

**Luke 15:11-32**  
**February 9, 2020**

**Open with Prayer**

**HOOK:**

Q: If one of your children came up to you and said, “Give me my share of the estate,” how do you think you’d feel and how would you respond? [Let people engage]

**Transition:** If you were with us last week, you will recall that Jesus continued to have a bunch of Pharisees in His audience while he was spending time with the tax collectors, lowlife criminals, prostitutes, i.e. sinners. The Pharisees are highly critical of Jesus for hanging with those kinds of people. So Jesus explains what He’s doing by telling three parables.

In the first parable we learn that a man has lost a sheep, and he goes to great lengths to find it. When he does, he brings the sheep back into the fold and invites his friends to rejoice with him. In the second parable, we learn about a woman who loses a coin, one of great value. She diligently looks for it, finds it, and then invites her friends to rejoice with her. The point of these two stories is that God’s joy is found in the salvation of one sinner. The joy of God fills heaven when one lost soul repents and experiences salvation.

Jesus has one more parable that emphasizes God’s joy over one repentant soul. Let’s begin.

**BOOK:**

**The Parable of the Prodigal Son**

<sup>11</sup> Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

<sup>13</sup> “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. <sup>14</sup> After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup> “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

<sup>21</sup> “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

<sup>22</sup> “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup> “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. <sup>27</sup> ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

<sup>28</sup> “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup> But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

<sup>31</sup> “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

### **Process Observations/Questions:**

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn’t understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

### **LOOK:**

Note the parallels between the prodigal’s coming to the father and our coming to the Father through Christ (John 14:6):

*The Prodigal*

*Jesus Christ*

He was lost (v.24)

“I am the way”

He was ignorant (v.17)

“I am the truth”

He was dead (v.24)

“I am the life”

There is only one way to come to the Father, and that is through faith in Jesus Christ. Have you come home?

### **Close in Prayer**

**Commentaries for Today's Lesson:**

**Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Vol. 1, pp. 234-238). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.**

**The Joy of Returning (Luke 15:11–24)**

We call this story “The Parable of the Prodigal Son” (the word *prodigal* means “wasteful”), but it could also be called “The Parable of the Loving Father,” for it emphasizes the graciousness of the father more than the sinfulness of the son. Unlike the shepherd and the woman in the previous parables, the father did not go out to seek the son, but it was the memory of his father’s goodness that brought the boy to repentance and forgiveness (see Rom. 2:4). Note in the story the three experiences of the younger son.

***Rebellion—he went to the far country (vv. 11–16).*** According to Jewish law, an elder son received twice as much as the other sons (Deut. 21:17), and a father could distribute his wealth during his lifetime if he wished. It was perfectly legal for the younger son to ask for his share of the estate and even to sell it, but it was certainly not a very loving thing on his part. It was as though he were saying to his father, “I wish you were dead!” Thomas Huxley said, “A man’s worst difficulties begin when he is able to do just as he likes.” How true!

We are always heading for trouble whenever we value things more than people, pleasure more than duty, and distant scenes more than the blessings we have right at home. Jesus once warned two disputing brothers, “Take heed and beware of covetousness!” (Luke 12:15) Why? Because the covetous person can never be satisfied, no matter how much he acquires, and a dissatisfied heart leads to a disappointed life. The prodigal learned the hard way that you cannot enjoy the things money can buy if you ignore the things money cannot buy.

“The far country” is not necessarily a distant place to which we must travel, because “the far country” exists first of all *in our hearts*. The younger son dreamed of “enjoying” his freedom far from home and away from his father and older brother. If the sheep was lost through foolishness and the coin through carelessness, then the son was lost because of willfulness. He wanted to have his own way so he rebelled against his own father and broke his father’s heart.

But life in the far country was not what he expected. His resources ran out, his friends left him, a famine came, and the boy was forced to do for a stranger what he would not do for his own father—go to work! This scene in the drama is our Lord’s way of emphasizing what sin really does in the lives of those who reject the Father’s will. Sin promises freedom, but it only brings slavery (John 8:34); it promises success, but brings failure; it promises life, but “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). The boy thought he would “find himself,” but he only lost himself! When God is left out of our lives, enjoyment becomes enslavement.

