

The Prodigal Son Luke 15:1–2 and 11–32

I. Introduction

- A. *The parable of the prodigal son is perhaps the best known and most popular of all the parables in the Bible.*
1. George Murray called it “the most divinely tender and most humanly touching story ever told on our earth.”
 2. Barclay called it the “greatest short story in the world.”
 3. Lenski said that it “has no equal in all literature.”
 4. Shakespeare alluded more often to this parable than to any other.
 5. “Let it be read without any comment or explanation and it conquers us.”
... “It has the power to untangle our raveled lives.”
- B. *Luke 15, where that parable is found, has been called the most priceless chapter in the Bible.*
1. In Luke 19:10, Jesus said that he had come “to seek and to save that which was lost.”
 2. Nowhere is that mission better illustrated than with the parables of the lost and found here in Luke 15.

II. Let’s begin our study by reading the opening verses of this parable.

- A. *Read Luke 15:1-2 and 15:11-20a.*
1. Luke 15:1 Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. 2 And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.
 2. Luke 15:11 And he said, A certain man had two sons: 12 And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. 13 And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. 14 And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. 15 And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. 17 And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, 19 And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. 20a And he arose, and came to his father.

B. Verse 11 introduces us at once to the three main characters in this parable – a certain man had two sons. Let's look first at the younger of the two sons.

C. *What were the sins of the younger son?*

1. As with most sin, his problems began with an expression of self will.
 - a) In verse 12, the younger son says "Father, give me." He wanted his inheritance early. He was in effect telling his father that he wished he were already dead. He was telling him, "I want your money, but I don't want you."
 - b) The far country to which he traveled has been called that land where God is not. And selfishness is the root cause of every trip to that far country, and this younger son's trip was no exception.
 - c) Selfishness also leads ultimately to separation, and again this younger son was no exception. "When you separate a selfish man from a Godly parent, a life of sin will always result."
2. But the younger son had another problem – he was impatient.
 - a) He didn't just want his inheritance; he wanted it now. He didn't just want to travel to the far country someday; he wanted to go there now.
 - b) This parable presents a stark contrast between the impatience of the younger son and the patience of his father.
 - c) We don't often think of impatience as a great sin – or perhaps even as a sin at all – but the Bible has much to say on the subject of patience.
 - d) The idea of patience as a virtue has virtually disappeared in our society. We moderns are, as a whole, not a long-suffering people.
 - e) As one social critic noted, "patience is something you admire in the driver behind you, but not in the one ahead."
 - f) Yet patience is a fruit of the spirit, and thus, as Christians, it must be evident in our lives. When this younger son saw his father, all he saw was somebody in his way. If we ever begin to see people that way, then we have a problem with patience.
 - g) Hebrews 12:1 tells us that we must all run with patience the race that is set before us.
 - (1) Did you ever consider the paradox in that verse? That one can *run* with patience?
 - h) Paul tells us in Romans 15:5 that God is a God of patience. We as his church must be a people of patience.
3. In addition to being selfish and impatient, the younger son was guilty of wasteful extravagance, which is another very modern malady.

- a) The term “prodigal” means wasteful and recklessly extravagant, and that term certainly describes this younger son. Verse 13 says he “wasted his substance with riotous living.”
- b) The Bible does not tell us specifically what he did. We (like the older brother, as we will discover in a moment) are left only to imagine all that took place in that far country.

D. Why did this younger son leave home?

1. No doubt, he was looking for freedom! At last he could live in unfettered joy free from his father’s restraints.
2. The father knew what the end result would be, and yet the father did not force him to stay. I think there is an important lesson in the fact that the father let him go.

E. He seeks freedom but he soon finds bondage!

1. In verse 13, he wastes all of his money. In verse 14, a famine strikes the land. And in verse 15 he finds himself being ordered around by a swine owner who sends him into the field to feed pigs.
2. By verse 16 he has become so hungry that he longs to eat the same food that the pigs are eating. In the Jewish mind of that day one could sink no lower. His freedom did not last very long!
3. In a typical Jewish story of the time, the story would have ended in verse 16 with the younger son getting exactly what he deserved. And without Jesus, that is where the story would end for all of us. But Jesus did not end his story there in verse 16.

F. Finding himself in bondage, the younger son once again seeks freedom! But this time he finds it.

1. The phrase “when he came to himself” in verse 17 is profound, yet it is often skipped right over.
 - a) Lenski says that this one phrase is the heart of the parable.
 - b) Barclay commenting on this phrase said that “Beyond a doubt, Jesus did not believe in total depravity.”
 - c) When we are alien from God we are alien from ourselves. When we are with God we are rational, right-minded, and properly balanced.
2. And what did this young son say when he came to himself? He said “I have sinned.”
 - a) That phrase occurs only three times in the New Testament, two of which are right here in this parable. It is not an easy thing to say, but it is the starting place for all repentance.
 - b) 1 John 1:9-10 “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”

- c) The younger son did not say “I made a mistake in judgment.” He did not say “I was sick.” He did not say “Look what you made me do.” He didn’t blame his parents, and he didn’t blame society. He said simply “I have sinned.”
 - d) “True repentance begins when a man complains of nobody but himself.”
3. After coming to himself and confessing his sins, this young son knew right where he had to go – he had to go home.
- a) And here we can also learn an important lesson. Perhaps the greatest gift we can give our children is the memory of a Godly home. This young son had that memory and it served as a guide for him when he finally reached rock bottom in that pig pen.
- G. *Did you ever think that this pig pen may have been the best thing that ever happened to this young son?*
- 1. It was not until he reached rock bottom that he came to himself and decided to return home.
 - 2. Perhaps the reason some of us have never returned from the far country is that we haven’t yet found ourselves in a pig pen.
 - 3. This pig pen caused a big transition in the life of this younger son between verse 12 and verse 19. In verse 12 he said “give me.” In verse 19 he said “make me.”
 - 4. As we mature as Christians, we undergo the same transition. Our prayers go from “give me” to “make me” as we pray each day that we will be changed into the image of his son.

III. The second character in this parable we need to consider is the father, who was introduced to us in verse 11 along with his two sons.

A. *Read Luke 15:20b-24.*

- 1. Luke 15:20b But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. 21 And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. 22 But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: 23 And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: 24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.
- B. Verse 20 is one of the most beautiful verses in the Bible. It tells us that the father ran.
- 1. James 4:8 tells us that if we draw near to God, he will draw near to us. Luke 15:20 tells us that he will *run* to us!

2. There was no reproof. There was no heaping on of guilt. There was no quarantine or probationary period. The father ran to meet him.
 3. And, even while the father stayed home, he was deeply concerned about the welfare of his younger son. Verse 20 tells us that he was looking in the direction from which his son would be expected to return, and he saw him even while he was still a great way off.
 4. And this young son no doubt looked very different on his return than he had when he left home – and yet his Father recognized him at once even while he was still a great way off. And he ran to meet him.
- C. *We can learn much about God's love for the lost from the description of this young son's return.*
1. In verse 22, the father puts the best robe on his younger son, he puts the family signet ring on his finger, and he puts shoes on his feet. He kills the fatted calf to celebrate his return. He kisses him fervently.
 2. Why did the father do these things? Why did he put his best robe on this filthy hog slopper? He did these things for one reason – he wanted the world to know that the relationship with his son had been completely restored! They would once again enjoy the beautiful father/son relationship they had enjoyed before the son left his father for the far country.
 3. It is not uncommon for some to delay becoming a Christian because they don't think they are good enough to become a Christian quite yet. They don't want to come to God as they are. They want to wait until they have had a chance to clean themselves up and become more presentable to God, more respectable.
 4. If we leave here today with only one lesson from this parable, let it be this: No one will ever come to God other than as a filthy feeder of swine, and there is no improvement program we can ever do on our own to improve that situation.
 - a) In Matthew 9:13, Jesus said "I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." And Romans 3:23 tells us that we are all sinners.
 5. There is a song in our song books (#577 "We Bow Down") that we sing every now and then, and I cringe each time we sing it. Incredibly, the song actually pictures us coming to Jesus and placing a crown on his head. I really don't know where we ever got the idea that we played some role in crowning Jesus king, but that idea is wrong.
 - a) The only crown that men ever placed on the head of Jesus Christ was a crown of thorns. God crowned Jesus king – not us. We do not come to Jesus carrying a crown; we come before him dressed in filthy rags.
 - b) We like Paul in Romans 7:24 can only cry, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"

