

*Luke 15:11-32 (NRSV)*

<sup>11</sup>Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup>The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup>A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. <sup>14</sup>When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout 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 to his fields to feed the pigs. <sup>16</sup>He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup>But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup>I will get up 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 like one of your hired hands.”’ <sup>20</sup>So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup>Then 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 slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup>And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup>for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup>“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup>He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ <sup>28</sup>Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. <sup>29</sup>But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ <sup>31</sup>Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup>But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’ ”

*We love stories of joyful homecomings and reunions. But are we always the joyful greeter ourselves? Are there those whom we would have trouble graciously welcoming home? Today’s story is a study in contrasts: two very different reunions.*

### *The Parable of a Father and Two Sons*

One of the most familiar of all Jesus’ parables, you probably know today’s scripture passage as “The Parable of the Prodigal<sup>1</sup> Son.” The trouble with this title or any other is that the title immediately takes your attention to one character or aspect of the story. But, I have on my desk nine different commentaries on this parable and each one takes a somewhat different tack. Some authors identify with the father and his boundless joy at the return of the younger son. Other authors want to focus on the reaction of the elder son and his declaration of unfairness. All of these are helpful, but this is an incredibly rich and complex story which will repay many return visits. Preachers often preach it in at least two parts. Read it at different times in your own life and you will hear a message you hadn’t heard before. Thus, rather than provide you with one explanation among many, I’ll give you some background that may help you to see the surprises.

### *Some Helpful Background*

- This parable and the two that immediately precede it (see the page two text box) are Jesus’ response to chattering among some Pharisees who are appalled that Jesus eats with tax collectors and assorted sinners. Tax collectors were despised by Jews because they worked as “entrepreneurs” who would collect as much money as they could, send to Rome what the empire required, and then keep the rest. They were seen as Jews who had sold-out to the pagan oppressors.

<sup>1</sup> “Prodigal” is not a word most of us use. It means to spend lavishly or foolishly.

- When the younger son asks for his inheritance, it would have been shameful and humiliating for the father. The son is dishonoring his father, in violation of Torah. It is as if he wishes the father dead. Indeed, in the original Greek, the father literally divides his *bios*, his “life,” between the two sons. Jesus’ listeners would have understood how much the father had been shamed, making the father’s joyful and unconditional welcome all the more shocking. Indeed, most listeners probably thought that the father had been pampering an immoral and poorly raised son.
- We all know that Jews don’t eat pork. But under the OT law, Jews were forbidden from even touching the carcass of a dead pig (Leviticus 11:7-8). Jesus shows the younger brother caring for swine (and even willing to eat what they eat!) so that Jesus’ listeners will understand that the young man could sink no lower. He had rendered himself unclean and placed himself outside the covenant with God. Jesus’ listeners would have been happy for the story to end there and probably expected it to. The wayward son had gotten what he was due for dishonoring his father.
- When the younger son returns, the father runs to greet him. Running was seen as undignified for an elderly Jewish man. Given the typical attire, he would have had to grab up the hem of his long robe and go charging down the path! The father gives the son the family ring and sandals because they are both symbols that the father is welcoming him as a son, even though the younger son has said he’d be happy to return home as a hired hand. To Jesus’ listeners, the father’s complete and unquestioning welcome would have been shocking and offensive; doesn’t the father have any pride!
- The elder son’s behavior is also very insulting to the father. His refusal to enter the house or even speak to his father was an offense that would warrant a beating! Note that Jesus doesn’t tell us the response of the elder son. The parable ends with the conclusion up in the air.

#### *A few reflections*

You can almost picture Jesus turning his gaze to the nearby Pharisees as the story moves to the reaction of the elder son. Could Jesus possibly mean that they, the defenders of the

#### Jesus Tells Three Parables

Any biblical passage is easier to understand if we put it in context. This is true even of the parables. Though each parable is its own self-contained story, you’ll find it helpful to look at the paragraphs immediately preceding and following a parable. Today’s parable is a good example.

In the opening verses of chapter 15, Luke tells us that assorted tax collectors and sinners are gathered around Jesus. Nearby Pharisees are offended that Jesus would welcome all the wrong sorts of people into his company. After all, the Pharisees wouldn’t be seen in such company, much less eat with them. Jesus responds to the Pharisees by telling three parables. The first parable is about a shepherd’s joy in finding one lost sheep from a flock of one hundred (15:3-7). The second parable is about the joy of a woman who lost a single coin and then found it, after working long and hard to find it (v. 8-10). Finally, Jesus turns to today’s parable and a father’s joy in finding a long-lost son. It doesn’t take much imagination to predict the reaction of those who criticized Jesus’ welcoming of sinners.

faith, were as the elder brother, unable to see the power of God’s grace and forgiveness? Might they resent God’s pouring out grace wherever God chooses? Through the Old Testament prophets, God had promised a celebration upon the restoration of Israel. How could Jesus imply that they, the Pharisees, would be left out while all the wrong sorts would enjoy the barbecue!

You can also picture the joy and wonder that must have come across the faces of the “tax collectors and sinners” as the story unfolded, a story of absolute and unconditional forgiveness; a story in which all are welcome to God’s party. It is no accident that Jesus hung out with the outcasts of society. By his very symbolic actions – like eating with tax collectors – he demonstrated that *everyone* could be forgiven and welcomed into God’s kingdom.

