



## Unit .25

### Session .02

# Jesus Tells the Parable of the Sons

## Scripture



### Luke 15:11-13,17-32

**11** And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. **12** And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. **13** Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ... **17** “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! **18** I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. **19** I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”” **20** And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. **21** And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ **22** But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand,

and shoes on his feet. **23** And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. **24** For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate. **25** “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. **26** And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. **27** And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ **28** But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, **29** but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. **30** But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ **31** And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. **32** It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

## Intro Options



**Main Point:**  
God's love and forgiveness extends to any who repents of their sin and self-righteousness.

## Option 1

Have you ever noticed how many children's films are about the main character being separated from a father?

- *An American Tail* relates the story of Fievel, a mouse whose curiosity leads him to a forbidden part of a ship full of immigrants. In a terrible storm, Fievel is swept out to sea and spends the rest of the film trying to find his papa.
- *Finding Nemo* is about a little clown fish who rebels against his father's wishes, gets caught by a diver in the ocean, and ends up in an aquarium in a dentist's office. The film shows Nemo's dad, Marlin, traveling the ocean past sharks and jellyfish in order to find his son.
- *Annie* is about an orphan girl longing to be reunited with her parents.
- *Home Alone* tells the story of a boy who wishes his family was gone and comes to regret that wish!

Stories of separation and reunion, longing and fulfillment, exile and return strike a chord in our hearts. Why? Because these stories all somehow mirror the great story of the world, in which sinners who are lost and in bondage need to be found and set free.

- **What books or movies about someone who is lost and found do you like most? Why do you think these stories resonate with us?**

## Option 2

The parable of the prodigal son is a story about one son's journey of living sinfully, reaching the point of desperation, and finding a forgiving embrace from the father he once turned his back on. However, the parable of the lost son is as much about the older brother as it is about the "prodigal." We tend to forget that there are plenty of verses in Luke 15 dedicated to the grumbling of the prodigal's older brother. It is easy to mistake those latter verses for a kind of "afterword," but really they are just as central to the story. Thus, this parable really should be called "The Parable of the Self-Righteous Son," or at least "The Parable of the Two Self-Centered Sons," because that's really the point that Jesus was making. By depicting the central sins of both the younger and older brothers, Jesus was showing that these boys are not so different, at least not in heart. In this session, we'll examine this famous parable and see how the story Jesus told reveals God's goodness and heart to welcome sinners home.

- **Which of the brothers do you think was more wrong?**

## TEACHING PLAN

### Read Luke 15:11-13.



Jesus didn't give us any backstory to the relationship between the younger son and his father. Was it tumultuous? Was it hostile? Jesus didn't tell us, but the small detail He did give us in the introduction is actually a big clue. By asking for his inheritance early, the younger son was essentially saying to his father, "I wish you were dead." Today's equivalent would be a teenager spitting in his dad's face and screaming, "I want you dead!" He wanted what his father could give him now, even at the expense of their relationship.

In verse 13, Jesus said the inheritance the younger son took early in his greed was "squandered." He said that the lifestyle of the son was "foolish." Whatever experience or possession the son was chasing in his new life came up short in reality. The imagery here (and afterward) is stark. The son, as we will see, lost everything. It's strange to think he couldn't have seen it coming. Maybe he was foolishly telling himself he could turn everything around. Maybe the highs of his rebellious living were too addictive. In any event, we see that living with yourself at the center is to live spiritually bankrupt and sets yourself up for a life of catastrophic emptiness.

- **Think of when you got something you'd wanted for a long time only to find it didn't satisfy. Why didn't it deliver on the promise?**

### Read Luke 15:17-24.



As we see in this next section, the prodigal son had bottomed out. He was not just at the end of his money and wild lifestyle but at the end of himself. Interestingly enough, this journey is sometimes necessary in one's coming to Christ. The circumstances may look different for each of us, but until we despair of ourselves, we will not see the beauty of Christ's fullness given to us in the gospel.

- **Like the prodigal son, have you realized that the things of this world do not give us lasting fulfillment, and that lasting fulfillment can only be found in Jesus? If so, what were the circumstances surrounding that realization?**

The crucial moment in Jesus' story occurred as the son approached his hometown. Jesus said that the father saw his son while he was still a long way off. In other words, the father had been watching diligently, hoping to catch a glimpse of his son. Through it all, the father had not stopped loving his child. He hoped to see their relationship restored. His eagerness to see his younger son again drove him time after time to the front of the yard, where he stared into the distance to see if maybe today would be the day his boy would be on his way home. 

- **Make a list of several characteristics communicated by the father's actions in this parable. How are these characteristics also true of God?**

# COMMENTARY

## Luke 15

**11-13.** The three parables in Luke 15 (lost sheep, lost coin, lost son) were told in an environment that heightened the drama of their stories. The religious leaders were complaining about Jesus welcoming notorious sinners to His table. In response, Jesus didn't give an explanation but told a series of stories, with the third one especially pointed—casting God the Father in the role of the loving father and His opponents in the role of a resentful elder brother.

