

## **Parable of Prodigals**

Today, we are going to look at part three of Jesus' trilogy of parables teaching the irrefutable fact that God is gracious and ready to receive sinners who come in faith and repentance. The extended truth that flows from God's acceptance of sinners is that we too must receive and rejoice when sinners repent. Jesus gives examples of repentant sinners and that God reached out to them and this begs the question of who in our lives do we need to reach out to with grace and mercy.

In this morning's parable, which will be read in just a moment, I want you to think of the father of the 2 sons as God the Father. The older son is the self-righteous Pharisees and the young son as the rebellious who repents. This parable is called the "Prodigal Son", but do you know what the word "prodigal" means? Because this parable could also be called the "Prodigal God". To understand this one needs to understand the definition of "prodigal", which is from the Latin word *prodigus* meaning *lavish* and has two meanings. First, the spending of money and resources freely and recklessly, which is wasteful and this definition applies to the youngest son. Second, it means giving something on a lavish scale, this is true of both the father of the parable and of God the Father.

In this parable we are shown two forms of death and one of new life. First, when one wants others things more than God the Father or Jesus the Christ, this is the younger son who walks away from his father and he experiences lost and almost physical death and there was certainly spiritual death. Second, is when one thinks they can earn their prideful righteousness and salvation by works and this is

represented by the older son, who lacks spiritual life. The parable also shows new life, when the rebellious repents and returns to the Father.

Now that we have some background, we are now ready to hear the Word of God. Please stand while Patrick reads God's inspired Word from Luke 15:11 to 32. Please be seated. Let me open with prayer.

## **The Prodigal Son**

In the first two verses of the parable the stage is set. “**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.**”<sup>13</sup> **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.”** It is important to understand some of the culture and practices in Jesus’ day. Father’s were highly esteemed and honored as the head of the family and a grandfather was the patriarch of the family. No important decision was reached without seeking approval of the patriarch. Today things are very different; many fathers are absent, single parent families now outnumber two parent families in America. Fathers are not honored and esteemed – media depicts fathers as absent, most Disney movies are centered around one parent families and in most current TV shows men are depicted as inferior to women, if not idiots. Those listening to Jesus tell this parable, would have been shocked at the attitude of both the son and the father. First because of the disrespect shown to the father by the son. To ask for the inheritance early was that same as saying, “*You know dad, I think I would rather have the money than have you. I wish you were dead now so I can have the inheritance now.*” Jesus sets the stage at the very beginning of the parable for his hearers to judge against the

younger son. Secondly, those present would have judged the father for giving the son what he asked for and not exerting his authority.

This third parable is not like the first two. In the first we were all rooting for the shepherd looking diligently for the lost lamb. In the second, we were cheering for the unmarried poor girl who was looking for her dowry coin, but in this third parable no one, at this point, is rooting for this younger son.

At this point they are all hoping this spoiled brat gets what's coming to him. How disrespectful to basically say to one father, *"I don't really love you and I would rather have your money than you."* Now, as is typical, with this son's selfishness, he gathers all his stuff together and leaves. He wants to put as much distance between him and his father and everything that reminds him of his father, so he **"took a journey into a far country."** If you find yourself not liking this son, that is the emotion Jesus' original hearers had. They detested this son and this is what Jesus wants them to do; deal with is their judgment.

Jesus lays a foundation that for this younger son, the Father's estate, what he had worked for all his life, meant nothing. He goes to the far-off country and spent all his massive wealth on prostitutes, parties, and his so-called-friends; friends as long as he had money to spend, Jesus says, **"he squandered his property in reckless living."** Jesus now gives the crowd what they expect, this disrespectful, selfish young man gets what he deserves. Reading at verse 14, **"And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything."** The money is all gone, his opportunistic friends are all gone, a severe famine breaks out and he is in desperate

need. Jesus' original hearers would have been saying, *"This I right, God who hates sin and is punishing this selfish sinner."*

The father had worked hard and had a prosperous estate and his sons had never been in need. In his father's house there were servants that cared for him and his sons, but now the youngest knows hunger and has no shelter. The famine in the far-off country was severe and the young man is on the verge of starving to death. He no longer has any money or friends and to survive, he, as my grandfather would say, slops the hogs. So, the picture Jesus paints is a well-to-do young Jewish man, because of his sin against his father, is reduced to working with unclean pigs and eating their unclean food to survive, as verse 16 reads, **"he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything."** The listening audience would have been shocked at this behavior that further separates this young man from God and upright father; what a disrespectful and sinful son.

