

16. The Parable of the Prodigal Son

Luke 15:11-32

The Parables of Jesus

In Chapter 15 of Luke's gospel, there are three parables, the Parable of the Lost Sheep (vv. 3-7), the Parable of the Lost Coin (vv. 8-10), and the Parable of the Prodigal Son (vv. 11-32). The context of the whole of chapter 15 concerns the attitude of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. What precipitated Jesus' teaching these three parables is the complaint by the Pharisees that Jesus *receives* sinners and eats with them (v. 2). The word that had got out from the religious elite was that Jesus did His miracles by the power of Satan (Matthew 12:24). As evidence that Jesus was of Satan, they pointed to those whom the Lord associated with, the sinners, prostitutes, and tax collectors. If this Man was the Messiah, they said, He would not keep close company with that kind of people!

Jesus taught these three Parables to correct their view on the character and nature of God, i.e., what His attitude is toward the lost, needy, and broken of this world. The religious leaders that were in attendance were authority figures in the nation at that time. People were bound to keep their rules and regulations. They were looked up to as those who were meticulously seeking to be like God and follow Him. ²"The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. ³So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach" (Matthew 23:2). When Jesus saw what the teachers of the law and Pharisees were modeling to the ordinary people and their disdain of anyone who was not of their club, He decided to tell them three stories to illustrate the Father's heart toward the lost. Each of the two parables we have already covered concludes with rejoicing and celebration over the finding of the sheep and coin.

Really, we could call this parable, *The Parable of the Prodigal Father*. Before you start your E-mail program to throw me an electronic stone, let me explain by saying that the word "*prodigal*" is not mentioned in the text, and means:

Rashly or wastefully extravagant": as in *prodigal* expenditures on unneeded weaponry; a *prodigal* life. *Giving or given in abundance; lavish or profuse*: *prodigal* praise. ¹

Yes, the younger son was wastefully extravagant, but the father was even more lavish and extravagant with his grace, mercy, and acceptance of his son back from the distant country. He was gracious with his finances for he didn't have to give his son what he wanted. With that thought in mind, let's look now at the third parable in chapter 15 of Luke's gospel.

The Young Son's Wandering from Home

¹¹Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired

himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything (Luke 15:11-16).

The first thing we notice about this young man is his demanding attitude. He does not ask kindly, and he lacks grace and tact with his choice of words. There is no discussion about his intentions. He is demanding of his father, knowing how gracious his father is. He says in effect: "Give me my portion of the inheritance now, rather than when you die or retire." The father knew some of the thoughts that had been going on in the young man's mind and had some idea of what the young man wanted to do with such an amount of money. Both sons were quite happy that the father would divide up his property among the two. The elder son got two-thirds and the younger one-third, per the Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 21:17). Right away, the younger son liquidated his assets to get the cash in hand.

Question 1) Why did the father give his son what he demanded instead of making him wait?

The young son was tired of being in his father's house. He wanted to be a man and to experience the world outside of his father's government and eye. The father did not argue or try to reason with him. There are some lessons that a father cannot teach a son. They must be experienced. Pain is a good teacher. We cannot protect our children from the lessons that only pain can teach them. Young people have learned to rely on parents for all kinds of things, but some lessons are only gained when one stands on his own two feet. At some point in every home, the young must be released from the nest to fly on their own. The teenage years should be years when parents are teaching and preparing to release their children to grow up and be self-reliant. It is often a sad time when a young person is released from under their parent's care. Hopefully, godly character is formed before that time comes. Even when good parents have done their utmost to prepare youth for the world, he will sometimes walk away from all that he has learned.

Jesus said the younger son “set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living” (v. 13). Later, the elder son accuses his brother of being with prostitutes (v. 30), even though he has not yet even seen his brother. How does he know his brother has been squandering his father’s property with prostitutes? It's highly likely that the brothers had talked about it together, i.e., the younger one trying to get his elder brother to come with him. Those that are intending to sin often find it difficult to do it alone. Sin likes company. Sin begins in the thought life. A man is not what he thinks he is, but what he thinks, he is (Anon). Stephen Charnock said: "As the image of the seal is stamped upon the wax, so the thoughts of the heart are printed upon the actions." Right thinking brings forth right living; remember that your thoughts are vocal to God. He knows all that we think. Evil and sinful thoughts will come to every person, but thoughts only become sin when we dwell on those thoughts, and they take root and germinate in the seedbed of our mind. One way of looking at it is this: we cannot stop the birds from flying around our heads, but we can prevent them from making nests in our hair.

