

I. Introduction

- A. Today is part three in our series, I'm Too [Blank] For Faith. So many people today have problems with the whole idea of faith. They've turned their backs on God, on God's Word, and on God's Church. The fastest growing spiritual/religious group in America today is called "the Nones." When surveys ask them their religious group, they say None. They're too blank for faith.
- B. Each week, we're filling in the blank with a different reason, a different rationale, a different excuse, concern, or fear for giving God the cold shoulder.
- C. Today, I want to fill in the blank with the word Guilty.
- D. *"Then He said: 'A certain man had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.' So he divided to them his livelihood.'" Luke 15:11, 12, NKJV.*
- E. This is a parable. A parable is a story that Jesus told to illustrate a truth. They are simple stories. And they are deep. They seem simple, but they're actually pretty profound.
- F. Jesus told about three dozen parables. This one is the most famous of all. It's called the Parable of the Prodigal Son.
- G. Prodigal means excessive and out of bounds. It means over the top. This is the story of a son who becomes the poster-child for Boys Gone Wild. The parable of the prodigal son.
- H. Let's go through the story, verse by verse. And let's see what Jesus would say to that voices that say, "I'm too [guilty] for faith."

II. I'm Too [Guilty] for Faith

- A. The whole world is living an unknowing insult to God.
 - 1. A certain man had two sons. In the parable, the man will represent God the Father. The two sons will represent the whole human race.
 - 2. Both sons are living off their father's generosity.
 - 3. Just as the whole human race lives off of God's generosity. Your life is a gift from God. Every breath you breathe. The shirt on your back. The shoes on your feet. Whatever wits are still left in your brain. If there is anything good in your life, if there is anything beautiful in your life, if there is anything worthy in your life, it is thanks to the never-failing kindness and provision of God.
 - 4. But most people don't realize it. Or if they do realize they either a) think they deserve it, and have made themselves without anybody's help (the second son, we'll see in a minute)... or b) they disrespect their Father, and waste the blessings he is given in ways that seem fun, but cause nothing but heartache and slow-motion self-destruction (the prodigal son).
 - 5. And so, the whole world is guilty before God, whether they realize it or not. Guilt is a real thing. It is what happens when you fall short of a standard.
 - 6. Guilty feelings are the result of a guilty status. You fall short of a standard, and this little nagging voice called your conscience kicks in. The inability to feel guilt makes you a sociopath, and you makes me nervous... honestly, though, there is healing for you from God.
 - 7. But most people can feel guilt.
 - 8. And, most people, if they could really see how holy God is, and how messed up they are — most people really should feel a whole lot more guilt than they do. Because we are all living an unknowing insult to God.
 - a) All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.
 - 9. The son is out front with his insult against his father. Dad, he says. I want you to cash it in, and put your will into effect now. Today.
 - 10. In effect, he's almost saying, Please die sooner rather than later, because I'd like to get my grubby little paws on the inheritance today.
 - 11. Pretty insulting.
 - 12. Jesus is going to make us ask who is more insulting to the Father's love... kid a) the good one who thinks they deserve the father's blessing, or kid b) the bad one who finally gets it through his skull that he's been guilty all along of refusing the party of his Father's never-ceasing grace.
 - 13. Imagine the arrogance this kid has to say to his dad, Dad, drop dead to your rights, and show me the money.
 - 14. This is exactly what the father does. Jesus said, "he divided to them his livelihood." This is the Greek word *bios* which gives us biology. He sacrifices his own SELF for the sake of his son. This is the beginning of grace.
 - 15. If there is a voice in your head that says, "I'm too guilty for grace," look at the prodigal son. He's where you were before the guilt kicked in.
 - 16. Let's see what happens.
 - a) *"And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living." (Luke 15:13)*
- B. There is no lasting happiness to be found far away from God; there is simply no such thing.
 - 1. He went on a journey to a far country. The logic is so clear. He wants nothing but to be far away from his father.
 - 2. Now, let's not get confused in this story. All we know about this father is that he loves his sons, and practices self-giving, self-sacrificing love for them. He has cared for them, and still does.
 - 3. I know that many of us have issues with our earthly fathers. We've had bad experiences, and we can tend to transfer those experiences to other fathers, and even to God.