The same is true today. Have we all, not seen good families, good Christian parents who raised their children well but have a child that rejects their parent's faith in Christ and walks away to end up in serious trouble? What is a family to do? Fall to their knees and pray to God their Father that the child would open their heart to the eternal truth and grace and love of God. This was my story in reverse; good hard-working parents, but they were not Christian, they were like the Pharisees, pursuing position and wealth. I followed their path until my life fell apart and like the young Jewish man in my despair God found me. The trouble was my parents were not believers and I could not run back to my father, who rejected the new me and I had to rely on my heavenly Father for many years before my relationship with my earthly father was restored.

This lost son's only hope was to return to the father. He learned the hard way that people will use you for all they can get. Friends run out when the money runs out. His father, however, was different, he could be trusted.

As far as the ancient hearers go, the story could have ended here - with a moral teaching. *Jesus could have said, "This is why you should always love your parents. This is why you should not be greedy. This is why you should avoid sinners. Young men, this is what happens when you seek out prostitutes and reckless living and you are condemned!"* But this is not the end of the story. The tables are turning...

Verse 17 marks a shift in the story and a turn in the life of this selfish sinful son. What happens in verse 17? Let's take up the parable there, **"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! <sup>18</sup> I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.' ' "** When the young man came to himself - he realized the reality of his situation. He realizes that he had disgraced his father and treated him very poorly. He realizes that his actions mean that his half of the inheritance is gone and he is no longer entitled to anything from his father or even to be called his son. He realizes everything he thought would bring him happiness, money, shallow friends, reckless living, getting away from this father's authority, had only, in truth, served to enslave him. Whereas at home, he served as a son and enjoyed the benefits of family, now in the far-off country where he lives at the level of a slave.

The young man came to his senses and is now broken and aware of his sin and shame, he openly admits his sin and repents. It seems he had discovered the

vanity of the promised life of the world that delivered him so close to death and destruction. As Solomon lamented, “I said in my heart, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.’ But behold, this also was vanity. <sup>2</sup>I said of laughter, ‘It is mad,’ and of pleasure, ‘What use is it?’ <sup>3</sup>I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly.” (Ecclesiastes 2:1-3) As rich and powerful as Solomon was, he came to realize, as the young son did, that living for self-pleasure was empty. The young son realizes his sin and what he has done and he remembers that his father is generous and forgiving. He remembers that his father is kind and merciful. He makes a decision to seek forgiveness and return. He begins by rehearsing his speech of confession and repentance and heads home.

His decision is made, <sup>20</sup> “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. <sup>21</sup> 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.’ <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.”

The first appearance of the father is back in verse 11 when he gives the son half of the estate. This would have caused the people listening to think that this father is a pushover and about as irresponsible as the son. In their minds and in ours the father should have refused the son and in those days possibly even disowned him. In the minds of the listeners the father’s wisdom perhaps was questioned from the very beginning of this story.

Even though the son had left - the father had been watching him, hoping he would return. Every day the father worked the estate and was concerned for his lost son. While the elder the son was close by, his heart was also far from the Father. The father knew his youngest son would have to suffer before he returned and the father knew the elder would need to forgive the younger if he came back. Who do you need to forgive? Who do you need to pray for – that they would return to God?

### **The Prodigal Father**

One day the father's prayers were answered, "But while young son was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." Have you ever considered that the father saw his son "while he was still a long way off?" This father was not working in the fields and just happen to look up and see his son. He had spent most evenings and mornings gazing over the horizon and praying for the return of his son. The father was faithful in praying for his son and desiring him, even though he did not know where he was. How faithful are we in our prayers? Joyce prayed for 13 years before my heart was broken and the Lord saved me – that is faithful prayer!

