

## **“Why Celebrate?”**

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Luke 15:22-24

Christians have been called by God to stand for those who are oppressed, falsely accused, depressed, grief-stricken, lonely, or in some other way marginalized by government or society.

Christians are also called to supply what is needed for those facing the uphill struggle as a refugee, an immigrant, or asylum seeker, and those who don't possess privilege or power — the people who often exist on the underbelly of society who have the odds stacked against them.

Throughout the Bible we read stories of God's people as the ones called to stand for and walk alongside those who are called “the least of these.”

Through history, Christians have been called to live on the ragged and jagged edge of society.

While called to this life, Christians are also asked to be selfless, other-centered, and humble.

Because they live this life, Jesus' followers face injustice, racism, hatred, pain, and stress. They face a world not in alignment with the way that God intended.

This sounds like a hard life, a serious life, a difficult life, if not an important life. But this isn't the whole story.

The followers of Jesus have also been called to celebrate. But how can one celebrate when facing all of this weight?

However, the Church probably has more reason to celebrate than we realize. But we have to ask, does this mean that we have to deny the difficulties in life, the struggles and darkness that seems so near and so often — put all of that aside so that we can celebrate?

The simple and straight answer is “No!”

But maybe your experience in church has looked like this — everyone is expected to have a shiny happy face and talk about how Jesus has taken away all of their worries, all of their cares and transformed their hopeless lives into a picture of utopia on earth.

Maybe you have been places where it seems everyone hides behind this idea that their lives

have to look perfect in order for the message they proclaim to be true.

Perhaps it strikes you like it does me. Pretending like that is simply inauthentic, besides not at all what Jesus taught.

Jesus told his disciples straight up that in this life they would have troubles, he was a living example of that, being pursued at never turn by those who wanted him dead. Jesus told them that they also would not be immune to pain and difficulties.

But, the rest of the story is that Jesus had overcome the world. He proclaimed a new way to live where they could acknowledge all of the pain, challenges, and struggles of life, and yet not be victims of those situations or circumstances.

God had rescued them, provided for them another way to live that was not dependent on things going well every day. All situations don't need to end with a shiny happy face.

Jesus encouraged them to take heart — to develop a perspective beyond the day to day life with God's love at the center.

Inside this world, God's people can celebrate!

We have good cause to authentically celebrate, because sin no longer controls us. We serve a God who loves us no matter what we have done or not done or what happens around us.

We serve a God who has already forgiven us for any way that we have messed up. We serve a God who sees the real us beyond the failures, beyond the facade, beyond the mask we wear, beyond our shiny Instagram or Facebook posts.

God sees us for who we really are beyond all of that stuff ... and this is the best part — God sees who we truly are, and smiles, because who we are is good.

When God sees us, God does not see our faults, our sins, our failings. God sees a beloved child. God has loved us all along!

People have had a hard time understanding this point for ... well for forever. So, Jesus told a powerful story to drive home the point. It is found in Luke 15.

### **READ LUKE 15:11-32**

Like so many stories of Jesus, this one has layers of meaning. It is often called The Prodigal Son, to signify the focus on the son who went away and lived a crazy and

irresponsible life, then came to his senses and returned to the open arms of his father who welcomed him home and threw a party for him. This is one layer in the story.

Then, we have the older brother who stayed home doing everything his father asked of him, but was hurt by the idea that his brother squandered all of his inheritance and at the end gets a party, while he doesn't feel acknowledged or appreciated. Maybe we feel like that sometimes.

Another layer is to look at the story with the father as the main character. The father's love is consistent for both sons. From this angle, we see it as a story about God's unconditional love and forgiveness no matter what we have done or not done. This is also a very important dimension of the story.

Jesus was highlighting the wrongdoing of the younger son. This broke the relationship he had with his father. Digging deeper into the story, we recognize that by asking for his inheritance while his father was still alive, the younger son was actually wishing his father's death. That's how people receive an inheritance, after all.

Jesus was making a point about how sin wrecks havoc in our lives.

What this really boils down to is that we wish God were out of the picture to give us free reign to do whatever we want. This is really what sin is about.

Jesus illustrated that this perceived freedom is in actuality no freedom at all, but always leads to broken relationships.

We could also probably call this story "The Two Sinful Brothers" because the older son is in the same boat. He was protesting and stuck on what he wanted like his younger brother.

Because the father is the God character in the story, it highlights perhaps more prominently than any other story in the whole Bible how God's faithfulness, love, compassion, and forgiveness is consistent and unlimited regardless of the situation.

As the younger son was seen by the father returning across the field, he hiked up his tunic and ran with reckless abandon to him. Before the son had a chance to say anything, the father had already forgiven him, and was making plans for a major celebration in his honor.

It didn't matter whether the son was repentant or not, the father's compassion and love overcame

any relational break there might have been.

Perhaps we can begin to grasp how profound a reality God's love is from this story.

Before any repentance is declared, God's forgiveness has already been given to us. God's love and forgiveness is not conditional upon us praying the right words, coming to a full understanding of Christian theology, or even taking any kind of action.

God's love is that big, that deep, that broad, and that profound!

But the reality is that we often beat ourselves up over what we have done or not done, leaving us with lots of guilt. The guilt controls us and we live under its weight.

But all the while, God has already forgiven us. God does not weigh us down with guilt, but frees us from it! We are the ones holding onto the guilt and Jesus is there giving us permission to lay it down, let it go. We actually are already free!

The message that Jesus offers us here is one of unconditional love and forgiveness, even when we can't forgive ourselves.

God's forgiveness frees us and is also a pattern for our lives.

**STORY 1** One fateful day, Christy Jones received an email from a woman she had never met. "You don't know me, but I am no longer dating your husband ... I'm sorry for any pain I caused your family," the email read.

"I felt paralyzed," Christy said. She called her husband at work, and he eventually admitted it was true. He had carried on a four-month affair with a woman he had met at work.

"Forgiving him was the hardest thing I've ever had to do," said Christy. "But his honesty made it easier." The two later went on to renew their wedding vows, and Christy said later that, "Our marriage is stronger for it. I have no regrets."

**STORY 2** During the Rwandan genocide in the mid 1990s, the entire family of a woman named Immaculee was murdered in a massacre. Immaculee chose to forgive the people who killed her family and went on to write a best selling book titled "Left to Tell." She founded the Left to Tell Charitable Fund in order to help children who have been orphaned due to genocide.

Rwanda's history has been marred by tragic cultural genocide, yet decades later, healing and reconciliation have begun throughout the country through people like Immaculee.

When we can follow Jesus' example and forgive others it both frees them and us!

This is how God works through us.

When we fully get that this love from God is freely given and not contingent on us doing anything to deserve it, it leaves us with gratitude and freedom, and this is perhaps the best reason to celebrate.

We celebrate because we have been forgiven.

We celebrate even in the ugliness of life, in the hurt and pain, through our failures, and through the persecution for our faith because we know that God already has us covered. We serve a God who loves us no matter what!

God doesn't only love us this way, God loves every other person we meet in this same way. How wonderful would it be if all of our friends who are struggling knew that they are already free as well. God has forgiven them too!

### **Closing Blessing:**

Let me remind you who you are. You, my friends, all of you are daughters and sons of God, sisters and brothers of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the peace, compassion, generosity, forgiveness and love of God are alive in the world through you! That is who you are as God made you. That is something to celebrate!

May you live that reality today and every day, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!