¹⁴but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.

¹⁵Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death (James 1:14-15).

The Greek word translated “enticed” means to catch fish by bait. Evil desires and thoughts are used by Satan to hook us and reel us in. The enemy entices us to a distant place from God. The

more we listen to him, the greater will be our slavery to sin and the more distant from the Father's home. This young man took the bait and swam with the temptation until, suddenly, the enemy pulled on the fishing rod and drove the hook home. He was caught with no resources left, and no one would help him. The result was painful.

I met Christ in 1977, but before that, I smoked marijuana and took drugs. Disgusted with my way of life and self-image, I realized my habit had a hold on me when I threw away a chunk of it, only to buy some more the next day. When I had to go to prison for "allowing my premises to be used for the smoking of Cannabis," I knew that I had to break free from my bondage to drugs, it was making my life a mess. Only when I gave my life to Christ, did I finally receive the power to overcome and break the habit. Sin is a hard task master. When the younger son's money ran out, his situation changed when a severe famine came upon the land. Need is often the way God manages to get our attention. Life in a distant land from his father no longer held the excitement it did at first. Instead, he became miserable. His life went downhill fast.

Question 2) What things do you see in the text that speak of his downward spiral? Has there ever been a time when you felt that your life was spinning out of control? Did a habit ever "get the best" of you?

He had no income during a time when food itself was very precious. Typically, he could have taken a job, but because of the famine, jobs were scarce. In an agrarian economy, such as Palestine's, if one had no land or money, things could get very desperate, indeed. He hired himself out (literally he "glued" himself) to one who sent him into the fields as a common day laborer. It was humbling to him to be in need and rely on someone else for food. The worse thing was that he was put to work in the pig pen to feed the pigs. A pig was an animal that is not kosher to the Jews. In verse 16, the word that is translated "*Pods*" is *Carob Pods*. Rabbi Acha (about AD 320) once remarked, "When the Israelites are reduced to carob pods, then they repent." The Carob tree (*Ceratonia siliqua*) is an evergreen shrub or tree native to the Mediterranean region, cultivated for its edible seed pods.



To a Jewish citizen, to not only feed pigs but also to be hungry for the Carob pods that the pigs were eating was a picture that this man had hit rock bottom in his life.

The Young Son's Awakening and Repentance

¹⁷When he came to his senses, he said, “How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.” ²⁰So he got up and went to his father (Luke 15:17-20).

Question 3) In describing this young man’s awakening to his need, the Lord used the words “When he came to his senses” (v. 17). What does the term mean to you? What is repentance, and what words in the text indicate his repentance?

Coming to one’s senses, or as the King James Version translates it, “He came to himself,” describes a person’s awakening to reality. He had been beside himself, but now he was fully sensing what life had become, and he realized the madness and folly of how he had been living his life. Solomon, writing in Ecclesiastes, tells us, “The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live” (Ecclesiastes 9:3). Living out of a relationship with God is madness and folly. We fool around with our eternal souls by playing spiritual Russian Roulette, trusting that our death is not today. However, we do not know what a day may bring forth. We spin the barrel of our spiritual gun, day by day, hoping that there is not a bullet in the chamber terminating our life, thus forever banishing us to a Christ-less eternity. Today is the day of salvation, so why put off this question another day? “Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Romans 10:13).

It was Socrates who said, "the unexamined life is not worth living." When the younger son hit rock bottom, the only way he could look was up. He began to examine his life, reflecting on how he had managed to get himself in such a position. To consider and reflect is to retire into ourselves, to compare one thing with another, and determine to correct things. This state of mind is a grace of God. Reflection, though, is not repentance. Reflection and conviction should lead us to repentance. This young man took a moral inventory of his life. One cannot turn the direction of his life until he fully sees himself to be morally broken and in a worthless condition. We often have little value for the Savior of the World until we reach the place of brokenness. John Flavel put it like this: "Christ is not sweet till sin is made bitter to us."

The younger son began to think of returning home and what words he could say to make amends and be restored. He knows that he has no right to anything and that he must face the shame and scorn of the village and his elder brother. He is bankrupt of position, and he now is ready to be a servant of his father. I note that he does not mention God's name but, instead, uses the word, "I have sinned against *heaven*." To many Jews, the name of God is most holy. When I lived in Israel, I often heard the words *H'Shem Adonai* (The Name of the Lord) used instead of the Hebrew word for God. It is possible that this young man was not only now respectful of God and eternal things but also especially of his father who loved him so much.

