

The Prodigal Son

Part 2

Luke 15:25-32

With Study Questions

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Review

To get a running start at this parable we read of Jesus being scrutinized by the religious leaders of His day for healing on Sabbath (14:1-6). This was followed by an event to which He was invited where he told the Parable of the Ambitious Guest (14:7-11) addressing ministers are more concerned with moving up ecclesiastical ladder than with humbly serving God.

This was followed by the Parable of the Ambitious Host (14:12-14) addressing good deeds done for reciprocation rather than the joy of the reward of the resurrection. Then Jesus gave the Parable of the Great Banquet (14:15-24) where those same false shepherds are informed of their impending exclusion from the Kingdom of God.

Jesus then taught on the Cost of Discipleship (14:25-35), not that one must be sinless to be saved but must be willing to forsake false gods. A man cannot have two masters. After this many tax collectors and sinners drew near to Christ, which drew the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes (15:1-2). This became the impetus for the Parable of the Lost Sheep (15:3-7), where a good shepherd will leave the ninety-nine and go after the one that is lost, and the Lost Coin, informing us of the heavenly joy over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:8-10).

This brings us to the parable of the Prodigal Son. Last time we observed the actions of the first son. He asked for his share of the livelihood of the household and squandered his possessions on prodigal or wasteful/reckless living. The son thought he could have the best of both worlds. He would take his father's riches then distance himself – going to a far country – away from his father's watchful eye. But he would soon find that he made a poor exchange in masters.

A famine comes to the land and he soon learns what a harsh taskmaster the world can be apart from his father's love and provision. He gets a job feeding pigs and longs to eat the pigs food but **"no one gave him anything."**

In his hardship the young man begins to think clearly. His eyes begin to open, his heart **"enlightened"** to the hope **"of his glorious inheritance (Ephesians 1:18)** and he decides to head for home in hopes of perhaps being a hired servant. Through these difficulties he comes to realize his offense against God and before his father.

Little doubt, to his great surprise, as the young man approaches his father's house, his father sees him and overwhelmed with compassion runs to him, falls on his neck, kisses him, restores his status as son and throws a party to welcome him home. His son was dead and is alive; he was lost and is found.

Whether we come to Christ for the first time, or as those who were at one time members of the covenant or as those who have had a trying week with its routine failures, we should never understand God as one who is hesitant to forgive. Sinners who repent are a joy to heaven. But sometimes they are not necessarily a joy to those within the church, who perhaps, and sometimes for what appears to be a good reason, are less willing to offer a warm reception. We will address that brings us to the other son.

As much as we might view the first son as the central figure of this parable, the context of this parable suggests otherwise. The parables leading up to this parable almost uniquely address the poor, dispassionate, disposition of those within the church who simply don't care and are unwilling to rejoice over the lost sheep and lost coins who were lost and now found.

It wouldn't be too difficult to conclude that the main point of this parable is found in the words before us. For even though many of us may identify ourselves with the sheep or coin found by God – or even the prodigal son who, by the grace of God, returned to the faith – the majority of us who are in church this morning currently fall into the category of this other son – the son who is here, the son who remained. Our natures have a sneaky way of turning us into the characters in the parables who we don't really want to be.

Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.' ²⁸ "But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ So he answered and said to *his* father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. ³⁰ But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.' ³¹ "And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. ³² It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found' (Luke 15:25-32).

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The Hard-Working Son

The older son was in the field – most likely working. He hears a party going on, a party to which he wasn't even invited! So Jesus sets up a social environment in this parable designed, it would appear, to aggravate any person operating within the mere confines of human reason and its limited capacity to grasp the fullness of the issue.

We immediately and romantically exclude ourselves from the disposition of the older brother even though we routinely fail when placed in similar circumstances. He faithfully remained home, sweating in his father's field, aware of his brother's rebellion (vs 30) soon to find out that his brother would receive that which he never received – the party was for his brother!

Do any of us think we would not have that same reaction?

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He Was Angry

Are there any of us who don’t understand how (at least at some level) how reasonable it would be for this son to be angry? How many times, parents, do you hear your children appeal to the advantages of their siblings? “Mommy, can I spend the night?” “No.” “Johnny got to spend the night.” “Daddy, can I go to Magic Mountain?” “No.” “Sally got to go – twice!”

It’s as if parents are required to be a detailed log of every last single favor they afford every one of their children along with a justification for the privilege based upon a purely objective evaluation of each child’s behavior. Other variables include: age, ability to handle the event, who will be attending, health, potential future events, etc.

The children are probably thinking I’m leaning on them and if so, so be it. But parents must realize that there remains in them, at very least, a remnant of the same attitude they observe in their children – even though we’ve learned to overcome or at least hide it.

Why would this other son get a party!?

It’s reminiscent of a conversation Jesus had with Peter after commissioning him to feed His sheep (John 21:15-17). After that Jesus would tell Peter **“by what death he would glorify God” (John 21:18, 19)**. Peter turned and looked at another apostle (likely John) and asks, **“But Lord, what about this man” (John 21:21)**? Jesus then gives the answer that, quite honestly, I give when I’m tired of explaining myself: **“If I will that he remain till I come, what *is that* to you? You follow Me” (John 21:22)**.