***Repentance—he came to himself (vv. 17–19).*** To “repent” means “to change one’s mind,” and that is exactly what the young man did as he cared for the pigs. (What a job for a Jewish boy!) He “came to himself,” which suggests that up to this point he had not really “been himself.” There is an “insanity” in sin that seems to paralyze the image of God within us and liberate the “animal” inside. Students of Shakespeare like to contrast two quotations that describe this contradiction in man’s nature.

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form, in moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god!

(*Hamlet*, II, ii)

When he is best, he is a little worse than a man; and when he is worst, he is little better than a beast.

(*The Merchant of Venice*, I, ii)

The young man changed his mind about himself and his situation, and he admitted that he was a sinner. He confessed that his father was a generous man and that service at home was far better than “freedom” in the far country. It is God’s goodness, not just man’s badness, that leads us to repentance (Rom. 2:4). If the boy had thought only about himself—his hunger, his homesickness, his loneliness—he would have despaired. But his painful circumstances helped him to see his father in a new way, and this brought him hope. If his father was so good to *servants*, maybe he would be willing to forgive a *son*.

Had he stopped there, the boy would have experienced only regret or remorse (2 Cor. 7:10), but true repentance involves the will as well as the mind and the emotions—“I will arise ... I will go ... I will say ...” Our resolutions may be noble, but unless we act on them, they can never of themselves bring about any permanent good. If repentance is truly the work of God (Acts 11:18), then the sinner will obey God and put saving faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21).

**Rejoicing—he came to the father (vv. 20–24).** Here Jesus answered the accusations of the scribes and Pharisees (Luke 15:2), for the father not only ran to welcome his son, but he honored the boy’s homecoming by preparing a great feast and inviting the village to attend. The father never did permit the younger son to finish his confession; he interrupted him, forgave him, and ordered the celebration to begin!

Of course, the father pictures to us the attitude of our Heavenly Father toward sinners who repent: He is rich in His mercy and grace, and great in His love toward them (Eph. 2:1–10). All of this is possible because of the sacrifice of His Son on the cross. No matter what some preachers (and singers) claim, we are not saved by God’s love; God loves the whole world, and the whole world is not saved. We are saved by God’s grace, and grace is *love that pays a price*.

In the East, old men do not run; yet the father ran to meet his son. Why? One obvious reason was his love for him and his desire to show that love. But there is something else involved. This wayward son had brought disgrace to his family and village and, according to Deuteronomy 21:18–21, he should have been stoned to death. *If the neighbors had started to stone him, they would have hit the father who was embracing him!* What a picture of what Jesus did for us on the cross!

Everything the younger son had hoped to find in the far country, he discovered back home: clothes, jewelry, friends, joyful celebration, love, and assurance for the future. What made the difference? Instead of saying, “Father, *give* me!” he said, “Father, *make* me!” He was willing to be a servant! Of course, the father did not ask him to “earn” his forgiveness, because no amount of good works can save us from our sins (Eph. 2:8–10; Titus 3:3–7). In the far country, the prodigal learned the meaning of misery; but back home, he discovered the meaning of mercy.

The ring was a sign of sonship, and the “best robe” (no doubt the father’s) was proof of his acceptance back into the family (see Gen. 41:42; Isa. 61:10; 2 Cor. 5:21). Servants did not wear rings, shoes, or expensive garments. The feast was the father’s way of showing his joy and sharing it with others. Had the boy been dealt with according to the Law, there would have been a funeral, not a feast. What a beautiful illustration of Psalm 103:10–14!

It is interesting to consider the father’s description of his son’s experience: he was dead, and was now alive; he was lost, and now was found. This is the spiritual experience of every lost

sinner who comes to the Father through faith in Jesus Christ (John 5:24; Eph. 2:1–10). Note the parallels between the prodigal’s coming to the father and our coming to the Father through Christ (John 14:6):

<i>The Prodigal</i>	<i>Jesus Christ</i>
He was lost (v.24)	“I am the way”
He was ignorant (v.17)	“I am the truth”
He was dead (v.24)	“I am the life”

There is only one way to come to the Father, and that is through faith in Jesus Christ. Have you come home?

