

The Prodigal Son

The parable of the prodigal son is an extremely well-known parable of Christ. Non-Christians and Christians love the parable mainly because they do not know what Jesus was actually teaching. Some Christians do not know the meaning of the word “prodigal.” Some think the word refers to someone who leaves and returns, but the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines prodigal as “spendthrift,” “waster,” “spender” and a “squanderer” (dated 1976). In summary, a prodigal is one who is wasteful. That is, the parable of the prodigal son actually refers to a son who spends money wastefully. As we will soon discover this parable is about a son who is prodigal, yet, the parable is more than that. It is about one son who wandered away and squandered his inheritance and another son who was not happy that he returned. But why did Jesus give the parable? That is our adventure in this study. Our study is from Luke 15:11-32.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PARABLE. Luke 15 contains three parables of Christ: the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and a parable that is usually called the Prodigal Son. However, it could also be called the Lost Son. This parable is not just about a son who is lost. It is also about two other individuals.

And He said,
“A man had
two sons.
The younger
of them said
to his father,
‘Father, give
me the share of
the estate that
falls to me.’ So
he divided his
wealth between
them.” Luke
15:11-12
(NASB)



The Prodigal Son
Is Embraced
by
The Father

Jesus starts by introducing us to two sons and to their father. The father is symbolic of God the Father as we will soon discover. The youngest son represents someone who is spiritually dead or lost, that is someone who is going to hell, but will become a Christian. The older son represents a religious person who is a false Christian. He meticulously keeps a list of “spiritual” rules that are supposed to guarantee him eter-

nal life. We must become confused and think that the parable is primarily about the youngest son. It is actually about the God the Father and then the oldest son. Jesus uses the youngest son to prepare us for His message of the parable.

After Jesus tells that the father had two sons, we are told that the youngest son demanded his share of the fathers’

inheritance. The Greek tense of the word “give” is in the imperfect tense which means that son c o m m a n d e d or demanded his part of the i n h e r i t a n c e . That was a bold and aggressive request. He could not wait for his father to die. He wanted

his portion of the inheritance now! According to Deuteronomy 21:17 the laws of inheritance that God established are different than what one might expect because the inheritance was not divided equally among the children. Deuteronomy 21:17 states that the oldest son was to receive a double portion of the inheritance and the youngest one receive one portion. The Hebrew expression for “double portion” is

pi shenayim. It is also used in Zechariah 13:8 and there it means two-thirds. Other ancient documents reveal that the expression means two-thirds.¹ Numbers 27:6-11 and Deuteronomy 21:15-16 provide information about inheritances for daughters. Other significant passages about inheritances are Job 42:15; Proverbs 17:2; 20:21; Ecclesiastes 2:18.

So the father divided his wealth between the two sons. We are not told what the oldest son did with his inheritance or how the father continued to live. It is possible that the father keep some money for himself and divided the balance. But we are told what the youngest did with his inheritance. He squandered it!

PRODIGAL SON SQUANDERS HIS WEALTH. After the father divided the inheritance, the youngest “gathered all” together. That is, he sold any property that he obtained in the inheritance and converted other items into money and left the home. Most likely the son had visions of freedom from his father and endless pleasure and leisure.

And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. Luke 15:13-14 (NASB)

The Greek word “took a journey” is *apodemeo*. It refers to a long trip to a foreign land. That is, he wanted to get away from his father. This is common for many a young man and woman. They want their freedom. They are immature enough to think that they and their friends are wiser and their parents are just difficult people. Now he can enjoy life and he has this large sum of money. However, as is usually the situation with many young people, they spend it on things

that are foolish. As a youth, I did the same thing. I had to learn that it was easier to spend the money than it was to earn the money. I could spend it faster in a few minutes that I could work for it in one month.

We are told that this youth “squandered” his wealth on “reckless living.” The Greek word for “squandered” is *diaskorpizo* and it literally means “to scatter.” This word appears nine times in the New Testament and seven times is

translated as “scatter.” This means that son scattered his money as a sower scatters seed (Matthew 25:24, 26, 31). He foolishly spent it. The Greek for “reckless living” is *astos* and it is the adverb “prodigally.” How reckless was he? We will be told later in Luke 15:30 that at least some of the money was spent on prostitutes. The foolish son enjoyed himself!

