

LUKE

Part 60: “The Prodigal God”

Luke 15:11-32

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Sunday, May 12, 2019 (The Third Sunday of Easter Season & Mothers’ Day)

Scripture Reading

¹¹ And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. ¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.’” ²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’ ” ¹

Almighty and Everlasting God, we thank you for the gift of your amazing grace. May your Spirit give us eyes to behold you Fatherly love as it is revealed in your Son Jesus. AMEN.

¹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Lk 15:11–32.

Introduction

It is Mother's Day today, and I know it is not exactly thematically fitting for me to be preaching a sermon about the Father-heart of God. However, I will say that a few years ago I preached a sermon about murder on Mother's Day, so I think we are at least heading in a good direction.²

Today's passage in Luke 15 is perhaps the most famous parable of Jesus's teaching ministry. Commonly known as the parable of "The Prodigal Son," it is the last of a trilogy of parables in this chapter that are all about the astonishing truth of the grace of God.

If there were a slight difference of emphasis in this parable from the previous two, it would be that the last two parables are about grace from God's perspective. But this third parable is meant to communicate the beauty of grace as it is experienced from a human perspective.³

Exposition

The way I want to tackle this passage today is by treating as a character study of three main characters: the father and his two sons (Lk. 15:11).

1.) The Reckless Son.

The first character is identified as the younger of the two sons. He begins the drama of the parable by coming to his father and demanding that his father give his inheritance. He says, **"...Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me..."** (Lk. 15:12, **ESV**).

Now even today, to come up to an elderly parent and abruptly demand an early inheritance would often come across as a very rude and inconsiderate. But in an honor-based culture, like the ancient Near East, this was a culturally spiteful and hateful thing to do. It was like saying, *"Dad, I hate you and I wish you were dead. I want nothing to do with you, but if you could, just give me your stuff that I am entitled to so I can get on with my own life."*

So for the original listeners, this would have provoked an emotion of righteousness indignation. We are supposed to feel a sense of "how dare this son treat his father this way!"

But even more, this is how we should see sin in our own life. Sin is not just the mere breaking of rules in some ancient rulebook. Sin is ultimately rejecting God's Lordship and presence in our life. When we sin against God, we are essentially saying, "I hate you."

² For those who are curious, that sermon was preached on May 10, 2015 and dealt with the Sixth Commandment.

³ Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Luke*, International Critical Commentary (London: T&T Clark International, 1896), 371.

I want to enjoy your stuff, your gifts, and your blessings, but I want nothing to do with you.”

Sin is a personal offense against the God who created us. Sin is rejecting the ultimate source of joy for in lieu of that which will never satisfy.

The younger son immediately goes moves to a far away country. So not only has he rejected his own family, he (as presumably a Jewish man) is even rejecting living among God’s covenant people. He pursues a life of indulgence and squanders his money very quickly with “reckless living” (Lk. 15:13).

This term translated as “*reckless*” (ἀσώτως) can literally mean as a “madness that knows no bounds.”⁴ It means wasteful and wanton, and can even be translated as “prodigal” which technically means “extravagant.” That is why this son is known famously as the “prodigal son.”

Not only does the prodigal son consume sin, but sin also consumes him. He runs out of money and famine strikes the land (Lk. 15:14). Food is running in short supply. The local economy has crashed. Soon the son who was living a life in hardcore party-mode is on the brink of desolation and starvation.

He ends up feeding pigs (Lk. 15:15), which, according to the Old Testament Law, were unclean animals (Lev 11:7; Dt. 14:8).⁵ As he is feeding the pigs, he finds himself hungry and “*longing*” (ἐπεθύμει) for the pig slop (Lk. 15:16). But his boss won’t even spare pig food for his servant. The once wealthy son is now starving in a faraway land with no hope. This is a man who has hit rock bottom.

The Bible is again showing us that the end of sin is death and destruction. Sin promises pleasure but ultimately will deliver only pain. It tastes like honey, but, in the end, it is as bitter as wormwood (cf. Pr. 5:3).

But then we get our first glimmer of light.

The son wakes up. The text says, “***But when he came to himself***” (Lk. 15:17). He comes to his senses. He sees reality for what it is. He sees himself for what he has done and where his actions have led him. He finally sees outside of himself and how his sin is an offense against God and his father: “***I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you’***” (Luke 15:18, ESV).

Sometimes it takes truly great suffering to wake us up to reality. But we don’t have to wait until we suffer before that happens. The truth of God’s word functions like smelling salts and wakes us up to what is good and true if only we have ears to hear!

⁴ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 148.

⁵ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 405.

Now the younger son is disgusted with his sin. He turns away from his life in the far away county. He leaves the pigsty. And he draws near to his home and father.

This is a narrative picture of what repentance looks like. Which if you have paid close attention to our study of Luke, Jesus has been talking a lot about repentance in these last few chapters. Repentance is turning away from sin and turning to a God who is so much better.

Repentance is necessary to be a Christian. We cannot stay living in willful sin and be in an active relationship with God. We cannot remain in the pigsty and enjoy the feast of the father at the same time.

But as long as you draw breath, it is never too late to repent and turn toward God!

