

## “The Parable of the Loving Father”

November 8, 2020

Luke 15:11-32

### I. Introduction

Jesus had been teaching the tax collectors and the moral outcasts spiritual truths concerning God’s kingdom when the religious leaders of the day made their displeasure known, in [Luke 15:2](#) they muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” In the eyes of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, tax collectors or publicans, who had sold themselves to the Roman government and prostitutes and other moral failures had cut themselves off from Israel’s religious community and were spiritually dead—lost.

The leaders hated Jesus for confronting and exposing their self-righteous hypocrisy, and in response they accused Him of being empowered by Satan. Another way they tried to discredit Jesus was by attacking Him for associating with the sinful, dregs of Jewish society, the tax collectors and sinners. That Jesus associated with Satan’s people (as the religious leaders viewed them) instead of God’s people (as they viewed themselves) proved, they argued, that He could not be from God.

Like the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, this parable shows God’s joy over the salvation of the lost. But while the first two parables emphasized God’s part in seeking sinners, this third parable, although still showing God as the seeker, focuses also on the human part of salvation—man’s sin, rejection, repentance, and return to God. This story is usually called “The Parable of the Prodigal Son” (the word *prodigal* means *wasteful*), but it could also be called “The Parable of the Loving Father.”

This familiar story revolves around three characters: the younger son, the father, and the older son and how they acted in a culture whose priorities included seeking honor and avoiding shame. The younger son appears to be the extreme example of shame by his rebellion against all that is right. Then, in the eyes of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, the father appears shameful when he accepts the son back. Finally, there is the older brother who represents the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, who believe that they were the most honorable and without shame, but in the end, they are shown also to be shameful.

## II. Three Characters

**A. The Younger Son** The story opens with rebellion as the younger son demands his “share of the estate.” The scribes and Pharisees listening to this story would have been surprised and shocked by this rebellious demand. It was disrespectful and showed a total lack of love and gratitude to the one who had provided everything for him. They would have considered it shameful, unacceptable behavior and a violation of the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment to “Honor your father and mother” (Exodus 20:12).

According to Jewish law, the eldest son in a family receives twice as much inheritance as any of the other sons in a family. Also, according to Jewish law if he wanted to, a father could distribute his wealth during his lifetime. The younger son had a legal right to ask for his share of the estate. But in this parable, he didn't request his share, he demanded it! It was like he was saying “*I wish you were dead.*” By receiving his share in advance, the son forfeited any claim to the estate when his father died. In addition, he lost his name, his standing and even his prestige in the community in which he was raised. He was completely cut off; he was regarded as dead.

In spite of all that, the rebellious son wanted his share. Instead of slapping him across the face for his insolence, his father gave him what he wanted. In the eyes of the religious leaders, by consenting to his son's demand, the father had acted shamefully himself. But Jesus was making the point that God gives sinners the freedom to choose their course of iniquity. God didn't create robots, but people with free-will.

With his inheritance tucked away, the younger son was on his own and free to go. His slogan could have been: “*Have Money, Will travel.*” So away he went. “There he squandered his wealth in wild living.” Life in the far country was not what he expected. His resources ran out and with no money, it seems that his fair-weather friends left him. “After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.” So, the younger son was forced to do for a stranger what he would not do for his father—go to work! Since his job was feeding unclean animals—smelly pigs—he probably was working for a Gentile and probably wasn't even allowed to celebrate the Sabbath. Because of the famine,

his daily food was insufficient to keep him from being hungry all the time. He even longed to eat the food given to the unclean pigs.

This scene in the story was Jesus' way of emphasizing what sin really does in the lives of those who reject God the Father's will. Jesus was emphasizing that the seeming sinful pleasures are fleeting—**turn to 1 John 2:16-17**. Sin promises freedom, but it only brings slavery. As Jesus said in **John 8:34**, **"I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin."** Sin promises success but it only leads to failure; it promises life, but, as it says in **Romans 6:23**, **"the wages of sin is death"**—an eternity in hell. The boy thought he would find himself, but, in his rebellion, he only lost himself. He had looked for human kindness but found none. It wasn't until he was at the bottom of the pit of despair that **"He came to his senses"**—he repented.

To *"repent"* means to *"change one's mind,"* and that is what the young man did as he cared for the pigs. He repented—as he began to think about his father—how he had hurt him, how his father had provided him with the inheritance that he had wasted. Since pigs aren't great conversationalists, I assume he talked to himself, **"How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!"** He compared himself, not to the servants who were in steady employment but to the temporary help. Compared to his situation in a pig pen, at his father's farm, hired men were living like royalty.

When things were as black as possible, the young man finally came to his senses—he changed his mind about himself and his situation and admitted that he was wrong—he was a sinner. At last, he realized that, unlike the man he now worked for, his father was a generous man and that service at home was far better than **"freedom in the far country."** As it says in **Romans 2:4**, **"It is God's goodness, not just man's badness or sinfulness, that leads us to repentance."** With that in mind, the boy rehearsed a brief confession to offer when he arrived home: **"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants."**

**B. The Father** Forced to his only option, the hopeful younger son **"got up and went to his father."** The reception he received was beyond his wildest imagination and it must have shocked and stunned the Pharisees. **"While he was still a long way off, his father saw him."** The father had been watching and

waiting for his son to return. But, instead of waiting for his son to come to him, the father “**was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son.**” In the East, old men do not run—it shows a lack of dignity and decorum—a lack of self-respect, especially when this occurs in public view of the villagers. In the eyes of the religious leaders, this was another shameful act of the father. But there were reasons for the father to ignore protocol. One obvious reason was his love for his son and his desire to show his love. Another reason was that the prodigal son had brought disgrace to his family and village and if anyone could shield him from the verbal and perhaps even physical abuse that he might receive, it was his father. So, he rushed toward his son and provided protection.

