

# The Prodigal Son

Part One  
*Luke 15:11-32*

*With Study Questions*

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9/11/2011*

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## Part One

Luke 15:11-32

Then He said: "A certain man had two sons. <sup>12</sup> And the younger of them said to *his* father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls *to me.*' So he divided to them *his* livelihood. <sup>13</sup> And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living. <sup>14</sup> But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. <sup>15</sup> Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. <sup>16</sup> And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him *anything.* <sup>17</sup> "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, <sup>19</sup> and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants." ' <sup>20</sup> "And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.' <sup>22</sup> "But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put *it* on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on *his* feet. <sup>23</sup> And bring the fatted calf here and kill *it*, and let us eat and be merry; <sup>24</sup> for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry. <sup>25</sup> "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> So 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 because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.' <sup>28</sup> "But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup> So he answered and said to *his* father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry

with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.’ <sup>31</sup> “And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found’ (Luke 15:11-32).

## Introduction

As a director of youth ministries for a local church (well over twenty years ago), part of my job description was to run a week long church camp at Catalina Island. During the course of the year we would raise thousands of dollars for camp scholarships and invite virtually any teenager who was willing to attend. To this day I run into former campers (some now in their forties) who were converted. Some appeared to be converted but it is hard to say.

A significant component of the camp was the testimonies give by students and counselors – a testimony being the story of how God led someone to faith in Christ. Often the testimonies were very intense. A person would share stories of their misspent past greeted by the oohs and aahs of the young camper. Inevitably (if you were asked to give a testimony) there was the turn in the story from the sinful life to the deliverance to Christ.

I remember not being very excited about having kids share their testimony if they had been raised in the church. It just wasn’t exciting enough. There wasn’t enough drama – enough transformation. I don’t recall if any of these church-raised kids ever resented the others getting the spotlight. For the most part they seemed entertained and a bit excited to be part of a ministry bringing in lost souls.

But over the years I’ve noticed a couple of dynamics as they relate to this parable: those who have been part of the covenant community – who at some level have **“tasted the heavenly gift” (Hebrews 6:4)** then reengage in a prodigal or reckless life, find it difficult to return. It seems that the Father they left is not as gracious as the Father they never knew. And this may be due, in part, to the disposition of the brother who never left.

Whether my personal observation is true or not, it certainly seems to be the point Jesus is making.

**Then He said: “A certain man had two sons. <sup>12</sup> And the younger of them said to *his* father, ‘Father, give me the portion of goods that falls *to me.*’ So he divided to them *his* livelihood. <sup>13</sup> And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living (Luke 15:11-13).**

## **Two Sons?**

It is difficult to understand a parable like this without understanding the biblical concept of the covenant. The man (who is no doubt God) has two sons. But we’ll soon learn that one son is dead in sin (Luke 15:24), and in a very real spiritual sense, is not a son at all. To be called a son of God is not a universal privilege.

**Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God (1 John 3:1)!**

**But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: <sup>13</sup> 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).**

When John writes that Jesus “**came to His own, and His own did not receive Him**” (John 1:10), He is writing about Israel – the Old Testament covenant community. This concept has critical implications – not the least of which is that a person can be a member of the covenant community and bear the name of child of God in a biblical sense, yet not truly be regenerate (or born again) at all.

The same, I believe, can be said of the New Testament covenant community, which is the church. I think this opens the doors of the church much wider, yet at the same time presses those who claim the faith “**to be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure**” (2 Peter 1:10).

This is not to say that those who have never been part of the church will not find as warm a greeting as this prodigal son. It is a matter of recognizing the context of the parable in order for us to be accurate – especially as it relates to the next point.

## **Father, Give Me**

This son is not merely leaving; he is leaving with as much as his father will give him. He is diminishing the wealth of the household, utilizing that which belongs to God in a selfish, carnal pursuit. It's as if he recognizes that it is only with the riches of his father that he can even begin his profligate lifestyle. We don't want to work but we want the money. We don't want to be cheated but we want to cheat. People want to live like heathens but they want their neighbors to live like Christians. People don't want to live in Sodom but they want to live like Sodomites.

The son thought he could have the best of both worlds. He would take his father's riches then distance himself – going to a far country – from his father's watchful eye. Like a student leaving for college with his parent's credit card – freedom finally! But he would soon find that he made a poor exchange in masters. It's been said:

**Thus “God, when His service no longer appears a perfect freedom, and man promises himself something far better elsewhere, allows him to make the trial; and he shall discover, if need be by saddest proof, that to depart from Him is not to throw off the yoke, but to exchange a light yoke for a heavy one, and one gracious Master for a thousand imperious tyrants and lords” [Trench].<sup>1</sup>**

We now begin to observe the tyrants.

**But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. <sup>15</sup> Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. <sup>16</sup> And he**

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<sup>1</sup> Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., Fausset, A. R., Brown, D., & Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments* (Lk 15:12). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him *anything* (Luke 15:14-16).

## Love and Severity

It is not beyond God to “**stretch**” his hand against a nation and “**send famine upon it**” (Ezekiel 14:13) – as always to a righteous end. In this case the prodigal will begin to taste the reality of a world devoid of fatherly love and provision. He would no longer be a visitor of the world but would join “**himself to a citizen of that country.**” You can only flirt with the world so much before you become part of it. The company one keeps, the music one listens to, the stories and movies one listens to will eventually become the very fabric of one’s character.