2.) The Loving Father.

Now that he is fully aware of his sin, the son knows full well is no longer worthy of being called a son. But he also knows that his father is such a good and generous man that he simply longs to be a servant in his father's household. He is hoping for and expecting nothing more than a job. He is coming with humility and no sense of entitlement, which is the exact opposite of his posture at the beginning of this parable.

The prodigal finally gets the courage to come home. He arises. He has his speech pre-planned and rehearsed. He knows he needs to own all of what he has done wrong, but when the son sees his father, he never has the opportunity to finish his speech.

All the time that the younger son was away, the father has been waiting and watching. He has not set his heart on the destruction of his son. He does not want vengeance against his son for all the ways he has been wounded. He doesn't want to bring judgment or comeuppance for all of his son selfishness and wrong. He simply wants his son.

The text says, *"...But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him"* (Luke 15:20, ESV). When the father sees his son runs. He doesn't wait for his son to come to him. This was a radical act of humility and love in this cultural context.

New Testament theologian N.T. Wright observes, *"One might even call this 'the parable of the Running Father': in a culture where senior figures are far too dignified to run anywhere, this man takes to his heels as soon as he sees his young son dragging himself home. His lavish welcome is of course the point of the story: Jesus is explaining why there is a party, why it's something to celebrate when people turn from going their own way and begin to go God's way."*⁶

⁶ Tom Wright, [Luke for Everyone](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 187–188.

Then, the father does something more. Look at verse 22: ***“But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate”*** (Luke 15:22–24, ESV).

There is a lot of cultural meaning in these words. The “best robe” is not just the former robe that the son left behind; it is the robe reserved for honored guests. The “ring” is not mere jewelry; it is a symbol of the father’s authority, now imparted to the son (cf. 1 Macc 6:15). The sandals were considered a luxury. Servants could not wear them. But the returned son is not a servant – he is a son!⁷

In other words, these are more than gifts. These are tokens of sonship. The father is telling the son, *“Son, your identity is not rooted in your sin. Your identity is rooted in the fact that you are my child!”*

Even the “fattened calf” is a symbol of extravagant love because, in the ancient Near East, most meals did not include meat. This was a meal that was reserved for only the most special occasions.⁸

The father has restored his son identity and now throws a feast in his honor. The son has come from death to life. He was lost but now is found. This is a picture of salvation!

When we respond to the grace of God with repentance, we don’t get punishment. We get the embrace of a loving father who calls us his child! We get a feast that we do not deserve!

Come to God because he is better and kinder and more loving than you could ever imagine!

Now, that is where most sermons on this passage stop, and understandably so. Everyone wants to end on a high note. But it is imperative we keep going, if we are to get the whole picture. After all, Jesus himself told us this is a parable about “two sons” (Lk. 15:11).⁹

There is still one more character of this story.

3.) The Bitter Brother.

We meet the older brother coming in from the field after a hard day’s work (Lk. 15:26). He probably wants to sit back and relax, after yet another day of being responsible. When he finds out that there is a full-blown partying going on in honor of his messed up brother, he is *“angry”* (ὀργιζω) and enraged (Lk. 15:28).

⁷ Stein, 407.

⁸ Ibid. 407.

⁹ Ibid. 404.

Now, in some sense the older brother's reaction is understandable, isn't it? Why does his brother get such a lavish party when all he has done is sin? This isn't justice. Plus, his brother's return will cut into the elder brother's own inheritance.¹⁰

But when the father comes to greet the older brother, we find that he has a prepared speech too. He has a case to make. The essence of this case is "look what I have done, look at what I deserve, look what I have earned by my obedience." In his own words, *"...Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!"* (Luke 15:29–30, ESV).

Notice the phrase "this son of yours," instead of "my brother." He has totally disowned his brother. He doesn't even care if he lived or died. And that is his sin. The older brother's frustration is understandable, but his hatred still self-centered, and shows a lack of love for both the brother, as well as father.

This is not a small side detail, by the way. This final scene is arguably the point of why Jesus is giving the parable in the first place. Remember how Luke 15 began, *"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them'"* (Luke 15:1–2, ESV).

Luke 15 isn't just a feel-good message about grace. Luke 15 is a corrective teaching for the Pharisees and scribes who are indignant that Jesus is receiving repentant sinners. He is confronting them of their own sin of self-righteousness as they judge others around them.

Self-righteousness is a tough sin to recognize in yourself. But I will give you a quick litmus test to help you test yourself. How do you measure your own righteousness? Do you measure your righteousness by the standard of God, or do you measure righteousness by the standard of self? Do you look to the perfection and holiness of God as the standard of righteousness? Or do you tend to compare yourself with someone who is sinning a little worse than you are and say in your heart, "I'm not perfect, but at least I am not them!"

Jesus is showing us there are two types of lostness: the lostness of our self-indulgence and the lostness of our own self-righteousness. Jesus is showing in the most brilliant way imaginable that the sin of self-righteousness is a sin that is just as fatal and damning as the sin of self-indulgence.

Both groups of sinners need repentance. Both sons need to come home. But sometimes the elder brother is less prone to repent because he is less likely to see his need for saving grace.