4. So when Jesus says that the son travelled as far away from the father as he could, there might be a voice in your head saying, "Got that right. I'm leaving that jerk behind too."
 5. I get that. But we have to set all that aside. That's not the picture of the Heavenly Father in this story, at all. He is the ideal father, the perfect father, the father you always dreamed of.
 6. And the only reason the prodigal son travelled to the far country is that *he* was a moral mess, not his father.
 7. Some here today are living in the far country. You've set up shop. Maybe that's you.
 - a) Your emotions are far from God.
 - b) Your choices are far from God.
 - c) Your thoughts are far from God.
 - d) Your sexuality is far from God.
 - e) Your language is far from God.
 - (1) You have pitched your tent in the far country, because the moment you move an inch toward God, your many sins start beating you up. It is much easier if you switch off your conscience, and the only place you can do that is in the far country.
 8. If that is where you find yourself today, listen up. God wants you home. Come home.
 - a) Come home for the first time ever and be saved.
 - b) Or if you're already saved, come home again and again, not to be saved, but to be renewed in the hope and joy of your salvation.
 9. It says he wasted his substance in prodigal living. Some Bibles say "riotous living," "loose living," or "extravagant living." The kid was over the top. We are free to use our imaginations to picture his lifestyle.
 10. He took his father's money, and blasted through every moral boundary his father ever taught him and maxed out every credit card his father ever lent him.
 - a) You can be prodigally (prodigiously) immoral, or prodigally hyper-moral.
 - b) You can be prodigally (prodigiously) sacrilegious, or prodigally hyper-religious.
 - c) You can be prodigally (prodigiously) a homeless wreck, or prodigally a dweller in mansions that reach to the sky.
 - (1) It makes no difference, it's all the same, if you're living in the far country.
 - (2) You are wasting the most precious gift the world has never known: the exceedingly valuable treasure called *life*.
 - (a) Just as this boy wasted his everything. Jesus said this:
 11. *"But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything." (Luke 15:14-16)*
- C. God loves you too much to subsidize your self-destructive ways.
1. The prodigal son was so far out of bounds, even the other partiers in town crossed the street when they saw him coming. "No one gave him anything," Jesus said.
 2. The other partiers in town crossed the street when they saw him coming. No more girls would hop in bed with him. No more bars would serve him. No more dealers would supply him. No more swine-herders would hire him. Not even the sweetest little old lady would let him bum a dime.
 3. He disgusted everyone.
 4. He disgusted himself.
 5. It's so sad. Life was a party, until it wasn't.
 6. The way Jesus crafts this story makes you dislike the prodigal son. He's the bad guy in the story. Jesus leads his listeners into judging him. Wagging their fingers at him, and nodding their self-righteous heads as they just imagine God getting ready to blast the prodigal son with heavenly lightning bolts.
 7. It's at this point that Jesus twisted the plot. Just when the prodigal pervert was sick enough of drugs, sex, rock-'n-roll, and swine slop, he headed back to the one place he might possibly bum a meal: his father's house.
 - a) *But when he came to himself, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.'" (Luke 15:17-19)*
- D. No matter how guilty, dirty, or unworthy you feel, just come home to your true Father today.
1. He did not wait till he could pay back his debt. He did not wait till he got his urges under control. As far as we know, he did not wait till he was clean and sober.
 2. He didn't even still understand the depths of his father's love. He just knew his father would take care of him, even if he could no longer love him as a son.
 3. No preliminaries. No life change. No turning over a new leaf. No religions vows. No performance. No production. No payment. No nothing.
 4. Just the choice to come home.
 5. For decades the greatest evangelist in modern times was Billy Graham. At all of his crusades, the choir sang the exact same song:

- a) Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bid'st me come to Thee,
- b) O Lamb of God, I come! I come!
Just as I am, and waiting not
To rid my soul of one dark blot;
Thou whose blood can cleanse each spot,
O Lamb of God, I come! I come!
- 6. Just as I am. No editing needed. No grandiose gestures.
- 7. Salvation does not mean that you make yourself ready for God. Salvation means that God has made himself ready for you, by paying the tremendous price of Calvary love.
 - a) You may feel guilty. You may have done the same sin over and over. Come home to God, just as you are.
 - b) You may feel unworthy. You may be painfully aware of how messed up you really are. You come home to God, today, just as you are.
 - c) You may feel dirty, unwanted, unloved. Come home to God.
 - d) You may feel used, abused, and cast aside. Come home to God.
 - e) You may feel as if you've crossed a point of no return. Come home to God. As long as you're drawing breath, there is no point of no return with him.
- 8. All your guilt is God's gift to motivate you out of the far country and back into to his own loving embrace.
- 9. And that is exactly what happens with the prodigal son.
 - a) *And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. (Luke 15:20)*
- E. 5. Human guilt withers to nothingness in the presence of God's omnipotent grace.
 - 1. If this story were in any other religious book, the ending would be wildly different.
 - a) In the Muslim *Qur'an*, he would have to repay his father fourfold and have his hand cut off.
 - b) In the Buddhist *Sutras*, he would be reincarnated as a deaf mute and have to scale the ladder of perfection from the dirt up.
 - c) In the Hindu *Vedas*, he would suffer karmic justice, because what goes around, comes around.
 - 2. Only in the Bible, with its God of love, can the story end the way Jesus ended it: the loving father has waited daily at the head of the road, longing for his idiot son's return. And when the son does return, his father makes himself a greater idiot by running to him—something no self-respecting nobleman would ever do in the ancient world.
 - 3. A self-respecting man did not run in public.
 - 4. But when the father saw his son at the end of the road, that is exactly what he did. You can never plumb the depths of God's self-giving, self-sacrificing love.
 - 5. If you are in the far country, and you move one inch toward God, that is what he will do for you. He will not shame you. He will not make you jump through hoops.
 - 6. Just as you are, he will embrace you, love you, and welcome you home.
 - 7. This is grace. Grace and guilt are like matter and antimatter. Grace explodes guilt into nothingness.
 - 8. But it gets better.
 - a) *And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his servants, "Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet." (Luke 15:21, 22)*
- F. 6. Grace means God never lets you barter your guilt away.
 - 1. If you remember the speech the son had planned, you will know that Jesus never lets him finish it.
 - 2. He planned to say the first part:
 - a) Father... that's true. He is the boy's father.
 - b) I have sinned against heaven... that's true too. All sin is against heaven.
 - c) And in your sight... also true.
 - d) I am no longer worthy to be called your son... that's also true, because nobody is a son by achievement; you become a son by birth or adoption. Worthiness isn't the point.
 - 3. At this point, the father interrupts him.
 - 4. When he rehearsed his speech, he planned to say, "Make me like one of your hired servants" (v. 19). But that's where Jesus has the father cut his speech off.
 - 5. Why?
 - 6. Because God's love is not up for barter. I will serve you, and you will feed me. I will perform for you, and you will take care of me. No. There's nothing even remotely like that at all in the equation of divine grace.
 - 7. This is the great missing point in Christianity today. So many people, even inside the church, are working, striving, sacrificing, and serving in an attempt to pay off their guilt.

