

CORE SEMINAR

Spring 2024

The Parables of Jesus

Course 5: The Parable of the Prodigal Son | Luke 15:1-3; 11-32

ICE BREAKER

Choose an ice breaker from the *Spring Community Group Guide* or go to www.fbcportland.org/icebreakers to select an ice breaker to ask your group.

- Spend about 5 minutes discussing the question – this is a great way to “warm up” your group.

INTRODUCTION

*****Most of the content from this lesson was derived from Tim Keller’s extraordinary book, *The Prodigal God*. It is truly an amazing book and really opens up the truth of Scripture. I would encourage you to read this book as you have time.*****

Considering all of Jesus’ parables, there may be none more famous than the parable found in the book of Luke known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It is a parable of a son who takes his father’s inheritance and wastes it all. Then realizing his mistake, he returns to a forgiving father. But, in telling this parable, we often forget that there are two sons mentioned in this parable. This is a parable about a younger brother and an older brother. In this parable, Jesus has given us both brothers so that we can compare and contrast the two brothers. If we don’t compare these brothers, we will miss the message that Jesus is leading us to in helping us understand our relationship with God.

As we turn our attention to this parable, we will be reminded of the weight of human sin as well as the grace, mercy and joy of our Heavenly Father every time a sinner seeks forgiveness and restoration in His father’s arms.

Let’s Pray and we’ll get started...

PRAYER

QUOTE

“Jesus's teaching consistently attracted the irreligious while offending the Bible-believing, religious people of his day. However, in the main, our churches today do not have this effect. The kind of outsiders Jesus attracted are not attracted to contemporary churches, even our most avant-garde ones. We tend to draw conservative, buttoned-down, moralistic people. The licentious and liberated or the broken and marginal avoid church. That can only mean one thing. If the preaching of our ministers and the practice of our parishioners do not have the same effect on people that Jesus had, then we must not be declaring the same message that Jesus did.”

Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*

QUESTION: Does anything stand out to you about this quote? Do you agree/ disagree with this quote?

SET THE STAGE FOR THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON

Have someone in your group read Luke 15:1-3

Before we begin with this famous parable, we must understand the context – who was in the crowd when Jesus began teaching this parable.

From the first three verses, we see that there are:

- Tax collectors [universally seen as sinners by the Jewish people]
- Sinners
- Pharisees and scribes [those in the religious establishment]

But, in these groups we see two different responses:

- The tax collectors and the sinners were “drawing near to hear Him.”
- And the Pharisees and scribes “grumbled” against Him.

From this context, Jesus shared three parables: Parable of the lost sheep, parable of the lost coin, and the Prodigal Son.

QUESTION: Does the context/ background of verses 1-3 help you to understand the reason Jesus told the parable of the prodigal?

- **Based on what you know about the parable, who do you think represents the:**
 - Younger son?
 - Older son?
 - Father?
- **What type of people were naturally drawn to Jesus and why?**

- **How are the Pharisees just as lost as the tax collectors & sinners they despised?**

Let's start again with **verse 11**

Have someone in your group read Luke 15:11-12

Jesus' parable begins with a speech and an introduction to the younger son. The younger son comes to the father and basically says, "father, give me my share of the estate."

Now – just so that we are aware – this request by the younger brother would have astonished the audience, because it would have been seen as highly disrespectful and unconventional. The parables Jesus taught often **shocked** His listeners. He didn't give them what they expected. This approach, exemplified also in the parable of the good Samaritan, reveals Jesus' unique teaching style, which aimed to provoke thought and challenge the "norm".

Let's continue. In those days, if you were a father and had two sons – and you died – then the estate would have been divided this way:

- $\frac{2}{3}$ to the oldest son – because the oldest son received a double portion
- And $\frac{1}{3}$ to the youngest son.

BUT, this division of the father's estate ONLY happened with the father died. So, when the younger son goes to the father and basically states, "give me my share of the estate NOW," – *while the father is still alive* – is to basically wish that the father was already dead.

The younger son wants the father's **things** but not the father. He simply wishes that the father was dead – and this is unheard of.

Now, if Jesus' listeners were shocked at the son's speech, they would have been even more amazed at the father's response. In **verse 12**, the father **agrees** to divide his property between his two sons.

Despite the immense personal cost, the father willingly complies with the younger son's request – demonstrating a heart of love and sacrifice. So, he divides his estate into 3rds and sells off $\frac{1}{3}$ of it and gives it to the younger son. This action leaves the father $\frac{2}{3}$ of the estate to pass along to his other son.