¹⁰ Wright, 190.

The older brother has tried very hard to save himself. He wants a gospel of karma. But the gospel is not karma. We don't get what we deserve – which is death. We get what Jesus deserves – which is life and love. The gospel is a gospel of grace.

Conclusion

This parable is one of the most powerful pictures of the gospel in the entire Bible, and over the centuries it has captured the imagination of Christian artists. One of those artists was a Dutchman named **1Rembrandt Van Rijn (1606-1669)**, who was widely regarded as one of the greatest painters of in the history of western art.

Rembrandt was also a Christian in the Reformed tradition, and he was obsessed with Luke 15 and the story of the prodigal son. In fact, he sketched multiple versions (**2 Prodigal Sketches**) of this story over and over again all throughout his life.

Early in his career, Rembrandt painted a work known as **“3The Prodigal Son in the Tavern” (c. 1637)**. The scene of a tavern or brothel shows the younger son at the height of his decadence. He has presumably a prostitute on his lap while lifting his goblet high in a toast. By the looks of his eyes and his precarious balance, he is not drinking apple juice, and this is not his first drink. This is an unflattering portrait of the prodigal in his deepest sin.

But that's the interesting thing about Rembrandt. If he is famous for one thing, it is the fact that he did multiple self-portraits. In some ways, you could say he invented the selfie! But he didn't use his self-portraits to make himself look good. Instead, they were brutally honest pictures of who he really was. This is why his painting of the prodigal is so important. When Rembrandt saw the prodigal son, he saw himself (**4Rembrandt as the Prodigal**). He painted himself as the prodigal son because he saw in the prodigal a picture of his own sin and his rebellion against God.

But it wasn't until the last two years of his life that Rembrandt produced the culmination of all his meditation upon the Luke 15. This is **“5The Return of the Prodigal Son” (c. 1661-1669)**. This painting was never sold but was later found in the artist's own studio after his death. It is the climactic moment when the prodigal comes home.

In this depiction, the younger son (pictured in, the lower left corner) is broken. His clothes are filthy and ragged. His shoes are worn and broken. His head is shaven, likely as an attempt to rid himself of lice. He collapses into the embrace of his father.

Despite his filth and unworthiness, the father's love is uninhibited. He embraces and envelops the son. The father is a picture of strength and dignity, yet he holds his son with tenderness and mercy.

Around the scene, there is a sense of quietness and awe. Grace is a holy and sacred reality. The onlookers look on with silent amazement; all onlookers except for one who looks down with disdain – the elder brother.

The older brother (located in the top right corner) puts himself above even the father. His hands are folded. His brow is furrowed. His judgment and hatred place him outside of the love of his father. Instead, only the son who realizes the true state of his condition enjoys the gift of amazing grace.

Rembrandt's painting, just like Jesus's parable ends without resolve. We don't know how the story will end. Will the older brother eventually humble himself to repent of his pride? Will he embrace his younger brother in love? Will he enter into the feast of the father? Or will his need to justify himself place him into a self-imposed exile of bitterness and hatred?¹¹

This is the true brilliance of Luke 15. We only get to see a flawed and bitter older brother, and it leaves us wanting a better older brother.¹²

After all, who should have gone to pursue the prodigal? Who should have pursued the brother in the far away country and rescued him from starvation? The older brother!

As the parable ends and the ministry of Jesus continues, Jesus will show himself to be that true and better brother who pursued us when we ran from the father. He is the brother who will not just leave home to a far country, but who will travel from heaven to earth for the one who was lost. He is the one who is not willing to pay out of his own inheritance, but give his life to redeem us.

He entered the pigsty. He brought us home. He paid our debt on the cross and has given us his own robe and ring, and brought us as adopted children in the family of God!

The word prodigal can mean wasteful, just as the son was wasteful. But the word prodigal can also mean "recklessly extravagant" and "having spent everything."

This is why, as Pastor Timothy Keller has famously said, this is not the parable of the prodigal son, this is the parable of the "Prodigal God."¹³

His love is a reckless love, for he has refused to reckon or count our sin against those who are in Christ. He has given Christ his son as the greatest expenditure to redeem us. His extravagant grace is our greatest hope, and it will change your life if you let it.

Let us be amazed and humbled and grateful for his grace. AMEN.

¹¹ Wright, 192.

¹² The thoughts expressed in this conclusion are largely derived from Timothy Keller's treatment of Luke 15 in *The Prodigal God: Recovering The Heart of the Christian Faith*. (New York: Dutton, 2008). Keller's own treatment was indebted to that of his late mentor Edmund Clowney.

¹³ Keller, xv.

Community Group Discussion Starters

- 1.) *Read Luke 15:11-32 and summarize the parable that Jesus tells.*
- 2.) *Has there been a moment when, like the younger brother, you have come to your senses and turned back to God? What did this look like in your life?*
- 3.) *How does the love of the father in this parable image the love of God the Father? How should this parable affect our view of God?*
- 4.) *How does the context of Luke 15:1-2 help us understand the character of the older brother?*
- 5.) *What character in this parable do you most identify with and why?*

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