

The Parables of Jesus

Week 5: The Prodigal Son -- Luke 15:11–32

The Pharisees are grumbling again. Tax collectors and sinners keep crowding in to hear Jesus, and He keeps welcoming them, even eating with them, and the religious experts cannot stand it. So Jesus tells them three stories in a row, all about something lost and the joy of finding it: a lost sheep, a lost coin, and finally a lost son. The third story is the longest and the most piercing, and it is really a story about two sons and the father who loves them both. It begins with a request that would have made the original audience gasp. The younger son comes to his father and says, in effect, “Give me my share of the estate now.” He is asking for his inheritance while his father is still alive, which is as good as saying, “I wish you were dead. I want your things, not you.”

And the father, astonishingly, lets him go. The boy gathers everything, travels to a far country, and there he squanders it all in reckless living. Then the money runs out, and a famine sets in, and the young man who once had everything ends up in a pigpen, feeding hogs and so hungry he eyes the pods the pigs are eating. For a Jewish listener, Jesus has lowered this boy as far as a person can go: a son of the covenant, slopping unclean animals, utterly alone, having traded his father’s house for this. He has gotten exactly what he asked for, a life without his father, and it has nearly killed him.

Then comes the turn the whole parable hangs on. Luke says, “He came to himself.” Sitting in the muck, the boy finally sees clearly. He remembers that his father’s hired servants have bread to spare while he starves, and he makes a decision. “I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.” This is no mere change of address; it is a change of heart. He owns his sin, he abandons every claim on his rights, and he turns his face toward home. And then he does the hardest thing of all. He gets up and starts walking back.

What happens next is the most beautiful scene in all the parables. “While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” The father had been watching the road. He runs, an undignified thing for an older man to do, and he throws his arms around a son who still smells of the pigpen. Before the boy can even finish his rehearsed speech, the father is calling for the best robe, a ring for his finger, sandals for his feet, and the fattened calf for a feast, “for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.” But the story does not end at the party. There is an older brother standing out in the field, and he is furious. Read this parable slowly, because somewhere in it, in the far country or out in the field, is a picture of your own heart, and a Father still watching the road.

Group Discussion: Jesus tells this story to religious people who were offended that He welcomed sinners. The parable holds up two very different sons, a reckless younger one who runs to a far country and a dutiful older one who stays home but grows cold and resentful. Why

do you think Jesus aimed this story as much at the respectable older brother as at the wayward younger one, and which of the two sons do you find easier to recognize in yourself?

Personal Reflection: The younger son “came to himself” only when he was sitting in the wreckage of a life lived apart from his father. Is there an area of your own life where you have wandered into a far country, whether dramatically or quietly, and the Father is watching the road for your return? What has kept you from getting up and walking home?

Read Luke 15:11–32

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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.
3. 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?
4. “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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?

9. 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)?
10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Luke 15:1–10, the lost sheep and the lost coin, and heaven's joy over one sinner who repents; Acts 2:36–38, Peter's answer to those cut to the heart, to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins; 2 Corinthians 7:9–11, godly grief that produces a repentance leading to salvation; Acts 8:22 and 1 John 1:9, the way of restoration for the erring through repentance, prayer, and confession; Psalm 51, David's prayer of repentance after his sin, longing to be restored to the joy of God's salvation.