### **The Joy of Forgiving (Luke 15:25–32)**

At this point in the parable, the scribes and Pharisees felt confident that they had escaped our Lord’s judgment, for He had centered His attention on the publicans and sinners, pictured by the prodigal son. But Jesus continued the story and introduced the elder brother, who is a clear illustration of the scribes and Pharisees. The publicans and sinners were guilty of the obvious sins of the flesh, but the Pharisees and scribes were guilty of sins of the spirit (2 Cor. 7:1). Their outward actions may have been blameless, but their inward attitudes were abominable (see Matt. 23:25–28).

We must admit that the elder brother had some virtues that are commendable. He worked hard and always obeyed his father. He never brought disgrace either to the home or to the village, and apparently he had enough friends so that he could have planned an enjoyable party (Luke 15:29). He seems like a good solid citizen and, compared to his younger brother, almost a saint.

However, important as obedience and diligence are, they are not the only tests of character. Jesus taught that the two greatest commandments are to love God and to love others (Luke 10:25–28), but the elder brother broke both of these divine commandments. He did not love God (represented in the story by the father), and he did not love his brother. The elder brother would not forgive his brother who wasted the family inheritance and disgraced the family name. But neither would he forgive his father who had graciously forgiven the young man those very sins!

When you examine the sins of the elder brother, you can easily understand why he pictures the scribes and Pharisees. To begin with, he was *self-righteous*. He openly announced the sins of his brother, but he could not see his own sins (see Luke 18:9–14). The Pharisees defined sin primarily in terms of outward actions, not inward attitudes. They completely missed the message of the Sermon on the Mount and its emphasis on inward attitudes and holiness of heart (Matt. 5–7).

*Pride* was another one of his failings. Just think, he had served his father all those years and had *never* disobeyed his will! What a testimony! But his heart was not in his work, and he was always dreaming of throwing a big party at which he and his friends could enjoy themselves. He was only a drudge. Like the Prophet Jonah, the elder brother did God’s will *but not from the*

*heart* (Jonah 4; Eph. 6:6). He was a hard worker and a faithful worker—qualities to be commended—but his work was not a “labor of love” that would please his father.

You cannot help but notice his *unconcern for his missing brother*. Imagine having to be told that his brother had come home! The father watched for the younger son day after day and finally saw him afar off, but the elder brother did not know his brother was home until one of the servants told him.

Even though he knew it would make his father happy, the elder brother did not want his younger brother to come home. Why should he share his estate with somebody who had wasted his own inheritance? Why should he even share the father’s love with somebody who had brought shame to the family and the village? Reports of the prodigal’s lifestyle only made the elder brother look good, and perhaps this would make the father love his obedient son even more. No doubt about it—the arrival of the younger son was a threat to the older son.

Perhaps the most disturbing thing about the elder son was his fierce *anger*. He was angry at both his father and his brother and would not go into the house and share in the joyful celebration.

Anger is a normal emotion and it need not be sinful. “Be ye angry, and sin not” (Eph. 4:26, quoting Ps. 4:4). Moses, David, the prophets, and our Lord Jesus displayed holy anger at sin, and so should we today. The Puritan preacher Thomas Fuller said that anger was one of the “sinews of the soul.” Aristotle gave good advice when he wrote: “Anybody can become angry. That is easy. But to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose and in the right way—that is not within everybody’s power and is not easy.”

The elder brother was angry with his father because his father had given the younger son the feast that the elder brother had always wanted. “You never gave me so much as a goat,” he said to his father, “but you killed for him the valuable fatted calf!” The elder brother’s dreams were all shattered because the father had forgiven the prodigal.

Of course the elder brother was angry at his younger brother for getting all that attention and receiving the father’s special gifts. As far as the elder brother was concerned, *the younger brother deserved none of it*. Had he been faithful? No! Had he obeyed the father? No! Then why should he be treated with such kindness and love?

The Pharisees had a religion of good works. By their fasting, studying, praying, and giving, they hoped to earn blessings from God and merit eternal life. They knew little or nothing about the grace of God. However, it was not what they did, but what they did not do, that alienated them from God (see Matt. 23:23–24). When they saw Jesus receiving and forgiving irreligious people, they rebelled against it. Even more, they failed to see that *they themselves also needed the Saviour*.

