

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

Luke 15:11-32

Luke 15:11-32: 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.’”

Background Notes

In the culture of that day, the family inheritance was usually divided up after the father passed away. For a Jewish son to ask for his inheritance ahead of time was the same thing as wishing that his father were dead. Such was the attitude of this rebellious runaway younger son. The surprising point in the parable is that the father went along with the son, and let him have his wish. This emphasizes that God, who obviously is the father in this parable, does not manipulate us. He allows us exercise our own free will, even when we have rebellious runaway attitudes.

With the mention of the “far country” (v13), the audience would naturally think of the area of the Decapolis on the east side of the Sea of Galilee, where they raised pigs (Luke 8). For a Jewish young man to squander his inheritance in loose living in the sinful Greco-Roman cities of the Decapolis, and then to end up with a job feeding swine was about as low as you could go. *“Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything.”*

But the rebellious runaway son finally came to his senses and returned home: *“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! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.”’*

Many commentators have rightly pointed out that we should call this the “Parable of the Forgiving Father” rather than the “Parable of the Prodigal Son.” Verse 20 says, *“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.”* The father did not even let the son get to the point in his confession where he planned to request a job as a hired hand! Instead, the father restored his lost son to his position of sonship, gave him the best robe, sandals on his feet, and a family signet ring on his finger. *“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. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry.”*

And then comes the banquet – *“and they began to be merry”!* There’s no end to the joy and rejoicing in the parable. What a picture of salvation - and the joys of Heaven to come - for all believers in the family of God!

Doctrinal Points

The Parable of the Lost Son emphasizes our rebellious attitude and the Father’s forgiveness.

1. The younger son represents unbelievers who are rebellious, but repent.

In application of this parable for today, does the younger son best represent a lost unbeliever who becomes a Christian? Or does he best represent a backsliding Christian who is restored? After all, he was in the family. We certainly could *apply* it both ways because of the following hermeneutical principle: There is always *one proper interpretation*, but there may be *many applications*.

However, the *best* applications are always the ones that are *closest to the interpretation*. To properly interpret any parable that the Lord gave we must answer the following two questions: “What did the Lord have in mind when He gave the parable?” and “To whom did the Lord give the parable?” The answers to these questions are easy, in this case.

Look again at verses 1 and 2: *“Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, ‘This Man receives sinners and eats with them.’”* And then the Lord gave the three parables – the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. There were two distinct groups in the audience to whom the Lord addressed this parable. There were the tax collectors and “open sinners,” like the Zaccheuses and the Mary Magdalenes, and there were the self-righteous sinners, like the scribes and Pharisees. Clearly the Lord had both groups in mind when He gave this parable. The unscrupulous tax collectors and loose living sinners are represented in the rebellious runaway son, and the proud and despising scribes and Pharisees are obviously represented in the self-righteous older brother. Both groups that the Lord was addressing were unbelievers, but at least some of the “Zaccheuses and the Mary Magdalenes” were coming to their senses, realizing and repenting of their sins and coming to the Lord.

The only reason the Lord used a family illustration here (even though both groups are unbelievers) was that the Lord was speaking to Jewish people. The Jewish people are God’s special people, and thus the family motif would be appropriate. But both groups were lost and needed to be saved. So the *best* application of this parable for today is not for backsliders, but for lost unbelievers needing to be saved.

Furthermore, the three parables taken together emphasize this point of being lost - the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. And the language that is used at the end of each parable emphasizes that unbelievers are in view: *“There is joy in Heaven over one sinner who repents”* (v7&10) and *“was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found”* (v24&32). “Alive again” is used in the sense of born again from a dead condition, not in the sense of once having life in the family. So the younger son represents unbelievers who are rebellious but repent.

2. The older brother represents unbelievers who are self-righteous and do not repent.

It’s easy to see that the Lord had the scribes and Pharisees in mind, in His description of the older brother in the parable. *“Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 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.’ But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. 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. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.’”*

The older brother was angry that grace had been shown to his younger brother, just as the proud scribes and Pharisees hated the fact that the Lord showed mercy to despised sinners. Notice that the older brother never acknowledged that the younger son was his brother. With scorn, he referred to him as “this son of yours.” This is the attitude of the self-righteous unbeliever, even today.

Notice that the father pleaded with the older brother. He said to him, “*Son, you are always with me and all that I have is yours.*” These verses certainly emphasize Israel’s favored position before God. Romans 3:1-2 says, “*What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God.*” In Romans 9:4 we read “*To Israel pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises.*” So in a larger sense, the older brother represents unbelieving Israel, even at the present time. The older brother represents unbelievers who are self-righteous and do not see their need to repent.

Practical Application

Praise the Lord for reconciliation!

The Parable of the Lost Son gives us a wonderful illustration of reconciliation! Reconciliation is *more than forgiveness*. Reconciliation means to be brought back into a beautiful harmonious relationship with God, and that’s what is portrayed in this parable.

When the lost son came home, he was not only *forgiven* by the father - he was **reconciled** to the father! He is not just forgiven, and then told to live out in the barn or assigned to work with the servants. No, he was restored to the position of a favored son, in fellowship with the father! This was “yellow ribbons” all the way! This is our position now as believers. We are *more than forgiven* sinners! Praise the Lord for reconciliation!