

The Parables of Jesus, Teacher's Guide

Week 5: The Prodigal Son

Luke 15:11–32

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This beloved parable is doctrinally rich, and it is one of the weeks where careful handling matters most. At its center stand two great truths: the nature of genuine repentance, pictured in a son who comes to himself, owns his sin, abandons his rights, and returns; and the heart of God toward the penitent, pictured in a father who watches the road, runs to meet his returning child, and restores him fully and joyfully. Around these stands a sharp warning in the older brother, a portrait of religious people who keep the rules yet harbor cold, resentful, grace-resisting hearts. Jesus aimed this story at exactly such people, and we must not miss that he is as much in danger as his brother.

Here is the place to be especially careful, because the parable is often misused. It is a window into the Father's welcoming heart, not a complete blueprint of the plan of salvation, and it should never be flattened into the idea that a sinner is saved simply by a private moment of decision or a "sinner's prayer." When teaching how repentance leads to salvation for someone outside of Christ, fill out what the parable assumes rather than spells out: the New Testament response to the gospel is hearing, believing in Jesus as Lord, repenting, confessing Him, and being baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of sins, followed by faithful living (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27). For a Christian who has wandered into a far country, as this son so vividly has, the way home is genuine repentance, prayer, and confession, and the restoration of fellowship with the Father (Acts 8:22; 1 John 1:9). Keep both pictures clear and do not blur them.

Then aim the lesson at the heart. The goal is not merely that students understand repentance and grace as concepts, but that the wanderers among them get up and start walking home, and that the older brothers among them come in from the field and let the Father's grace soften their resentment. Keep the Father running down the road in front of the class the entire hour, because it is the sight of that welcome, more than any warning, that draws sinners home.

Question 1

Student Question:

The younger son asks for his inheritance while his father still lives, then takes the gifts and leaves the giver behind (vv. 12–13). What does this reveal about the true nature of sin, and how does wanting God's blessings without wanting God Himself lie at the root of so much human rebellion?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the audacity of the younger son's request, because it exposes the nature of sin. To ask for one's inheritance while the father lives was to treat the father as already dead, to say, "I want what you can give me, but I do not want you." That is the essence of sin: not merely breaking rules, but wanting God's gifts, life, freedom, pleasure, provision, while pushing God Himself away.

Help students see how relational sin is. We often picture sin as a list of forbidden acts, and it includes those, but at root it is a turning away from the Father, a grasping of His good gifts while rejecting His person and His authority. The son did not hate the estate; he loved it. What he rejected was the father.

Note the father's painful permission. He lets the son go. God made us free, and that freedom includes the terrible possibility of walking away into a far country. Love does not coerce. This is part of why sin is so serious: it is the abuse of a freedom given by a Father who would not force us to stay.

Apply it widely. Even religious people can commit the younger son's sin in subtle ways, valuing what God provides over God Himself. The question invites students to recognize that wanting the gifts without the Giver is a temptation common to wanderers and stay-at-homes alike.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sin as turning from the Father, not merely breaking rules
- Wanting God's gifts while rejecting God Himself
- Human freedom and the terrible possibility of walking away
- The relational, personal nature of rebellion against God

Discussion Prompts

- How does the son's request reveal what sin is really about?
- In what subtle ways can we want God's blessings without wanting God?
- Why does the father allow the son to leave, and what does that tell us about love?

Question 2

Student Question:

Before his money ran out, the younger son surely thought of himself as finally free. Where in your own life have you been tempted to treat God as a source of blessings rather than as the Father you love, wanting His gifts more than His presence? Be honest about where you may be drifting from Him even now.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This first self-examining question turns the younger son's heart toward the student. The danger it probes is treating God as a vending machine of blessings rather than as a Father to be loved. This is a respectable, churchgoing version of the prodigal's sin: staying near the estate while loving the gifts more than the Giver.

Help students notice the symptoms. We drift toward gift-love rather than God-love when our prayers are mostly requests, when our devotion rises and falls with our circumstances, when we are content as long as life is comfortable and distant from God the moment it is not. The far country is not always a place; sometimes it is an attitude carried even into the pew.

Invite honest reflection on present drift. The question is not only about dramatic rebellion but about quiet wandering. Where is the student's heart edging away from the Father even now? Naming it gently, before it becomes a far country, is part of the wisdom this parable teaches.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Loving God's gifts more than God Himself
- Treating God as a means to blessing rather than as Father
- Recognizing quiet, early drift before it becomes a far country
- Devotion that depends on circumstances as a warning sign

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to want God's gifts more than God's presence?
- What are the early signs that your heart is drifting from the Father?
- How can naming a small drift now keep it from becoming a far country?

