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Introduction

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Introduction

Jesus came to show us the Father and to reconcile us with Him. He told the parable of the lost son to help us see our Father as He really is. As a vivid illustration, Jesus tells of a father's love for his sons and how he wants to be in relationship with each one.

Our heavenly Father loves us just like the father in this story. In God's sight we are worthy and valuable no matter what condition we are in. God loves us with a great, unstoppable love. He loves us despite our sins and wanderings. He loves us even when we are self-righteous and think we are better than others because we follow rules.

This is how God sees us, but so often we don't know of or cannot accept His unconditional forgiveness and grace. We judge ourselves based on the good or evil we think we have done. If we have done bad things we listen to the voice of condemnation and beat ourselves up with guilt or shame. If we have obeyed the rules, we consider ourselves good and right and pride wells up within us. To further complicate the problem, we falsely assume that God, our Father, judges us in the same way we judge ourselves. We assume He condemns us because of our bad behaviors or values and loves us because of our good deeds and hard work.

However, this is not how our Father thinks of us. God does not see us through the rules of the law; He sees us in love. In this story, we hear of the contrast between the Old Covenant of law and the New Covenant of grace. Both the lost son and the hard-working son are measuring themselves according to what they have done—according to the law. They judge and value themselves—and assume that their father judges and values them—based on their obedience to the Old Covenant of law introduced through Moses.

Both sons are focused on what they think they deserve based on the law. They view acceptance, blessing and love as rewards to be achieved or withheld based on their behaviors. This is how things work in the Old Covenant—or in any law-based religion.

But the father is clearly not thinking like either of his sons. His actions come from his loving heart. He loves both his sons—not because of what they have done or failed to do—but simply because they are his sons. The father treats his sons with

love, kindness, care and compassion. He loves his younger son and his older son and desires that both join him in joyful relationship.

God reaches down to us in love. Even our best attempts to obey the law, or any other set of religious rules, will not help us earn our way to God. Yes, God wants us to be good by His definition—to be right and holy like He is. But we can't achieve that by following rules; we only come to be good in loving relationship with God. God doesn't love us because we are good; He makes us good because He loves us. He makes us good through our inner relationship with Him. That inner relationship can't help but work itself out so that we actually become good on the outside as well. In this way, obedience is a by-product of living in right relationship—of living in love.

The Christian life is not to be one of external conformity to the law—of legalism. Neither is it to be one of disregard for the law—of license. Rather, the Christian life is to be one of liberty. In liberty, we are set free from sin—not just from the consequences of sin, but from the actual thought and deed itself. In the Christian life, as God intended it to be, our loving relationship with God sets us free to be our true selves, fashioned after the image of God.

In the New Covenant, the Father sent His Son to die for our sins and reconcile us to Himself. Regardless of our wanderings or our self-righteous ways, our Father loves us unconditionally and always. A loving relationship with our heavenly Father is the foundation for all that we were created to be. Reconciled with God—dwelling in His love—we become right from the inside out.