He enjoyed himself so much that he scattered all of his money. He squandered his inheritance! The Wall Street Journal reports that research has shown that seventy-percent



1. Jeffery H Tigay. Deuteronomy. The JPS Torah Commentary. Jewish Publication Society. 1996. pp. 195-196.

of first children squander their inheritance within one year.

When wealth is passed down through generations in a family, the long-term prognosis generally isn't very good. Research shows that in most families, 70% of inherited wealth is lost by the second generation and 90% by the third.²

Other research states that within 19 days most children buy a new car. This tragedy reveals our greed and desire for pleasure even today! The prodigal son was not any different than our children today. We are like the prodigal son. If you had his inheritance statistics state that most likely you would spend it all too!

Sadly, Jesus says that about the time the youngest son squandered his inheritance, a severe famine occurred in the country in which he was staying. Now he was in real trouble. Now he was in real need. He never expected

the famine. He assumed that life would always be positive. But since the famine hit, he went to work feeding pigs.

So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. Luke 15:15-16 (NASB)

Wow, imagine a Jewish boy feeding pigs. Verse 14 reveals that he became so hungry that was even desired to eat the

pig's food, but he did not. It would have been too disgusting for a Jew to eat pig's food. According to the Mosaic law, pigs were unclean animals (Leviticus 11:7; Deuteronomy 14:8). Further, Rabbinic tradition said,

Cursed is the man who rears swine.³

This young son was already helping to rear or raise swine by feeding them. This helps us understand the severity of this son's situation. It also helps understand this son was desperate. We are also told that no one was giving this son food. This suggests that his money went for housing and other

necessary items. He had a serious problem. God allowed this to happen to him and He allowed it for a reason. Do you why?

SON ADMITS HIS SIN. Next we are told that the son "came to his senses."

But when he came to his senses, he said,

"How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.'" Luke 15:17-19 (NASB)

The literal Greek for "came to his senses" means "into himself he came." This Hebrew expression, "came to his senses,"



Prodigal Son
With Pigs

2. Brian Luster. "How to Prepare Heirs to Handle a Family Inheritance." Wall Street Journal. April 12, 2015.

3. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson. Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament. Baker Academic. 2007. p. 343.

commonly meant that the son “repented.”⁴ But before he repented, he started thinking and realized that his father’s servants had food to eat and it was not pig food or pig meat. He was finally honest with himself and realized he was foolish. Therefore, he planned to go back home. Now do you see what he planned to tell his father? He planned to say, “I have sinned against heaven and in your sight.” The son was repentant and humbled.

Isn’t that what happens to us? We wait until we find ourselves in a very difficult situation then we are motivated to think about why did this happen to us. As we struggle trying to understand the reason for our miserable or difficult situation, we discover our sin. We are not honest with ourselves. A very difficult situation has to occur first. Then we think and repent. But not everyone repents. Some of us defend ourselves by excusing our sinful behavior. Some are too proud to admit that they commit sinful acts and have horrible attitudes. But this young son planned to repent before God first and then humble himself before his father in order “to be saved.” In addition, he was willing to do whatever his father wished, including being a servant. Notice that the phrase “to be saved” is in quotes. The quotation marks are intended to draw your attention to the son who is characteristic of anyone who was being convicted of his or her sins and being drawn to Christ by the Holy Spirit (John 6:44; 16:7-11).

SON HUMBLING HIMSELF AND REPENTS. Next, we are told the son stood to his feet and journeyed to his father’s home. His purpose was to restore his relationship with his father and he did this by admitting his sin to his father.