**Do not be deceived: “Evil company corrupts good habits” (1 Corinthians 15:33).**

That Paul begins the warning the way he does suggests that deception in this area is likely easy.

To the audience of Jesus, the idea of feeding swine would have been a vile occupation. Spiritually, the world has very little (truth be told – nothing but evil) to offer and its emptiness reveals itself by how fast runs out. He goes from being on vacation to becoming a citizen. “**He who begins by using the world as a servant, to minister to his pleasure, ends by reversing the relationship**” [Trench].<sup>2</sup> But his spiritual emptiness is not yet complete and perhaps pride – or hopes of a change in fortune hold his conversion at bay.

He would gladly eat what the pigs eat but “**no one gave him anything.**” Jeremiah records that which I have seen all too often in those who have opted for the world over the tender hands of a gracious God.

**For thus says the Lord: Your hurt is incurable, and your wound is grievous.<sup>13</sup> There is none to uphold your cause, no**

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<sup>2</sup> Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., Fausset, A. R., Brown, D., & Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments* (Lk 15:15). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

medicine for your wound, no healing for you. <sup>14</sup> All your lovers have forgotten you; they care nothing for you;

**But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, <sup>19</sup> and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants” (Luke 15:17-19).**

### **Reflections on Home**

It is difficult sometimes to appreciate our current home until we leave or it is somehow breached; how much more when we consider this world against peace with God. The young man begins to think clearly. His eyes begin to open, his heart “**enlightened**” to the hope “**of his glorious inheritance (Ephesians 1:18)**”. At home there was an inheritance...for the believer an eternal inheritance.

Yet this son, like so many of us, underestimates the grace of God. Like the Canaanite woman we ask for crumbs (Matthew 15:27). He can’t bring his own mind – even in his private reflections – to consider re-obtaining the status of son-ship. He would be more than happy to be a hired servant.

It is woven into these reflections – the pondering of his own destitute condition – that the clarity of his offense is made manifest. He has sinned against heaven and before his father; almost as if the offense was uniquely against God – his father being a mere observer.

**And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup> “But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring out the best robe and put *it* on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on *his* feet. <sup>23</sup> And bring the fatted calf here and kill *it*, and let us eat and be merry; <sup>24</sup> for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ And they began to be merry (Luke 15:20-24).**

## Fatherly Compassion

This may be the heart of the parable. Jesus does not portray the Father as one who begrudgingly welcomes and partially opens the door, with the chain still attached, poking his head through the narrow opening. No, He sees His son down the street and runs to meet him – the Father is anxious to forgive. The son may have unworthy but to the Father he was not without worth. The scribes and Pharisees, who will shortly become characters in this parable, should have known this of God.

**Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he my darling child? For as often as I speak against him, I do remember him still. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him, declares the Lord (Jeremiah 31:20).**

In Jesus' depiction of a father running to his son, Jesus is not presenting a new and improved God from the Old Testament.

**They shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity, for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the Lord, and their descendants with them. <sup>24</sup> Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear (Isaiah 65:23, 24).**

Parenthetically, we should not conclude from this parable that God's grace is initiated by man's repentance – recognizing that repentance itself is granted by God (2 Timothy 2:25). Jesus is not addressing the entirety of the *ordo salutis*. Why certain prodigals return and others don't is a matter of God's grace and election. It is simply not an issue addressed in this parable.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Calvin writes: It is wretched sophistry to infer from this, that the grace of God is not exhibited to sinners until they anticipate it by their repentance. "Here," say they, "is held out to us a father ready to pardon, but it is after that his son has begun to return to him; and therefore God does not look, and does not bestow his grace, on any but those who begin to seek him." It is, no doubt, true that, in order to his obtaining pardon, the sinner is required to have grief of conscience, and to be dissatisfied with himself; but it is wrong to infer from this, that repentance, which is the gift of God, is yielded by men from their own movement of their heart. And in this respect it would be improper to compare a mortal man to God; for it is not in the power of an earthly father to renew the stubborn heart of his son, as God changes hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. In short, the question here is not, whether a man is converted by himself, and returns to him; but only under the figure of a man is commended the fatherly gentleness of God, and his readiness to grant forgiveness.<sup>3</sup>



What is addressed is the Father's compassion followed the giving of a robe, a ring, sandals and a feast. All of these things would signify full restoration and heavenly joy. The son confesses in hopes of having the privileges of a hired servant and before he can say a word, he is overwhelmed with the love and grace of a father who does not hesitate to grant him far more than he thought possible.

**I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation (Isaiah 61:10).**

His son was dead and is alive again. Can this not be said of every believer?

**And you *He made alive*, who were dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1).**

Whether we come to Christ for the first time, as those who were at one time members of the covenant or as those who have had a trying week with its routine failures, we should never understand God as one who is hesitant to forgive. Sinners who repent are a joy to heaven. But sometimes they are not necessarily a joy to those within the church, who perhaps, and sometimes for what appears to be a good reason, are less willing to offer a warm reception. We will address that in another message.

## Questions for Study

1. How do you explain the two sons in this parable, since one is dead in his sins (pages 4, 5)?
2. How did the son think he could have the best of both worlds (page 5)?
3. Discuss the idea of exchanging masters (page 5)?
4. Is it possible that God would cause a famine? Why (page 6)?
5. Discuss how your environment can invade your character (page 6).
6. Who did the son sin against (page 7)?
7. How did the son underestimate the grace of his father (page 7)?
8. Discuss the father's response to his son's return. Does this mean God's grace is initiated by man's repentance (pages 8, 9)?