8. As if God's love is for sale.
9. They are the ones who are cheapening the grace of God. The only way to cheapen the grace of God is to put a price tag on it humans can actually afford to pay. Commitment. Devotion. Being All in. Being more than a fan.
10. I'm sick of the legalism in the church, and it keeps trying to creep into our church too.
11. No. The prodigal son would not earn his meals. Would not even earn his son's status.
12. "Quick!" said the father. "Bring out the ring and put it on his finger and bring out some sandals, and put them on his dirty, broken, scabbed over, impoverished, rough feet."
 - a) With the ring, he reminded him of his status as a son and heir of the family... and the utter eradication of every bit of guilt and shame.
 - b) With the sandals, he reminded him of his father's never ceasing care.
 - (1) This alone is grace. Did he earn it? No. Did he deserve it? No. Did he have to serve, obey, or change for it? No, no, no. He just had to come home. Just had to believe. Just had to show up.
 - (2) This is grace. But as we know, God never stops with just grace.
 - (3) He always kicks it up a notch... to amazing grace.
13. What is the true cost of discipleship? What is the true cost of grace? What is the true price on your salvation?
14. *'And bring the fattened calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry.* (Luke 15:23, 24)
- G. 7. No one is ever so guilty that the Cross of Christ can't wash them spotlessly clean before the eyes of God.
 1. The father not only runs to the pierced, tattooed, lice-ridden, spiked, strung out, STD-risking son, he also embraces him, showers him with kisses, and wastes even more money by throwing a budget-blowing party, complete with a hired band, prime beef on the spit, and dancing.
 2. If that doesn't blow the lid off your pressure-cooker of legalism, I don't know what will.
 3. The gracious Father calls for the slaughter of the fattened calf. Jesus gives the fattened calf three mentions (Luke 15:23, 27, 30), an often-overlooked factoid. This would be a special calf, culled from the herd, penned near the house, and fed grains and corn. The other cattle ate grass. This one ate grains. It was a *fattened* calf; its whole life was a prelude to death.
 4. As Jesus crafts his parable, the final party is made possible only by the slaughter of the fattened calf.
 5. Jesus became our fattened calf. He was born to die. He became our sin-bearer on a hill called the Skull (Calvary, to use the Latinized name). In the matrix of God's heart, love, and justice kissed at the Cross. Christ's shed blood legitimized God's love for prodigals in the face of God's justice against prodigals.
 6. Christ's slaughter makes the celestial party possible. His effort, his work, his sacrifice.
 7. All my life I have struggled with feeling guilty and unworthy as a person and before God.
 8. But this is what I know.
 - a) *You cannot erase guilt by redefining sin*, by redefining right and wrong. Your conscience knows your guilt, even if your mind rationalizes it away.
 - b) *You cannot erase guilt just by making amends*, even though that is something you should do. You can't unwind history.
 - c) *You cannot erase guilt by human performance, service, or effort*, or else you have reduced God's love to a barter system. You make him into a God who trades love for obedience. What's the difference between that god and all the gods of the ages? Where's the grace?
 9. The only way to erase your guilt is to position yourself in the shadow of the Cross of Christ.
 10. No one is ever so guilty that the cross of Christ can't wash them spotlessly clean in the eyes of God.
 - a) *He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.* (Psalm 103:10-12).
 - b) *"Come now, and let us reason together," says the LORD, "Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool."* (Isaiah 1:18).
 - c) *But You have lovingly delivered my soul from the pit of corruption, For You have cast all my sins behind Your back.* (Isaiah 38:17).
 - d) *For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.* (Hebrews 8:12).
 - e) *He will again have compassion on us, And will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins Into the depths of the sea.* (Micah 7:19)
 11. Child of God, your sins are g-o-n-e gone!
- H. Conclusion
 1. But you say, I've repeated your sin. What part of white as snow don't you understand?
 2. You need more vitamin G — Grace in your system.
 3. Above all else, just come home to God, right now today.