

In the well-known parable of the prodigal son, a key moment comes when we hear, “But when he came to himself...” There’s the turning point, in the prodigal’s story, when he remembers who he is. This parable deals with an issue that is currently very large in our culture: identity. Who – or what – do you identify as? That’s the question, isn’t it?

You might identify yourself based on your job, or your favorite sports team, or a hobby you’re passionate about. People may identify with a particular political party. Or increasingly, they may have a different “gender identity.” Some of these identifications are rather harmless; others go directly against God’s Word.

The key point in all of this is to know who God has made us to be. Our identity must be, above all, grounded in who He says we are. It’s in coming to Him that we, like the prodigal son, come to ourselves.

How did the prodigal son get in such a mess, anyways? Jesus says, “And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.”

This young man rejected the identity he had – who he really was – and tries to make his own identity, guided by his sinful desires. He doesn’t want to stay at home and work in the fields, fields he’d grown up in, fields that likely would have been in his family for generations. No, he wants to go to a far away country, new, exotic, different. And he’s not going there to start up a business. He’s going to party, to live for himself and indulge his passions and desires.

He also cuts himself off from everyone he’s ever known, from his family. He’ll cut these bonds and go establish new ones, even though these old ones were given him by God. And especially, this young man wants an identity that isn’t connected to his father. In asking for his inheritance, he’s telling his father that he is as good as dead to him.

This son wants to live as though his father doesn’t exist. In the son’s eyes, his father’s only there to be a source of money and possessions for him to use. The love, the care, the instruction that the father gave him – forgotten. The fact that the son’s own name, even his own life, were given to him through the father – ignored. This young man’s identity – who he truly is – comes in large measure through his father, but he doesn’t care. He’ll find a newer, better, identity without him.

This quest for a newer, better identity, apart from his father, starts off wonderfully. But then the money runs out. And then the famine hits. And it becomes clear that all these new people with whom he’d surrounded himself really didn’t care about him at all. They were just using him. The party-goers, the musicians, the merchants, they’re all happy to be with him, as long as he can pay for it.

But once his inheritance has been squandered, it all goes away. Even the guy who hires the son to feed his pigs won’t spare any of the pigs’ food for him. And so the young son is left there, lying in the mud, starving, his self-made identity completely in shambles.

This desire for a different identity apart from what God our Father has graciously given to us has been with humanity from Eden. Though they had been made the pinnacle of creation, the only part of the universe formed in the image of God, Adam and Eve weren't satisfied with that identity. They instead listened to the devil's lies, that, instead of being servants of God, they could be like God, have an identity where they weren't under anyone's authority. And this new identity gets them thrown out of paradise, led into conflict with one another, and finally returning to the dust in death.

Humanity's quest for a new identity apart from the one given to us by God continues to lead us into suffering and separation, just like the prodigal son. Instead of looking to God's Word and hearing who He says we are, and rejoicing in that identity, we seek to make one much more in line with the world.

Our job, our hobbies, our entertainment, our social groups, our political affiliations – we seek to define who we are by these sort of things. And in order to pursue these, we often give up or make secondary the identities God gives, such as father or mother, son or daughter, brother or sister, Christian.

This quest for seeking an identity other than what God has given lies at the heart of all that is celebrated this month in the name of the sin of pride. God made man for woman and woman for man, or else gives the gift of celibacy, but humanity's sinful flesh often warps this, causing people to sexually desire others of the same sex. Rather than rightly understand themselves as people made in the image of God who struggle with temptations of same sex attraction, they are deceived into thinking that being gay or lesbian is just who they are, part of their identity.

Or when people who struggle with the cross of gender dysphoria – thinking that they're in the wrong body – decide that their identity is transgender, they may be led to inflict great and irreversible harm on their bodies, robbing themselves of other identities that God has created for them, such as father or mother.

These desires to form our own identities amount to God telling us who we are, who He has created us to be, and us defiantly telling Him no. Like the prodigal, we want to live as though our Father in heaven were dead, good only for giving us stuff that we can do with as we please. And like the prodigal, this leaves us in a terrible place, cut off from our God.

This open rebellion isn't the only sort of identity problem seen in this parable. The other son, the elder, also has one, though it may not be as obvious. This son has remained, staying at home, working with his father. On the outside, that looks great. But when the younger son returns home, the heart of this older son is shown, and it's not one of love.

When his father comes out – because he is stubbornly refusing to go in – the son has this to say: “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!”

In his words, this son shows himself to be arrogant and prideful. His identity is one of self-righteousness. He's the good son. He's the son who has worked as a servant for his father. His brother – whom he refuses to acknowledge, referring to him as “this son of yours” – devoured his with prostitutes. The rest of the inheritance is supposed to be his! The wealth being spent on this feast was supposed to be his – once his father died. But now, now, since the younger son is restored, he'll get another inheritance, since he is a son and therefore an heir of the father's estate.

This older son tragically doesn't seem to have a bond with his father, even though it wasn't severed as openly as the younger's. He sees his father as selfish, imaging him as not even willing to give him a young goat. He's wanting to rejoice, not with his father and his returned brother, but with his own friends, away from his family – just like his younger brother had been.

And he too apparently sees his father as only a source of material goods, not as the man who loves him and who would give whatever he had for his son. The older son's outward identity is that of a faithful son, but beneath the surface, this son's identity is also concerned with only himself.

