

A Tender Word for Pharisees

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This Sunday I preached at Watermark Church in Dallas under the title “[A Tender Word for Pharisees](#).” There are not many tender words for Pharisees in the mouth of Jesus. Mainly his words to Pharisees are tough, even terrifying (see Matthew 23).

The most moving words of tenderness for Pharisees are in [Luke 15:25–31](#), the words of the father to the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son.

Luke 15 begins with Jesus eating with “tax collectors and sinners.” The Pharisees grumbled, “This man receives sinners and eats with them” ([Luke 15:2](#)).

Jesus explains what he is doing with three parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. The point of each is that when Jesus eats with sinners, what’s happening is that the Father in heaven is seeking the lost. The physician is tending the sick ([Luke 5:30–31](#)). That’s the meaning of Jesus’s ministry.

Seeking Lost Legalists Too

But in the third of these parables, Jesus goes beyond explaining what he is doing with collectors and sinners; he explains what he is doing with Pharisees. We know this because in [Luke 15:1–2](#), the Pharisees are standing aloof grumbling about the meal Jesus is sharing with the sinners. And in [Luke 15:28](#), the older brother is standing aloof, angry and unwilling to join the father who is eating with the younger brother who represents the tax collectors and sinners.

The older brother “was angry and refused to go in” (verse 28). He said to his father, “Look, these many years I have *served* you, and I never disobeyed your *command*, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!” (verses 29–30).

Notice the words “served” and “command.” The problem is that the older brother related to his father as slave to a master, not as son to a father. His father was merely a command-giver, and he was a command-keeper. And therefore, merit, not mercy, was the foundation of the relationship; and mercy to the undeserving made him angry.

Five Tender Expressions from the Father

How will the father handle this situation? The son is angry on the porch of merit and refusing to walk into the celebration of mercy. In great patience and tenderness, his father does five tender things.

1. The father moves toward him, similar to the way he ran out to meet the younger son (verse 20). Verse 28: “And his father came out.”

He does not send a servant to get him. He does not holler from a distance and command his son to come into the house. He goes himself. This is a picture of God coming to save hypocrites as well as harlots.

2. The father entreats him. Verse 28: “His father came out and began *entreating* him.”

The word “entreat” is different from what the elder son said about the way his father speaks. He had said that his father gave *commands*. But the father is entreating, not commanding. We see the force of this in the contrast Paul made between commanding and entreating: He said to Philemon, “Though I am bold enough in Christ to *command* you to do what is required, yet for love’s sake I prefer to *entreat* you” ([Philemon 1:8–9](#)).

The Father was wooing, appealing, pleading, and yearning — not commanding. He did not want a performance, but a new heart.

3. The father calls him, “my child” — “My child, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours” (verse 31).

Most translations use “son,” but the Greek word for son throughout the chapter (eight times) is *huios*. Here the word is *teknon*, and is more intimate and tender. He is not belittling him, but speaking endearingly. This is where I can easily imagine tears coming to the father because the word carries all the memories of when this angry son was the father’s little boy.

4. The father says, “You are always with me” — Verse 31: “My child, you are always with me.”

“*With me.*” “*With me.*” The deepest void in the elder son’s heart was that this was not precious to him. Being with the father every night for supper, and running the estate together was not a joy to him.

It seems that perhaps the elder son really loved what the younger brother used to love, but didn’t have the guts to leave the estate. In fact, Jesus says in [Luke 16:14](#) that the Pharisees were lovers of money. He really wanted to party with his friends, not with the father (verse 29).

O how many people stay in the church, but do not have hearts that are with the father. He is not their treasure. They are just as worldly as the prodigal was, but the church is a cover.

5. The father says, “All that is mine is yours” — Verse 31: “My child, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours” ([Luke 15:31](#)).

There is a massive inheritance coming. And the father only hints at the condition: “*Child . . . all that I have is yours.*” Jesus leaves unsaid the possibility that the elder son will remain forever on the porch with the *slaves*, rather than sit at the table of mercy as a grateful child, a son. He leaves unmentioned what he said in [Matthew 15:11–12](#).

Many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness.

Not here. Not in this parable. Here it is all tenderness toward the Pharisees. The message of the parable ends with tenderness to both brothers: Come in from the foreign country of misery, and come in from the porch of hard-earned merit. Both are deadly. But inside is the banquet of grace, and forgiveness, and fellowship with an all-satisfying Father.