Hundreds of years before Jesus told this story, the teacher of Ecclesiastes gave us a philosophical background for it. Apparently the reflections of an elderly Solomon note how often he declared the heights of his pleasure-seeking and the peaks of his accumulation as nothing more than vapor, smoke, a “chasing the wind.” Once you catch it, it vanishes in your hands. The pursuit, at the end of it all, proves fruitless, worthless, and empty.

What was true for Solomon and true for the prodigal is true for us today—sin is turning from the satisfaction of God to the prospect of satisfying ourselves with things God has made. It is choosing the gift over the Giver. It is living as if we are the lords of our own hearts and the sovereigns of our own kingdoms. When we choose sin, in fact, it is choosing to live as if our heavenly Father is no longer alive.

**17-24.** Some have said that the most significant character in the parable of the lost son is the father. He corresponds to our heavenly Father, who overflows with loving-kindness to all generations, whose love is steadfast and equally abundant in riches to younger and older brothers, the rebellious and the religious. The father in the story, like our heavenly Father, operates on the kingdom economy, not the world's. When the lost son returns, he imprudently runs to greet him. And then he throws a party—for the kid who wished his father were dead, who shook his fist at him with a shameful spending spree during his exile! Like the joy for the found sheep and the found coin, the joy for the found son seems disproportionate to the occasion. And it is, if your heart, like the older brother's heart, is set to law, not gospel.

**Main Point:**  
God's love and forgiveness extends to any who repents of their sin and self-righteousness.



## 99 Essential Doctrines *(p. 16, DDG)*

### God is Gracious

God's nature is to delight in giving unmerited favor to those who are undeserving (Eph. 2:8-9). His grace toward sinners is found most clearly in the salvation He has provided through Christ. Because of sin, humanity is undeserving of salvation—all of us have turned our backs on God, and as a result, we deserve death (Rom. 6:23). However, instead of leaving people in their sins, God has demonstrated His graciousness by providing atonement and forgiveness for our sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus (2 Cor. 5:21).

# TEACHING PLAN

Jesus said that when the father finally saw the son at the edge of the village, he pulled up his robe and ran to him. In Middle Eastern culture, running was considered shameful for someone in a position of honor, but that didn't stop this father. The son spoke, acknowledging his sin against his God and his father, rightly admitting that he was unworthy to be a son once more. He understood his unworthiness to be part of the family and receive such love. He recognized the weight and depth of his sin and the shame and agony his father experienced because of it. He was truly repentant. And the father responded by accepting the boy back as a son and not as a servant. 

- **How does it make you feel knowing that God graciously forgives when you repent from your sin?**

**Read Luke 15:25-32.**



Jesus described how the older son responded to people celebrating his brother's return. In Jesus' culture, any older son would be expected to hightail into the house and join the feast as quickly as possible. Instead, the older son stayed outside, choosing to murmur about the apparent unfairness of his father's actions. He deemed the party unworthy of his attendance.

You see, Jesus painted a picture of two types of lost people. The first is openly rebellious—the “in your face” sin of the younger son. The younger son's request illustrates the enormity and consequence of human sin. “God, we want what You can give us, but we don't want You!” The second is a more subtle type of sinner—seen in the older son. He represents someone who appears to be near God but is actually far away. He's the church member who wants God's blessing but could care less about God's name being honored or about glorifying God with his life. He doesn't care about his father or his brother—only about himself and what he can get out of the situation.

Just as the father went out to meet his prodigal son, he went out to convince his puffed up and arrogant older son to come in and celebrate his brother's return. In essence, the loving father had two sons who blocked his love in different ways. The younger one had walled himself off from the father's love by doing evil, while the older one walled himself off from that same love by doing “good.” The older brother went through the motions so he could gain rights in the household, not true membership in the family. The younger brother—the repentant rebel—was inside feasting while the older brother—the “good” son—stayed outside pouting.

- **How can our “good deeds” be a way of walling ourselves off from a relationship with God?**

Jesus ended the parable as a cliffhanger, leaving the audience waiting for the story's resolution: Did the older brother go in and join the family celebration? By doing so, we are invited to examine our own hearts to determine which of the two brothers we identify with—the younger rebellious one, or the older rule-following one. Will we turn from our rebellious living and turn back to the Father whose presence and love is what we long for? Will we enter the house of God and become a part of God's family? Or will we stay out in the field, appearing close to God while we are actually far from His heart? Whichever way we lean, Jesus invites us in to celebrate the Father's warm embrace.

