

# WEEK 5: THE PRODIGAL SON

Luke 15:11–32



## The Place of the Passage

Like the parable of the rich fool, the parable of the prodigal<sup>1</sup> son is found within the narratives that record Jesus' journey "toward Jerusalem" (Luke 13:22). At every step closer to the cross, Jesus teaches about the countercultural characteristics and commitments of God's kingdom. As he does so, opposition to his pronouncements and predictions mount, especially from the Jewish religious leaders and eventually the Roman authorities.

## The Big Picture

The parable of the prodigal son is a word picture of Jesus' mission of reception and fellowship with repentant sinners.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, Luke 15:11-32. Then think through and write your own notes on the following questions. (See ESV Study Bible notes on pages 1989-1990; online at www.esv.org.)

Before turning to the parable of the prodigal son, look at the preceding context. How would you summarize the shared themes in the three parables of Luke 15? Look for key repeated words.

Handwriting practice lines for the first question.

What circumstances lead to Jesus' telling of these three parables, and how do they offer a defense of Jesus' actions of receiving and relating with tax collectors<sup>2</sup> and sinners (Luke 15:1-2)?

Handwriting practice lines for the second question.

How does what is said in Luke 16:14 shed further light on the Jewish religious leaders? How about Jesus' parable of the dishonest manager (vv. 1-9) and his teaching regarding money (vv. 10-13)?

Handwriting practice lines for the third question.

Look at Luke 15:11-16. A story, no matter how short, involves setting, characters, and plot. Where are the two places (one assumed, the other named) that

constitute the setting? Who are the characters? What is the problem presented at the beginning of the story?

Handwriting practice lines for the first question on page 39.

What do the father's actions teach us about him? Do you think he is gullible? Generous? An optimist?

Handwriting practice lines for the second question on page 39.

Read Luke 15:17. How important is it that we come to the end of ourselves, or hit rock bottom ("he came to himself"), before we come to recognize our need for grace and redemption? Do you have a story like that? If so, are you willing to share it with the group?

Handwriting practice lines for the third question on page 39.

In the younger brother's coming-back-to-his-senses speech to himself, how many times does he use the word "Father," and why might this repetition be significant?

Handwriting practice lines for the fourth question on page 39.

How much of his rehearsed repentance<sup>3</sup> is the son able to blurt out before his father stops him? While the father says nothing to the son (which is interesting!),

what does he say to his servants that shows his love and forgiveness<sup>4</sup> of his son? What does this part of the story (Luke 15:20–24) teach us about God the Father?

In Luke 15:25–32 the older brother takes center stage. We have learned lessons from the father and younger brother. What lesson, or lessons, do we learn from the older brother’s reaction to his brother’s repentance and his father’s forgiveness? Moreover, and to return full circle, how might the older brother’s reaction relate to what is recorded in 15:1–2?

We do not read of the older brother’s response to his father. Why might Jesus end the parable in this inconclusive way?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

### Gospel Glimpses

**THE PRODIGAL FATHER.** The real scandal of the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) is the excess with which the father, representing God, lavishes

love on his younger son. According to Jesus, the God of heaven delights to run to us (v. 20), to bestow on us the status of sons and daughters (v. 22), and to compromise his own dignity in order to enhance ours. In Jesus, this God endures not only angry criticism (see vv. 2, 28–30) but torment and death—all in order to shower love on anyone who will repent and rest in his mercy.

**JESUS RECEIVES SINNERS.** The word “sinners” in Luke 15:1 does not mean regular sinful humans (“we are all sinners”; see Rom. 3:23). Rather, it implies a criminal class of people, usually Jews who made a living through lawless living. The term here is often paired with “tax collectors” or “prostitutes” in the Synoptics (Matt. 21:31, 32). Yet it is “the tax collectors and sinners” who “were all drawing near” to listen to Jesus (Luke 15:1). Elsewhere in Luke, Jesus calls a “tax collector named Levi” (5:27) to follow him, and Levi accepts the call. We also know that, soon after, Jesus dines in Levi’s house with a “large company of tax collectors” (v. 29). Jesus’ fellowship with such notorious sinners is obviously not an anomaly, as Jesus earns the reputation of being a “friend of tax collectors and sinners” (7:34). Thus it is quite ironic that, when the Pharisees and scribes grumble as they see tax collectors and sinners listening to Jesus (saying, “This man receives sinners”; 15:2), they provide the perfect short summary of Jesus’ earthly ministry! He has indeed come “into the world” not only to receive sinners but to “save” them, even the worst of them (“the foremost”; 1 Tim. 1:15).

