

Jesus Tells the Parable of the Sons

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: The stories Jesus told reveal God’s goodness and heart to welcome any sinner home.

BACKGROUND PASSAGE: Luke 15

Over our mantel hangs a print of Rembrandt’s masterpiece *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. At first glance, it doesn’t seem to contain much detail. In the foreground, illuminated by some mysterious light, the repentant son kneels before his compassionate father, who is embracing him. This is the main focus of the painting and most people’s recollection of the parable. But to the right stands the prodigal’s older brother, with his hands folded. He too is illuminated because his role in the story is equally prominent. While there are other interesting details we could mention, the main point of both the painting and the parable is right there in the light: the father welcomes his “sinful” son with the same love he has for his “righteous” son. Yet this story turns the typical categories of “the sinful” and “the righteous” inside out.



Why do you think this parable is so often called “The Prodigal Son” while the older brother’s role is overlooked?

Group Time

Point 1: Selfishness leads to rebelling against the Father's goodness (Luke 15:11-13).

¹¹ He also said, "A man had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate I have coming to me.' So he distributed the assets to them. ¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered together all he had and traveled to a distant country, where he squandered his estate in foolish living.

Jesus didn't provide a backstory for the events of this parable because one wasn't necessary. This story just dives right in, but one small detail does set the stage for the young son's actions. By asking for his inheritance early, before his father's death, the younger son essentially told his father, "I wish you were dead." Thus, he dishonored and cut himself off from his father and family because he desired to live for himself. This is the essence of every sin, both from the prodigal son and from us.



Why might people resist identifying with the prodigal son at this point in the parable?

In verse 13, Jesus said the inheritance the son took early in his greed was "squandered" and that his lifestyle was "foolish." Whatever experience or possession the son was chasing after in his new life came up short in reality, and the pursuit cost him everything (vv. 14-16). He should have seen it coming—but do we? Not often enough. A lifestyle of sin, whether public or private, one day will cost us everything. To live with yourself at the center—rather than God—is to live spiritually bankrupt and set yourself up for utter catastrophe and sorrowful emptiness.



What words of warning and encouragement might you give to someone younger than you?

Point 2: Sorrow leads to repentance in light of the Father's goodness (Luke 15:17-24).

¹⁷ When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food, and here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I'll get up, go to my father, and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. ¹⁹ I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired workers.'" ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. But while the son was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him.

²¹ The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father told his servants, 'Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Then bring the fattened calf and slaughter it, and let's celebrate with a feast, ²⁴ because this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' So they began to celebrate.

The prodigal son has bottomed out. He is not just at the end of his money and wild lifestyle but at the end of *himself*. In coming to Christ, we all must come to this same end. The circumstances will look different for each of us, but until we despair of ourselves, we will not see the beauty of Christ in the gospel. Still, in coming to Christ, we must come in the right way. The prodigal came hoping only to be a hired hand, but his father had other plans.

In your repentance, how do you typically come to God?



As a Hired Hand

As a Humble Child

Some have said that the most significant character in this parable is the father. He corresponds to our heavenly Father, who overflows with lovingkindness to all. The father in the story, like our heavenly Father, is a giver of grace! Despising the shame, he runs to his once-lost son and then throws a party for the son who once wished his father were dead.



What has been your experience of the overwhelming grace of God through faith in Jesus?



Voices from the Church

"Repentance doesn't mean just feeling sorry for what we've done. It involves action. It means moving back toward God, humbly confessing our sin to Him, and receiving His forgiveness and restoration."¹

—Tony Evans

Point 3: Self-righteousness leads to resenting the Father's goodness (Luke 15:25-32).

²⁵ “Now his older son was in the field; as he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he summoned one of the servants, questioning what these things meant. ²⁷ ‘Your brother is here,’ he told him, ‘and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

²⁸ “Then he became angry and didn’t want to go in. So his father came out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he replied to his father, ‘Look, I have been slaving many years for you, and I have never disobeyed your orders, yet you never gave me a goat so that I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.’

³¹ “‘Son,’ he said to him, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

Through the older son’s disdain for the younger and his conversation with his father, we can decipher his worldview: life is a spiritual meritocracy, where God’s holiness is to be taken seriously and obedience to the law of God should earn you good standing in the world. On the surface, this worldview sounds worthwhile, but in the end, it comes up short because it fails to take seriously God’s goodness toward us in the gospel. In fact, it rejects the need for the gospel and leads to resenting those who fall on God’s grace.