Repentance is not just feeling sorry for one's sin but changing our mind and direction in life. Until a person makes tracks to the Father's house, he is still merely under conviction of heart. But this young man prepared his speech and resolved that he would serve his father by being a day laborer in his fields. The words, "he got up and went to his father" (v. 20) describe his repentance. There have to be active steps and not just words. A person's will is involved.

Question 4) If you had never heard this story before, what would you assume would happen next when the son returned? What do you think Jesus' listeners in that day would have expected to happen for the returning son to be accepted back into his Father's house?

All the listeners at this point in the story would be amazed at the level of shame the son had brought the father, the family, and the town in which he lived. In the listener's minds, they were wondering what would be the acceptable punishment for the son for his rebellion. All kinds of thoughts of just penalties would have been in the minds of the Pharisees to stop this kind of thing happening again, but instead of hearing the expected condemnation, Jesus' next words shocked them to the core.

The Prodigal Father

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²²"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate (Luke 15:20-24).

This father behaved shamefully, the Pharisees thought. There was no need in Israel for pigs, and Jesus said the son had gone to a distant country (v. 13), so he was probably among Gentiles (non-Jews) in an adjacent country. Wherever he was, we can deduce that he was several miles from home. This father is a picture of God the Father, a long way from home, waiting and looking for his son. There was no anger at his son's sin; when this father saw his son in the distance, the only emotion he had was compassion.

Dictionary.com says that compassion is a *deep awareness of the suffering of another coupled with the wish to relieve it*. As soon as the father saw his son, he *picked up the lower part of his robe to run* to him. In the Middle East, this is something an elderly head of a family does not do. People at the time never showed off their legs, and only in an emergency or a fight would a man tuck his robes into his belt for ease of movement. They all would have thought this was shameful behavior on the part of the father. They all began to wonder where Jesus was going with this story, for no father would do such a thing. This father, though, was in pain for his son while he had been away from home.

The elderly father was so ready to forgive that he does not even give the young man a chance to speak his words. The father accepts the young son before he got his words off his chest. This story describes a father in great love with his son. The English King James version of the Bible says, "He fell on his neck, and kissed him." The original Greek tense brings out the fact that he kissed and kept on kissing his son again and again and again, being extravagant in his unrestrained kissing of his son. There is no thought in the mind of the father about the stench of the pigsty that still hangs on the boy. He is just so pleased to see him! The father expressed his kindness before the son expressed his repentance. These words speak of God's kindness and His readiness to be reconciled to those who have been apart from His love. Finally, the young man, during sobs, I'm sure, manages to get out part of his speech that he had prepared. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (v. 21).

However, the father cuts him off and speaks to the servants that are with him to bring some things.

Question 5) When Jesus presented this parable, why did he have the father running to the son, and what aspect of God's character does this display? What three things were brought for the son, and what do you think these things can represent to us as Christians?

They were told to bring the "best robe." There is a double emphasis here in the Greek text, i.e., the robe, that principal robe. We are not talking about a coat here; this robe speaks of the son restored to a place of honor. It speaks of a robe of righteousness that covers over our pigsty of sin. The ring speaks of authority and power of attorney. In that day, rings were used to sign official documents. Often, the ring had an impression on it, that, when pushed into hot wax, was the official seal of the family. Joseph was given such a ring by Pharaoh when he was elevated to second in command of Egypt after interpreting Pharaoh's dream (Genesis 41:42).

We, too, are given authority and power by our God to do the works of Christ (Matthew 28:18-20). The son was given shoes. No slave ever wore shoes, and the father would not let his son go barefoot. He was a son, not a slave. Our feet are shod with the Gospel of peace (Ephesians 6:15), and we are made sons of God (1 John 3:2). The servants were told to kill the calf fattened for this day. This father had been slowly fattening the calf, knowing that, someday, he would celebrate when his son would come home. These were all gifts of grace lavished on the slave returning home and restored to sonship.

When Jesus was describing the son returning home, I think He was looking at the sinners and tax collectors with smiles of warm acceptance on His face, but when He started to talk about the elder son, He turned to face the Pharisees and the teachers of the law.

The Elder Son

²⁵Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷"Your brother has come," he replied, "and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound." ²⁸The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!" ³¹"My son," the father said, "you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:25-32).

These religious leaders prided themselves on thinking they were representatives of those who lived for God. When Jesus faced them and described the elder brother's attitude, don't you think they began to see themselves in a mirror?