### Whole-Bible Connections

**A CELEBRATION MEAL.** Repeatedly in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, the great joy that God has for his people is depicted in terms of a feast (e.g., Isa. 25:6; 30:29; Jer. 31:14; Luke 14:12–24). Then, at the Last Supper, Jesus institutes a shared meal that his disciples are to use to commemorate and celebrate his death until he returns (Luke 22:14–20; 1 Cor. 11:26). And when Jesus does return, we will partake of the most joyous feast of all time for all time: the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:6–9). We will celebrate forever our forgiveness in Christ in the presence of our loving, triune God.

**THE BEST ROBE.** For the father in the parable of the prodigal to call his servant to “bring quickly the best robe” (Luke 15:22) highlights that the son has tattered or insufficient clothing. It also shows the father’s extravagant love (he did not need to give the *best* robe). Scripture often uses clothing to shape a story. For example, in Genesis Joseph goes from being stripped of his many-colored robe to receiving Pharaoh’s signet ring and being clothed in garments of fine linen, with a gold chain around his neck (Gen. 37:23; 41:42). At the other end of the Bible come the final pictures of royal clothing, as Christ himself is “clothed in a robe dipped in blood,” “the armies of heaven” are “arrayed in fine linen,”

and the bride of Christ is granted “to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure” (Rev. 19:7-8, 13-14). We are robed in Christ’s righteousness (see Zech. 3:3-9)—surely the best robe!

**Theological Soundings**

**OUR SONSHIP IN CHRIST.** Just as the prodigal son never stopped being the beloved son of his father, so we who are in Christ experience that same loving family fellowship. For all eternity Jesus, who is God the Son, has enjoyed complete unity and intimacy with the Father. He loves the Father completely and is completely loved by the Father, through the power of the Spirit, so that together the persons of the Trinity enjoy eternal, perfect joy in a loving relationship. We are enabled to call God “Father” by means of the Spirit of the Son, meaning that we are, through Jesus, enabled to enter into the same kind of relationship that Jesus himself has enjoyed for all eternity. God has brought us fully into his family.

**AN IMPERISHABLE INHERITANCE.** The prodigal squanders his inheritance. For those in Christ, that is not possible. We are promised, as Peter puts it, “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven” (1 Pet. 1:4). That inheritance is not today’s money or our earthly family’s land. Our inheritance is a sinless, resurrected existence in God’s renewed heavens and earth (2 Pet. 3:13), the perfect promised land, where God himself will dwell with his people (Gen. 15:7; Deut. 1:8; Josh. 13:6) forever.

**Personal Implications**

Take time to reflect on the implications of Luke 15:11-32 for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. Make notes below on the *Personal Implications* for your walk with the Lord of the (1) *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) *Theological Soundings*, and (4) the passage as a whole.

**1. Gospel Glimpses**

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**2. Whole-Bible Connections**

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**3. Theological Soundings**

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**4. Luke 15:11-32**

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**As You Finish This Unit . . .**

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord’s blessing and help as you continue in this study of Jesus’ parables. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight or underline these to review again in the future.

**Definitions**

- <sup>1</sup> **Prodigal** – Someone who wastes resources or, in the case of the prodigal son, an inheritance, in irresponsible and excessive ways.
- <sup>2</sup> **Tax collectors** – In the Gospels, Jews who collected taxes for Rome from their fellow countrymen. They were viewed as greedy, lawless traitors. They were also deemed unclean and a disgrace to their family and community and thus were excommunicated from the synagogue.
- <sup>3</sup> **Repentance** – A complete change of heart and mind resulting in one’s turning from sin to God. Repentance is both a command (Acts 3:19) and a gift (John 6:65; Acts 3:26; 5:31; 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:25). It both begins (justification) and marks (sanctification) the Christian life. Indeed, repentance is one of the main vehicles linking us to our Savior on a daily, even hourly, basis.
- <sup>4</sup> **Forgiveness** – Release from guilt and the reestablishment of relationship. Forgiveness can be granted by God to humans (Luke 24:47; 1 John 1:9) and by humans to those who have wronged them (Matt. 18:21-22; Col. 3:13).