6. The song we should be singing is, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound – that saved a wretch like me.” That is a song that we can all sing along with this younger son, because we were all in that wretched condition prior to our salvation through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

IV. We might wish the story ended right here in verse 24 with this beautiful picture of forgiveness and reconciliation. But there is a third character we need to consider.

A. *This final section of the parable is the climax of the story, and to really appreciate its importance we need to consider the context in which this parable was told. Why did Jesus tell this parable?*

1. Verse 2 tells us that Jesus told this parable in response to complaints from the Pharisees and the scribes. This parable was directed primarily to them.
2. When we think of a Pharisee, we think of a self-righteous hypocrite. We think of the type of person that Mark Twain once called “a solemn, unsmiling, sanctimonious old iceberg who looked like he was waiting for a vacancy in the Trinity.” Today, “Pharisee” is a term of derision.
3. But that was not the case in the first century. When this parable was told, Pharisees were respected and revered community leaders. They were thought to be the people who were most pleasing to God and most blessed by God.
4. It was shocking to think that the Pharisees might not be right with God! If these respected and revered community leaders were in trouble, then who could possibly be pleasing to God?
 - a) Yet Jesus saw the Pharisees for what they really were – whitewashed tombs full of dead men’s bones.
 - b) As we study this final section of the parable we need to remember that Jesus told this parable in response to something that the Pharisees had said. This parable was directed first to them.

B. *Read Luke 15:25-32.*

1. Luke 15:25 Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. 26 And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. 27 And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. 28 And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him. 29 And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: 30 But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. 31 And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. 32 It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.

- C. One commentator writing in the 1800's complained that, to the people of his day, "the home-staying son was merely a picturesque figure introduced to fill the background of the parable agreeably."
1. Why do we so often ignore the older brother? Why do we see him as just a secondary character? An afterthought?
 2. I think we may ignore the older brother because we think the sins of the younger son were so much worse.
 - a) The younger son wallowed in sins of the flesh, and worse yet (at least for a modern reader) he failed to invest his money wisely!
 - b) In contrast, the older brother was just a little grumpy – and perhaps (we might feel) even understandably so.
 - c) Thus we may focus on the younger son because we think that the younger son's sin is much worse than that of his older brother.
 - d) But was that the message that Jesus was trying to tell the Pharisees – that they weren't really all that bad? Hardly!
 3. Of course, Jesus never condoned any sins or minimized any sins. His command to all was to go and sin no more. Indeed, he paid the ultimate price for our sins. No one understands better than Jesus just how horrible sin is – all sin. No one has suffered more from sin than Jesus Christ.
 - a) But, Jesus repeatedly met sins of the flesh with mercy while he met sins of the spirit with withering denunciation.
 - b) One commentator has said that "Our lord was so compassionate with those swept by the sins of passion, but oh, what withering wrath, what white-hot words he had for those whose sin was a willfully wrong disposition, a spiritual pretense, a subtle hypocrisy, an assertion of pride in one of its ugly forms."
 4. What am I saying?
 - a) I am saying that if we focus on the younger brother's sins of the flesh and dismiss the sins of the elder brother as mere character flaws then we are missing the whole point of what Jesus was teaching.
 - b) The primary point of this parable is not to keep us from being like the younger brother. The primary point of this parable is to keep us from being like the older brother.
 5. We must see sin as Jesus saw sin.
 - a) Perhaps when we do we will discover that those sins we have treated lightly in our own lives are the very ones that grieve Jesus the most.
- D. *So what type of person was this elder brother?*
1. He did have some good points.
 - a) He was responsible. While his younger brother was out squandering the family fortune, his older brother was in the field working. (verse 25)