Even more shocking to the Pharisees was that when he reached the prodigal, the father, in spite his son’s filthiness and the vile rags that he most likely wore, “**threw his arms around his son and kissed him.**” Before the son could so much as fall before his father as a slave and kiss his feet, or bend his knee and kiss his father’s hand, his father accepted him back as a member of the family. By kissing him, the father made it known to his son and everyone else that he still considered him his son. Therefore, when the young man wanted to give his speech and say that he would like to be employed as a hired man on his father’s farm, he no longer could do so. The father had ruled that out by kissing him.

But the son did confess his sin. “**Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.**” The young man spoke the truth. Because of his past he was no longer worthy; he had forfeited every right to sonship. But the father’s love forced the son to let go of his carefully rehearsed plan. The father forgave his sins, accepted him back as a son. The past was forgiven and forgotten. To demonstrate his acceptance, the father brought out “**the best robe and put it on him. He put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.**” The robe was the one worn on the most significant occasions, the ring was the father’s signet ring, both demonstrated that the son had regained all the privileges, rights, and authority as his son. Sandals, not usually worn by slaves, again signified his full restoration to sonship. Just as the son returned to the father with nothing, so repentant, empty-handed sinners come to their heavenly

Father, who justifies the ungodly—Romans 4:5 (NKJ) says, “But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.”

Like the shepherd who found his lost sheep and the woman who found the lost coin, the father showed his joy by ordering his servants to prepare an extravagant celebration for the whole village. The father had found his lost son, who was dead and had come to life again; who was lost but now had been found. All three celebrations—the shepherd, the woman, and the father—demonstrate heaven’s joy at the divine recovery of lost sinners. And this party, like the first two, in reality honored not the one found, but the finder, who sought his son and gave him full reconciliation through his merciful forgiveness and gracious love. This is the spiritual experience of every lost sinner who comes to God the Father through faith in Jesus Christ—in John 5:24 Jesus said, “Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.”

**C. The Older Son** At this point the scribes and the Pharisees must have felt relieved—Jesus hadn’t said anything about them. For once they had escaped His judgment—He had centered His attention on the tax collectors and sinners. But Jesus hadn’t forgotten that the father had an older son. His firstborn had been a faithful son who took personal interest in the farm. Of course, the son knew that he was the heir. He served his father well. And his father appreciated his hard work.

But the elder brother has broken both of God’s commands—turn to Matthew 22:34-40. He didn’t love God (represented by the father in the story) and he didn’t love his brother. Just like the Pharisees, the elder brother would not forgive his younger brother for wasting his inheritance and he wouldn’t forgive his father for forgiving his younger brother. He was self-righteous, he could definitely see the sins of his brother, but couldn’t see his own sin. He was full of pride. He had served his father and never disobeyed. But his heart wasn’t in his work. He did it to please and impress his father; not as a labor of love.

The same father who had run to meet the prodigal came out of the house of feasting to plead with the older son. How gracious and patient he was with his son—just as God is gracious and patient with us and Jesus was with the Pharisees. Even though the father explained that he was willing to have a feast for the

older boy and his friends and that everything the father had belonged to the older son, the older son remained angry and would not go in. He stayed outside and pouted. He was missing the joy of forgiving his brother and restoring the broken relationship. He was missing the joy of pleasing his father and uniting the family again.

The older, legalistic brother was a picture of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. They were unrepentant, self-righteous, hypocrites who, as Jesus said in [Matthew 23:25](#), were “clean on the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they were full of greed and self-indulgence.” Like the older brother, they chose to scorn Jesus Christ, God incarnate, for reconciling sinners whom the Jewish religious leaders had rejected. They refused to join the heavenly banquet with those praising God for their salvation.

The father had the last word, so we do not know how the story ended. But we do know that, in real life, the scribes and Pharisees continued to oppose Jesus and separated themselves from His followers and within months were instrumental in Christ’s arrest and death. In spite of God the Father’s pleadings, they would not come in.

### **III. Conclusion**

The prodigal son is an example of every sinner. They deny God His place, they hate Him and even wish that He didn’t exist. They refuse to love Him or even give Him honor. They take the gifts He gives them and squander them on a life of self-indulgence, degenerate living, and unrestrained lust. And like the prodigal son, they find themselves spiritually empty and destitute, with no one to help, nowhere to turn, and facing eternal death. At some time in the past, this described each one of us. [Romans 3:23](#) says that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” But God came seeking you just as He did the tax collectors and sinners as well as the religious leaders. [Romans 5:8](#) puts it this way, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” How does [John 3:16](#) put it? “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” When you made Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior ([Romans 10:9](#)), you were welcomed back into God’s family, you became one of His children and all heaven rejoiced over your “home coming.”

The older son is a warning to us. Because of his attitude, he missed the joy of forgiving his brother and restoring a broken relationship; he missed the joy of pleasing his father and reuniting the family again. If we are out of fellowship with God, we cannot be in fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ, and if we hold an unforgiving attitude toward others, we cannot be in communion with God—turn to Matthew 5:21-24. When they show true repentance, we must forgive those who sin, and we should seek to restore them in grace and humility—turn to Matthew 18:21-35. Ephesians 4:32 says, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”