The same father who ran to meet the prodigal came out of the house of feasting to plead with the older son. How gracious and condescending our Father is, and how patient He is with our weaknesses! The father explained that he would have been willing to host a feast for the older boy and his friends, but the boy had never asked him. Furthermore, ever since the division of the estate, the elder brother owned everything, and he could use it as he pleased.

The elder brother refused to go in; he stayed outside and pouted. He missed the joy of forgiving his brother and restoring the broken fellowship, the joy of pleasing his father and uniting the family again. How strange that the elder brother could speak peaceably to a servant boy, but he could not speak peaceably to his brother or father!

If we are out of fellowship with God, we cannot be in fellowship with our brothers and sisters and, conversely, if we harbor an unforgiving attitude toward others, we cannot be in communion

with God (see Matt. 5:21–26; 1 John 4:18–21). When they show true repentance, we must forgive those who sin, and we should seek to restore them in grace and humility (Matt. 18:15–35; Gal. 6:1–5; Eph. 4:32).

The father had the last word, so we do not know how the story ended. (See Jonah 4 for a parallel narrative.) We do know that the scribes and Pharisees continued to oppose Jesus and separate themselves from His followers, and that their leaders eventually brought about our Lord’s arrest and death. In spite of the Father’s pleading, they would not come in.

Everybody in this chapter experienced joy except the elder brother. The shepherd, the woman, and their friends all experienced the joy of finding. The younger son experienced the joy of returning and being received by a loving, gracious father. The father experienced the joy of receiving his son back safe and sound. But the elder brother would not forgive his brother, so he had no joy. He could have repented and attended the feast, but he refused; so he stayed outside and suffered.

In my years of preaching and pastoral ministry, I have met elder brothers (and sisters!) who have preferred nursing their anger to enjoying the fellowship of God and God’s people. Because they will not forgive, they have alienated themselves from the church and even from their family; they are sure that everyone else is wrong and they alone are right. They can talk loudly about the sins of others, but they are blind to their own sins.

“I never forgive!” General Oglethorpe said to John Wesley, to which Wesley replied, “Then, sir, I hope you never sin.”

Don’t stand outside! Come in and enjoy the feast!

**Martin, J. A. (1985). Isaiah. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, pp. 244-245)**

15:11. **A man ... had two sons**; the contrast between his sons is the point of the parable.

15:12–20a. This section of the parable describes the actions of **the younger** son. He requested an unusual thing when he asked **his father** to **give** him his **share of the estate**. Normally an estate was not divided and given to the heirs until the father could no longer manage it well. This father acquiesced to his son’s demand and gave him his share of the inheritance. **The younger son** took that wealth, went far away, and **squandered it in wild living**, involving himself presumably, as his older brother said, with prostitutes (v. 30). The hearers immediately would have begun to understand the point of the story. Jesus had been criticized for associating with sinners. The sinners were considered people who were far away from God, squandering their lives in riotous living. In contrast with the younger son, the older son continued to remain with the father and did not engage in such practices.

A **famine** occurred and the second son ran out of money so that he had to work for a foreigner feeding **pigs**, something detestable to a Jew. Perhaps the far **country** was east of the Sea of Galilee where Gentiles tended **pigs** (cf. 8:26–37). In his hunger he **longed** for the **pods**—the food he fed **the pigs**. As a Jew, he could have stooped no lower. The pods were probably carob pods, from tall evergreen carob trees.

In this low condition, **he came to his senses** (15:17). He decided to **go back to his father** and work for him. Surely he would be better off to work for his **father** than for a foreigner. He fully expected to be **hired** by **his father** as a servant, not to be taken back as his son.

