

The Other Prodigal

Luke 15:25-32

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The Parable of the Prodigal Son is one of the most famous parables Jesus told during His earthly ministry. But whenever someone refers to it, they do it in that way: “*Prodigal Son*.” Singular. But there are two prodigals in Luke’s account in chapter 15. The first prodigal came home to his father, expecting rejection but experiencing grace. The other prodigal never left home, expecting recognition but experiencing bitterness. We’ve studied the lost son, now let’s learn from the son who never left.

There’s a meal taking place. A banquet of sorts at someone’s home; we’re not told where, but it’s a typical Middle Eastern meal where no one’s in a hurry; food is mingled with laughter and long conversation.

Trouble is, Jesus is having long conversations, no doubt laughing and enjoying the company of people who would not have been allowed in the synagogue.

He’s effectively hosting a banquet for tax collectors—traitors to the Jewish people, they were the scum of the earth—he’s sitting next to people simply described as sinners. As if to say, there were sinners around Jesus of any and every variety.

Now the religious leaders have sent their own collection of Pharisees and scribes to monitor this meal. To take roll. And sure enough, they refuse to enjoy anything about it. Luke 15:2 tells us that all they could do was grumble.

It is in response to their grumbling that Jesus stops everything and starts telling a story.

Food is forgotten; conversations end; and Jesus, the Master teacher, begins telling them all perhaps His most famous series of parables.

A parable about a lost sheep that is destined to die without the love of a diligent shepherd seeking and saving.

A parable about a lost coin that has no value at all, apart from the woman who searches for it and finds it.

After every rescue, there is celebration and joy. In fact, Jesus tells everyone that the joy of the shepherd and the woman are a demonstration of the joy in heaven over people who are lost and then found.

With that, Jesus begins the third parable: this one about a man who had two sons.

The younger son will represent all these tax collectors and sinners, prodigals who want nothing to do with God the Father. The older son will represent these religious leaders who've followed all the rules outwardly, but do not care about God inwardly.

This man had two sons, but let me remind you:

- Both sons were lost;
- One son is lost in a far country, but the other son is lost while staying at home;
- One son is outwardly dirty, sitting in a pig sty; the other son is inwardly dirty, sitting in the synagogue;
- Both sons defy their father's wishes;
- Both sons break their father's heart;
- The Father must leave his house to go out to both sons and offer them grace;
- Because both sons need to be found.

This is a parable of two prodigals.

Now in our last study, the younger son has returned home.

His plans to negotiate an apprenticeship as a hired craftsman literally crumbled to the dust at the sight of his father's unbelievable humility and love.

His negotiation turned into reconciliation as the prodigal watched his father bear the shame and ridicule of the village by racing to him to bring him safely home.

With that, the focus shifts to the older son—the other prodigal. And keep in mind that the heart of this older son is what started this series of parables. This is the verdict; this is where Jesus is leading them.

Now before the older brother makes his appearance, let me draw some observations from this early first century culture. There are some actions that should have taken place but did not.

First, according to this culture, the older brother would have been responsible to go and search for his younger brother on behalf of their father. He was to be the agent of reconciliation.

And by the way, this principle is reflected in the gospel. Paul says that we are to take on this responsibility; he writes in 2 Corinthians 5:20: “We beg you, on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

This older brother should have found his brother and begged him, on behalf of their father, to be reconciled to God.

Adapted from Clinton E. Arnold, General Editor; [Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Volume 1](#) (Zondervan, 2002), p. 448

It’s possible the older brother did in fact travel to where his brother was living—because he knew what his brother was doing—and he left him there with the idea of good riddance.

Secondly, it was the older brother’s responsibility to protect the father’s estate from any inappropriate claim for the inheritance. In other words, he should have stepped in to stop his brother’s shameful and selfish demand for an early disbursement.

The younger brother had effectively told his father he was tired of waiting for him to die; he wanted his share now!

And the older brother is not only silent, the text tells us that he went along with it. Back in **verse 12 we’re told that the father then “divided his property between them.”**

There was no protest; there was no demonstration of loyalty to his father.

Kenneth E. Bailey, [Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes](#) (Eerdmans Publishing, 1983), p. 168

He didn’t try to stop his younger brother’s scandalous demand; he went along with it and benefited from it.

One author writes on this text that his younger brother’s open rebellion allowed him to benefit from it, while maintaining a thin veneer of respectability.