- b) The world, no doubt, thought the father was very fortunate to have such a good son – particularly considering his worthless brother.
 - c) This elder son (like the Pharisees) had some good points, but (again, like the Pharisees) his good points were far outweighed by his bad points. What were the sins of the elder brother?
2. First, he was bitter.
- a) His obedience was grim duty, not loving service. In verse 28, he was angry while his father was happy.
 - b) He was not moved by the fact that a great weight had been lifted from his father’s heart. He thought only of himself, and looked on the whole scene with jealous eyes and bitterness in his heart.
 - c) Notice in verse 12 that the elder brother received his inheritance when his younger brother received his. In fact, under Jewish law, the eldest son received a double portion. He had nothing to lose by his brother’s return, and yet he was bitter.
3. Second, he was self satisfied and self righteous.
- a) This elder brother thought there was nothing wrong with himself; the problem was with his brother and his father.
 - b) In verse 29, he tells his father that he had never disobeyed one of his commands. And the Pharisees thought the same thing about God.
 - c) There was even one group of Pharisees who actually kept track of all that they did for God so they would know exactly how much God owed them!
4. Third, he was self centered.
- a) In verse 29 he tells his father he had for many years been slaving for him, and yet he had really been slaving for himself. The words “I”, “me”, and “my” occur 5 times in verse 29.
 - b) This older brother was the center of his own universe and everyone revolved around him.
5. Fourth, he was filled with self-pity.
- a) Look at verse 30. Could any son have had a worse brother or a worse father?
6. Fifth, he was loveless.
- a) Perhaps the elder brother is the reason the younger brother left in the first place. Many a Christian has been driven back to the far country by the lovelessness of an elder brother.
 - b) After all, what did this older brother do when his younger brother left home? Do you think he was upset? Or did he perhaps just say “Good riddance!”
 - c) Did you ever wonder how this story would have ended had the elder brother been the first to see his brother coming down that road?

7. Sixth, he thought the worst and was envious of sinners.
 - a) We generally think of the younger son as wasting his inheritance on harlots, but there is no mention of harlots until the older brother brings up the subject in verse 30. How did he know what his younger brother had been doing?
 - b) Did he perhaps envy his brother because of all the so-called “fun” he had while in the far country? Perhaps in verse 30 the elder son was telling us what he would have done had he run off to that far country.
 - c) One commentator was very blunt on this point: “There are, I believe, many men and women who have sinned deeply, and brought upon themselves shame and misery, who are not really as corrupt as others who live in the inward indulgence of the worst desires and passions from the actual gratification of which they are held back only through cowardice.”
 8. Seventh, he was ungrateful.
 - a) In verse 31 the father reminds him of what he had:
 - (1) He had privilege: He was a “son.”
 - (2) He had position: He was “always with me.”
 - (3) He had possession: “All that is mine is yours.”
 - b) And yet he was not grateful for those blessings.
 9. So, he was bitter, he was self satisfied and self righteous, he was self centered, he was filled with self-pity, he was loveless, he thought the worst and was envious of sinners, and he was ungrateful. Are these just minor character flaws? Hardly!
 - a) I think we have before us one of the worst characters presented in the Bible – and I think that is just how Jesus wanted us (and the Pharisees) to see this elder brother.
 10. In Luke 15, we have not one, but two prodigal sons.
 - a) One left for the far country while one stayed at home.
 - b) One became an alien through sins of the flesh while the other became an alien through sins of spirit.
 - c) One found himself eating the husks of worldliness while the other ate the rancid food of a sour and sullen mind.
 - d) One shows us what outward sins do to our lives, while the other shows us what inward sins do to our hearts.
 11. Note how the father’s love had opposite effects on his two sons. It melted the heart of one, while it hardened the heart of the other. The father could not reach the son with the full life, but he readily got through to the son with the empty life.
- E. Was there a happy ending? Did the elder brother repent? We are not told, but we know the door was left open for his return.*

