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Redefining Forgiveness: The Grace That Chases

How the Kingdom of God Redefines Forgiveness and Invites Us into Restoration

Let's be honest—most of us are used to the idea that forgiveness has to be earned. Someone messes up, they apologize (maybe more than once), and *then* maybe we let it go. But when Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15, He paints a very different picture—one where forgiveness isn't earned at all. Instead, it's offered freely, even before the apology is finished. It's grace that chases us down.

This story gives us a window into how God's Kingdom operates. And spoiler: it's way different than what we're used to.

1. Forgiveness Starts With the Father, Not the Offender

In the story, the younger son has seriously messed up—he wasted everything and totally disrespected his dad. When he finally comes back home, he's ready to grovel. But before he even gets the words out, his father runs to him, hugs him, and throws a party (Luke 15:20–24). No lecture. No punishment. Just love.

That's what God's forgiveness looks like. It's not based on how good our apology is. It's based on His love. He makes the first move.

Picture this: A teenager crashes the family car and runs away out of shame. Days later, they come home expecting a furious parent. But instead, the parent hugs them, calls the insurance, and cooks their favorite dinner. That's grace.

So what about us?

How often do we wait for someone to “deserve” our forgiveness? The Kingdom flips that script. We're called to lead with grace. Ask yourself:

- Who am I waiting on to make the first move?
- What would it look like to offer forgiveness first, like the Father does?

2. Restoration Is All-In, Not Halfway

The father doesn't just welcome his son back—he completely restores him. He gives him a robe, a ring, and sandals, which in that culture meant honor, authority, and full sonship. There's no, "Let's see how you do for a while." He's instantly back in the family.

God doesn't do "probation forgiveness." He goes all in. He restores identity, not just status.

Imagine this: An employee gets fired for messing up badly. But later, not only do they get rehired—they get promoted. That wouldn't happen in most workplaces. But it happens in God's Kingdom because restoration is about relationship, not performance.

For us, that raises questions:

- Do we treat people who return to faith like second-class citizens?
- Are we celebrating their restoration or quietly judging them?

Let's be a church that reflects God's heart by restoring people fully—not putting them on spiritual probation.

3. The Older Brother Misses the Point of Grace

Then there's the older brother. He's been the "good kid," and he's *not* happy about his brother's party. He basically says, "I've done everything right, and you've never thrown a party for me" (v. 29). He's been treating obedience like a transaction: If I do good, I should get rewarded.

But grace doesn't work that way. It doesn't play favorites or keep score. The Kingdom welcomes both the wild ones and the well-behaved—but both need grace just the same.

Think about this: Someone who's been in church forever sees a former addict step into leadership quickly. That can stir up pride or even resentment. But the Kingdom isn't about spiritual seniority—it's about surrender.

So here's the challenge:

- Are you trying to earn what God gives freely?

- Is pride keeping you from celebrating someone else's comeback?

God's grace offends our ego. And that's a good thing.

4. The Father's Heart Is Our Example

The most powerful part of the story might be the father himself. He runs to meet the younger son—but he also goes out to plead with the older one. He's constantly moving *toward* his kids, not away from them. He doesn't shame either of them. He invites them both into relationship.

That's the posture we're called to have—as parents, friends, coworkers, leaders, church family.

Picture a coach: A star player gets injured and finally returns to the team. The coach doesn't bench them forever—he welcomes them back *and* reminds the veterans that it's about the team, not competition.

So ask yourself:

- Am I living with that kind of compassion?
- Who do I need to move toward instead of waiting for them to come to me?

Final Thoughts: Step Into the Celebration

The story ends with an invitation: “Come join the party.” That's what the Kingdom is like—a celebration of grace where the lost are found, and even the bitter are lovingly invited back in.

But here's the thing—we don't just get to enjoy that grace; we're called to live it out.

Try this:

- **Reflect:** Is there someone I've written off as too far gone?
- **Repent:** Have I made forgiveness or restoration conditional?
- **Respond:** Reach out to someone who needs to know they're not beyond grace.

God's forgiveness chases us. His restoration is complete. And His heart is wide open. Let's be people who reflect that same kind of love. Kingdom grace redefines forgiveness—not as a transaction, but as a transformation. It invites us not just to return home, but to join the feast.

Discussion Question for Small Groups

- 1. What do you think motivated the younger son to leave home, and how does that reflect attitudes we sometimes have toward God or authority?**
- 2. How does the father's reaction to the son's return challenge common ideas about forgiveness and grace?**
- 3. Why do you think the older brother struggled to accept his brother's return, and how can we guard against having a similar attitude?**
- 4. What does this parable reveal about God's character and how He relates to both the rebellious and the self-righteous?**
- 5. In what ways might we identify with each of the three main characters (the younger son, the father, the older brother) at different points in our lives?**