

**Introduction:** References: **The Gospel of Luke**, William Hendriksen, Baker Book House, 1978; **The Prodigal God**, Timothy Keller, Penguin Books, 2008; **All The Parables of Jesus**, Herbert Lockyer, Zondervan Publishing, 1963.

**Luke 15:** In Luke 15 we find Jesus in the midst of a crowd preparing to teach. Tax collectors and sinners were gathered close to Him, so they would be sure to be able to hear. There were also Pharisees and scribes present, most likely checking up on what Jesus was teaching. They grumbled about the presence of tax collectors and other people they considered unsuitable for the company of good people. It was bad that Jesus allowed such sinners in His presence, but even worse he ate with them. Eating with someone signified accepting them. To this mixed group of the religious elite and societal outcasts, Jesus told 3 parables about God's concern for the "lost."

The parables flow naturally from one to the other with little comment. The parables share the common theme of God's care for the lost, but Jesus makes different points as He moves through them.

In each parable, something was lost. There is a noticeable progression in the percentage loss in moving from the first to the third parable. In the "Lost Sheep," there is one lost sheep out of 100, or a 1% loss. In the "Lost Coin" there is one lost coin out of 10, or a 10% loss.

We now come to the third parable, which is variously called the "Prodigal Son," "Lost Son," "Lost Two Sons," or "Bereaved Father." A man has 2 sons. The younger leaves home causing difficult circumstances for the father. The father believes he has lost that son which would be a 50% loss. But as the parable ends, it is clear the stay-at-home son has also been lost to the father in a different way, so that his actual loss was 100%.

**Parable of the Lost Sons:** Luke 15:11- 32, *"And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup> Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. <sup>14</sup> And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of*

*that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.*

*<sup>17</sup> “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ <sup>20</sup> And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup> But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. <sup>23</sup> And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.*

*<sup>25</sup> “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. <sup>27</sup> 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.’ <sup>28</sup> But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, <sup>29</sup> but he answered his father, ‘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. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’*

*<sup>31</sup> And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup> It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”*

The man who has two sons is apparently a relatively prosperous land owner. In Hebrew culture, at the father’s death, the older son will inherit 2/3 of the father’s estate, the younger son will inherit 1/3.

**The Younger Son:** This son frets about his situation at home. He yearns to be free to go to a place where life would be filled with fun things to do. Knowing he will eventually inherit 1/3 of his father’s estate, it seems to him he should be able to have

his portion immediately. In his culture that is an offensive idea, in fact so offensive that the usual consequence would be for him to be disinherited.

Convinced he can persuade his father, He goes to him and asks that he be given his 1/3. That request is the same as saying he wishes his father would die. His action is a great insult. If he obtains his portion, the community will consider the whole process disgraceful. The young man wants his portion in spendable form. Because most of the father's wealth is in land, if the father grants the younger son's request, it will mean selling land and other concrete assets.

For love of his son and perhaps other reasons, the father consents to this very unusual, counter-cultural arrangement. The father does what is necessary to be able to divide the estate between his two sons giving the younger son his portion in spendable form. The younger son soon departs for his imagined "heaven on earth" where everything will go his way. In this new place, he expects to live as a man of means in a place of pleasure. He quickly becomes "prodigal," which means he becomes a reckless spendthrift spending without restraint until he has nothing left.

Everything is squandered in an out of control lifestyle as he wines and dines his new friends and enjoys the pleasures of life without constraints. But inevitably his money runs out. His new friends vanish. In an attempt to sustain himself he takes a job caring for pigs. Pigs are forbidden to Jews as unclean. Caring for them is about the lowest kind of job a Jew could imagine. Even with the small income he earns, he is hungry, having insufficient means to feed and shelter himself.

As he worked caring for the pigs, he suddenly came to himself. I assume that means he began to rationally think about what he had done and how through his own actions, he was now destitute. He realized his father's hired men were better off than he. He thought, I will return to my father, confess that I no longer have any rights as a son, and ask my father to make me one of his hired men.

With that resolve, the younger son began the long journey back home. His father had never stopped longing for him to return. Every day he watched hopefully. Then one day in the distance, the father sees what he believes to be his lost son. He immediately runs to see if it is really him. It is!

What does the father do? He welcomes the repentant wayward son with open arms and heart. The father's welcome was effuse and literally reckless. The father was prodigal both in his love and his physical gifts as he welcomed his lost son home. The father did not reckon or count the son's sin against him or did he demand

repayment of the spent inheritance before restoring him as a member of the family. That response offended the elder stay-at-home son.

The father commanded a lavish feast of celebration be prepared in honor of the younger son's return. In the parable, the father represents God. The father's lavish actions convey a startling message. The father's grace is prodigal.

**The Prodigal God:** The "prodigal" grace and love bestowed on the repentant returned son pictures God's grace. God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness are prodigal. He can and does pardon and restore sinners from any and every kind of sin or wrongdoing. Are your sins horrible? Murder, stealing, abusing your wife and children? God's grace is more than a match for the sins of any repentant sinner.

**The Elder Brother:** As the elder son reacts to his brother's return and his father's actions, we learn a lot about the elder's character and spiritual health.

The elder brother hears from a servant that his brother has returned, been lavished with gifts, reinstated, and given a welcome home feast by his father. That brings the elder brother no joy. He is furious. Though the celebration feast is ongoing and everyone is inside, he refuses to go in to the great feast.

Because the elder brother remains outside, to speak with him the father must embarrassingly leave the feast at which he is the host. The "bad" son who left home but has returned is enjoying the feast with his father. The "good" son who stayed home refuses to go in to the feast.

What are the elder brothers' concerns? They are multiple. His father has spent a lot of money on a feast and on presents for the delinquent brother. The father had never done such things for the elder son. These are issues on the elder brother's mind, but undoubtedly the major issue was the father's reinstatement of the younger brother. Bringing the younger brother officially back into the family makes him once again an heir. The estate had been reduced by 1/3 to give the younger brother his share prematurely. Now the much smaller estate will again be divided 2/3 to the elder and 1/3 to the younger. It seems unfair.

The father responds to the elder son's complaints with tenderness. ***"And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup> It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"***

The father's restoration of the younger brother to the family was indeed at the elder brother's expense. The father had earlier divided his property between the younger and older brothers. Everything in the estate belonged to one or the other. The father retained use of property but ownership of nothing. The father's statement that "all that is mine is yours" was literally true. After the younger brother had taken his 1/3 and squandered it, everything remaining belonged to the elder brother. Restoration from a life of sin must always be paid for by someone. Christ paid that cost for all who come to Him.

Does any of this justify the elder brother's open rebellion against his father? Will the family be finally be united in love? Jesus doesn't complete the story. Why?

**What's Next:** A look at why Jesus stops the story where He did plus more about the characters in the parable and their relationship to the listening crowd.