

Parable #31 — Luke 15:11-32 — The Prodigal Son

¹¹ Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The 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. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “When 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! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men [skilled craftsmen].’

²⁰ So he got up and went to his 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.

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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. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So 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.’

²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But 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. ³⁰ But 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. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ ”

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1. How do you feel when others get rewards greater than they deserve?
2. Who do the three major people in the parable represent (father, older son, younger son) in Jesus' day? Who do they represent today?.
3. What share of the estate would the younger son be entitled to? (Deut 21:17) When would he receive this? By asking for his share early, what did the younger son show?
4. What are the differences and similarities between this parable and the two preceding ones? (All three were told at the same time to the same audience)
5. What causes us to show resentment when mercy is shown to someone else?
6. Who is the vilest person you know or know about? What would you do if that person said he (or she) wants to be forgiven?
7. How can you guard yourself from feeling resentful when God shows mercy to people you think don't deserve it?
8. Is there a totally undeserving person to whom you can extend God's love and forgiveness this week? How?
9. The older son was invited by the father to return to the feast. Did he?
10. What do the three parables in Luke 15 (lost sheep, lost coin, lost son) reveal about God's love?

The three parables—The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, and The Lost Sons (prodigal)—are told together by Jesus. When he tells these parables, Jesus is on his journey to Jerusalem where he knows he will be killed. He tells these parables about himself (as the good shepherd, the woman, and the father) to explain his purpose.

Luke 15: 11 – 12 The Prodigal Son

Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

It’s important to know that Jesus is talking to an audience (the Pharisees) who thought of themselves as righteous because they followed the law very carefully, and they looked down on the “sinners,” the ordinary people of the land. In the Prodigal Son, the older son represents the Pharisees and the younger son represents the “sinners.” In these three parables, Jesus is answering the Pharisees’ question about why he eats with and accepts “sinners” at a deep level.

Notice that Jesus does not dwell on why the son wanted to leave. For some reason the younger son was not happy. Maybe he felt like he couldn't be good enough because his big brother was always doing things better than him. Maybe he was tired of his father telling him what to do. Maybe he thought his father made him work too hard. Or maybe he thought that his father loved his brother more than him. The “why” of his leaving is not important to the story, but rather the way he decided to do it.

Verses 11 and 12 have a particular meaning in the Middle East. If a son were to ask for his inheritance before the father’s death, the son would be wishing his father dead. Ken Bailey lived in the Middle East and researched the culture—a culture that in some areas has not changed much since the time of Jesus. He said that in 40 years, he has never found one example of such a request.

But in this parable, Jesus is painting a picture in which we sinners wish God dead. He’s saying that we want to live our lives extravagantly with friends, not thinking of God. If we consider the son’s words, the son is careful not to use the word inheritance. In the Middle East, accepting the inheritance means accepting responsibility to carry on providing for the family. The son is not looking for responsibility but for the money and the easy road.

Middle Eastern parables are packed with emotion and to leave it out is to miss much of the rich content. Middle Easterners would anticipate that the father’s (God’s) response to the son’s request would be to explode with ANGER and refuse the request. His son is wishing him dead. He would have to sell much property because wealth was held in land, not a bank account. There would be shame because of the community’s reaction. However, the father’s (God’s) actual response is to grant this request. The father knows that punishing the son would only further alienate the son from himself. Basically, the father had two choices. He could protect himself by writing the son off no longer considering him a son and banishing him from his thoughts. But the father chooses the second way of suffering. The son had severed the relationship, and now the father can only hope for future reconciliation.

Luke 15:13-19 The Return of The Prodigal Son

“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. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “When 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! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men [skilled craftsmen].’

When the son spent all his money and a famine strikes the distant land, he is forced to work for a foreigner feeding pigs (a detestable animal to Jews.)

The son is starving. He would gladly eat the bean pods and corn husks for the pigs but he cannot digest them. He thinks of the one place that there is bread. This next point that is being developed may seem subtle, but it highlights the difference between a God who is good and a God worth dying for... The son’s reason for going home is TO EAT, not to reconcile with his father. The son is not repentant. He crafts a speech that he feels might work to get him food and to save face. The Pharisees know the scriptures well and known that the speech is a speech crafted to manipulate, not to repent. This son’s wording is taken from what the Pharaoh said to Moses after several of the plagues in Egypt. Pharaoh said anything to placate Moses to stop the plagues. (Exodus 8:8, 8:25, 9:27-28, 10:16-17)

Moreover, the son is not planning to ask to become a slave, he wants to become a craftsman so he is free, has respect, and can pay his own way.

The father (God) understands that we don’t return to him with right motives but simply want to get something—to eat, to be healed, to be financially blessed. He understands that the only things that we can offer him are the dirty rags on our back and our dirty motives. It is in this situation that the son starts his journey back to the father—literally with only dirty rags and a contrived speech.

