

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

- **Scriptures**
 - Luke 15:11-32
 - **Note:** the word prodigal is not found in the Bible (KJV)
 - definition of prodigal: "spending money wastefully, extravagantly"
 - parables not always named in the Scriptures
 - this parable is also called:
 - the Lost Son
 - the Two Brothers
 - the Loving Father
 - the Bereaved Father
 - **notice:** the word "father" is used at least 11 times in this parable
 - is the focus on God the Father?
 - Jesus came to "reveal" the Father (Matthew 11:27; Luke 10:22)
 - this parable reveals the loving, forgiving nature of our heavenly Father
- **Context**
 - verses 1-2 – "Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them."
 - "Then" – (key word) what was discussed in the previous chapter?
 - Luke 14:1 – "And it came to pass, as he went into the house of one of the chief Pharisees to eat bread on the sabbath day, that they watched him."
 - Jesus had been with the Pharisees, but now the "sinners" were gathering around Him
 - no doubt, after he left the house of the chief Pharisee
 - "sinners" – commentators call them "the outcast classes" (Cambridge Bible)
 - often included publicans (tax collectors) and harlots
 - "scribes" – copyists and interpreters of the law
 - spent their time recording, teaching, and ruling on the Law (Bible.org)
 - "Pharisees" – separatists; added traditions to the law
 - Pharisees and scribes' accusation: "This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them."
 - Parable is the 3rd in a series of 3
 - lost sheep
 - lost coin
 - lost son
 - Mathematical progression (Expositor's Bible Commentary)
 - 1/100
 - 1/10
 - 1/2
 - Need to read all three together to get a complete picture of what Jesus was saying
 - these three stories together are a form of parallelism (see lesson on the Lost Coin)
 - common life examples are being used to portray spiritual lessons

Keep the purpose of the parable in mind: Jesus was accused of receiving sinners.

- **Outline of the Parable**

- verse 11 – "And he said, A certain man had two sons"
 - as parable unfolds, it becomes apparent:
 - **father** = the Heavenly Father
 - **oldest son** = represents the Pharisees (legally righteous)
 - **youngest son** = represents the publicans and sinners
 - also, Jews and Gentiles could be said to be represented here
 - "two sons" – often the second son is lost sight of, but he had serious needs as well
 - 1st two parables – lost property
 - this parable – a lost human being
 - fatherhood
 - 1 percent and 10 percent (though hard) were bearable losses
 - 50 percent loss – tragic!
- verse 12 – "And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living."
 - not customary
 - **Customs:** property generally wasn't divided until father's death
 - what might have dividing all his property before his death looked like?
 - father to older son – "all that I have is yours"
 - was he dependent upon his sons?
 - the equivalent of wishing his father were dead (Got Questions)
 - **Customs:** cultural expectations
 - "If a Jewish son lost his inheritance among the Gentiles and then returned home, the community would perform a ceremony (kezazah). They would break a large pot in front of him and yell, 'You are now cut off from your people!' The community would totally reject him" (The Cross & the Prodigal).
 - "divided unto them" – the elder son received a portion as well
 - Jewish law decreed 2/3 to the older son and 1/3 to the younger son (Deuteronomy 21:17)
 - the Father did not have to grant his son's request
 - shows that God will not force His will on us
 - the privilege of choice
- verse 13 – "And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living."
 - all that his father had worked years to accumulate was spent in a short time
 - **compare:** spiritually mothers & fathers work years and rebellious children can destroy it very quickly
 - **example:** Hezekiah and Manasseh
 - Manasseh became king at age 12
 - immediately did evil in the sight of the Lord (2 Chronicles 33:2)
 - idolatry
 - sorcery

- immoral living
 - sacrificed his own son(s) to idols
- taken into Babylonian captivity in chains
- finally returned to the one true God
- after years of rebellion, he received mercy from God
- "not many days"
 - very soon after he received the inheritance
- why a "far country"?
 - to be out from the watchful eye of parents, relatives, friends
 - away from his Jewish culture (religious and civil)
 - a Gentile country ("afar off"; Ephesians 2:17)
 - believed to possibly be Rome or Alexandria
 - compare to the young person who rejects/leaves his godly upbringing
- "riotous living"
 - riotous = prodigal, thriftless
- verse 14 – "And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want."
 - "famine in that land"
 - famines were common in Eastern nations
 - this famine was connected with the ungodly living of that country
 - Amos 8:11 – "not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD"
 - the worst famine of all
 - "began to be in want"
 - no one gave him anything
 - first step in coming to himself
 - first step to repentance
 - yet, not sufficient in itself
 - why didn't the prodigal return home at this point?
- verse 15 – "And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine."
 - "joined himself" – absolute dependence upon the "citizen"
 - "verb means to glue or cement" (Vincent's Word Studies)
 - citizen not interested in hiring him
 - reluctantly took him into service
 - doubtful that the "citizen" needed another employee during a famine
 - notice, nothing is said about wages or payment
 - if there were wages, not enough to satisfy his hunger
 - with all his money and partying, the prodigal son did not gain "a single friend. Sin never forms a real bond of pity and sympathy" (Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges).
 - "he sent him" – no longer free to do whatever he wanted
 - "to feed" – pasture or tend to
 - "to feed swine" – imagine what the Pharisees were thinking