15:20b–24. The third section of the parable describes the father’s response. He had been waiting for his son to return, for **while he was still a long way off** the **father saw him**. The

father, full of **compassion for** his son, **ran to** him, and hugged **and kissed him**. The father would not even listen to all of the young son's rehearsed speech. Instead **the father had his servants** prepare a banquet to **celebrate** the son's return. He gave the son a new position with a **robe ... a ring ... and sandals**. Jesus intentionally used the banquet motif again. He had previously spoken of a banquet to symbolize the coming kingdom (13:29; cf. 14:15–24). Jesus' hearers would have easily realized the significance of this feast. Sinners (whom the young son symbolized) were entering into the kingdom because they were coming to God. They believed they needed to return to Him and be forgiven by Him.

15:25–32. The parable's final section describes the attitude of the older brother, who symbolized the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. They had the same attitude toward the sinners as **the older son** had toward the younger son. **The older brother**, coming home from working **in the field** and hearing what was happening, got **angry**. Similarly, the Pharisees and teachers of the Law were angry with the message Jesus was proclaiming. They did not like the idea that people from outside their nation as well as outcasts and sinners in the nation were to be a part of the kingdom. Like the older son who **refused to go** to the feast, the Pharisees refused to enter the kingdom Jesus offered to the nation.

Interestingly the **father went out and pleaded with** the older brother to go to the feast. Likewise, Jesus ate with Pharisees as well as sinners. He did not desire to exclude the Pharisees and teachers of the Law from the kingdom. The message was an invitation to everyone.

The older brother was angry because he had **never** been honored with a feast even though, as he said, **All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders** (v. 29). Those words betrayed the fact that the older brother thought he had a relationship with his father because of his work. He served his father not out of love but out of a desire for reward. He even thought of himself as being in bondage to his father.

**The father** pointed out that the older **son** had had the joy of being in the house all the time, and now he should rejoice with the father in his brother's return. The words, **You are always with me and everything I have is yours**, suggest the religious leaders' privileged position as members of God's Chosen People. They were the recipients and guardians of the covenants and the Law (Rom. 3:1–2; 9:4). Rather than feeling angry, they should rejoice that others were joining them and would be a part of the kingdom.

**Cabal, T., Brand, C. O., Clendenen, E. R., Copan, P., Moreland, J. P., & Powell, D. (2007). *The Apologetics Study Bible: Real Questions, Straight Answers, Stronger Faith* (p. 1546). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.**

**15:25–30** The attitude of the older son is completely understandable. Indeed, the listener to the parable is supposed to feel the same sense of injustice that the older son feels, highlighting the distinction between our self-centeredness and God's grace. The point is that God is a gracious Father, and if one is truly to be His child, one should adopt His attitude toward repentance.

**Stein, R. H. (1992). *Luke* (Vol. 24, pp. 404-410). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.**

**15:11** **There was a man.** This is a typical Lukan introduction to a parable. See comments on 10:30; 16:19–31, "Context."



**Two sons.** This indicates that this parable does not find its completion after 15:24 but after 15:32. If 15:25–32 were not an integral part of the parable, the parable could begin “There was a man who had *a* son.”

**15:12 The younger one.** Speculation concerning his age and marital and family status is irrelevant for the parable. Luke included in the present account all that was necessary for his readers to understand the meaning of the parable.

**Give me my share of the estate.** The older son would receive two thirds of the estate and the younger son one third (Deut 21:17). Actually the younger son would receive slightly less than a third if there were daughters, for money would be needed for their dowries. Usually such a division of the inheritance took place upon the death of the father, but it could occur earlier. Sirach 33:19–23, however, advises against the latter.

**So he divided his property between them.** The wisdom, or foolishness, of the father in doing this is an irrelevant issue. Jesus wanted the father to do so in order to tell the rest of the story. One should not allegorize this detail and search for meaning in it.

**15:13 Not long after that.** “Not long” is literally *not many days*.

**Got together all he had.** “Got together all he had” means *converted to cash his inheritance*. The question of how this was done, whether a sale of land was involved and so forth, is unstated and therefore irrelevant.