Luke 15:20-24 The father welcomes his son

²⁰ So he got up and went to his 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. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

As the son comes closer to his home, he would likely be feeling fear and shame. He wished his father dead, left family and community, and now he has lost everything. He expects to face his

father's and brother's anger and rejection. Besides the family, the close knit community would also reject and banish him, as was the custom. Any Jew who loses his money among foreigners will face the Kezazah (literally "the cutting off"). The Kezazah would be performed by breaking a clay pot at the feet of the man as visual symbol that the community rejected him forever.

I would imagine that when the son saw his father (God) running to him at a distance, he would be struck with fear. In the Middle East, it was considered humiliating for men over age forty to run. As the father ran, he would have had to lift his robe—another humiliation. As the father drew closer, the son would see not anger—but joy. And when the father reached him, the father kissed him over and over.

After experiencing the father's visible, costly love for him, the son's manipulative speech was gone, and all he could say was that he is not worthy to be the father's son. But the father restored the son: put shoes on the son (sons, not slaves, wore shoes); put his best robe on him; and put the ring on his finger (a signet ring would give him the power to transact business).

The imagery here is that of the son returning with dirty rags and a contrived speech. But it was the father's costly outpouring of visible love that turns the son's heart toward him—perhaps for the first time. The son's work (repentance) is **SIMPLY ACCEPTING BEING FOUND**.

Told in conjunction with The Prodigal Son, The Lost Sheep provides vivid imagery of this as well. The lost sheep is lost in the wilderness. Once a sheep realizes that it is lost, it freezes, shakes, and can only bleat (cry out). For the shepherd, the act of finding and restoring the sheep often takes two or three days. The good shepherd (God) takes the responsibility to find and restore the sheep. He does this with joy. The shepherd must carry the sheep—50 to 70 lbs. for an adult sheep—because, even when the sheep hears the shepherd's voice, it cannot move because it is too scared. Here too the sheep is not able restore (repent) itself. The only thing the sheep can do is accept being found and have the shepherd restore it.

God joyfully takes the responsibility to find us and restore us. We too simply need to accept being found. Throughout the bible, grace is proclaimed. In these parables, Jesus explains why God came to us in Jesus, and why he chose to die. We, like the prodigal, want to run our lives ourselves—even if we starve. On the prodigal's return home: he didn't want to be reconciled with the father: he wanted to get food and have a job. This is true for us as well. Even when we return to him with wrong motives, God wants to restore us as his sons and daughters.

Notice that the father's suffering at the beginning of their estrangement has no effect on the prodigal son. He is not even aware of it. A demonstration of the father's suffering for him must be witnessed by the son. Without this the son in his callousness will never discover the suffering of his father and will never understand that he is its cause. Without this visible demonstration the prodigal will return to the house as a hired hand. Without this visible demonstration of costly love, there can be no reconciliation. Isn't this the story of the way of God as he deals with the sin of the world on Golgotha, where Jesus died on the cross?

How we personally define repentance in large part defines how we interact with God and others. When we feel responsible for our own repentance (like the Pharisees), there is tremendous pressure to be "good." The problem is that, when we focus on being "good", we forget the importance of the relationship with God and endlessly oscillate between self-righteousness and

guilt. We then project this thinking onto others. Yet, when we realize that God takes the responsibility (with joy) to find and restore us, we can release much of what controls us.

Luke 15:25-32 The Older Son

²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So 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.’

²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But 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. ³⁰ But 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. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ “

Throughout this parable, Jesus is defending his position of accepting the “sinners” at a profound level. As noted earlier, the father represents God, the younger brother represents the “sinners,” and the older brother represents the Pharisees.

In the beginning of the story, when the younger son asks his father for his portion, it was the custom in the Middle East for the older son to mediate between the father and the younger son. Yet the older son remains quiet. Behind his quiet response lurks anger which does not become apparent until later in the story when the father accepts the younger son back and holds a celebration. The older son would normally greet and serve the guests so they would feel important. But in this case, he refused to go into the party at all.

Earlier that day, the father demonstrated costly, humiliating love by running to the younger son. The father shows costly love once again by leaving the banquet—a humiliating act in the Middle East—to find his older son. The older son points out how he has served the father as a slave never disobeying his commandments. Yet in fact, right then the older son is refusing to greet the guests. Anger blinded him.

There is no response to the father by the older son—the end of the story is missing. As in many other parables, the last section is missing—on purpose. The last missing section is to be written by the Pharisees who have been drawn into the parable. How would the Pharisees complete this story? The father (God) would wish that the two brothers would embrace and enter with joy into the celebration. However, just like the older son, the Pharisees felt seething anger toward Jesus throughout his ministry. And ultimately their answer was to crucify Jesus. And just as The Prodigal Son talks about the father’s (God’s) costly, visible love for the younger and older son, so Jesus died in a costly, visible way so that we might see the heart of God.

Deut 21:17 - He must recognize the rights of his oldest son, the son of the wife he does not love, by giving him a double portion. He is the first son of his father’s virility, and the rights of the firstborn belong to him.