John MacArthur, [A Tale of Two Sons](#) (Thomas Nelson, 2008), p. 154

People could still pat him on the back for being the brother who stayed home. *He* didn’t run away. He was working in the father’s field.

The Lord is going to reveal that it’s possible for a prodigal heart to exist in the father’s field just as easily as it exists in the far country; it can exist feeding swine in a pig pen and it can exist while singing songs in the sanctuary.

There happen to be *two* sons who need redemption.

Now I don't know who you identify with as you read this parable. Frankly, I think every believer should see something of themselves in all three.

- In the Prodigal who sees himself as unworthy, every believer should see themselves as unworthy sinners saved by grace;
- We should see ourselves in the Father's actions; we must set our hearts toward adopting His humility and grace with others;
- We should see ourselves in the older brother, the Pharisee who kept the rules and concluded that he deserved better treatment from his father.

Now the Lord will obviously identify the older brother with the attitude of the Pharisees; they are unwilling to rejoice over sinners redeemed.

Remember, this is what started it all, at the beginning of chapter 15: Jesus is receiving sinners and eating a meal with them, offering them grace! And the religious leaders didn't like it! To this day, it's easier to grumble about all those sinners out there rather than rejoice over sinners who are saved.

But there's more here to this older brother's reaction.

As we conclude our study in this parable, I want to draw out four different characteristics of a prodigal heart and watch how the father responds in grace.

First, it's possible to resent what God does for someone else that He hasn't done for you.

Now verse 25:

"Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 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.' But he was angry and refused to go in."

Luke 15:25-28a

In this culture, it would be the role of the older brother to stand at the door and greet all the guests on his father's behalf.

Bailey, p. 194

Now in this setting, the front door wouldn't have opened into the living room, but into a courtyard—this is where the older son has arrived.

He hears the music and the sound of dancing—the Greek phrase would include singing; it’s the word *sumphonia*, which gives us our word “symphony.”

Ibid, p. 192

He asks someone “What’s going on?” “Your brother has returned, and your father has barbecued the fattened calf and invited the village to celebrate.”

By the way, who’s calf was that? Technically, the older brother’s!

David E. Garland, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke* (Zondervan, 2011), p. 63.

Who’s paying for the symphony? The older brother. It was the older brother’s inheritance now being used to celebrate his younger brother’s welcome home party.

And according to this culture, the father had the right to dispense what he wanted, until he died, although any expenditure would reduce the final inheritance.

This is the older brother’s stuff!

But here’s the bigger point of disagreement: his father is receiving a sinner and is going to eat a meal with him.

Does that sound familiar?

And the older brother grumbles; he doesn’t want any part of it!

But to refuse to go in—to stay out there in the courtyard where guests are arriving—is about to become a public shaming of his family and his father’s desires.

Luke writes here in **verse 28** that the older brother was **angry**. The word refers to someone becoming visibly enraged; it can refer to a pot of water boiling over.

Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Luke* (Zondervan, 2012), p. 386

This isn’t going to be like the little argument you might have in the back bedroom with your wife, so the children don’t hear you—which is a good idea, by the way, because you’re going to have disagreements in marriage.

Or maybe you’re like the man who said the secret to his wonderful marriage was that he would take a walk outside whenever there was a problem, then he added that he’d mostly lived an outdoor life!

Well, this disagreement isn’t getting handled in the back room; the older brother is going to be loud and boiling hot and everybody at the party will overhear everything.

What’s happening here? It’s possible to resent what God does for someone else that He hasn’t done for you.

When you lose touch with the Father's heart, you lose the ability to rejoice with those who rejoice unless He's doing the same thing for you.

Here's the second characteristic of the heart of a respectable prodigal:

It's possible to see sin in someone else's life without recognizing it in your own life.

Go back to verse 28 again:

"But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him."

Luke 15:28

The word for **entreat** here is a gracious word, and the tense tells us he kept at it; you could translate it, "he kept on pleading (appealing) to reconcile."

Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal* (IVP Books, 2005), p. 83

This is a beautiful picture of the incarnation, where the Lord leaves His home to come to our home to invite us back to His home.

But for the second time in the same day, the Father is bearing the shame of his son's actions; he's demonstrating selfless love in order to reconcile with both of his prodigal sons.

Ibid, p. 82

At this point, the older son will have none of it; **notice what he says to his father in verse 29:**

"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. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!"