Question 3

Student Question:

Luke says the son "came to himself" and resolved to return, confessing, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you" (vv. 17–19). What does this scene teach us about the nature of genuine repentance, and how is it far more than feeling sorry that things turned out badly?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question defines genuine repentance, the hinge of the parable. Luke's phrase "he came to himself" pictures a man waking up, seeing his situation truthfully for the first time. Repentance begins with that honest sight: not vague regret, but a clear recognition of one's sin and condition before God.

Trace the elements in the son's resolve. He acknowledges sin specifically: "I have sinned against heaven and before you." He abandons his rights and pretensions: "I am no longer worthy to be called your son." And, crucially, he acts: "I will arise and go to my father." Biblical repentance is

a change of mind that produces a change of direction. It is not finished in the feeling; it is completed in the turning and the going.

Distinguish godly grief from worldly grief, as Paul does in 2 Corinthians 7:9–11. Worldly grief is sorrow that things went badly, that we got caught, that the money ran out; it produces nothing but misery. Godly grief grieves the sin itself and produces repentance, a real return. The prodigal could have been merely sorry he was hungry; instead he was sorry he had sinned, and he went home.

Apply it carefully. Many people mistake remorse for repentance and wonder why nothing changes. Help students see that true repentance always has feet; it gets up and walks back to the Father. Feeling bad in the pigpen is not repentance until it becomes the road home.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Repentance as honest recognition of sin (“coming to oneself”)
- True repentance as a change of mind that produces a change of direction
- Godly grief versus worldly grief (2 Corinthians 7:9–11)
- Confession that owns specific sin and abandons self-justification
- Repentance completed in the turning, not merely felt in remorse

Discussion Prompts

- What are the marks of genuine repentance in the son’s resolve?
- How is godly grief different from simply being sorry things went badly?
- Why is remorse without a change of direction not yet repentance?

Question 4

Student Question:

“Coming to yourself” means seeing your situation honestly, as it really is before God. If you were to look honestly at your walk with Christ today, where might God be inviting you to “come to yourself,” to stop pretending and admit that something needs to change and turn around?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question invites the student to “come to himself” in some real area of life. The exercise is honest seeing. Most of us maintain a flattering self-image and avoid looking squarely at the places we have wandered. Repentance cannot begin until we stop pretending.

Help students locate the far country, which is often quiet rather than dramatic. It may be a neglected prayer life, a cherished resentment, a compromise with the world, a habit hidden from others, a relationship pulling them from Christ. The point is to name one place honestly and to recognize the Father watching the road.

Then gently address what keeps us from walking home: shame, pride, the fear that we have gone too far, the dread of being seen. The parable answers all of these with a father who runs. Encourage students that the only wrong response to seeing clearly is to keep sitting in the pigpen. Coming to ourselves is meant to get us up and moving.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest self-examination as the start of returning
- Identifying the quiet far country in an ordinary life
- Naming the obstacles to returning: shame, pride, fear
- The Father's welcome as the answer to our reluctance to come home

Discussion Prompts

- Where might God be inviting you to come to yourself and see clearly?
- What far country, dramatic or quiet, has your heart wandered into?
- What has kept you from getting up and walking home?

Question 5

Student Question:

While the son was still far off, the father saw him, felt compassion, ran to him, embraced him, and restored him fully with the robe, the ring, and the sandals (vv. 20–24). What does the father's response teach us about the heart of God toward returning sinners, and about how eagerly and how completely He welcomes those who repent?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question opens the glory of the parable: the father's welcome. Walk through the details, because each one preaches. He saw the son "while he was still a long way off," which means he had been watching the road, day after day. He "felt compassion" before a word of confession was spoken. He "ran," which a dignified elder man simply did not do, hiking up his robes and racing toward a boy who still reeked of the pigpen. This is the heart of God toward the penitent.

Then note the completeness of the restoration. The son had rehearsed a speech asking to be made a hired servant, but the father will not hear of it. The robe marks honor, the ring marks authority and belonging in the family, the sandals mark a son rather than a barefoot slave. The father does not restore the boy to probation; he restores him fully as a son. God's forgiveness is not a grudging second-class readmission but a complete welcome home.

Correct the picture of a reluctant God. Many imagine God as the offended party who must be talked into taking us back. Jesus paints the opposite: a Father straining toward us, eager to forgive, running to close the distance we created. The initiative and the eagerness are all on the father's side.

Apply it to the gospel. This is the God who so loved the world that He gave His Son, who is patient toward us, not wishing any to perish but all to reach repentance (2 Peter 3:9). The sight of the running father is meant to demolish every excuse that says we are too far gone to return.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's eager, compassionate welcome of the penitent (Luke 15:20)
- Grace that runs to meet us before we have proven ourselves
- Full restoration to sonship (robe, ring, sandals), not mere probation
- Correcting the image of a reluctant, arms-folded God (2 Peter 3:9)
- God's initiative in salvation, straining toward the returning sinner

Discussion Prompts

- What does each detail, the watching, the running, the robe, the ring, teach about God?
- How does full restoration to sonship differ from a grudging second chance?
- How does this scene confront the idea that anyone could be too far gone to return?

Question 6

Student Question:

Many of us secretly imagine God as reluctant to take us back, arms folded, waiting to see if we are sincere enough. As you picture the father running down the road, do you actually believe God receives returning sinners like that? What in your view of God most needs to be reshaped by this scene?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question targets a distorted picture of God that quietly cripples many believers: the image of a reluctant, grudging Father who must be persuaded to take us back. The parable was designed to shatter that image, and the question asks whether it actually has.

Help students notice where their functional view of God differs from the running father. Some pray as though they must grovel sufficiently before God will relent. Some avoid returning after a fall because they assume a cold reception. Such hearts have absorbed a false picture, perhaps from a harsh upbringing or from religion experienced as mere rule-keeping.

Invite reshaping. Ask students to hold their truest image of God up against the father racing down the road and to let the parable correct it. This is not sentimentality; it is theology. God really is like this toward the penitent, and believing it changes everything about how readily we return when we fall.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Confronting a distorted image of a reluctant or grudging God

- How a false view of God hinders our return after sin
- Letting Scripture reshape our functional picture of the Father
- Confidence to return quickly, grounded in God's welcoming heart

Discussion Prompts

- Do you actually picture God receiving you the way the father received the son?
- Where did your truest image of God come from?
- What in your view of God most needs to be reshaped by this scene?

Question 7

Student Question:

The father throws a feast, explaining, "this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (v. 24), echoing the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (vv. 7, 10). What does this teach us about the value God places on a lost person being found, and about the kind of joy that ought to mark the Lord's church when someone comes home?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question draws out the theme that unites all three parables in Luke 15: joy over the lost being found. The father throws a feast and declares, "this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." Twice earlier Jesus has said that there is joy in heaven, joy before the angels of God, over one sinner who repents. Heaven measures worth very differently than we do.

Teach the value God places on a single lost person. The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine for the one; the woman turns the house upside down for one coin; the father runs for one son. This is meant to confront the grumbling Pharisees, and us, with how precious to God are the very people religious folk are tempted to write off.

Then bring it to the church. If heaven throws a party over one repentant sinner, what should mark the Lord's church when someone comes home? Joy, welcome, celebration, not suspicion or cold scrutiny. A congregation that has caught the Father's heart rejoices over returning wanderers and new converts rather than eyeing them warily.

Apply it to the students' own attitudes. Do we genuinely rejoice when an unlikely person turns to Christ, or does some older-brother reflex stir? The parable presses us to share heaven's joy.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Heaven's joy over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:7, 10, 24)
- The immense value God places on each lost person
- Seeking the lost as the heart of God reflected in His church

- Joyful welcome rather than suspicion toward returning wanderers and new believers

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Jesus emphasize joy in all three parables of Luke 15?
- What does the value God places on one lost person say to how we view people?
- How should the church respond when someone comes home, and how do we sometimes fail?

Question 8

Student Question:

The older brother kept all the rules yet grew resentful, cold toward his father, and unable to rejoice when his brother returned (vv. 25–30). Examine your own heart honestly: where do you see the older brother in yourself, serving out of duty rather than love, or quietly resenting the grace God shows to people you think deserve it less?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question turns the spotlight onto the older brother, and it is essential not to rush past him, since he is the character Jesus aimed at his original audience. The older son kept all the rules, stayed home, worked hard, and yet his heart was cold. When grace was shown to his brother, his true condition surfaced: resentment, self-righteousness, and a relationship with his father based on duty rather than love.

Help students recognize the older brother in themselves, because long-time church members are especially prone to him. The signs include serving God out of grim obligation, keeping a mental record of our own faithfulness, comparing ourselves favorably to others, and feeling quietly indignant when grace is lavished on those we judge less deserving. The older brother never left home, yet he too was estranged from his father, just on the respectable side of the property line.

Note the father's tenderness even here. He comes out and pleads with the older son just as he ran to the younger. Grace pursues the resentful as well as the reckless. But the parable ends without telling us whether the older brother went in, an open question left hanging over the grumbling Pharisees, and over us.

Invite honest self-examination. Which son are you, really? Many who would never run to a far country need to be warned that they can be lost in the field of dutiful religion, near the house but far from the father's heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The older brother as a portrait of self-righteous, dutiful religion
- Serving God from obligation rather than love

- Resentment of the grace God shows to others
- The danger of being near the house yet far from the Father's heart
- Grace that pursues the resentful as well as the reckless

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you recognize the older brother in your own heart?
- What are the signs of serving God out of duty rather than love?
- Why is it possible to keep all the rules and still be estranged from the Father?

