Did your parents have favorites? Did they love your older or younger sibling more than you? It feels that way some times doesn’t it? Especially when your parents let your older sibling do more things than you, or let the younger ones get away with things they never let you get away with.

How about our heavenly Father, does he have favorites? The Pharisees certainly thought so. That’s why they scoffed when Jesus ate with tax collectors and other people the Pharisees considered to be “sinners”. They figured that if Jesus really was the Son of God, he would know not to spend time with such sinful people. After all God didn’t care for people who had rejected him did he? Instead didn’t he love those who faithfully served him and kept his laws as the Pharisees thought they had done? The truth is our heavenly Father does not have favorites. He loves both obvious and oblivious sinners and desperately wants both to repent. Jesus made that clear through the Parable of the Prodigal Son - a parable that helps us behold the Father’s love for all sinners.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is really quite simple. There was a father who had two sons. The younger one didn’t like living at home and made his feelings clear by demanding part of the inheritance immediately. As the younger son, he was entitled to 1/3 and his older brother 2/3 of the estate. The son might as well have said, “Dad, I wish you would just die.” In spite of his son’s poor attitude, the father gave him part of the inheritance, and with this newfound wealth the son ran away. “The farther the better” he must have thought, “that way I can live how I want and not the way dad has ‘made’ me live all these years.” That of course translated into wild living.

It’s not difficult to see how the younger son in the parable represented the tax collectors and other obvious sinners with whom Jesus was spending so much time. Just as the younger son couldn’t wait to get out of his father’s house and live life on his terms, so the tax collectors had abandoned the commandments they learned as children and took advantage of their neighbors by charging more tax than was necessary. Having the extra cash on hand often led the tax collectors into a life of overindulgence. For these reasons the tax collectors were reviled by the common people and considered to be among the worst sinners in society.

The first few months away from home may have been exciting ones for the runaway son but he soon found out that the pleasures of this world don’t last forever. He first ran out of money and then the country where he was living was hit with a famine. The young man tried to find work but this apparently didn’t go so well because he had to beg for a job and was only reluctantly given the task of feeding pigs. Think of how shameful that must have been for a Jewish boy. It was bad enough that he had to beg a gentile (a non-Jew) for work but even worse to be sent to handle pigs – animals that were unclean for the Jews! Still, the young man hadn’t hit rock bottom yet. Apparently the pay was so horrible that the young man was hungry enough to want to fill his stomach with the slop that was being fed to the pigs, but he was denied even that! Do you see Jesus’ point regarding sin? While running away from God’s commands to live life on our terms may seem like the fun thing to do, in the end sin can only make us a friend of swine.

As the son thought about his predicament he came to his senses. He realized that running away from his father’s house had been an insane thing to do! He also believed that if he went back to his father, he would find a better life again. Even though he had forfeited his right to be treated like a son, wouldn’t his father at least receive him back as a servant? The son then started for home intent on making this confession: “Father, I have sinned
against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men” (Luke 15:18b, 19).

With a few short sentences Jesus helps us understand the nature of repentance. Repentance is not feeling sorry for yourself because of what your sin has done to you; it’s being sorry that you have disobeyed God. A repentant person also knows that he has no one but himself to blame for his sin. The younger son did not say it was his father’s fault for being “too oppressive” that he had run away. Nor did he blame society for making him believe that a better life could be had away from rules and morality. He blamed himself. A repentant person also knows that he cannot go on living in sin. The son’s plan was not to call up his father, make his confession, and then ask his father to wire him some money so he could keep partying. No, he left behind that life-style when he set out for his father’s house.

The only thing more impressive than the son’s repentance is the father’s forgiveness. While the son was still a long way off, the father saw him and came running to meet him. Had I been the father I would have sat back and said to my servants, “Oh, this ought to be good. Here comes that no good lowlife son of mine. He’s probably run out of money and wants to beg his way back into the house. We’ll see about that!” That’s not what the father did at all. He not only went running to meet his son, he fell upon him with kisses, not spankings. That’s mercy. The son didn’t get what he deserved. But the son would experience more than mercy that day, for before the son could even finish his confession, the father called for a rich garment, a ring to put on his finger, sandals for his feet, and for the servants to kill the fattened calf. Instead of a lecture and the cold shoulder, the father gave his son a party! That’s grace - getting the opposite of what we deserve.

How wonderful it is to know that our heavenly Father treats us the same way. Before we can even confess our sins God wraps us in a hug and covers us with kisses. Instead of making us prove our love to him, he proves his love to us by giving us the robe of Christ’s righteousness and the signet ring of the Holy Spirit. He also provides a heavenly banquet in the Lord’s Supper to assure us of his love and forgiveness. Friends, if you have run away from God, know that God desperately wants you to come back. Know that he has already forgiven your sins. Therefore stop living in sin’s slop; it’s an insane thing to do!

The joyous occasion of the runaway son’s return was dampened by the attitude of the older son. When he found out that Dad was throwing a party for his younger brother, he refused to come in and share the joy. The father could have just ignored the older son and let him pout but he loved him too, so he went outside to plead with his son to come in. But the older son retorted, “Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him” (Luke 15:29, 30)!

While the younger son had been lost to wild living, the older son was in danger of being lost to self-righteousness. There are two things about the sin of self-righteousness that shows itself in this parable. First all of the self-righteous do good expecting to get something. It must have broken the father’s heart to hear that really the only reason the older son had stayed at home was because he expected to get something for his service, not because he loved his father. The second thing we learn about the self-righteous is that
they overestimate their goodness. Was it true that the older son had always obeyed his father’s commands? Perhaps it seemed so outwardly but it was obvious that he had not done so inwardly for he had obeyed out of sense of obligation not joy.

Can we identify with the older son? Unfortunately we can, for it’s so easy to do the Lord’s work hoping that others will notice and when they don’t we get upset. Can we say then that our work for the Lord was truly for his glory? Wasn’t it more for our pride? We’re also like the older son when we insist that we’re pretty good people – that we have kept the Lord’s commands. Friends, while our sins may not be obvious, let’s not remain oblivious to them. In no way do any of us come close to serving God the way he wants to be served. If we think we have, then we are at least guilty of the sin of self-righteousness. There’s one more thing we’ll want to be warned about regarding the older son’s attitude. It’s how he was upset that his father should spend the time and money celebrating his younger brother’s return. Do we feel that way about our congregation’s outreach programs and the money we send for world mission work? Do we think that this money and time should be spent looking after our own members first? While we dare not overlook the sheep in our flock, we don’t want to forget that Jesus said there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent (Luke 15:7). The reason our congregation exists is to equip God’s people to reach out to the lost.

So does our heavenly Father have favorites? No, he wants both obvious and oblivious sinners to repent so that we all may enjoy his forgiveness. Therefore if you have run away from God thinking life would be better without him, don’t wait until you hit rock bottom to come back. On the other if you have been faithful in worship and active in serving the Lord, ask yourself why you do these things. If it’s to gain favour with God, you’ll become blind to all the things God has given you thinking that you deserve more. Instead of focusing on your deeds or on your sins, behold the Father’s love. Don’t just behold that love; take advantage of it. Confess your sin. Leave your sin. And enjoy your Father’s warm embrace. Amen.