In the same way, it isn’t hard to imagine the hope that must have sprung up in the hearts of all those nearby who were neither Pharisees nor obvious “sinners.” It is a story that Jesus’ fellow Jews wanted to hear, a story of exile and restoration. Perhaps, after so many centuries of oppression, God was at last going to forgive the sins of Israel and truly deliver them from exile, ushering in the kingdom of God. Perhaps that big day was finally upon them.

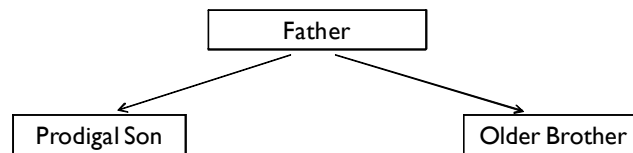
## Interpreting the Parable of the Prodigal Son

By their nature, parables lend themselves to over- and under-interpretation. For example, it is often said that each parable has a single main point. But this isn't necessarily so. Often, there are important meanings built around each main character. There are some questions to ask yourself about a parable that will help you hear Jesus better. In this text box, we'll step through these questions for each parable in this series.

*What is the narrative context of the parable?*

- Jesus' teaching is attracting all the "wrong" sorts of folks. Even tax collectors are coming to hear him. Pharisees and scribes grumble that "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them" (15:2).
- Jesus' response is to tell them three parables
  - The shepherd who leaves 99 sheep in the wilderness to go find the one lost sheep.
  - The woman who has ten silver coins but misplaces one and searches high and low for it, rejoicing when she has found the lost coin.
  - Today's parable about a father and two sons. But who is really the centerpiece of the story? The prodigal son or the prodigal's father or the older brother?

*What is the parable's structure?*



*What background information about culture, customs, geography and so on are important?*

- See the bullet points that begin on the first page of the background study.

*What is the perspective of each of the main characters?*

- The prodigal – After insulting his father and throwing away his inheritance the son is reduced to the lowest of jobs. He decides to return home. Is he genuinely repentant? What does he seek from his father?
- The father – What sort of welcome does the prodigal son get? Why is the father so joyful? Shouldn't there be consequences to the son's actions? Who do you think that the father models in his welcome home?
- The older brother – This story is often preached as a second sermon. What underlies his resentment? What do you think that he will do?

*With whom do we or the first readers identify?*

- It isn't hard to identify to some degree with all three main characters, even as we acknowledge how far short we usually fall of the father's grace-filled welcome. How often are we the older brother, resentful of God's grace being offered to others?
- Try to imagine that you are one of those hearing Jesus. Might you hear this parable as a story about a genuine return from exile and the forgiveness of sins that it implies.

Note: The parable diagrams are taken from Craig Blomberg's book, *Interpreting the Parables*. If you really want to dig into the parables, this book is a good guide.

## READING WITH HEART & MIND

**Monday, Genesis 26:34 – 28:4** Another story of a father, two sons, and rivalry!

**Tuesday, 2 Samuel 14:28 – 15:12** After murdering his brother in revenge, Absalom returns to Jerusalem and is welcomed by David. How gracious and welcoming a return does it seem to be. What follows?

**Wednesday, Isaiah 43:25 – 44:3** Israel's welcome home (return from exile) will mean that Israel's sins have been forgiven.

**Thursday, Zephaniah 3:14-20** A song about Israel's coming home (see v. 20)

**Friday, Luke 15:1-32** The entire sequence of "lost & found" parables

**Saturday, Luke 16:1-13** The parable of the dishonest steward. Why might this parable immediately follow the "lost/found" parables?

## Sermon Notes

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### ***Our Family Tree: The Stories of the Christian Denominations***

A new series in Scott Engle's 11:00 class on Sunday mornings in Festival Hall. This has always been a much-requested series and is the first time it has been offered.

**Today: *To God the Glory: Calvin and the Presbyterians***

**Next Week: *Radical Reformation & the Baptists***

**All the Sermon Background Studies (now more than 350) can be found at [www.thebibleacademy.com](http://www.thebibleacademy.com).**

They are posted as easily downloadable pdf files. Your browser can search the listing for studies on specific books of the Bible or Scripture passages. They are suitable for individual study and for biblically-oriented small group discussions.

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

1. How do you think you would react if you were the father in the story? Would it make you want to do unto the son as he had done unto you? Sometimes, as children separate themselves from their parents to build their own lives, parents respond by emotionally separating from their children. But, in this model of parental love, the father's love is profound and unconditional. What can we do to build such relationships with our own children or with our own parents? What are the biggest barriers?
2. I've raised three sons and I can't tell you how often I've heard, "That's not fair!" I usually respond with something like, "Maybe, but life isn't fair." [I guess that sounds pretty lame sometimes!] To the elder brother, the father's open-armed welcoming of the "family ne'er-do-well" is overwhelmingly unfair. Why is fairness so important to people? What do you think this parable teaches about fairness? Do you truly want God to be fair with you?
3. In this story, the errant son is welcomed back with a party, with singing and dancing! The whole neighborhood is invited to the celebration. Is this how we welcome back those in our own lives who have hurt us or offended us? If we welcome them at all, do we expect that they will spend some time in penance, showing us the contrition we think we are owed? Notice in the parable that the father wasn't even listening as the son apologized!