# COMMENTARY

## Luke 15

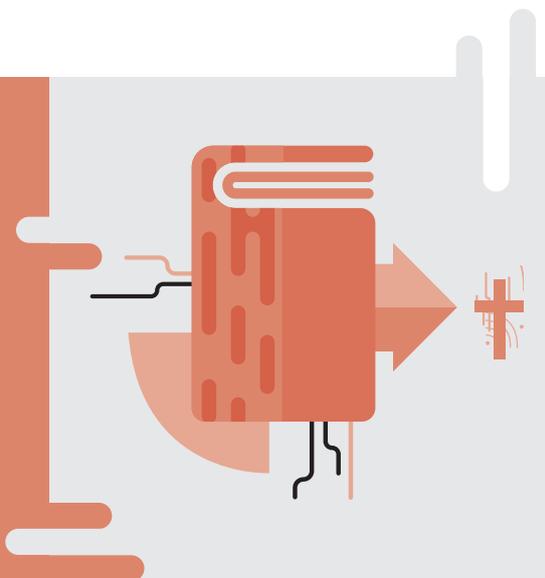
**Main Point:**  
God's love and forgiveness extends to any who repents of their sin and self-righteousness.

**25-32.** In a brilliant way, Jesus was suggesting a fulfillment to a familial dysfunction at work throughout the biblical generations, particularly between older brothers and younger brothers. According to Jewish custom, the oldest son is first in line when it comes to honor and legacy. However, throughout the Old Testament, family after family shows us the younger brothers outwitting, outlasting, and outshining the older brothers. The failure of the older brother to live up to his honorable position begins with Cain, proceeds through Esau to Joseph's brothers and to David's brothers, and culminates in the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. It is not that the younger siblings are all that great themselves, but one way God reinforces His penchant for shaming the wise with the foolish and the strong with the weak (1 Cor. 1:27) is by making the older serve the younger (Gen. 25:23, Rom. 9:12).

However, it is also worth pointing out that there is a big difference between the third story and the first two in Luke 15. In the accompanying parables of the lost coin and the lost sheep, it is interesting that someone goes looking for the lost items. In the lost-son parable, however, nobody goes (certainly not the older brother). Nevertheless, Jesus is the good older brother who does go out and seek the lost in order to rescue them. Contrasting with the older brother in this narrative, Jesus willingly goes to great pains to not only restore lost prodigal children, but also provides the means for them to return home and be restored with the Father.

## (p. 18, DDG) Christ Connection

The Pharisees and scribes criticized Jesus for welcoming sinners and dining with them. In response, Jesus told a story of a father longing for and celebrating his wayward son's return. This story illustrates God's joy over sinners coming to repentance and trusting in Jesus, the Savior, who came to seek and save the lost.



# Our Mission

God's Story has always been designed to connect with our story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own. Suggested answers to these questions can be found on the right-hand side of the page for leaders.

## Head



**If you were to summarize the essence of the story in your own words, what would you say?**

**Why is it important to emphasize the Father's desire to restore the relationship with both of his sons?**

## Heart



**Why do you think the story of the prodigal son is so relevant for today?**

**What does the prodigal's story teach us about pursuing a pleasure-seeking lifestyle?**

## Hands



**Like the prodigal son, what are some ways we might waste God's good gifts in our own lives?**

**What are some ways we can better utilize His gifts beginning this week?**

**Main Point:**  
**God's love and forgiveness extends to any who repents of their sin and self-righteousness.**



## Head

In Luke 15:30 we see that the older son refused to call the younger son his “brother.” Instead, he only referred to him as his father’s other son. Then Jesus ended His parable with the gracious father’s response to his older son’s complaint. Although the older son had lashed out and refused to address his dad respectfully, the father replied by calling him “son.” The father reminded him of their shared relationship. He earnestly wanted his older son to come inside so that the family would be whole.

The father turned the focus away from possessions, works, and obedience. The father desired relationship. The issue was neither the faithfulness of the older son nor the reckless living of the younger one. Rather, the emphasis is on the need for the father-son relationship to be restored. The father’s response of graciousness is directed to both sons, just as the graciousness of our heavenly Father is directed to all humanity through His common grace and mercy.



## Heart

The prodigal son’s reckless tour of debauchery is nothing new. People have lived for the sake of their own pleasure since the fall of mankind. One reason this story from Jesus still resonates so well today is that the pleasure-seeking, immoral lifestyle of the younger son has basically become the default state for the average young adult in the Western world. You don’t even have to renounce your dad to live like the prodigal son anymore; you can do it in high school on spring break or in the college frat/sorority house.

But the other enduring constant is the end result of that kind of living. What happens to the prodigal son is what happens to everyone who goes full-tilt into self-worship—they end up with nothing to show for it but scars, sorrows, and a life of regrets. Nobody gets to their deathbed, after all, and says, “I wish I’d been more selfish. I wish I’d lived more wastefully.”



## Hands

One thing we learn from the younger son is that outwardly-rebellious sin eventually leads people to squander their lives until they are at the mercy of whatever they have glued themselves to. People attach themselves to drugs, alcohol, relationships, TV, and so forth. We become addicted to something or someone we think will provide hope; instead, the addiction brings enslavement, reminding us to daily avoid the temptation to fall into the traps of the older brother and the younger brother.