

## The Parables of Jesus Lesson 10

### The Parable of the Prodigal Son

In looking at Luke 15 we find three parables of 'lostness': the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. These parables highlight Jesus' message of God's concern for the lost and the joy in their return, contrasting this with the self-righteous attitude of the Pharisees who scorned sinners. In this lesson we will focus on the third of these parables and that is the parable of the lost son, or more commonly known as 'the prodigal son'. One misunderstanding is that the word "prodigal" mean "rebellious" or "runaway." The actual meaning of the word "prodigal" is: *spending money or resources freely, recklessly, or wastefully; extravagantly generous or lavish.*

#### The Text

Luke 15:1-10 NIV Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup> "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. <sup>14</sup> After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup> "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

<sup>22</sup> "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. <sup>25</sup> "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. <sup>27</sup> 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' <sup>28</sup> "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup> But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him! <sup>31</sup> "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

#### Introduction and Context

Like the two previous parables in Luke 15, the familiar story of the 'prodigal son' highlights the joy that results from even one sinner who repents.

However, now we have the introduction of the older son, which speaks directly to the attitude of the Pharisees and scribes who are grumbling against Jesus' mission to the 'lost sheep' of the house of Israel.

Additionally, we have the character of the compassionate father who is waiting and watching for his son to return home. This aspect highlights God's mercy toward sinners who return home, to which the father's celebration is seen as 'prodigal' in the eyes of the older son.

The main point of the parable is not necessarily about 'getting your act together' but how one is welcomed and loved by the Father and experiences His amazing grace which restores ones identity no matter how far someone has wandered.

## Walking Through the Parable

As we walk through the parable, we see three movements: 1. The Younger Son with his rebellion and return, 2. The Father and His restoration, and 3. The Older Son and his resentment.

### 1. The Younger Son: A Picture of Rebellion and Return (v. 11-19)

- **“Father, give me my share of the estate”** (v.12): This is more than a financial request — it’s a relational rupture. In Jewish culture, asking for your inheritance early was like saying, *“I wish you were already dead.”* This reflects how humanity seeks life apart from God, not always through overt rebellion, but through the subtle lie that we can live on our own terms. The father, under no obligation and despite the shame incurred, willingly gives the son his portion.
- **“Squandered his wealth in wild living.”** (v.13) The son leaves for a distant country and wasted all of his inheritance. When a famine hits, he found himself in desperate need and works feeding pigs (and unclean animal for Jews), wanted to eat their food.
- **“When he came to his senses”** (v.17): This line is one of the most powerful pictures of repentance in all of Scripture— he *wakes up*. Repentance is a change of mind, not a self-inflicted punishment. He realizes the truth: life was better in his Father’s house. So he rehearses a speech in which he will renounce his sonship, and work to his living as a servant, *“I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants”*. However, grace isn’t about worthiness, it’s about the Father’s love and restoration.

### 2. The Father: A Picture of Lavish, Unconditional Grace and Restoration (20-24)

- **“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”** (v.20): Here we see the Father, seeing His son, runs to him and embraces him. In ancient culture, dignified fathers didn’t run — especially toward rebellious children. But this Father defies social expectations and religious assumptions. The Father doesn’t wait for the apology speech. When the son tries to give his speech to the Father, the Father pays no attention to the groveling and just rejoices and restores the son immediately and unconditionally. Notice the Father is filled with compassion. He doesn’t respond with anger, disappointment, or skepticism. His first emotion wasn’t, “Let’s see how sorry he is,” but rather, “My son is home!”
- **Best robe, ring, and sandals** (v.22): These are not just nice gifts — they’re symbols of full restoration. The **robe** covers his shame, the **ring** restores his authority as a son, and the **sandals** declare that he is no slave. Nothing is withheld. In Christ, this is exactly what God does for us. He doesn’t put us on spiritual probation. He fully restores us to relationship, identity, and freedom.
- **“Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate!”** (v.23): Like in the previous parables, celebration is the Father’s response to repentance — not because the son has proven himself, but because relationship has been restored. This joy reflects the heart of God toward every person who comes to Him.
- **“For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”** (v.24): Notice the language — *this son of mine*. The Father never disowned him, even when the son walked away. He affirms identity even in the face of past rebellion.
- In the Father’s response, we learn a valuable lesson on grace: We do not have to earn anything that God freely gives us in Christ. The son didn’t have to work for or earn back his place, the Father gave it — immediately, fully, freely. God doesn’t gradually adopt us. He doesn’t say, “Prove it first.” He declares, “You’re my son!” the moment we turn toward Him.

### 3. The Older Son: A Picture of the Resentment Legalism and Pride Produces. (25-31)

- **"The older son was in the field..."** (v.25): While the celebration is happening, the older son is outside working — physically close to the house, but relationally distant from the Father. The older son wasn't rebellious in behavior, but he was estranged in mindset — living like a servant, not a son.
- **"He heard music and dancing... and became angry and refused to go in."** (v.26-28): The sound of grace offended him. The celebration for someone else's restoration stirred resentment instead of joy. Legalism is always upset when grace is freely given, especially to the undeserving. This reflects how the religious mind resents unearned favor — it thrives on comparison and worthiness, not generosity and forgiveness.
- **Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders** (v.29): His mindset is that he believes the Father's blessings are earned, not given. This is the heart of religion exposed: *"I've obeyed, so I deserve!"*
- **"Everything I have is already yours."** (v.31): This is the Father's gentle but powerful reminder: *You already belong. You've never lacked anything.* The older son's problem wasn't the Father's provision, but it was his perception. He lived like a worker, not a son. In Christ, we're not earning our keep, we're resting in our relationship with Him. Grace invites us to stop striving and start enjoying what's already ours in union with Jesus. The older son didn't need to earn anything — it was already his by grace, all he had to do was ask.
- **"But we had to celebrate and be glad..."** (v.32): The Father reiterates the need for rejoicing over the lost son. And how because he's a part of the family and has returned, that is worth throwing a party. This closing line leaves the older son outside, invited but unresolved. It's a call to every religious heart, especially those standing there listening to Jesus: *Will you come in and join the celebration of grace? Or will you stay outside, clinging to your self-righteousness?*

This parable teaches us that both the rebellious sinner and the religious rule-keeper needed grace. One wandered far, while the other was stuck in performance — both needed the Father's love.

#### Personal Application and Conclusion

- 1. God's love is not based on your behavior:** Whether you've run far from God or stayed close physically but distant relationally, God's arms are open.
- 2. Your identity is fully restored in Christ:** The moment you turn and believe in Jesus, you don't come back as a servant; you are fully accepted as a son/daughter. God gives you the robe, ring, and sandals — not because you performed, but because you belong.
- 3. Let go of religious striving:** The older son teaches us that slaving for love is just as dangerous as sinning for fulfillment. Stop trying to earn what you already have in Christ. Rest in it.
- 4. Celebrate grace, not performance:** If we live based on performance, we will believe that God's opinion of us changes with our behavior, but when we focus and live out of God's grace, we can live with his approval every day.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is not just a story about one wayward son — it's a story about two lost sons and one radically gracious Father. Whether it's the younger son's rebellion or the older son's religious pride, both paths lead away from the Father's heart. Jesus tells this parable to reveal that God's love is not earned by performance nor revoked by failure. The Father runs toward the broken, restores the unworthy, and pleads with the proud. The real shock is not the son's sin, but the Father's scandalous grace. This parable invites all of us — sinners and saints alike — to drop our shame or our self-righteousness and come inside to enjoy the celebration of being fully loved, fully accepted, and fully restored by grace.