Question 9

Student Question:

This parable beautifully pictures repentance and restoration, but it shows us the Father's welcoming heart rather than laying out the whole plan of salvation. For someone outside of Christ, how does the New Testament fill out what genuine repentance leads to, namely hearing the gospel, believing in Jesus, repenting, confessing Him, and being baptized into Christ (Acts 2:36–38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27)? And for a Christian who has wandered like this son, how does Scripture describe the way home through genuine repentance, confession, and prayer (Acts 8:22; 1 John 1:9)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinally weightiest question, and it must be handled with both clarity and care, because the prodigal son is one of the most misused parables in popular preaching. Begin by stating plainly what kind of story this is. It is a parable revealing the Father's heart toward repentant sinners and the contrast between the penitent and the self-righteous. It is not a step-by-step manual of how a person is saved, and it was never meant to be read as one.

Guard explicitly against the common error. Many treat the son's return as proof that a sinner is saved simply by a private moment of decision, a "sinner's prayer" prayed in the heart. The parable says nothing of the kind. The son does not pray a prayer to be saved; he gets up and physically returns to his father. To build a doctrine of conversion out of the silences of a parable is to misuse it. We should let the clear teaching passages of the New Testament tell us how repentance leads to salvation, and read the parable in their light.

So fill out the picture for someone outside of Christ. The New Testament consistently presents the gospel response as hearing the word, believing in Jesus as Lord and Christ, repenting of sin, confessing Him, and being baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of sins, after which one lives faithfully as a disciple (Acts 2:36–38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27; Mark 16:16). Repentance, the very thing the prodigal so beautifully pictures, is an essential part of that response, but it is not the whole of it, and it is not a substitute for it. The parable shows us the turning heart; the rest of Scripture shows us where that turning leads.

Then address the other picture in the parable, which fits the prodigal most directly. This son is a son who left and returned, a vivid image of a child of God who wanders into sin and comes home. For the erring Christian, Scripture describes the way back not as being saved all over again from scratch, but as genuine repentance, prayer, and confession, and the restoration of fellowship with the Father who forgives (Acts 8:22; 1 John 1:9; James 5:16). The same God who runs to meet the alien sinner runs to meet His straying child.

Land the lesson on both truth and grace. Help students hold together the warm welcome of the Father and the clear pattern of the New Testament. We do not pit the running father against the words of Peter at Pentecost; the one reveals the heart behind the other. The Father longs to receive every returning sinner, and He has told us, plainly, how to come home.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The parable as a revelation of the Father's heart, not a complete plan of salvation
- A clear rejection of the "sinner's prayer" as the means of salvation; the son returns, he does not pray a saving prayer
- The New Testament plan of salvation: hearing, faith, repentance, confession, baptism into Christ, faithful living (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27; Mark 16:16)
- Repentance as an essential part of the gospel response, not the whole of it
- Restoration of the erring Christian through repentance, prayer, and confession (Acts 8:22; 1 John 1:9)
- Reading parables in the light of the New Testament's clear teaching passages

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it a mistake to read the son's return as a "sinner's prayer" that saves?
- How does the New Testament fill out what genuine repentance leads to for someone outside Christ?
- How does Scripture describe the way home for a Christian who has wandered like this son?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the parable. The Father is still watching the road, for the wayward and for the resentful alike. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through this story. Whether you most need to come home from a far country or to come in from the field where the older brother stands, what is the one step you will take this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone gathers up the whole parable and presses it toward a single step home. The genius of Jesus' ending is that he leaves two sons standing in two places, the younger restored at the

feast and the older still outside in the field, and he asks every listener which one they are. Keep the class on that personal question.

Help students take the appropriate step. For the wanderer, the step is to get up and come home, to repent and, depending on their relationship to Christ, either obey the gospel or be restored to faithful fellowship. For the older brother, the step is to come in from the field, to let go of resentment and self-righteousness and rejoice in the Father's grace. Both steps are real, and both can begin this week.

Close by reminding students that the goal of this study is formation, not information. We are not here merely to admire a moving story; we are here to respond to a Father who is watching the road for us. Invite each person to name their one step, and let the group pray, with special tenderness for any who need to come home and any who need their resentment melted by grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Scripture aimed at a real return, not mere admiration of the story
- The wanderer's step home: repentance and obedient or restored faith
- The older brother's step: releasing resentment to share the Father's joy
- The Father watching the road for the reckless and the resentful alike

Discussion Prompts

- Which son do you most recognize as yourself right now?
- What is the one step home, or in from the field, that you will take this week?
- How can this group support and pray for you in taking it?