**Set off for a distant country.** Compare Luke 19:12. The purpose of his doing so is not stated. It is not important.

**Squandered his wealth.** The next phrase explains how this took place. It was not due to a business failure.

**In wild living.** “In wild living” is literally *living recklessly*. Luke described this more fully in 15:30.

**15:15 Hired himself out.** Due to the circumstances described in 15:14, the younger son seeks to avoid starvation.

**A citizen of that country.** He is a Gentile, as his raising pigs reveals. Compare Acts 10:28.

**Sent him ... to feed pigs.** These were “unclean” animals (Lev 11:7; Deut 14:8; cf. 1 Macc 1:47). This part of the parable gives a poignant picture of a Jewish man on “skid row.” Compare *Baba Qamma* 82b, “Cursed be the man who would breed swine.”

**15:16 He longed to fill ... that the pigs were eating.** This may mean that he saw the pigs eating and being filled and he would have liked to have been full also. It was psychologically impossible, however, for him to eat such “pig-food.” It could also mean that he would have liked to have eaten the food the pigs ate, but it was physiologically impossible to do so since humans could not eat such food. Finally, it could mean that he would have liked to have eaten the food the pigs ate, but the “citizen” would not allow him to do so. It is uncertain which of these is more likely, but what is clear is that the younger son has fallen as far as he can. He is working for a Gentile, feeding pigs, and is in some way or other contemplating “breaking bread” with them. “Pods” are carob pods used to feed animals, and at times the poor were forced to eat them.

**No one gave him anything.** This is a further description of the younger son’s desperate plight.

**15:17 Came to his senses.** This is a Hebrew/Aramaic expression for “repented.” This refers not only to a mental process that causes him to think more clearly about his situation but also to a moral renewal involving repentance. This is evident from Luke 15:7, 10 and the younger son’s confession in 15:18, 21.

**He said.** “Said” means *thought to himself*. Compare 12:17.

**Hired men.** Compare Matt 20:1–16, where work is done by “hired servants” rather than slaves.

**15:18 Father.** For those who seek to make this parable into an allegory in which the Father is God, note that the “Father” in this verse (“you”) is clearly distinguished from God (“heaven”).

**Sinned against heaven and against you.** “Heaven” is a circumlocution for God. Note how Jesus’ order “God and man” follows his teaching in 10:27 concerning “God and neighbor” (cf. Exod 10:16; Num 21:7; 1 Sam 15:24). See comments on 10:27. Jesus’ theological orientation is apparent. The young man has first of all sinned against God (cf. Ps 51:4, which was commonly understood as describing David’s repentance over his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah). The younger son has sinned against his father by dishonoring him (Luke 15:12). In so doing he above all has sinned against God who gave this, the Fifth, Commandment (Exod 20:12).

**15:19 No longer worthy to be called your son.** The issue does not involve the young man’s legal status (I am not legally your son any longer) but his filial status (a father like you deserves better than a son like me).

**Like one of your hired men.** The younger son’s attitude reveals his true repentance. He knows he has no grounds for being treated like a son.

**15:20 While ... a long way off, his father saw him.** The question of how the father could have seen his son a long way off can be answered easily. Jesus, the teller of the parable, wanted him to.

**Filled with compassion.** Compare 7:13.

**Ran to his son.** Throwing aside Oriental behavioral conventions, Jesus has the father run to his son in order to show God’s love, joy, and eagerness to receive outcasts.

**Threw his arms around him.** “Threw his arms around him” is literally *fell on his neck* (cf. Acts 20:37; Gen 33:4; 45:14–15). This action shows the father’s loving acceptance of his son (cf. Gen 33:4 and 10).

**Kissed him.** Compare Acts 20:37; 2 Sam 14:33.

**15:21** Compare Luke 15:18–19. The father is so eager to receive him that the young man cannot complete his prepared speech.

**15:22 But the father said.** The father is about to practice “usufruct,” i.e., the right to exercise control over the property he has irrevocably given to his older son.

**To his servants.** These probably would be understood as household servants in contrast to the field workers, or hired men, in 15:17.

**Best robe.** The best, not the former robe he left behind. This refers to the robe reserved for notable guests.

**Ring.** Through the ring the father bestows his authority upon his son. Compare 1 Macc 6:15.

**Sandals.** Sandals were a luxury, and servants did not wear them. The son is not, however, to be treated as a servant. He is to wear sandals. These individual details in the parable are not to be allegorized in order to have them correspond to some spiritual reality but are only meant to reveal the father’s full acceptance of his son. Compare Gen 41:42.

