

LESSON NINE

GOD'S LOVE FOR PEOPLE

*“Let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead
and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”*

LUKE 15:23-24 NKJV



REFLECTION

At some point in life, God's love must move from being a concept we wonder about to a conscious experience that transforms our lives. God's love deserves better than a half-hearted acknowledgment! In what tangible ways have you already felt God's love for you? In what ways has that love transformed your life?

SITUATION

Since the beginning of his ministry, Jesus had been traveling resolutely toward Jerusalem. The showdown with the Jewish religious leaders was coming. As he traveled, he continued to teach and heal. Desperate people came to him, and he welcomed them, much to the dismay and anger of his enemies. Yet instead of arguing directly with his opponents or pointing out their hypocrisy in plain language, Jesus resorted to parables. These short stories invited questions and provoked pondering. They also contained a barb of truth that prodded the deceitful while at the same time communicated God's great love for sinners.

OBSERVATION

Read Luke 15:11–32 from the New International Version or the New King James Version.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

¹¹ Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

¹³ "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. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ "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! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' ²⁰ 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.

²¹ "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

²² "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. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

²⁵ "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

²⁸ "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

³¹ “My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.’ ³² 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.”

NEW KING JAMES VERSION

¹¹ Then He said: “A certain man had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.’ So he divided to them his livelihood. ¹³ And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living. ¹⁴ But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. ¹⁵ Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. ¹⁶ And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, ¹⁹ and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.”’

²⁰ “And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. ²³ And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; ²⁴ for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ And they began to be merry.

²⁵ “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.’”

EXPLORATION

1. Who were the three characters in Jesus’ parable? Who did they each represent?

2. What character traits of God are highlighted in the parable?

3. What happens when God gives people freedom to make their own choices?

4. In what ways have you, like the younger son, showed disregard for God's authority?

5. In what ways have you, like the older son, showed disregard for God's mercy toward others?

6. In what way does God respond to people who confess their sins and return to him?

INSPIRATION

Captured in the portrait is a tender scene of a father and a son. Behind them is a great house on a hill. Beneath their feet is a narrow path. Down from the house the father has run. Up the trail the son has trudged. The two have met, here, at the gate.

We can't see the face of the son; it's buried in the chest of his father. We can see the mud on the back of his legs, the filth on his shoulders and the empty purse on the ground. At one time the purse was full of money. At one time the boy was full of pride. But that was a dozen taverns ago. Now both the purse and the pride are depleted.

The prodigal offers no gift or explanation. All he offers is the smell of pigs and a rehearsed apology. He feels unworthy of his birthright. . . . The

boy is content to be a hired hand. There is only one problem. Though the boy is willing to stop being a son, the father is not willing to stop being a father.

Look at the tears glistening on the father's leathered cheeks, the smile shining through the silver beard. One arm holds the boy up so he won't fall, the other holds the boy close so he won't doubt. "Quick!" he shouts. "Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:22-24).

How these words must have stunned the young man. "*This son of mine* was dead . . ." He thought he'd lost his place in the home. After all, didn't he abandon his father? Didn't he waste his inheritance? The boy assumed he had forfeited his privilege to sonship. The father, however, doesn't give up that easily. In his mind, his son is still a son. The child may have been out of the house, but he was never out of his father's heart. He may have left the table, but he never left the family.

Don't miss the message here. You may be willing to stop being God's child. But God is not willing to stop being your Father. (From *The Great House of God* by Max Lucado.)

REACTION

7. Why is it important to recognize that God values all people equally?

8. How does it feel to know that God sees *all* of your faults and still loves you?

9. Why do you think God allows difficult times in your life like the prodigal son experienced?

10. What does this parable tell you about the way God forgives you?

11. What does this parable tell you about recognizing all the blessings God has given to you as his child? How should that compel you to be merciful to others?

12. Think of one person you know who is difficult to love. In what ways can you show God's love to that person?

LIFE LESSONS

Parent, sibling, and wayward child—all of us relate in one way or another to the parable that Jesus told. Often we play more than one part, and each of the parts enables us to learn something about love. God designed relationships in such a way that allows us the opportunity to love and be loved. Some people will disappoint us, and we will disappoint others . . . only God loves perfectly. But he will help us to love better than we could possibly accomplish in our own strength. In fact, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

DEVOTION

We stand in awe, Father, of your great love—a love so deep that you sacrificed your only Son to save us. Forgive us for our rebellion and disobedience. Give us the strength to turn away from our sin and accept your forgiveness. And help us see others through your loving eyes.

JOURNALING

How will you thank God for treating you better than you deserve?

FOR FURTHER READING

To complete the book of Luke during this twelve-part study, read Luke 15:1–18:43. For more Bible passages on God's love for us, read Deuteronomy 7:8; Jeremiah 31:3; John 3:16; Romans 5:8; Ephesians 2:4–5; and 1 John 3:1; 4:7–21.