Calvin comments:

We have in Peter an instance of our curiosity, which is not only superfluous, but even hurtful, when we are drawn aside from our duty by looking at others; for it is almost natural to us to examine the way in which other people live, instead of examining our own, and to attempt to find in them idle excuses. We willingly deceive ourselves by this semblance of apology, that other people are no better than we are, as if their indolence freed us from blame. Scarce one person in a hundred considers the import of those words of Paul,

*Every man shall bear his own burden, (Galatians 6:5.)*¹

The father in this parable is not dismissive of the older son. In a similar manner that the father ran to the prodigal son the father came out and pleaded with the older one. He could have justifiably said “I am the father, it all belongs to me and I’ll do with it as I please.” But Jesus demonstrates the compassion of the Father, not only on the recovered lost sheep, coins, sons – but also for those within the boundaries of the covenant/church whose pride and arrogance have gotten the better of them.

I Never Transgressed?

The older son here gives a testimony hardly befitting him – let alone the scribes and Pharisees who this older son no doubt represents. **“Lo these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed”!!!??** Really? It is amazing what kind of opinions we can form of ourselves. I recently spoke at the chapel service at Providence College. Josh, our intern, and I discussed afterward how it felt to speak with these young people. He was musing on how much older he was than they (only a few years really).

¹ Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: John* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Jn 21:20). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

I mentioned how easy it is for me to begin to feel like I'm one of them — until I see myself in a mirror.

For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴ for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was (James 1:23, 24).

When one seeks to walk in the word of God it functions like a mirror — revealing what kind of people we are. It would appear this brother spent more time observing his wayward brother than observing God's word. Consequently he developed a pretty lofty opinion of himself.

With that lofty opinion of himself came contempt for his brother and disrespect for his father. The contempt for his brother is somewhat understandable — this younger brother devoured the father's **"livelihood with harlots."** But the disrespect is another matter — **"this son of yours."** Like Adam's attempt at deflection **"The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate"** (Genesis 3:12).

But the father is patient with his son's disrespect. And, at least for now, doesn't question his self-inflated testimony. For the sake of argument Jesus will grant the unrealistic self-appraisal — especially when one considers that the older brother stood for the Pharisees whose hearts were hard and bitter against God. Even if what you say of yourself is true — that you've never transgressed — you should have a different reaction to your brother.

And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. ³² It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found' (Luke 15:31, 32).

All That I Have is Yours

The utter rebellion of the Pharisees and their lack of willingness to heed the teaching of Christ would eventually altogether exclude them from His kingdom (Luke 14:24). There would be those, nonetheless, among the

Israelites who would not go with the flow of religious public sentiment and follow Christ (Romans 11:1). Jesus graciously places that son in this category. The actions of his brother serve in no way to diminish his own heavenly riches – his inheritance and favor of his father – **“you are always with me, and all that I have is yours.”** Then the father says something that so easily escapes our attention.

It Was Right

“It was right” *edei* the father states. The verb signifies something that should be done and can be translated “it was necessary.” The father, who no doubt is gushing with joy (sometimes children don’t know how much their parents love them and how much it hurts their parents when they hurt each other) now states what amounts to be a moral imperative.

Whether it’s done by compulsion, a matter of duty or external law, the father is stating that it was right to **“make merry and be glad”** whether we feel like it or not. It’s the same verb Jesus uses in Matthew 18:33 in the parable of the Unmerciful Servant **“should you not have shown mercy to your fellow servant as I showed mercy to you?”**

If we don’t feel like sharing in the joy of the restored or redeemed brother, it should at very least reveal to us our own sinfulness – a sinfulness from which we should repent that every aspect of who we are might more conform to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29).

There is little doubt that it is more desirable to God that men walk in perfect integrity. For the older brother to think that the younger got away with something is shortsighted; for we are never better off for having sinned. The parable does not address the residue of evil and corruption that prodigal would have to contend with for the remainder of his life.

But what Jesus is seeking to emphasize over and over in these parables is how the repentance of one ungodly person produces joy in heaven and it is right that it should produce joy in us as well.

Questions for Study

1. Review the parables leading up to the Prodigal Son. What does Jesus seem to be addressing (page 2)?
2. Review the first portion of the Prodigal Son. What are some mistakes and hardships he faced? Why (pages 2, 3)?
3. Is the response of the older son entirely unreasonable? Explain (page 4).
4. Why do we tend to look at other people in God's dealings with us? What does that produce (pages 5, 6)?
5. How can our opinions of ourselves get so off track? What can that tempt us to do (pages 6, 7)?
6. Does the father seem frustrated with the older son? How does the father interact with the older son in a similar way as he does with the younger (pages 7, 8)?
7. Discuss the father's explanation of how we should react to a redeemed brother or sister (page 80).