Not only did the Father see his son from far away but also, he "felt compassion". Last week we learned that we should be encouraged to repent because our heavenly Father and all the angels in heaven rejoice when sinners repent. Jesus is consistent with these parables. Here, the father is filled with compassion, not anger, not hostility but compassion at the return of his son. The father is so happy that his son is alive that he does something that dignified rich men simply did not do in ancient times. He rolls up his robe and runs across the fields and road to embrace and kiss his son. This is the picture of how ready our

Heavenly Father is to forgive us. When we repent, He feels compassion toward us and heaven celebrates.

This day was something the Father had prayed for and hoped for but because it appears years may have passed, it seemed almost impossible. I have had these same thoughts and prayers for those whom I loved so much, but were lost. I am also sure at times, the father wondered, had his son strayed too far to return? The son certainly thought so - in that far-off country - have I passed the point of no return? However, when he finally came to his senses, he prays that his father will hear his plea of repentance.

The father runs to his son and embraces and kisses him. How does the son respond, humbly he says to his father, **“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”** The son is correct; he had sinned against God or as he says, **“against heaven”** and against his father. This is how much God had changed his heart – the son humbly repents and seeks forgiveness without expectation of reward – **“I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”** The son had to be broken and emptied of himself before God could work in his heart. This is what had to happen to me, so I can relate to the son. One sign of a person who is truly repentant and saved is the condition of their heart and they no longer have their own agenda. As Paul wrote, **“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.”** (Philippians 2:3) This is why the son said, **“I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”** Another indication of true repentance is one feels completely unworthy for God the Father to call us, save us and for him to call us his sons and daughters. I cannot think of just one reason why God saved me and this makes me understand I am unworthy and it is all by his grace.



Tax collectors may have been shunned by the Jewish society, but the Romans chose them because they were smart and capable; as Jesus tells this story these repentant men bowed their heads in submission for, they knew he was speaking about them. They were the ones who had strayed from God and yet, God had welcomed them home and embraced them.

The son does not get his rehearsed speech out, his father cuts him off saying to the servants, **“Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet.”** <sup>23</sup> **And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.** <sup>24</sup> **For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.”** The father has the best robe brought and clothed his son in it. Do you know what robe the best robe was? It was the father’s robe. Notice, it does not say that his son was taken and cleaned up first. No, the father embraced, kissed and place his own robe on his stinky dirty pig smelling son. The father’s tears flowed down the cheek of his son leaving streaks in his son’s dirty face and as they embraced, he kisses his son. This is what Jesus did for you and me, **“Bring quickly the best robe”**, Jesus takes his pure robe and covers our filthy sin-ridden body and God the Father no longer sees our sin but sees us with the purity of Jesus.

The father immediately reinstated the son into the family, not as a hired servant like the boy had hoped, but as a son by placing the family signet ring on his finger. The son traveled from the far country barefoot but he would not stay that way. The servants may have been barefoot but not the father’s son. Jesus clothes us also, remember my beloved, we represent Jesus here on earth until he returns; we are to wear **“shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace.”** (Ephesians 6:15) As it is written, **“How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”** (Romans 10:15)

There are benchmarks in the journey of life; birth, adulthood, marriage and death are the major ones. For the father there is celebration for there is new life. “Bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.”<sup>24</sup> For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.” The prodigal son who lost everything, including himself has returned and he is accepted by the prodigal father who lavishes his love on the new life of his repentant son!

At this point Jesus could have ended the parable and said, “*Everyone lived happily ever-after.*” If Jesus had stopped here his introduction would not have had meaning - “There was a man who had two sons.” (v.11) and the elder son, who represents the Pharisees would not have been addressed.

### **The Proudful Son**

Everyone celebrated that day except one – the proudful elder son. Taking up our story in verse 25, “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.”<sup>26</sup> And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.<sup>27</sup> 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.’<sup>28</sup> But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him,<sup>29</sup> 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.’<sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’<sup>31</sup> And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’<sup>32</sup> It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’ ”

Here at the end Jesus puts a twist on his story. The youngest son, the one who took half of the father's estate, the one who wasted it all, the one who loved money more than his father, the one abandoned his family is now completely reconciled to the father through repentance. However, there remains one son totally estranged. The older brother has been near the father the whole time. He has been busy obeying the commands of the father and yet, his heart is not in line with his father.