1. In fact, in verse 28 we once again find the father going out to meet one of his sons. But instead of running to meet a returning son, the father in verse 28 goes out to meet his stubborn elder son who is angrily sulking alone outside the house.
2. The father's statement to his elder son in verses 31-32 is one of the most beautiful statements in the Bible.
 - a) Luke 15:31-32 "And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. 32 It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found."

V. This parable has been called "the gospel in the gospels" and "the heart of the gospel."

1. But where in this beautiful picture of repentance and forgiveness do we find Jesus? How can this parable be the heart of the gospel without Jesus playing a role?
2. Jesus does play a role in this parable, but we have to look closely to discover it.
 - a) Isaiah 9:6 gives us a hint about where to look. In that verse, we find that one title for the Messiah is "the everlasting Father."
 - b) I think that the Father in this parable does not represent God the Father, but instead represents Jesus the Messiah.
3. To see why, we must see the story through the eyes of Middle Eastern peasants.
 - a) These events would not have occurred in a vacuum. The entire village would have known that the younger son had left home with his inheritance and was now returning home with nothing.
 - b) As the young son walked home dirty, penniless, and in disgrace, the villagers would have heaped scorn and ridicule upon him, if only to preserve the father's honor and show their own disapproval of the son's behavior.
 - c) And yet what does the father do? He runs to meet the younger son to spare him that long, shameful walk home. Given the normal garb, the father would have had to pull up the skirt of his robe to run, which would have been very undignified for one in his position, and yet he races down that road like a teenager to welcome his son home.
 - d) And how do you suppose the villagers would have reacted to that scene?
 - (1) They would have heaped their ridicule on the father as he ran to meet his errant son. What a fool! Running to meet and welcome home a worthless son like that! By leaving his home and running down that road, the father was taking on himself the scorn and ridicule that otherwise would have fallen on his son.

(2) The father intentionally leaves the comfort and security of his home and takes upon himself the shame and humiliation that was due to the prodigal.

e) So where is Jesus in this story? Listen as Paul tells us:

(1) Philippians 2:5-8 Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:
⁶ Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: ⁷ But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: ⁸ And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

(2) 2 Corinthians 5:21 For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

f) In this one parable, we see the incarnation of Christ, we see the sacrificial, atoning death of Christ, and we see the gospel of Christ.

B. We found Jesus in this parable, but the question today is have you found yourself in this parable?

1. Are you a younger son who has lost fellowship with the father through sins of the flesh? Or perhaps are you an elder brother who has lost fellowship with the father through sins of the spirit? Or perhaps you are not a son at all because you have never obeyed the gospel?
2. The good news is that if you come today God will run to meet you. But you must make a decision. You must act.
 - a) The younger son's relation with his father was not restored until after verse 18, where he said "I will arise, I will go, and I will say." He acted, he made a decision, and so must you.
3. And what must you do? That same question was asked in Acts 2:37 on the day when the very first gospel sermon was ever preached – and the answer in Acts 2:38 has not changed in the intervening years. You must repent and be baptized for the remission of your sins. That was the gospel message on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, and that is the gospel message today.
4. "The fatted calf, the shoes, the robe, the ring; All for me, unworthy son. But sweeter to me, the most wonderful thing, God ran to meet me. I saw God run!"
5. Do you want to see God run? Then walk down this aisle and come right now while we stand and while we sing.