So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” Luke 15:20-21 (NASB)

Have you ever admitted your sin to another person? Some people will never admit their sin to another person. Instead they justify their behavior and blame the person they

offended. Most of us have experienced such proud people. To verbally admit one’s sin requires humility and this son humbles himself. This son admitted that he had sinned against God and also his father. Then he admitted the truth when he said, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” This is another characteristic of one who seeks to have God forgive their sins. When a person admits their sin to himself or herself, he or she will be humbled before God. Remember that Jesus said that He came to save sinners and not the righteous (Matthew 9:13; Luke 5:32). In the beatitudes Jesus describes humble individuals. They are the “poor in spirit,” “those who mourn,” “the gentle,” “those who desire to be holy,” “the merciful,” “the pure in heart” and “the peacemakers.” They are the ones who will go to heaven (Matthew 5:3), be comforted (Matthew 5:4), inherit the earth (Matthew 5:3), see God (Matthew 5:8), and be called the sons of God (Matthew 5:9). Those who never humble themselves before God by admitting their sin and seeking God’s forgiveness will never get into heaven. His son admitted his sin and loathed himself. He knew he was not worthy of his father’s forgiveness.

Now did you notice Jesus said that while the son was “a long way off” the father saw him and felt compassion for Him. Salvation is like that. God the Father knows what we are doing before we confess our sins and ask Him to give us eternal life. He knows everything we do. In fact, John 6:65 teaches that when a person believes in Jesus as their Savior and Lord, it is the Father who decides who will come to Christ and then He draws to Jesus by the Holy Spirit (John 6:44, 37; 16:8-11). Further, Acts 3:16; Ephesians 2:8 and 2 Peter 1:1 teach that God the Father gives us the faith as a gift. Acts 13:48 helps us understand that when a person receives Christ as their Savior and Lord, it is because God the Father had appointed them to eternal life.

When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. Acts 13:48 (NASB)

Yet, from our perspective we feel guilt over our sins and eventually humbly submit to Christ by believing in Him,

4. Robert Stein. Luke. The New American Commentary. 1992. vol. 24. p. 406.

pleading for our sins to be forgiven and submitting ourselves to Him. The process of receiving Christ is very real to everyone who becomes a Christian. But God the Father knows what we are doing!

In this parable Jesus says that the father felt compassion for his son, ran to him and kissed him. The Greek word “ran” is *trecho*. It is used in 1 Corinthians 9:24 of someone running a race. The father was rushing to his youngest son. It was as if he was running a race. Since Middle Eastern noblemen did not run,⁵ this reveals the father greatly loved his son. The father ran, embraced, and kissed his son.

The father once again is symbolic of the Father. Both Christ and the apostles have told us that the reason anyone is forgiven and given eternal life is because He loves us (John 3:16; Romans 5:5-8, Titus 3:4; 1 John 4:9-10), even though we did not love Him (1 John 4:9-10).

So the father in the parable ran and kissed his son while the son humbled himself, admitting his sins and admitting that he was unworthy of being treated as a son.

THE FATHER REJOICES. But the father rejected the idea that his youngest son would become a servant and ordered a feast.

But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly bring out the best robe

and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.” And they began to celebrate.

Luke 15:22-24 (NASB)

Notice the father’s words, “he was lost and has been found.” This reveals that the youngest is like unbelievers who respond in saving faith.

The father’s acceptance reminds us of John 1:12 where we are told that we can become children of God by receiving Christ. In a very real sense the son was seeking the father, repenting of his sins and asking to be allowed to serve as a slave.

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were

born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. John 1:12-13 (NASB)

Just as the angels in heaven rejoice over a sinner who is saved (Luke 15:10), so the father rejoiced over his son who was saved and called for a party.

The father ordered a robe, a ring, and sandals to be brought for his son. Some propose that the robe is symbolic of notability. The ring symbolized authority and the sandals