Question 6) What stands out to you concerning the elder brother? What do his words and actions reveal about his character?

The first thing we read about is that the older brother is out in the field, a metaphor for being distant from the father. It is telling that he didn't know about his brother's return. The father had not sent anyone out to the field to tell him that a party was underway. He knew that the elder brother did not care in the slightest about his younger brother, and that, instead, he would be angry about his return. The father deliberately kept the information from the elder son because the elder boy had no relationship with his father who knew that he despised his younger brother.

When the father went off at different times looking for the younger son, the elder brother didn't care. If the older brother had seen the younger son on his way home, he would have sent him away again before he even saw his father. We can almost hear the elder son say; "Don't you realize how you have shamed the father and the family? You stink! Your father is angry with you; don't you dare come home after what you have done!" These are all words that Satan whispers in our ears when we begin to think of returning to our Father's house. Those of us that are parents can learn a lot about restoring our children to God from these verses.

At the end of a hard day's work, the elder son returned home. He was surprised to hear music and a party going on. Immediately suspicious, he won't go into the house. Religious people are wary of those with true joy at being in right relationship with the Father. He won't go in, but instead, he asks one of the servants what's happening. He found out from the servants that, **"Your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound"** (v. 27). The special calf that the father has been preparing for months has been butchered, put on the spit, and carved up for the many friends and neighbors who are celebrating.

At this point in the story, the Pharisees finally saw some sense in the story. They heard of the elder son's anger that the father had received the younger son. They probably felt that the elder son was justified in his attitude against the father. The Pharisees in the crowd expected the father would see his shameful behavior at allowing the younger son to go back home with no punishment. However, each of them, hopefully, began to see, that the elder son too, was separated from his home and father because of his attitude. There's that word again in some translations, i.e., he has him back safe and sound, or he has *received* him gladly, as some English translations say. They are reminded of their own words at the beginning of the chapter of the three parables where they said, **"this man receives sinners and tax-collectors"** (Luke 15:2) Things begin to come together for all who were listening. These parables are about each of them and the amazing grace of God not only toward Pharisees apart from God but also the sinners and tax-collectors.

The elder brother was full of pride and used words like "I," "me," and "my," quite a lot in these few verses. William Barclay, in his commentary on the book of Luke, says:

- 1) His attitude shows that his years of obedience to his father had been years of grim duty and not of loving service.

- 2) His attitude is one of utter lack of sympathy. He refers to his younger brother not as my brother but as “your son.”²

The elder brother would not celebrate that the lost and dead son had been found and was now alive and restored to the family. He had utterly disowned his brother just as the Pharisees had done to their brother and sister Israelites that are "sinners." He showed none of the same concern and love that the father had. What is in his heart spills out to the father. ²⁹“But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders'” (v. 29). What we hear him say is that he has been slaving away all these years to try to earn what the father gives freely—his inheritance. Why has he been slaving away? This attitude was in the heart of the Pharisees hearing His words. You cannot please God by keeping a rule-based system of works! “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6). The Pharisees felt that they had earned their place in heaven by their good works, but they completely missed the grace of God. They did not need grace and kindness, they thought. We've never disobeyed your orders! You never gave me a party with my friends, was his attitude.

For those of us who have been on the Father's farm for many years, what can we learn from the elder brother?

We must be careful about “*slaving*” for the Father (v.29). The works that we do should never be a substitute for joy at being close to the Father. The elder son had created distance between himself and his father by his sins of attitude. As they sat there listening to Jesus' words, the picture of the elder son showed up the attitude of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. They lived their lives feeling like God owed them something for their detailed attention to keeping even the smallest commandment of the law. Just as it is the Father's great joy to receive the lost back to His house, so it should be our greatest joy to see slaves of sin return to the Father. We should be ever laboring to see this very thing happen to those around us and far away from us. Let us always have an attitude of celebration when one comes home.

When Jesus suddenly stopped the parable at verse 32, they were all left hanging. The big question that He left to them was, "What did the elder son do?" Did he repent and apologize to his father for being distant to him? Did he go into the feast and fully accept his brother? Each of the Pharisees listening began to see that the Father's great joy is to welcome His children to His house and celebrate together for eternity. He left it to each of them, and us, too, to finish the story. Will we return home to this gracious and compassionate God and Father?

Prayer: Father, thank You for receiving us home to Yourself with such joy and extravagant love. May we always treat others the way we have been treated. Amen.

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² William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, the Gospel of Luke*, Published by St. Andrews Press, Edinburgh, p. 206.