While the household rejoiced, he grumbled; remember last week the Pharisees and scribes grumbled. This eldest son served as an illustration to all those standing within hearing distance of Jesus and for all those who would read this parable down through the centuries of the fallacy of self-righteousness. As the prophet had spoken the words of God, long before, <sup>9</sup>“**Astonish yourselves and be astonished; blind yourselves and be blind! ...** <sup>10</sup>**For the LORD has poured out upon you a spirit of deep sleep, and has closed your eyes (the prophets), and covered your heads (the seers). ...** <sup>13</sup> **And the Lord said: ‘Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me...’ ”** (Isaiah 29:9-10 & 13) The father longed for the return of the son who left and went to the far country and he longed for the return of the son who never left home whose heart was self-serving. So, now Jesus reveals the other form of eternal death: working to earn your own righteousness. The prideful elder son could not understand why the father would lavish such grace on someone who had treated him so terribly. He could not understand grace and forgiveness. Today, it is the same – there are two paths; repentance and self-serving righteousness.

It was harder for the Pharisees to understand the message of grace that Jesus told than for tax collectors and sinners, for the nearer we think we are to God by

our deserving nature and privilege of birth and our own works - the harder it is for us to grasp the truth of the Gospel of good news, the Gospel of grace.

Jesus continues to drive home this point concerning the condition of one's heart. The father leaves the celebration and invites the older son to join in as well but all the older son could do is express anger at the father's mercy. Because of all the son's hard work, he felt entitled to all of the father's love. There is a danger when we begin to think that we have earned the right to be loved by God.

Look at verse 30 with me, **“But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!”** Notice the elder son's response to the father. This self-righteous son would not even call the prodigal - his brother, but says, **“this son of yours”**. Here is something that is often missed; the younger son entered into sin and left, but when he came to his senses, he returns in hope that he would at least be able to be a servant in his father's household. The father makes him a son before everyone. However, the elder son refused to be a son under his father's authority with love for his brother, so in truth, he remained a servant, as he said in verse 29, **“Look (*This was a disrespectful way to address his father*), these many years I have served you ...”** The prideful elder son possesses the heart of a self-serving servant without regard for others.

Tax collectors and sinners knew they had not earned God's love but came to Christ hoping for mercy, just as the prodigal son who remembered his father's mercy. We must never think God owes us anything, as the Pharisees and the elder son, and the father tries to make his prideful son understand mercy, <sup>32</sup>**“It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was**

lost, and is found.” One comes to the Father through Christ seeking mercy, but the elder prideful son feels by his hard work he is owed everything.

## **Application**

Jesus has presented a dilemma to the Pharisees and all people who feel they can earn their salvation or deserve it by their righteousness. There is no salvation without a heart of repentance. One's station in society is not important for their relationship with God. Those who are distant from God, in a far-off country do not have to stay there. When one considers, the Pharisees, scribes, tax collectors, repentant sinners and the unrepentant; does not God, the Creator of everything that exists have the right to do with His creation as he pleases? God can soften the hardest hearts and fill dead souls with His Spirit.

It is Jesus Christ who speaks of the Father's love. He is the One who has opened the door to the Father's house. He is the one who invites sinners' home. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ sat down with the moral and social outcasts and ate with them and through repentance and faith brought them home.

As we look into our own hearts today, we must ask ourselves, “Do I come to God with an attitude that He owes me something? Or do I come as a lowly despised sinner and fall at the feet of Christ pleading for mercy saying, “**Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am not worthy to be called your son. Have mercy on me!**”

In this story, Jesus leaves the ending open. There was still time for the self-righteous to repent. There is still time for people to repent today. If you have drifted far from God, repent and feel his mercy. If you do not know Jesus, repent and become a child of the Living God. Amen!