Luke 15:29b-30

Now at first glance, I must tell you, I'm actually on his side. His rebellious little brother gets roast beef, and he doesn't even get goat meat!

That doesn't sound fair to me.

Well, remember, grace is never about fairness. Grace is always undeserved.

If we got what we deserved, we'd all go to hell. Nobody should get grace. And everybody who gets it doesn't deserve it.

This parable is all about the grace of God and undeserving sinners being invited to the feast.

But this is the Pharisee's heart: he's kept all the rules; he's respectable, dependable, industrious, moral, steady, obedient.

R. Kent Hughes, [Luke: Volume 2](#) (Crossway Books, 1998), p. 144

And by the way, the father doesn't celebrate the older brother for everything he's done right, he's appreciated that, but it isn't the point.

The point is that grace isn't a reward, it's a gift!

I think it's interesting that the father doesn't stop and point out that his son is actually defying his wishes at this very moment; he's shaming his father openly.

Here he is, telling his father, "I have never sinned against you" while he is sinning against him!

Like the person who says, "I've never told a lie." Well, you just did.

The father had *commanded* the robe, the ring, the shoes, the fattened calf, the celebration. "Father, I never disobeyed your command," well, he just did.

It's even more defiant than that. If you look carefully, instead of apologizing to his father, he's effectively demanding that his father apologize to him. "You owe me an apology because you're not giving me what I deserve!"

The music stops. The father, having set in motion a celebration for his younger son's return, is now publicly shamed by his older son's accusation.

The prodigal can easily highlight the sin in his brother's life, but he's blind to his own sinful, prodigal heart.

There's a third characteristic of a prodigal heart:

It's possible to complain that God owes us something more in life, while ignoring what we already have.

If we were God, how much complaining would we put up with? But again, this parable is intended to reveal the immeasurable grace of God and the glory of the Father in His invitation to the banquet hall of salvation.

Notice how the father responds in verse 31:

“And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’”

Luke 15:31

“Son,” that’s not the typical word for son. In fact, the typical Greek word for son, *huios*, has shown up in this parable seven times. But this time it changes to *teknon*, a term that communicates fatherly affection.

The crowd of onlookers would have been stunned by the older son’s public shaming of his father; he could have easily been disinherited by his father.

But instead: “Son.” You could translate it, **“My dear son!”**

Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal*, p. 86

You are always with me; all that is mine is yours. Not just some fat calf, not just some roast beef dinner with live music. This meal is all your brother has at the moment—he’s starting over.

What is this celebration compared to all that you already have?

“You are the heir. All that is mine is yours. How can I possibly give you more?”

Bailey, *Poet & Peasant*, p. 201

Here’s the final warning of a prodigal’s heart—number four:

It’s possible to be unmoved by the restoration and reconciliation of someone’s life to Christ.

The father appeals to his son to understand in verse 32:

“It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.”

Luke 15:32

The truth is: the older brother cares more about himself than his father’s happiness. He’s pouring cold water over this celebration.

He cares more about himself than his brother’s restoration; he remains unmoved.

The father says, “It was fitting to celebrate! We needed to celebrate! Why? Your brother was dead to us, and he’s now alive; he was lost, but now he’s been found.”

Jesus doesn’t tell us what happened next. This story is what you call a cliffhanger.

It's unfinished. The ending is missing. Jesus has done this on purpose.

Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal*, p. 87

At this point, the Lord would be looking at the Pharisees and the scribes. Their grumbling had started this series of parables. Jesus has identified their unmoved and uncaring hearts toward the reconciliation of sinners seated at the table.

Now what? The ending of the parable is theirs to write.

What will they write? Are they going to come into this meal where Jesus is and join the party? Or will they stay outside?

What are they going to do? What are *you* going to do?

Jesus makes it clear in these parables that we are heading toward a never-ending celebration of sinners saved by the grace of God.

In the meantime, let's resist the attitudes of the older prodigal. It will be a lifelong battle simply because it's easy to be a Pharisee. Let's ask the Father for more of His heart of grace. And what will that look like?

Well, let me reverse these four characteristics; let's word them this way:

First, instead of resenting God, rejoice when God gives something to someone that He *hasn't* given to you.

Secondly, instead of seeing sin in other people's lives, become more of an expert in recognizing sin in your own *heart*.

Third, instead of identifying something you believe God owes you, thank Him for what He has *already* given to you.

And finally, never get over the reconciliation and restoration of someone's life to Christ—including *yours*.

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