QUESTIONS: What motivated the younger son to demand his inheritance from his father and what type of pain did the father likely experience?

- **Have your actions ever communicated that you want God's things but you don't want God?**
- **What are the sins of the younger son?**

Let's keep reading:

Have someone in your group read Luke 15:13-24

After receiving his share of the inheritance, the younger son squanders it all in reckless living. His life is ruined, and he finds himself literally among the pigs in the mud. It's in this moment that he comes to his senses, recognizing the foolishness of his actions. From this position – he develops a plan.

The plan is this:

- **To go home.** Home is where he belongs and where he is accepted. Home is a **relationship**.
- **To payback what he owes.** He didn't request to be a slave, he requested to be a hired man. A slave lived and worked on the estate. A hired man lived in town and earned a wage. In his context, the younger son realized that an apology would not work – he had to make restitution. So, in this part of the plan, the younger son is proposing to pay his father back the **debt** he owes.

In his plan, the younger son isn't seeking to be reinstated as a son – he acknowledges that he doesn't deserve that status nor is he worthy of it. Instead, he proposes to **earn** his way back, seeking only an opportunity to prove himself through his actions.

With a plan in mind, the younger son sets off for home, and as he approaches, the father spots him from a distance and runs to greet him. **This act is deeply significant** in that cultural context, grown men [especially the patriarchs] did not run under **any** circumstances. So, Jesus' portrayal of the father running towards his son would have shocked the audience, likely eliciting audible murmurs of surprise.

But, there's something else about the father – our Scripture states that he “felt compassion” for him. In the Greek, compassion **means this: to be moved in the inward parts [especially the nobler entrails – the heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys], to feel compassion. These gradually came to denote the seat of the affections**¹ As the son arrives, the father's emotional outpouring continues as he embraces and kisses him, displaying complete and unconditional love and acceptance.

¹ Compassion = splagchnizomai | <https://biblehub.com/greek/4697.htm>

Now – it was at this time that the son attempted to roll out the big pay-back plan, but the father wouldn't hear of it. The father then does something completely outrageous. He commands his servants to:

- Put a robe on the younger son.
- Put a ring on his finger.
- Place sandals on his feet.

Jesus then tells us the father throws a magnificent feast to celebrate the day his lost son has come home!

It's crucial to note that the younger son's **intention** was not to be brought back into the family but to earn his way back. However, the father's actions, such as clothing him in a robe, placing a ring on his finger, and giving him sandals, demonstrate that he is not interested in making his son earn his place back but rather in bringing him back into the family through grace. Through these gestures, the father essentially reinstates the younger son's sonship, not based on merit but out of sheer grace.

Similarly, when we approach God, we often feel unworthy and believe we must earn our place in His family through our efforts. However, God's grace, demonstrated through Jesus, grants us full rights as adopted sons and daughters, accepting us and providing us with security.

QUESTIONS: What did the younger son do with his inheritance money? [squandered it on wild living.]

- When the younger son returned to his father's home, what was his hope? [that his father would let him work as a servant/ hired hand.]
- How did the father receive the younger son?
- The prodigal son expected to be a servant, but what was lavished on him instead?
- How does sin promise enjoyment but bring enslavement? How does obedience to God's will bring true freedom?
- The son was brought to repentance. How is true repentance different than regret or remorse?

Now let's move to **verse 25**... and see how Jesus finishes this parable.

Have someone in your group read Luke 15:25-32

Jesus finishes by introducing a new character – the older brother – and He tells us that this brother is in “the field.” Now, we are meant to take many things away from this brother. The older brother has:

- Stayed with the father.
- Remained faithful to the father.
- Has not embarrassed the father.
- And, he continues to work in the field.

So, he was in the field and when he came near to the house he heard a party going on with music and dancing. Upon hearing music and dancing coming from the house, the older brother inquires from a servant about the cause of the celebration. Learning that his younger brother has returned and that his father has killed the fattened calf in his honor, the older brother becomes furious and refuses to join the celebration. By making this move, the older brother not only rejects his brother's **reconciliation** but also insults his father's **integrity**. Essentially, he implies that he wants no part in his father's family if his younger brother is welcomed back. The father attempts to reconcile with the older brother, but his efforts are in vain.