- the prodigal had sunk to the lowest
 - swine considered unclean animals
 - "They so abhorred swine that they refused to name them. They spoke of a pig as . . . 'the other thing'" (Bible Study Tools - The Parable of the Lost Son).
 - "keeping of swine prohibited to the Israelites" (Vincent's Word Studies)
 - perhaps this was the citizen's way of humiliating the (unwanted) prodigal
 - "sin will take you farther than you want to go"
 - "He who begins by using the world as a servant, to minister to his pleasure, ends by reversing the relationship" (Trench).
- verse 16 – "And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him."
 - "he would fain" – longed for, desired
 - he wanted to but didn't/couldn't
 - would he have been punished for taking the pig's food?
 - was there a certain quantity allotted for the pigs?
 - he is not yet longing for the right thing – that which satisfies
 - Matthew 5:6 – "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled."
 - again, not paid enough to satisfy his hunger (if being paid at all)
 - perhaps he was paid famine rations
 - "husks" – Strong's G2769
 - means "little horns"
 - a bean pod from the carob tree
 - 6 to 10 inches long
 - also called "St. John's bread"
 - shaped like a horn
 - sweet taste
 - used for fattening swine – the "food of beasts" (Matthew Poole's Commentary)
 - food eaten by the lower classes
 - "When Israel is reduced to the carob-tree, they become repentant" (old Jewish saying).
 - "no man gave unto him"
 - Psalm 142:4 – "I looked on my right hand, and beheld, but there was no man that would know me: refuge failed me; no man cared for my soul."
 - He was in a "far country" – away from the truth & those who cared
- verse 17 – "And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!"
 - "he came to himself"
 - spent all
 - be in want
 - joined to a citizen of the far country
 - sunk to the lowest of low
 - no man helped him
 - (downward steps – leading to his repentance)

- he realized his true condition
 - previously – not thinking clearly
 - sin deceives
 - Ecclesiastes 9:3 – "the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live"
 - notice – no blaming others
 - his father
 - the servants
 - his brother
 - the famine
 - the citizen
 - "hired servants"
 - why did he say "hired servants"?
 - the lowest of laborers
 - not born to wealth
 - day laborers
 - temporary workers
 - servants in New Testament times:
 - **NOTE:** at this time as much as 1/3 of the Roman population were slaves; 1/3 had been slaves earlier in life (GotQuestions)
 - **"bond-servant" or "bond-slave"**
 - permanent fixture in a family
 - owned by the master
 - declares love for master
 - Exodus 21:5-6
 - master's slave for life
 - Paul wrote, "Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus" (Romans 1:1 AMP).
 - job security
 - fed, clothed and housed
 - often treated and loved as family
 - much more comfortable life than a hired servant
 - **example:** Eliezer (Abraham's servant)
 - trusted (to find a wife for Isaac)
 - "ruled over" (had charge of) all that Abraham owned (Genesis 24:2)
 - "hired servant"
 - let go when no longer needed
 - could be fired
 - could have his pay withheld
 - worked harder than the bond slave with less compensation
 - prodigal realizes – even the lowest servants have it better than he does
- verses 18-19 – " I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants."

- remembers his father
 - doesn't ask for his former position – son
 - "Give me" has now become "make me" – vastly different requests
 - a picture of repentance
 - remembering father's house
 - seeing his unworthiness
 - loss of pride
 - "I will go" – determination
 - "I have sinned against heaven"
 - heaven is referring to God
 - all sin is ultimately against God
 - Psalm 51:4 – "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight."
 - "and before thee"
 - and against thee (the Father)
 - "I am no more worthy to be called thy son"
 - indicates that "riotous living" was more than spending all his money (see verse 30; "harlots")
- verse 20 – "And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him."
 - "And he arose, and came"
 - repentance requires action
 - repentance is a journey
 - no consulting with the citizen or former friends
 - **NOTE:** what did he eat on this long journey home? Very difficult with little/no funds.
 - verse 17 – he thought or said to himself
 - if no action – just feeling sorry for one's self, too proud to return
 - verse 20 – he got up and went home
 - "But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him"
 - a picture of a waiting father (the Heavenly Father)
 - this wasn't the first day the father was watching & waiting
 - the father recognizes him
 - 2 Timothy 2:19 – "The Lord knoweth them that are his"
 - "a great way off"
 - imagine his feelings of unworthiness as home is now in sight
 - perhaps he paused or his steps slowed down
 - Ephesians 2:13 – "But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ."
 - "father . . . had compassion, and ran"
 - **Custom:** not considered proper (dignified) for grown men to run (cultural)
 - to do so would require hitching up one's tunic (so as not to trip)
 - showing bare legs
 - father did it anyway
 - perhaps to come between the community & his son

