

March 5 Lesson 1 (NIV)

The Prodigal Son

Devotional Reading: Psalm 28
Background Scripture: Luke 15:11–32

Luke 15:11–24

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 servants 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 servants.’ 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.

Key Text

The son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.

—Luke 15:21

Jesus Calls Us

Unit 1: Called from the Margins of Society

Lessons 1–4

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How to Say It

Gentile/*en*-tile.

parable/*pair*-uh-buhl.

prodigal/*prod*-i-guhl.

Septuagint/*Sep*-*too*-ih-jent.

Introduction

A. Family Reunions

Did you look forward to your most recent family reunion, or did the thought of attending bring dread? For many families, these occasions are joyous as multiple generations assemble for conversation, celebration, and recollection, frequently over a cherished family meal.

However, other family situations are more complicated and painful. At best, the relationships within those families might feel cold or be difficult to tolerate. At worst, those relationships might be characterized by cruelty, mean-spiritedness, or even abuse. In such a family system, whole and harmonious relationships seem unattainable.

Shame or selfishness is often at the root of broken families. Scripture describes families who experienced conflict for these reasons (Genesis 21:1–20; 27; 37; etc.). Would Jesus’ depiction of a broken family repeat these themes? Could he use these themes to change the hearts of his audience?

B. Lesson Context

The meaning and implications of parables have been greatly debated. The Greek word translated “parable” (Matthew 15:15; Mark 4:13; Luke 8:9; etc.) is also translated as “proverb” (4:23). In the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, a form of the same Greek word is used regarding a proverb (Ezekiel 18:2) or a song of warning (Micah 2:4).

At their core, biblical parables compare something familiar—like an object or experience—to a truth about God and his work. Parables function on two levels: their literal reference and their spiritual implications. Jesus taught with parables to challenge his audience to consider what assumptions or attitudes of theirs were at odds with God’s work (compare Matthew 13:10–15).

Today’s Scripture is frequently called the parable of the prodigal son. While modern audiences sometimes use the designation “prodigal” to speak of the rebellion of the younger son, the word’s meaning is associated with reckless waste and spending.

This parable is the third in a series in Luke 15. The other parables describe a lost sheep (15:3–7) and a lost coin (15:8–10). All three parables include similar themes: (1) something valuable is lost, (2) the lost thing is found, and (3) celebration ensues.

Jesus told these parables as a response to criticism from Pharisees and teachers of the law. These groups were upset because Jesus “welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2). Throughout his ministry, Jesus associated with people whom the religious leaders considered unclean.

These people included Jewish “tax collectors” (Luke 5:30; 15:1) who collected taxes for the ruling powers. Tax collectors were hated and regarded as having betrayed their people because they assisted the Roman Empire and acted corruptly (see 3:12–13).

Another group that Jesus frequently associated with was “sinners” (Matthew 9:11; Luke 7:34; 15:2). This title applied to people who had failed to follow the Law of Moses as interpreted by the religious leaders of the day.

Jesus’ association with these people was not limited to the public gatherings. He shared meals with them before they had sought the proper means of forgiveness and restitution as prescribed by the law. His association with them was critical to his mission to seek those who are lost (see Luke 19:10) and bring repentance and salvation (5:29–31).

I. The Dishonorable Son (Luke 15:11–19)

A. Shameful Demand (vv. 11–12)

11. Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons.

The characters in Jesus’ parables were generally left unnamed (examples: Luke 14:16; 16:1; 20:9; contrast 16:20, 23). This practice hinted to the audience that he was teaching by way of a

parable and not speaking of real individuals. Jesus' introduction of *a man* and his *two sons* continues that trend. Today's lesson, however, will only focus on the interactions between the younger son and the father. The narrative of the older son (15:25–32) will not be included.

12a. "The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.'

Children traditionally did not receive their father's inheritance until the father's death (see Numbers 27:8–11). The *younger* son's request for his *share* of the inheritance was effectively saying, "*Father*, I wish you were dead."

12b. "So, he divided his property between them.

Each son would have received part of the father's property in the inheritance. Jesus does not describe the measures by which the father *divided* the inheritance. Based on the Law of Moses, the oldest son would have received a double portion (see Deuteronomy 21:15–17). Either son's portion could have included land (see Genesis 48:21–22), a house (see Proverbs 19:14), and other items of wealth (see 2 Chronicles 21:3).

The son's request implied tremendous dishonor toward the father and exhibited a rebellious attitude toward the family. The Law of Moses prescribed harsh consequences for a son who displayed stubbornness and rebellion toward his family (see Deuteronomy 21:18–21). Rather than respond according to the letter of the law, though, this father responded with mercy and grace. The father sought no retribution, despite his son's vile and dishonorable request.

B. Selfish Decisions (vv. 13–16)

13a. "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country

It was one thing for *the younger son* to demand his portion of the inheritance. However, for him to gather *all* that he had and leave the land of his family added further insult. By leaving nothing behind as he left for his journey implied that he did not intend to return. The parable does not reveal the name or location of the *distant country*. Jesus wanted to keep the focus of the parable on the attitudes and actions of the son, not identify the country to which he relocated. Not only did the son want nothing to do with his father; the son physically distanced himself through his own relocation.

13b. "and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

The son did not lose the *wealth* of his inheritance through shrewd-but-failed investments. Instead, he *squandered* it through undisciplined behavior as he "squandered [the] property with prostitutes" (Luke 15:30). The son piled shame upon shame; he brought further disgrace to his father and family name—all for gluttonous, *wild living* (compare Proverbs 28:7).

14. "After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.

Famines were frequent in biblical times, just as they are in parts of the world today. These famines would occur when crops failed because of drought (see 1 Kings 18:1–2; Jeremiah 14:1–6) or an infestation of insects (see Joel 1:2–10). Famine also resulted when fields went unharvested because of warfare (see 2 Kings 6:24–25; 25:1–3). The effect of the *severe famine*, not its cause, was most important for the teaching point of the parable.

During a famine, people relied on the generosity of their relatives, neighbors, and leaders (examples: Genesis 41:56–42:2; 45:9–11; 2 Kings 8:1–2; Ruth 1:1). But the younger son had no such social network to provide care during this crisis.

Not only did he lack social connections, but *he had spent* all his money. These resources would have sheltered him from experiencing much of the effects of the famine. His survival would depend on his savvy actions, not his wealth.

15. “So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.

The son’s desperation led him to take degrading work as the hired hand of *a citizen* of the famine-inflicted *country*. *Pigs* were considered unclean by the Law of Moses (Leviticus 11:7–8). Jesus’ Jewish audience would have considered this job to be humiliating. Because the *citizen* owned pigs, he was likely a Gentile (a non-Jew). The son’s work would remind him the extent of his abandonment of his family and their heritage.

The son suffered three levels of shame: he wasted his wealth, became a servant, and took a job feeding pigs. For Jesus’ audience, the son had received the appropriate consequences for his dishonorable acts. He had brought shame to his father and household, and now multiple levels of shame were heaped on him. The parable seemed to fulfill an ancient proverb: “The righteous eat to their hearts’ content, but the stomach of the wicked goes hungry” (Proverbs 13:25; compare 13:18).

16. “He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

Any food provided (if at all) was so unappealing that it made the food *that the pigs were eating* seem desirable. The exact nature of *the pods* is unknown, but students have proposed that they came from the pods of a carob tree. The pigs received better care than the son. He was without support or hope. The son lived up to (or down to) the designation “prodigal” (see Lesson Context).

C. Sorrowful Direction (vv. 17–19)

17a. “When he came to his senses, he said,

The son had to come to the point of desiring pig food to realize his foolishness; he had wasted the material blessings that he had received. Though he had yet to repent, the statement *he came to his senses* implied the first step of repentance. He recognized the faulty direction of his life and felt sorrow as a result (see 2 Corinthians 7:10).

17b. “ ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!

The son’s sorrow and regret were based on his firsthand knowledge of his *father’s* generosity. While the son desired pig food, he remembered that his father provided lavishly. All in the father’s house had more than enough to eat.

As a result, the son viewed his father’s generosity from the perspective of the *hired servants*. Because he had demanded his share of the inheritance, he experienced shame. But even worse than shame, he had forfeited his position as a son. If he were to receive generosity from his father, it would not be as a privileged son. Instead, he could only imagine receiving the same level of generosity that a hired worker received (compare Luke 12:35–38).

18. “ ‘I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

The son planned his way forward, based on his knowledge of his father’s generosity and his own unworthy and shameful status. The first step would be to leave the foreign land where he had squandered his wealth.

The second step involved showing repentance for the ways that he had *sinned*. Recognizing sin and confessing guilt are the first steps of repentance (see Leviticus 5:5). The son acknowledged his sin: he had rebelled against his father, thus breaking the fifth commandment (Exodus 20:12). The son’s rebellion was also directed *against* God since *heaven* is the place where God resides.

By confessing his sin, the son hoped to receive mercy from his father (see Proverbs 28:13). However, that response was not certain, given the stubborn and rebellious actions of the son (see Deuteronomy 21:18–21).