Christians are tempted to this selfish identity as well. Being in the church for years, giving generously, serving in various roles – these are wonderful things. Yet our sinful flesh, aided by the devil's whispers, can lead us to think that, because of our service, God owes us something.

If not resisted by the Holy Spirit's power, these temptations can get us to put our confidence of salvation in all that we've done, rather than in the blood of Jesus and our identity as His baptized people. The identity of a Christian becomes something “earned” by works, not a gift of the grace of God. We go to church and do other good works, not because we love Jesus, but because they're proof that we're better than others.

But then, when someone who's lived a sinful life repents and is brought into the Kingdom of God, and when we find out that that person will be in the same heaven we will, it causes outrage. Like the elder son, we're tempted to decide that, if such unworthy people will be a part of the Kingdom, of the Church, then we won't be a part of it. A hypocritical Christian identity can be just as harmful to salvation as an openly rebellious one.

Two sons, both seeking an identity apart from their loving father. One openly, one hypocritically, but the same at heart. What does the father do? Throw them both out in a fit of righteous anger? Disown them both for their coldheartedness toward him? No, the father responds in mercy and grace.

The father's heart was broken when he watched his youngest son ride off, having traded his family for material wealth. Why did he let the son do this? Why didn't he refuse when his son made this absolutely despicable request of him? Because the father wanted his son to love him, and love cannot be forced. He allowed himself to be grievously hurt by his own child.

But he never stopped loving that son, because he was his son, and nothing could change that. From the parable, it seems that every day he would watch for his son's return. No doubt others – such as his other son – thought this stupid, a waste of time and concern with someone who didn't deserve it.

“He’s gone, and good riddance!” Yet the father watched. And as we read, “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.”

The sight of his son – filthy, dressed in rags, having none of the wealth he departed with – doesn’t make the father angry. No, he has compassion, love, for this son. He doesn’t wait for his son to get to him; he takes off running to his son. He doesn’t give his son a stern tongue-lashing, or slap him across the face; he embraces him and kisses him – pig filth and all!

The son, no doubt surprised, repents to his father: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But before the son can say anything about being just a hired man and earning his keep in his father’s house, the father calls out to the servants, “Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.”

The son is restored as a son in the house, and restored in fullness. The best robe, an expensive ring, leather sandals – there is no mistaking that this is the son of the father. With the words and the outward signs, the son’s true identity is restored and made visible for all to see.

This is not a foreigner, not a swineherd, not a hired man. This is his son! The son had come to himself, and that led him to come to his father.

Later, when his other son pouts out in the field, too prideful to come in, the father doesn’t say, “His loss” and continue on with the celebration. He doesn’t send a servant out to tell the elder son that, if he doesn’t get in here this instant, he’ll be getting no inheritance at all.

No, like with the younger son, the father goes out to this sinful older son and shows him mercy. He answers the son’s selfish accusations with patience and love, pointing out that all he has, young goats and much more, are his son’s as well. And he acknowledges that his son has been with him.

But then he gently reminds this son that his identity comes from his family, from the father. What good is the stuff if it can’t be used to celebrate the return of a long-lost brother? What is an inheritance when you’re dead? If you have no love or mercy, then what do you have that is actually worth celebrating?

The father is seeking to get this son to, like his brother, come to himself, and realize that that means coming to the celebration, coming to his brother, coming to his father.

When we have sought an identity apart from God and His Word, and consequently mired ourselves in rebellion or hardened ourselves in hypocrisy, the Lord calls us to come to ourselves as well. He might do this through sending us discipline and suffering.

Remember, it was the famine, starving among the pigs, that finally brought the younger son to himself. God sends punishment still today, for this very reason. When such trials come, then, we need to ask ourselves if this is God calling us to leave the path of sin and return to Him. When our loved ones who have left the church come into hardship and suffering, we need to pray that it would bring them to themselves, and back to Christ.

And like with the older son, when God’s Word gently – or forcefully – convicts us of sin and hypocrisy, we must not resist the working of the Holy Spirit there. We must humble ourselves before

our Lord and repent of seeking an identity apart from Him, or having only an outward identity of Christian while still remaining self-centered in our heart.

If the older son angrily stays outside, he cuts himself off from the feast. If the younger son refuses to repent, he dies of starvation among the pigs.

But where repentance does occur, when the Holy Spirit turns our hearts back toward the Lord, then He comes and restores us, quicker than the father running to embrace his son.

When we repent of our sins, our Lord clothes us again in his spotless righteousness. When we throw ourselves at His mercy, He picks us up and embraces us in His almighty arms as the angels in heaven rejoice. When we would see ourselves as unworthy of the Kingdom and needing to earn our way back in, He cuts us short and proclaims us His precious children.

So strongly does He desire to have us back in His house that He had not just some fattened calf killed, but sent His own Son to be the sacrifice. The feast that He offers us is that of His Son's flesh and blood, the Lamb who was slain and yet now reigns over all. He invites us in to the celebration that will last forever in heaven.

When our Lord calls us to repent, He is not asking us to do anything strange or foreign. He is calling to us in love and mercy to come to ourselves, to be who He has created us to be. Our true and eternal identity is in Him. Apart from Him, any identity we form will eventually go away. But the identity He grants us as His children in Baptism, that will last forever.

In the name of Jesus, amen.