- protection?
 - "a far off" – before he entered the village
 - given the custom of kezazah (see page 2), what might the villagers reaction have been?
- the son comes slowly, the father runs
 - do you suppose the villagers followed the running father?
 - "What is going on?"
 - clearly there would be no rejecting this son!
 - the father took the shame
- verse 21 – "And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son."
 - "I have sinned"
 - cannot get help until one admits they are a sinner
 - last part omitted "make me as one of thy hired servants"
 - why?
 - perhaps the Father stopped him: "But the father said"
 - Isaiah 65:24 – "while they are yet speaking, I will hear."
 - perhaps the son realized it was not a time for bargaining – come "just as I am"
- verses 22-24 – "But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry."
 - only the father could restore the son to full sonship
 - "best robe"
 - "robe of righteousness" (Isaiah 61:10)
 - rags of sin were taken off
 - "ring on his hand"
 - not on his finger
 - showed that he could do business for the family
 - Genesis 41:42-43 – "And Pharaoh took off his ring from his hand, and put it upon Joseph's hand . . . and he made him ruler over all the land of Egypt."
 - the rich and those in office commonly wore them
 - restored as a son
 - "ring was the mark of a free man" (Pulpit Commentary)
 - "shoes on his feet"
 - being barefoot was for slaves
 - "fatted calf"
 - according to Eastern customs – held in readiness for some great occasion
 - a lot of food – believed that the entire village would be invited
 - "was dead, and is alive again"
 - Ephesians 2:1 – "And you hath he quickened [made alive], who were dead in trespasses and sins."
 - theme of "lost" and "found"
 - sheep (verse 6)

- coin (verse 9)
 - son (verse 24)
 - brother (verse 32)
- verses 25-26 – "Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant."
 - narrative changes to older son/brother
 - older son = Pharisees and scribes
 - "in the field" – taking care of the family business
 - hard at work while his brother was living it up
 - blameless life (seemingly)
 - just as the Pharisees
 - **NOTE:** "one of the duties of the eldest son would have included reconciliation between the father and his son. He would have been the host at the feast to celebrate his brother's return. Yet, he remains in the field . . . This act alone would have brought public disgrace upon the father" (GotQuestions).
 - "drew nigh to the house" – why didn't he go in?
 - verses 27-28 – " And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him."
 - "safe and sound" – or in good health
 - what part made him angry?
 - the return of his brother?
 - the ring, shoes, robe?
 - the killing of the fatted calf?
 - why do you think that made him angry?
 - "came his father out, and intreated him"
 - a continuing picture of the loving Heavenly Father
 - verses 29-30 – "And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf."
 - "many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment"
 - compare with the rich young ruler
 - "All these things have I kept from my youth up" (Matthew 19:20).
 - Pharisees and scribes placed great importance on their works
 - see here the character of the Pharisees
 - "neither transgressed I at any time"
 - exaggeration
 - compare "kid" and "calf"
 - "it's not fair"
 - "thy son" – not my brother

- Pharisees didn't want to consider sinners and publicans worthy
 - "devoured thy living"
 - reminding the father that it was his money the prodigal son wasted
- verses 31-32 – " And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found."
 - "all that I have is thine"
 - the property was divided
 - the elder brother still had the inheritance
 - "it was meet"
 - it was right
 - answering the original complaint about Jesus – He eats with sinners
 - "we should make merry"
 - all of us, including the older brother
 - the angels in Heaven were glad
 - the father was glad
 - the servants were glad
 - "thy brother"
 - reminding the older son of the relationship
 - not known if the older brother was reconciled to the prodigal
- **Quotes About This Parable:**
 - "The finest short story ever written" (Charles Dickens).
 - "The Gospel within the Gospel" (unknown).
 - "The most divinely tender and most humanly touching story ever told on earth" (George Murray).



Carob Pods



Carob Tree

Sources

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