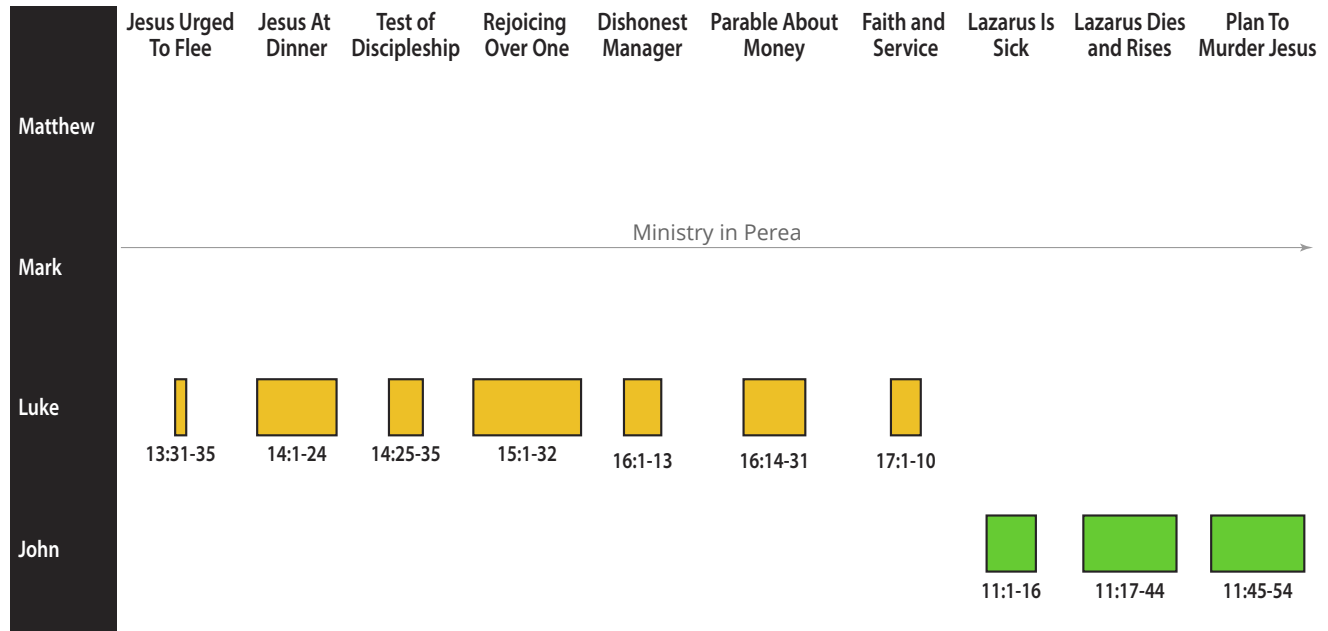


Father Embraces The
The Prodigal Son

5. John MacArthur. Luke 11-17. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Moody Publishers. 2013. p. 315.

Life and Heart of Jesus

Ministry In Perea - Fall of A.D. 32



spoke of luxury.⁶ But another commentator said the robe symbolized a minister of reconciliation, the ring symbolized the Holy Spirit and the sandals spoke of a promise.⁷ Another said, the robe, ring and sandals represented status, authority and a freeman.⁸ The reason that these variations in opinion are shared is to demonstrate that we cannot confidently declare what these items represent. It is guess work. But what is clear is the father was treating the son with honor and respect. The youngest son did not have these items of clothing. After the meal was prepared, the celebration began. These verses show us how much the father loved his youngest son.

OLDEST SON CONTRASTED TO FATHER. The emphasis of the parable is on the father and the oldest son. The stage has been set. The youngest son was lost but is now found. The previous two parables were about lost things too! The

first parable was the lost sheep which was found. The second parable was about a lost coin that was lost. Each time there was joy when the lost sheep and the lost coin were found. They were used to prepare us for this significant parable about a lost son which is now found and the father had great joy. But Jesus now reveals the heart of the oldest son, who is angry the father was rejoicing and giving a party.

Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. Luke 15:25-26 (NASB)

According to the parable, the eldest son returned from the field and as he approached the house heard music and dancing. He was very curious about this event. His father nor had a servant informed him previously. Therefore, he asked one of the servants to explain the reason for the party.

And he said to him, "Your brother has come, and your father

6. Stein. Ibid. p. 407.

7. R. C. Trench. Notes on the Parables of our Lord. Baker Book House. 1948. p. 148.

8. William Hendricksen. Luke. New Testament Commentary. Baker Book House. 1978. p. 756.

has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.” But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. Luke 15:27-28 (NASB)

The servant tells this son that his brother had returned. The New American Standard says he was “safe and sound.” But the Greek word is *hygiaino*. The word means “healthy.” But from a spiritual perspective the youngest son was healthy both physically and spiritually.