**15:23 The fattened calf.** Meat was not usually eaten at meals. The slaughter of the fattened calf, which was specially fed and kept for special occasions, indicates a great feast/banquet in celebration of the lost son. Compare Gen 18:7–8; Amos 6:4.

**Let’s have a feast and celebrate.** At times such feasting and rejoicing is appropriate. In contrast to the rich fool in 12:19, thanksgiving is offered to God for bringing the prodigal son back from death unto life. In 12:19 what is condemned is a godless self-indulgence.

**15:24 Dead.** In the picture part of the parable this is a metaphor for “assumed physically dead” or “missing from the family unit,” but in the reality part of the parable this refers to being “spiritually dead,” i.e., dead in trespasses and sins.

**Alive.** In the picture part this is a metaphor for “present again in the family”; in the reality part, for “saved,” i.e., possessing life in God’s kingdom.

**Lost and is found.** This ties this parable to the preceding two (cf. 15:6, 9) and to the conclusion of this parable (cf. 15:32).

**15:25 Meanwhile, the older son.** The second part of the parable is now introduced.

**In the field.** The question of why the brother was not at home but in the field is easily answered. For the sake of his parable, Jesus wanted him there.

**15:26 Asked ... what was going on.** Compare 18:36; Acts 21:33.

**15:27 Safe and sound.** “Safe and sound” is literally *healthy*. More is implied than his physical health. In the picture part of the parable this would refer to his moral and spiritual health; but in the reality part, to his having received salvation.

**15:28 Pleaded with him.** Even as in this parable the father enjoins his son to share in the banquet, so Jesus was appealing to his opponents to join in and celebrate what God was doing in this acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4:18–21).

**15:29** The older brother refuses to join the banquet. He likens his relationship to his father as years of servitude (“I’ve been slaving for you”) without any joyous recognition (“you never gave me even a young goat [and for this son of yours you killed the fattened calf]”).

**Never disobeyed your orders.** Compare 17:9–10.

**15:30 This son of yours.** “This” is used derogatorily, as in 14:30; 15:2; 18:11; Acts 17:18.

The older brother’s refusal in the picture part of the parable to acknowledge that the returned son is indeed his “brother” corresponds well in the reality part of the parable with the Pharisees’ refusal to acknowledge the outcasts as brothers. Compare the lawyer’s unwillingness to acknowledge that it was a “Samaritan” who proved to be a neighbor in 10:37.

**Who has squandered your property with prostitutes.** How did the older brother know this? Again, the answer is that Jesus provided this knowledge to the older brother.

**15:31 My son.** Jesus was making an affectionate appeal to his opponents through the parable. In this instance there was still hope they would have a change of heart (cf. also Luke 7:40ff.). Elsewhere, however, there was no such hope (cf. 11:37–52; 13:15–17). The positive appeal to the Pharisees and teachers of the law indicates that the parable originated in the situation of Jesus rather than of the early church, for in the latter situation there was little of such hope.

**Everything I have is yours.** The assumption is that the division of 15:12 also involved the older brother, who possesses all that remains of the inheritance (over two thirds), even though the father still has usufruct of it.

**15:32 We had to celebrate.** Literally *it was necessary (edei)*. The word indicates a divine necessary. See Introduction 8 (1). God requires his people to rejoice that salvation is coming to the outcasts.

**This brother of yours.** Through the parable Jesus taught the Pharisees and teachers of the law (15:2) that the outcasts, who were receiving life, were Abraham’s children, i.e., their brothers.

Why did the older brother react this way? Jesus did not tell us. As a result it is illegitimate to question the thinking of this fictional character. Fictional characters do not exist and therefore cannot think. It is legitimate, however, to ask why Jesus’ opponents reacted so negatively to Jesus’ ministry to publicans and sinners. One reason is that this may have resulted from the view that godly people should not associate with the ungodly because they would be tempted to share in their evil deeds. This is an overreaction to such views as found in the references listed in 15:2. Another reason is that such behavior clashed head-on with their view of how righteousness is achieved. The full acceptance of repentant publicans and sinners, before they could achieve a holy

life-style and track record, contradicted their understanding of piety. They believed in repentance and forgiveness, but the immediate acceptance of such people as “righteous” was difficult to accept. Perhaps also despite the claim that the law was a delight, many of Jesus’ opponents saw it as a burden that all people should have to bear. To receive forgiveness freely, apart from bearing such a burden, made their own burdensome keeping of the law seem unnecessary and worthless (cf. 15:29; Matt 20:12). Rather than feeling sorry that the outcasts missed the joy of the life of obedient faith, they were angry that they could receive salvation without having to bear the burden of the obedient keeping of the law.