In **verse 29**, the older brother addresses his father without calling him "father," indicating his anger and disdain. He says, **"Look...these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!"** By referring to his brother as "this son of yours" instead of acknowledging him as his own sibling, the older brother refuses to recognize their familial bond. *[By the way, this is the 3rd parable taught in succession. In the first two, someone searched for the lost sheep and the lost coin. The crowd would have noticed that Jesus removed this part from this parable. They would have also known that it would have been the older son's responsibility to go and bring the younger son home. No matter the cost...]*

In addition, the older brother's resentment extends even to the celebration of the fattened calf. In the cultural context of the time, the killing of the fattened calf for a meal was a rare and significant event, often signifying a grand occasion. By his actions, the father is symbolizing the immense joy and celebration of his son's return, a momentous occasion for the entire community.

However, the older brother fails to see the significance of this gesture. Instead, he focuses solely on the perceived *misuse* of his inheritance, indicating his narrow-mindedness and inability to appreciate the deeper meaning behind his father's actions. While the servants, the community, and even the father himself recognize the significance of the moment, the older brother remains blinded by his own sense of entitlement and resentment.

SO, we must ask the question – what does the older son care about? What is really important to him?

- The older son cares about the father's things. That is what is really important to him.
- And, he doesn't seem to really care about the father... ***is this sounding familiar??***

He seems to care more about:

- the family name [serving and obeying his father.]
- the estate [in the fields working]
- the cost of the celebration [fatted calf] that is taking from his future inheritance.

So, he cares about the father's things but doesn't seem to care about the father's **heart.**

What's interesting – if you think back to the first of the story – the father had to sell $\frac{1}{3}$ of his property to appease the younger's son request. Which meant he kept $\frac{2}{3}$ of the estate as an inheritance for the older son. When the father went out to plead with the older son, he told him, ***“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.”***

And this is the TRUTH! The younger son's share is gone. All that is left to the father will be there for the older son to inherit. He is the only heir left... it will all be his.

- And all the older son can see is that his inheritance is diminishing as a result of the younger brother's return.

QUESTIONS: How did the older brother respond to the celebration when the younger brother returned?

- **What are the sins of the older son?**
- **How was his attitude like that of the Pharisees and the scribes?**
- **Are churches today more full of “elder brothers” than we would like to think? In what ways?**
- **How can we avoid thinking, feeling, and acting in the same way as the elder son?**

CONCLUSION

When we get to **verse 32** – Jesus ends the parable. Kapoot. It's over! We leave this parable and we don't know what happens with the family. We are left in a cliff hanger!

Why does this story end the way it does? Why does Jesus leave this parable unfinished? What is Jesus attempting to get across to the listener?

Let's think through it.

As the story progresses – that the father has 2 sons: one “bad” and one “good.” BUT they have both been alienated from the father because they both have been using the father to

get to the things they really love – which is the **wealth** and the **status**. The only difference is that one has been doing this by leaving and ultimately breaking all of the rules. AND the other has been doing this by staying, obeying and keeping all of the rules.

So, in conclusion, Jesus is teaching us that there are two kinds of lostness and that both brothers are lost. They are both alienated from the father. And in these two kinds of lostness, we see that we can escape God as much through “morality and religion” as we can through “immorality and sin.”

There are a lot of Christians with an elder brother type of heart. They often justify their religion by saying things like:

- I try very hard to be obedient. I go to church. I pray.
- I try and serve Jesus and as a result of me doing these things – God you owe me by answering my prayers, to give me a relatively good life and to take me to heaven when I die.
- We do these things in an attempt to get God to **give** us things we really want.

Elder brothers obey, to get things from God – and if God doesn’t give those things – elder brother’s get very angry.

So, the most stunning thing about this parable is in the way it ends. We now know who the “2 sons” represent. Remember the context, He was speaking to tax collectors & sinners as well as Pharisees & scribes.

- Tax collectors and sinners are like the younger brother. The younger brother has been “bad,” and through his actions we get a very traditional picture of sin.
- Pharisees and scribes are like the older brother. The older brother has been “good,” and through his actions we get a very traditional picture of obedience.

From this, Jesus’ listeners know exactly what His point is and so do we.

- The younger brother goes off – then comes back. He humbles himself, repents and goes into the feast a saved and recognized son of the Father. The lover of prostitutes is saved.
- But the elder brother – the good man who has kept all of the moral rules – is lost as far as we know.

QUESTION: List the 6 most influential things that you believe is causing the church not to reach out to the “younger sons/brothers” of the world today?

CLOSING PRAYER