The oldest son responded not with rejoicing but with anger. The Pharisees would have approved the oldest son’s anger since they believed only those who kept the details of their nit-picky, legalistic rules deserved to be favored. In Matthew 23:23-24 Jesus declared,

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! Matthew 23:23-24

The Pharisees lacked justice, mercy, and faithfulness. In Matthew 23:27 Jesus said that they appeared beautiful on the outside but inside they were full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. That is, the Pharisees would have been angry too! They hated sinners! Remember that before Jesus started sharing this parable the Pharisees were grumbling that Jesus eating a meal with tax collectors and sinners (Luke 15:1-2). Their attitude was the motivation for the three parables. The Pharisees were hypocrites.

The father somehow discovered that his oldest son was outside and was unwilling to join the celebration. The Greek word for “not willing” is in the imperfect tense and it means that the son was repeatedly unwilling to go in. This suggests the father repeatedly asked him to enter. But the son refused! The Greek word for “pleaded” is also in the imperfect tense which means that the father had repeatedly pleaded with him.

Finally, the son revealed his heart. He was angry with his

father and his younger brother. In verses 29-30 notice the self-centeredness of the son.

But he answered and said to his father, “Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.” Luke 15:29-30 (NASB)

First the oldest son attacked his father. He complained that he had served his father and never disobeyed. This is a very revealing comment. The Greek word the son used for “serving” is *douleo*, which means “to slave.” That is, he did say that he was just a servant. He slaved for his father and never disobeyed once! Yet, the father never gave him a celebration! Notice that he used the word “I,” “me” and “my” five times. Sense the selfishness in “never gave me a young goat.” and “that I might celebrate with my friends.” This self-righteous and self-deceived son claims that he was perfect but his father was not. We must not think that this son was a teenager. Even adults in mid-life and older are very self-centered and self-righteous. Our politicians appeal greed and self-centeredness all the time. Are you like the oldest son?

When the oldest said, “this son of yours” rather “my brother” he revealed his disdain for his brother. Then he slanders him with, “has devoured your wealth with prostitutes.” But the truth is the wealth the youngest son spent was his part of the inheritance. Also, he did not need to say that his brother had committed fornication with prostitutes. That was simply slander from the heart. In Matthew 15:19-20, Jesus said,

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man. Matthew 15:19-20 (NASB)

Then the son condemned his father with, “You killed the fattened calf for him.” As if to say, the father should not have done that. That described the attitude of the Pharisees. The

oldest son is a picture of how most people respond — “You were not fair!”

CONCLUSION. In sharp contrast, the response of the Father was loving, merciful and kind. The son failed to appreciate that the father had already given him his portion of the inheritance. The oldest son was truly selfish. He expected that life would be centered around him.

And he said to him, “Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.” Luke 15:31-32 (NASB)

The older son was self-deceived, self-centered and lacked mercy! He did not rejoice that his brother had come home and was healthy. He did not care that his brother was not lost anymore! All that he was interested in was himself and that others comply with a legalistic standard of self-righteousness. He was like the Pharisees. In sharp contrast the father loved his son, forgave his son, rejoiced that his son was found and celebrated.

The Father’s wealth was given to both sons. It is not symbolic of salvation or heaven. It speaks of God’s providence or provision for all of us. The youngest son is a picture of non-Christians who become Christians. The oldest son is a picture of self-righteous religious individuals who are not Christians and as Jesus said, the Pharisees were going to hell (Matthew 8:11-12; 23:33).

The Father is a picture of God the Father who loved both sons. This parable is so commonly misunderstood. It is actually not about the prodigal son. It is about a loving father who loves tax collectors and sinners. He loves everyone, including the oldest sons who reject Him. A better title for this study would be “The Loving, Forgiving Father” rather than “The Prodigal Son.”

Which one are you? Are you like the repentant son who is no longer lost? Or, are you like the proud, God-rejecting son? If you are like the like the oldest son, and long to have your sins forgiven, you believe Christ died for your sins and returned to life, then stop and pray and share your desire with God. Then heaven will rejoice that you are no longer lost but have been found.