The question has often been raised about how the older brother responded to his father’s words in Luke 15:31–32. This question loses sight of the fact that this is a parable, i.e., a work of fiction. There is no real older brother. Jesus did not want this character to respond, and he ceased to exist after 15:32. On the other hand the question of how the Pharisees and teachers of the law responded to Jesus’ parable is a legitimate one. There is no indication of how this particular group of Pharisees and scribes responded, but elsewhere it is clear that the majority of them responded negatively.

### **The Lukan Message**

These three parables fit well the Lukan emphasis on God’s love and grace for outcasts (cf. 14:12–14, 21–23). God’s mercy (cf. 6:36) is now described poignantly by these parables. God has shown his mercy (1:50, 54, 58, 72, 78) by visiting the needy (1:51–53). No doubt for Luke and Theophilus their own entrance as Gentiles into God’s kingdom would have come to mind. Was Luke seeking to reassure his readers of God’s love and acceptance of them in light of such opposition as found in Acts 11:2–3; 15:1 (cf. Gal 2:11–14)? Probably when Luke wrote, this was no longer an issue. Nevertheless, the parables found in this chapter would remind Luke’s readers of what they once were (cf. Eph 2:1–3, 12) and of God’s great love for them. God accepts all repentant sinners, no matter how outcast they may be.

Several other theological themes appear in this chapter. We should not lose sight of the Christological claims found here. In Jesus’ eating with tax collectors and sinners, God was at work offering his kingdom to outcasts. For Luke these parables had to be understood in light of 4:18–21. God’s Son has come, bringing with him God’s kingdom, and he is offering it to the lost. It is true that the eyewitnesses and ministers of the word also through their preaching offer the kingdom to sinners, but there is a difference. They offer the kingdom to sinners in Jesus’ name. Jesus’ eating with publicans and sinners *is* God’s offering the kingdom to sinners. For Luke there was a distinct difference between those who go out and minister in Jesus’ name and the One who goes out and ministers in his own name.

Another theme that appears frequently in this chapter involves the need for repentance. The aim and goal of such repentance is clearly the forgiveness of sins. The people represented by the lost sheep (15:7), the lost coin (15:10), and the “lost” son (15:17–21) repent in hope of the forgiveness of sins. See comments on 3:3; Introduction 8 (6). Although it is not expressly stated, Luke believed that the need to repent is universal (see comments on 15:7). This implies a doctrine of sin and depravity. And if repentance results in immediate entrance into the kingdom, then this also implies that salvation is by grace. Even though the parable of the gracious father was not given to teach the doctrine of justification by faith, the younger son’s acceptance by his father rings true to this biblical teaching. His acceptance was entirely gracious.

The question has been raised about whether this parable teaches that God’s forgiveness is “free.” Did Luke believe there was thus no necessity of an “atonement.” One cannot require in a parable such as this, which teaches God’s love for the outcasts and the hostility this encounters, a

complete doctrine of the atonement as well. A parable is not meant to serve as a shorter catechism of all Christian doctrine. Luke expected that this parable would be interpreted in light of what he had already said in his Gospel (cf. 9:22), what he would say shortly (cf. 19:10; 22:17–22), what he would write in Acts (4:12; 13:26–39; 20:28), and what they had already been taught (perhaps a tradition such as 1 Cor 15:3–8). The purpose of this parable is to teach essentially one basic point dealing with the situation described in 15:1–2. To ask more of it than this is unwarranted.

The church must continually examine the significance of this parable. Will we be the church of the elder brother or the church of the loving father?

**The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (Lk 15:11-32). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.**

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