19. “ ‘I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’

The son did not expect to be restored to his former status in his father’s household. He hoped that perhaps the father would show mercy and grant him a place of service in the household, *like one of the hired servants*. In this role, the son would at least receive wages for his work (compare Matthew 20:1–15). However, working every day for his father would remind the son of his shameful acts.

II. The Compassionate Father (Luke 15:20–24)

A. Emotional Reconciliation (vv. 20–21)

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.

The statement that the son was seen while he was *still a long way off* indicates that at the very least *his father* had been scanning the horizon. Despite the disrespect that the father had endured, he hoped that his lost and prodigal son would return. That return is an act of repentance even before the son could express such repentance in words.

The father disregarded any perceived indignity as he *ran* toward his son. Physical displays of affection, such as how the father wrapped his arms around his son and *kissed* him, were not uncommon (examples: Genesis 27:26–27; 33:4; 45:14–15; 48:10). The father’s response revealed his heart of grace, mercy, and forgiveness.

Jesus intended that the father’s forgiveness reveal the *compassion* of God. When God’s people rebel, he responds with mercy (examples: Nehemiah 9:17–18; Daniel 9:9). His compassion is like that of a loving father toward his children (Psalm 103:13). But we realize at the same time that God’s mercy has limits; he will not tolerate unrepentant, unending rebellion (example: 2 Kings 22:10–17; 24:2–4).

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.’

The son remained committed to his plan of repentance and humility (see Luke 15:18–19, above). Despite the affection that he received, the son maintained his intentions to surrender his position in his father’s house and offer himself as a hired servant.

B. Gracious Celebration (vv. 22–24)

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.

The father interrupted his son’s plan with a plan of his own. The son no longer needed to suffer humiliation; he would be restored to a position of honor. Fine clothing and rings were signs of authority and power (examples: Genesis 41:41–43; Esther 3:10–12; compare and contrast James 2:2–4). By receiving *the best robe* and *a ring*, the once-shamed son again shared in his father’s wealth and authority.

23. “ ‘Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate.

Slaughtering a *fattened calf* was not a frequent occurrence in Jesus’ time. Not only would its meat need to be eaten quickly, but the animal was more than one family could consume. Neighbors would join the family to *feast* and celebrate the return of the lost son (compare Genesis 18:6–8).

The other parables in Luke 15 depict celebrations that occurred after the recovery of something lost (Luke 15:5–6, 9). These celebrations were intended to teach Jesus’ audience of heavenly celebrations that follow repentance (15:7, 10).

24. “ ‘For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So, they began to celebrate.”

The son had previously treated his father as if he were dead to him (see commentary on Luke 15:12, above). And by abandoning his family, the son had effectively become *dead* to his father. Despite the son’s previously selfish actions, he was restored and considered *alive* to the father—a reason for the father to be merry and *celebrate*.

In this parable, Jesus’ audience of tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and teachers of the law (Luke 15:1–2) heard echoes of God’s promise. To obey God leads to life, but to rebel against him leads to destruction (Deuteronomy 30:15–18). The implications are profound. For the tax collectors and sinners, the promise is one of renewed acceptance upon their repentance. For the Pharisees and teachers of the law, the promise is one of warning, a warning made more explicit in Matthew 21:28–32, another parable about two sons.

God promised to be generous and patient; celebration with joy and gladness would come when his people returned to him (see Isaiah 35:9–10). God’s people have confidence that he will show mercy and provide spiritual life, even when they are dead in their sin (see Ephesians 2:1–10).

The parable, however, does not end with the father’s display of generosity and mercy. In its second part, Jesus focused on the anger of the older brother regarding the father’s treatment of the younger brother (Luke 15:25–30). The parable’s focus on mercy and generosity can be summarized by the father’s response to the older brother: “We had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours ... was lost and is found” (15:32).

Conclusion

A. Lost and Found

Today's parable invites all people to embrace the upside-down nature of the family of God. In this family, God offers and desires reunion where broken relationships exist. We may feel shamefully unworthy, as the parable's younger son felt. However, like the parable's father, God is generous and merciful. His generosity has been displayed for centuries (see Numbers 14:8; Deuteronomy 28:11; Ephesians 3:16; James 1:5; etc.). Like a shepherd who cares for his flock, God cares for his people and provides for their needs (see Psalm 23:1; 1 Timothy 6:17). Such actions give testimony to all people of God's generosity and faithfulness (Acts 14:17).

God welcomes all people to become his beloved children in his family. He desires his people to feel hope and not shame (see Romans 5:5; 1 John 3:1). "And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming" (2:28).

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, you are loving, merciful, and kind. We rejoice that you accept us into your family and love us. Help us reveal your kindness and generosity to others. In Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Do you need to return to God?¹