God Is Gracious: God’s _____ is to delight in giving _____ favor to those who are undeserving. Because of sin, we deserve death. But God has demonstrated His graciousness by providing atonement and _____ for our sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The parable of the prodigal son is as much about the older son’s legalism as the younger son’s hedonism. Our heavenly Father’s goodness is not contingent upon the law—as if we could earn His favor through our legalistic efforts. Rather, we experience God’s goodness through His grace—namely, the person and work of Jesus Christ, who put an end once for all to legal striving and redeems us from the curse of the law through His own perfect obedience on our behalf.



What are some ways Christians can exhibit a legalistic worldview?

Daily Study

Day 1: Read Luke 15:1-7

What Jesus proposed in this passage—no, in fact, *commanded*—is a fundamentally and wholly different way of looking at outsiders and the unsaved than we are accustomed to and inclined toward.

Think of the daily outrage about “the culture” featured in evangelical social media feeds. We are offended, shocked, and often driven to attack by what should be an utterly unsurprising fact of life: people who don’t know Jesus act like they don’t know Jesus. Sinners sin. That this is the sad state of things doesn’t make sin acceptable, of course, nor does it mean Christians are not called to preach against sin. The gospel of Jesus is good news for sinners, and anyone who isn’t able to face first the facts of his or her own sin will not be able to receive the grace that liberates him or her from it. This reality should affect how we look at sinners.

Jesus responded to the accusatory insults about His “welcoming sinners” with a story about a shepherd who prioritizes the lost sheep. This turns our spiritual meritocracy, or our system of trying to earn God’s favor, on its head. In the economy of the kingdom of God, there are no “good people” and “bad people.” There are just *people* (sinners, all), and then there’s Jesus.

So the next time you’re tempted to be outraged by the latest report that lost people do indeed act like lost people, remember your Savior who was not repulsed by you. He did not hold you at arm’s length or rail against you and your unholy transgressions but rather rushed to embrace you. Remember that Christ sees the lost not as gross or untouchable but as those who are “like sheep without a shepherd.” When He saw sinners, He had compassion for them. And this is not just good news for those offensive sinners “out there.” It’s good news for you too.



How can you cultivate in yourself the mindset of the apostle Paul, who considered himself the “worst of sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15)?

Voices from the Church

“Jesus’ words are both an explanation of his ministry to those who saw themselves as the ninety-nine ... and also an explanation of God’s priorities as they truly are, since he really does rejoice more over the bringing back of the lost than over anything else.”³

—David Wenham

Day 2: Read Luke 15:8-10

How much is one person worth to Jesus?

In the second parable of the three in Luke 15, Jesus gave us the image of a woman who has cleared everything out and lit everything up in order to find one lost coin. The woman acts like this one lost coin makes all the difference in the world. The fortune is not a fortune without the value of that one coin.

In the same way, Jesus said the Lord and His heavenly host celebrate the salvation of one sinner as if that one makes all the difference. Every time a lost person is saved, every time a stranger comes into the fellowship of the church, we should act like we didn't know how incomplete we were without him or her. We should treat every found person as if she were the missing piece.

That's how much one person is worth to Jesus. Every believer is valuable, necessary, and important to the kingdom.



What do your attitude and behavior reveal about how much lost people are worth to you?

Day 3: Read Luke 15:11-16

The younger son's request for an early inheritance obviously was driven by his sense that something was missing from his life. Maybe he was bored. Maybe he felt stifled by life on his father's estate. Maybe he wanted to experience the world and indulge himself. In any event, he imagined that the money and what money could buy would bring him a satisfaction he didn't have.

In the end, of course, he learned this was a fruitless pursuit. He ended up more empty than when he began, even less satisfied than he was before he had the inheritance. After all, he was staring at pig food with hungry eyes.

Sadly, it often takes getting to the end of our fruitless pursuits for you and I to learn that Jesus has always been more than enough. The truth is if we have Christ, we can suffer any loss or stifled pleasure because in Him we have everything we need.



When were some times that you learned, maybe even the hard way, that Jesus is what truly satisfies?

Day 4: Read Luke 15:17-24

Do you realize there isn't a day in your life when the Lord is surprised by your flaws and failures? He's not even surprised by your sin. He is God, and therefore, He has seen it all coming. If you're a Christian, He knew what He was "signing up for" when He saved you.

Believers often have difficulty comprehending this truth: You do not get into God's kingdom by God's grace only to be kept in by your own goodness. It is grace all the way, from start to finish.

We see a picture of this in the father's reception of the repentant son. When the lost son was found, the father wasn't shaking his head, crossing his arms, and "tsk-tsk'ing" from his porch. No, he ran to his son. He embraced him with joy. And he threw a party. Similarly, the disposition of the heavenly Father over you is one of great joy. He's glad you're His. He's never sad to see you. He loves you and rejoices over you (Zeph. 3:17).



