

To enjoy the Father’s good things, prodigal sons run far away to squander their inheritance, but the Father loves them so much he rushes to forgive and celebrate their repentant homecoming. Give up your sin which will destroy you and come home to your Father.

Introduction – Here we have perhaps the best known and most beloved parable in all the Bible. It touches us deeply because it speaks so profoundly to our fallen human condition. We all have an unquenchable thirst for fulfillment. Everyone has a fundamental need to be happy, to be loved, to be forgiven.

I. A Divided Family

A. Jesus with the tax collectors and “sinners” (v. 1)

Remember the context of this parable. Jesus is being criticized for eating with social outcasts and “sinners.” Tax collectors were hated, avoided, and considered traitors. “Sinners” were social misfits like the poor, crippled, blind, and lame (Lk 14:21), and also those who lived a sinful lifestyle.

B. A father with two sons (vv. 11-12)

1. The father in the parable is a very wealthy man. According to Jewish law and custom, the younger son would receive half the amount of property allotted to the older son. Thus the younger son inherited one third, while the older son received a two thirds share.
2. Sometimes a father would give away the capital but retain the income. A son was allowed to sell the capital, but the buyer could not take possession until the father’s death. It is scandalous for this young man to demand his share. Yet in this parable the father lets his son have his own way, picturing how God the Father permits sinners to go their own way.

II. From Easy Street to Skid Row

A. The prodigal dream (v. 13)

1. Only a few days later he gathered up his property and set out to a far country. He must have converted all his property into money. He was more interested in the cash than in getting fair market value. When he got there he squandered all his money in reckless living.
2. The “younger brother” types become deathly quiet, lowering their eyes and hanging their heads. They like being with Jesus even though they know he does not approve of their prodigal lifestyle. What will he say next? Will he condemn all “younger brothers”?

B. The prodigal nightmare (vv. 14-16)

1. The prodigal set off with a fortune, yet he managed to spend every last penny. Then a severe famine arose in the country. He who was once rich and spendthrift is now needy and hungry.
2. So the prodigal gets a job to pay the bills. He had dreams that sin would set him free, but all it got him was slavery (Jn 8:34). He hires his services out to a Gentile who promptly sends him into the fields to feed pigs (Lev 11:7; Dt 14:8). By doing so he has compromised his heritage by sinning against his “Jewishness.”

3. The bottom: but “no one gave him anything.” The prodigal is completely deserted. He is hungry, longing to eat the carob tree pods that he feeds the pigs. His life at this point tragically illustrates how sin will literally ruin a person.

C. The insanity of sin (v. 17)

Then he realizes that while he is dying of starvation, his father’s hired servants are at home with more than enough bread to eat. Finally the prodigal son comes to his senses. The text literally says “he came to himself” as if he was not in his right mind before. One might say he went insane in his sin, ending up as more of beast than a man (cf. Ps 73:21-26; Dan 4:15-16).

III. An Ending Too Good *Not* to Be True

A. The humility of repentance (vv. 18-20a, 21)

1. Not only does he come to his senses, but he is spiritually awakened. He knows he has sinned not only against his father but also against God his heavenly Father. The picture of the penitent is classic. He is not sorry for what he has lost, but for what he has done and who he has offended.

2. The prodigal demonstrates the genuine character of his repentance by not seeking restoration based on his right as son and heir. No, he resolves to tell his father that he is no longer worthy to be called a son. Instead he will ask his father to treat him as one of the other hired servants. As a hired servant and not a restored son, he would also not impose on his older brother’s inheritance.

3. Notice the prodigal acted on his guilty conscience and actually repented. Now try to hear this parable for the first time with those tax collectors and “sinners.” “But what will happen when his father sees him? Will his father accept an apology and hire him as a servant, or will the father shame him and send him away? Does God really still love me?”

B. The extravagance of grace (vv. 20b-24)

1. While the prodigal was still a long way off, his father saw him coming home and felt compassion welling up inside him (cf. Jer 30:18; Hos 11:1-9). Before his son got a word in edgewise, he embraced and tenderly kissed his son again and again. What a beautiful picture of the extravagant love of God!

2. Then the son begins his “I’m sorry” speech. But the father does not permit his son to finish, cutting him off. So the father calls to one of his servants to bring meaningful provisions for his son: the best robe, a ring, and sandals. The robe signified family status; the ring was a symbol of family authority; sandals are a free man’s privilege since bondservants went barefoot.

3. Time for a real party! The father orders the fattened calf—the one saved for a special occasion (cf. Gen 18:7; Amos 6:4), brought and prepared for food to celebrate. He announces aloud that from where his son had been compared to now, it is as if he was dead but is now alive again. This is what God’s kingdom looks like. It is full of people who were spiritually dead but made alive, fully alive and free, and celebrated in Christ (Jn 5:24; Eph 2:1-10; Lk 19:10).

Conclusion – Are you living as a prodigal? Stop the insanity, repent, and come home. Are you torn apart inside for the prodigal in your life who has not come home? Hope in the God of the prodigal son, and trust him for extravagant love. Do you believe in the doctrine of assurance, but don’t believe it’s true for you? God embraces those who turn to him in repentance, not those who clean themselves up. Are you a little uneasy with how extravagant God’s love is for undesirables, social outcasts, and flagrant sinners? Jesus love you so much that he speaks to you too. His parable continues by becoming multilayered, unsettling, subversive, challenging, for there is not one son of the father, but two.