in a filthy state, smelling of our failures and our offences. He loves.

And because he loves, he forgives and restores.

Jesus expresses this in his parable. The father and son have reunited. There have been hugs and kisses but the son hasn't really grasped the magnitude of his welcome. He starts to come out with his prepared speech about no longer being worthy to be his father's son but, please, can he come back as a servant instead. But he never gets as far as the bit about being a servant before his father's instructions to his actual servants interrupt.

"Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet."

Is this just preparation for the celebratory party he is about to throw with the fatted calf, the one that has been especially bred should an important visitor come along? No it is far more than this. The robe and the ring and the sandals have special significance for a son.

The robe isn't any old garment to cover up the son's state of dress and lack of cleanliness, although it does do this. It is the *best robe*, a long one reserved for special events and celebrations.

It is a symbol of honour and status and signals that the son is forgiven for his actions and reinstated into his place in the family, all shame removed.

The ring signifies the same thing and more. It would have been a signet ring used for sealing contracts and decrees in place of a signature. The son is not only forgiven and reinstated as part of the family; he is restored to his position of authority as a family member. With the ring he has the legal right to represent his father.

And the sandals are significant too. In a household like this only family members wore sandals. Servants and slaves went barefoot. In asking for sandals to be put on his son's feet, the father indicates that there is no question of him being a hired servant. The son is coming back as a full member of the family. The sandals show that he has the right to walk anywhere he pleases on his father's territory.

What is Jesus saying to us in this? He is saying that God's forgiveness has consequences.

His forgiveness means sonship – or offspringship if you want to be gender neutral although the original Greek does actually express this.

It means that we can approach the Father intimately, hugs and kisses included. It means that we have the right to tread anywhere in God's world that we choose as his chosen representatives. And it means that we have the authority to act on his behalf, as Jesus did.

God's love and forgiveness bring more than mere personal consolation. Love and forgiveness face outward as well as inward.

I think we forget this, or ignore it or maybe haven't even grasped it as a truth that applies to us. We may feel we are not worthy of carrying the Father's authority.

But, as we heard, Paul certainly didn't feel like that. He didn't regard himself as an unworthy family member due to his murderous past. He entered fully into family membership, fully into being a representative of the Father, wearing the sandals and going to extreme lengths travelling to spread the message of good news to as many as possible.

He wore the Father's ring and entered into the full authority of a family member so that we read in Acts (19:11-12) *God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.*

Sadly, there is a mismatch between our lives as Christians and the one modelled by Jesus. We fail, individually and collectively, to wear the robe, the ring and the sandals effectively, even when we know they are ours. And I include myself here.

Yes, all we like sheep, like the lost son, have gone astray. Yes, we have come to him, to the Father, for forgiveness and restoration into his family. And these we have, as we will remember in Holy Communion in a moment.

But since we also get a robe, a ring and sandals might we not wear them, and wear them properly to good purpose? Amen

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11 October 2026