What difference does it make for you today as a Christian knowing you woke up under the Lord's approval of you and will finish your day the same way?

Day 5: Read Luke 15:25-32

In his book on Christian community, *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about this thing called the "wish-dream." The wish-dream is the vision for the church you want (by contrast to the church you actually have). Bonhoeffer cautioned pastors and church members about the wish-dream because he says if we're constantly fixated on what people aren't, we won't be able to love them as they are. In other words, you cannot love someone and constantly be measuring them up at the same time.

The older son in the parable of the prodigal son was very busy measuring, specifically, the younger son against himself. This is often how legalism works. The legalist doesn't measure other people against the holiness of God but against his own perceived holiness. We need to take care in realizing that all fall short of God's glory, including ourselves. This will help us have compassion for others who aren't as put together as we think we are, not to mention help us to express awe and praise for the God who has loved and forgiven even us.



What can you do to point others to the grace of God over the next few days?

UNIT 25

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1. Elisabeth Elliot, *These Strange Ashes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 1998), 146-47.
2. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989) [eBook].

SESSION 2

1. Tony Evans, *God Can Not Be Trusted (And Five Other Lies of Satan)* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2005), 60.
2. D. L. Moody, "The Prodigal," in *The D. L. Moody Collection*, ed. and comp. James S. Bell Jr. (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1997), 346-47.
3. David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1989), 101.

SESSION 3

1. Amanda Bible Williams, in *She Reads Truth*, by Raechel Myers and Amanda Bible Williams (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2016), 6-7.
2. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Gospel of Life: Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 107.
3. Quoted in "Only one life, 'twil soon be past..." by Thomas and Elizabeth West, *The West London Life*, December 31, 2018, www.thewestlondonlife.com/single-post/2018/12/31/Only-one-life-twil-soon-be-past.
4. John Bunyan, *Come and Welcome to Jesus Christ*, in *The Select Works of John Bunyan* (London: William Collins, Sons, and Company, 1866), 564.

SESSION 4

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: HarperOne, 2002), 503.
2. Athanasius, "Homily on the Resurrection of Lazarus," quoted in *John 11-21*, ed. Joel C. Elowsky, vol. IVb in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 13.
3. Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: New Testament*, vol. 1 (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2001), 334.

UNIT 26

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2. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *A Heart for God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1985), 155.
3. Louie Giglio, *The Air I Breathe* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2003), 22.

SESSION 2

1. Andrew Wilson, *Unbreakable: What the Son of God Said About the Word of God* (IOPublishing, 2014) [eBook].
2. Kim Huat Tan, *Mark*, in *New Covenant Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015) [Wordsearch].
3. Augustine, *Tractate on John* 40.9.13, quoted in *Mark*, eds. Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, vol. II in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001) [Wordsearch].

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1. John Stott, quoted in "Between Two Worlds: An Interview with John R. W. Stott," by R. Albert Mohler Jr., August 8, 2011, albertmohler.com/2011/08/08/between-two-worlds-an-interview-with-john-r-w-stott.
2. Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1967, reprint 2008), 73.
3. Anne Askew, *The Latter Examination of Anne Askew (1547)*, ed. John Bale; quoted in *Luke*, ed. Beth Kreitzer, vol. 3 in *Reformation Commentary on Scripture: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015) [Wordsearch].
4. Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Sword & the Trowel, Volume 6*, vol. 85 in *The Complete Works of C. H. Spurgeon* (Delmarva, 2013) [eBook].
5. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1980), 181.

SESSION 4

1. See "Diamonds Unearthed," by Cate Lineberry, *Smithsonian Magazine* (December 2006), www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/diamonds-unearted-141629226.
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3. Dexter Maben, "Mark," in *South Asia Bible Commentary*, gen. ed. Brian Wintle (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 1322.
4. Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1999), 487.

SESSION 5

1. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Sermon on the Paralytic 12*, quoted in *Mark*, eds. Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, vol. II in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001) [Wordsearch].
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UNIT 27

SESSION 1

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3. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 252-53.

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SESSION 3

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3. Elisabeth Elliot, *Through Gates of Splendor* (Doubleday Direct, 1996), 165.

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1. Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew* 4.28.18-20, quoted in *Matthew 14-28*, ed. Manlio Simonetti, vol. Ib in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001) [Wordsearch].
2. Corrie ten Boom with Jamie Buckingham, *Tramp for the Lord: The Story That Begins Where the Hiding Place Ends* (Fort Washington, PA: CLC Publications, 1974), 63.
3. Robby Gallaty, *Rediscovering Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015) [eBook].