

FPFWC Christian Development



Called from the Margins of Society

March 2023

Spring Quarter

March 4, 2023

Lesson #1 – The Prodigal Son

SCRIPTURE TEXT – Luke 15:11-32

ICE BREAKER –

1. What causes us to harbor resentment when mercy is shown to someone else?
2. How do feelings of shame or sorrow lead a person to repentance?

Key Verse – “The son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.”—Luke 15:21

LESSON BACKGROUND

The meaning and implications of parables have been greatly debated. The Greek word translated “parable” (Matthew 15:15; Mark 4:13; Luke 8:9; etc.) is also translated as “proverb” (4:23). In the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, a form of t

he same Greek word is used regarding a proverb (Ezekiel 18:2) or a song of warning (Micah 2:4).

At their core, biblical parables compare something familiar—like an object or experience—to a truth about God and His work. Parables function on two levels: their literal reference and their spiritual implications. Jesus taught with parables to challenge His audience to consider what assumptions or attitudes of theirs were at odds with God’s work (compare Matthew 13:10–15).

Today’s Scripture is frequently called the parable of the prodigal son. While modern audiences sometimes use the designation “prodigal” to speak of the rebellion of the younger son, the word’s meaning is associated with reckless waste and spending.

This parable is the third in a series in Luke 15. The other parables describe a lost sheep (15:3–7) and a lost coin (15:8–10). All three parables include similar themes: (1) something valuable is lost, (2) the lost thing is found, and (3) celebration ensues.

Jesus told these parables as a response to criticism from Pharisees and scribes. These groups were upset because Jesus “receiveth sinners, and eateth with them” (Luke 15:2). Throughout His ministry, Jesus associated with people whom the religious leaders considered unclean.

These people included “publicans” (Luke 5:30; 15:1), Jews who collected taxes for the ruling powers. Tax collectors were hated and regarded as having betrayed their people because they assisted the Roman Empire and acted corruptly (see 3:12–13).

Another group that Jesus frequently associated with was “sinners” (Matthew 9:11; Luke 7:34; 15:2). This title applied to people who had failed to follow the Law of Moses as interpreted by the religious leaders of the day.

Jesus’ association with these people was not limited to the public gatherings. He shared meals with them before they had sought the proper means of forgiveness and restitution as prescribed by the law. His association with them was critical to His mission to seek those who are lost (see Luke 19:10) and bring repentance and salvation (5:29–31).

LESSON COMMENTARY

15:11. This parable appears only in Luke’s gospel and is acknowledged by many as a masterpiece of storytelling. While it is often known as the parable of the Prodigal Son, note that Jesus began the parable with the mention of **two sons** (15:11), with the older brother playing as vital a role in the parable as the younger.

a. The First Son (15:12–24)

15:12–20a. The younger of the man’s sons exhibited a foolish rebellion (15:12–13). He selfishly requested his inheritance, showing himself as disrespectful and uncharitable. In effect, when the young man asked for his inheritance he was betraying a materialistic, selfish impulse at best, and at worst was saying to his father, “I wish you were already dead.” When the young man received his inheritance (15:12) he imprudently departed, and then he sinfully squandered his money (15:13). The young man found himself in an inevitable destitution (15:14–16). He was struck by poverty (15:14), thrown into virtual slavery (15:15a), and experienced hunger and estrangement (15:16–17), probably for the first time in his life. From the nadir of this condition the young man took the steps necessary for his restoration (15:17–20a). He **came to his senses** (15:17), that is, he became aware that his own foolishness and sinfulness had brought him to this destitution. He realized he needed to make a full confession (15:18, 21), and he had to own up to the condition of his heart and the consequences of his actions. He exhibited genuine humility when he concluded that he was unworthy to be called a son and was willing to accept the status of hired man (15:19). Finally, he took the necessary action to follow through in deed from the intentions of his heart—**he got up and came to his father** (15:20a).

b. The Gracious Father (15:20b–24)

15:20b–24. The note that **his father saw him** (15:20b) while the young man was still far off may indicate that the father was looking for the son, though the text does not say this and the point should not be pressed. The father’s reaction, like the response of the shepherd to finding the lost sheep and of the woman upon finding the lost coin, was “exaggerated” (15:20c). “There can be no doubt that in the father’s welcome of the younger son Jesus is teaching that the heavenly Father welcomes returning sinners” (Morris, *Luke*, 243). The father’s compassion for his returning son would not permit him to accept the terms offered by the Prodigal.

The father did not even allow his son to get so far as to propose becoming like one of the **hired men** (15:19b)—nothing short of full restoration would do. The son was clothed (15:22) and his return was celebrated (15:23). The father’s justification for this celebration revealed the severity of the son’s condition before his repentance (**was dead ... was lost**) and the complete restoration of his condition since his repentance (**has come to life ... has been found**) (15:24). The father’s statement made the application of the parable clear: Sinners are dead and lost, but they can come to life and can be found if they return to the Father.

c. The Second Son (15:25–30)

In a sense the parable was complete, having made, for the third time, the point made in the first two parables of this chapter—God finds and receives lost sinners who repent and return to Him. But the attitude of the Pharisees (15:2) needed to be addressed directly. It is clear that the older brother represented the scribes and Pharisees. It is this half of the parable that is most pertinent to the context of 15:1, and in which the primary point of the parable is found.

15:25–30. When the older brother was made aware that his younger brother had returned and that a celebration was underway to welcome him back (15:25–27) he became angry and resentful (15:28a). His complaint **I have never neglected a command of yours** (arguably not true) (15:29) echoed the attitude of the legalistic Pharisees. His accusations against his brother were uncharitable (and untrue—there is no mention of **prostitutes** [15:30b] in the earlier narrative about the younger son). His unwillingness to be forgiving was in stark contrast to the attitude of the father. And his attitudes were not significantly different from those of his younger brother’s. The older brother would have liked **a young goat** so that he could **be merry with his friends** (v. 29), that is, to enjoy material goods from his father without his father’s company. The two were not so different after all!

d. The Gracious Father (15:31–32)

15:31–32. Again, the father was the picture of graciousness and forbearance. His pleas to the older son, reiterating his earlier words about the younger son’s pre- and post-repentant states were largely lost on the bitter and resentful older son. No conclusion to this exchange between the father and this older son is given. Jesus allowed the Pharisees to write their own conclusion: They could continue to resent that Jesus welcomed tax collectors and sinners (cf. 15:2), or they could drop their bitterness and join the celebration as repentant sinners themselves. Perhaps an application from these parables is that God’s people should weigh carefully their own attitudes toward those on the fringes of society—and consider more deliberate attempts to reach them as Jesus did, and for which He was criticized. We should also be slow to criticize or question the motives of those who are seeking to minister to social and spiritual outcasts (such as drug addicts, homosexuals, prostitutes, or criminals). The last verse summarizes the point of all three parables—what was lost has been found.

LESSON NUGGET – Jesus saw the disobedient son who was wasting his inheritance and needed to come home to the Father. He also saw his potential. The son could return home and lovingly serve his father because there is hope for every sinner. Jesus welcomes everyone.

Sources: Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary, Wiersbe Study Bible and The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary