

42. The Parable of the Loving Father

Luke 15:11-32

Luke, A Walk Through the Life 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 Loving Father (Vv. 11-32). The context 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 *received* sinners and ate with them (v. 2). The word that came from the religious leadership 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 the Lord associated with, the sinners, prostitutes, and tax collectors. If this were the Messiah, they said, He would not keep close company with that kind of people!

Jesus taught these three Parables in Luke 15 to correct their view of the character and nature of God, i.e., what His attitude is toward the lost, needy, and broken of this world. The religious leaders in attendance were authority figures in the nation at that time. People were bound to keep their rules and regulations, but Jesus saw through their hypocrisy of saying but not doing. 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). Jesus decided to teach three stories to illustrate the Father's heart toward the lost. The first two parables of chapter 15, we have covered elsewhere in our studies in the [Gospel of Luke](#). Each parable concludes with rejoicing and celebration over the finding of the sheep and coin.

Many people call this passage the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but the parable, in my opinion, is more about the gracious father than the prodigal son.

Yes, the younger son was wastefully extravagant, but the father was even more extravagant with his grace, mercy, and acceptance of his son back from the distant country. Let's unpack the story:

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 lacks grace and tact with his choice of words. There was no discussion about his intentions regarding what he wanted to do with his inheritance, but he demanded his father to give him what he wanted. In effect, he was saying, "Give me my portion of the inheritance now, rather than when you die or retire." The father knew some of the thoughts going on in the young man's

mind and had some idea of what the young man wanted to do with his 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? Why would a father give in to such demands from a son he loved?

The young son was tired of being in his father's house. He wanted to be a man and experience the world outside 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 life 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 independently. The teenage years should be 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 their parent's care. Hopefully, a 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 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 seen his brother. How does he know his brother has been squandering his father’s property with prostitutes? The brothers had likely talked about it together, i.e., the younger one trying to get his elder brother to come with him. Those intending to sin often find it challenging 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 Emphasis mine).

The Greek word translated “enticed” means to catch fish by bait. Satan uses evil desires and thoughts 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. His situation became painful.

I met Christ in 1977, but I smoked marijuana and took drugs before that. 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. When I gave my life to Christ, I finally received the power of God to overcome and break the habit. Sin is a hard taskmaster. 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 better 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 agricultural economy, such as Judea and Samaria, things could get very desperate if one had no land or money. 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 be in need and rely on others for food. The worse thing was that he was put to work in the pigpen to feed the pigs. A pig was an animal that was not kosher to the Jews. In verse 16, the word 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 feed pigs and 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 his life had become, and he realized the madness and folly of how he had been living. 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).

Socrates 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, 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 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 knew he had no right to anything and that he must face the shame and scorn of the village as well as his elder brother. He is bankrupt of position and now ready to be his father's servant. 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 this young man was now respectful of God and eternal things and 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 to 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 must be 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 would have expected to occur for the returning son to be accepted back into his Father's house?

At this point in the story, Jesus' listeners would have been amazed at the level of shame the son brought on the father, the family, and the town in which he lived. They would have wondered at what an acceptable punishment could be when the son returned. All kinds of thoughts of just penalties would have been in the minds of the Pharisees to stop this kind of thing from

happening again, but instead of hearing the expected condemnation, Jesus' following 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).

The Pharisees thought that this father behaved shamefully. 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 the adjacent land. Wherever the young man was, we can deduce that he was several miles from home. This father is a picture of God the Father, waiting and looking for his son to turn towards home. 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, an elderly head of a family does not typically run anywhere. 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. Jesus' listeners would have thought this to be shameful behavior on the father's part. They all began to wonder where Jesus was going with this story, for no father would do such a thing. However, this father was in pain for his son while away from home.

The elderly father was so ready to forgive that he did not even give the young man a chance to speak his words. The father accepts the young son before getting 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 father's mind about the stench of the pigpen that still hangs on the young man. 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 readiness to be reconciled to those apart from His love. Finally, during sobs, the young man manages to get out part of his prepared speech. "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 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?

The father said 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 covering our pigpen of sin. The ring speaks of authority and a power of attorney. On 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).

As Christians, we are also given authority and power by our God to do the works of Christ (Matthew 28:18-20). The son was given shoes. No enslaved person 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 father also told the servants to kill the calf fattened for this day. This father was 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 Pharisees heard that the older brother was 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 did not send anyone out to the field to say to tell the elder brother that a party was underway. He knew he did not care 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 his bad attitude hindered him from having an intimate relationship with his father.

When the father went looking for the younger son, the elder brother didn't care. We can almost hear him 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.

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

At this point in the story, the Pharisees perhaps began to see themselves in the story and that the elder son was also separated from his father because of his bad attitude. At the beginning of the chapter of the three parables, the Pharisees were reminded of their own words when they said, **"This man receives sinners and tax-collectors"** (Luke 15:2). These three parables are about the inner attitude of hatred towards those loved by God and His amazing grace toward sinners and tax collectors, as well as Pharisees apart from God. The elder brother's attitude shows that his obedience to his father had been years of grim duty and not of loving service. His attitude was one of utter lack of sympathy, referring to his younger brother not as my brother but as "your son."¹

The elder brother would not celebrate that the lost and dead son was found and restored to the family. He showed none of the same concern and love that the father had. What was in his heart spills out. ²⁹**"But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders'"** (v. 29). We hear him say 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? One 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 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, but you never gave me a party with my friends, was the elder brother attitude.

Question 7) For those of us who have been on the Father's farm for many years, what can we learn from the elder brother's story?

We must be careful about *"slaving"* for the Father (v. 29). The works we do should never be a substitute for joy at being close to the Father. The elder son created distance between himself and his father by his sins of attitude. As the Pharisees sat there listening to Jesus' words, the picture of the elder son showed up their ungodly attitude. They lived their lives feeling like God owed them something for their detailed attention to keeping even the most minor commandment of the

¹William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, the Gospel of Luke*, Published by St. Andrews Press, Edinburgh, p. 206.

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 God. Let us always have an attitude of celebration when one comes home.

When Jesus stopped the parable in verse 32, they were all left hanging. The big question He left with them was, "What did the elder son do?" Did he repent and apologize to his father for being distant? Did he go into the feast and fully accept his brother? Each Pharisee 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 you have treated us. Amen.

Keith Thomas

Website: www.groupbiblestudy.com

Email: keiththomas@groupbiblestudy.com