

March 5 Lesson: The Prodigal Son

Spring Quarter 2023: Jesus Calls Us

Unit 1: Called from the Margins of Society

Sunday School Lesson for the week of March 5, 2023

By Hal Brady

Lesson Scripture: Luke 15:11-24

Key Verse: Luke 15:21

Lesson Aims

1. Identify the younger son's choices and the outcome of each choice.
2. Identify who each figure in the parable represents in real life.

Today's lesson begins a new quarter of studies on the exciting theme of "Jesus Calls Us." According to the authors, the lessons this quarter explore some of the most basic principles of Christian faith: that Christ's invitation is open to all people, that his resurrection changed everything, and that those who put their faith in Jesus and anticipate their own resurrection are Jesus' chosen community. These truths spell out much of what it means to live in the kingdom of Heaven, both in the present and in our glorious anticipated future.

Unit 1 of the study is labeled "Called from the Margins of Society" and highlights accounts in which Jesus disregarded artificial societal barriers, choosing instead to reach people on the margins. We begin with the parable of "The Prodigal Son" and the introduction to the lesson.

Introduction

Some families anticipate and look forward to family reunions. For them, these occasions are joyous as multiple generations get together for conversation, celebration, and recollection, frequently centered in a cherished meal.

On the other hand, some family reunions are not so anticipated and joyous. At best, these family occasions can drum up feelings of coldness, indifference, and only toleration. Then, at worse, these family relationships are characterized by cruelty, mean-spiritedness, or even worse. In truth, shame or selfishness is often at the root of broken families.

Question! What does Jesus' parable of "The Prodigal Son" have to do with any of this?

Lesson Context

The meaning and implications of parables have been much debated. The Greek word translated “parable” (Matthew 15:15, Mark 4:13, Luke 8:9, etc.) is also translated as “proverb” (Luke 4:23).

At any rate, at their core, biblical parables compare something familiar—like an object or experience—to a truth about God and his work. Parables function on two levels: their literal reference and their spiritual implications. Jesus taught with parables to challenge his audience to consider what assumptions or attitudes of theirs were at odds with God’s work (compare Matthew 13:10-15).

Today’s Scripture is frequently called the parable of the prodigal son. While moderns sometimes use the designation “prodigal” to speak of the rebellion of the younger son, the word in meaning is associated with reckless waste and spending.

This parable before us and the other two parables in Luke chapter 15 all have similar themes: concern for the lost—a lost sheep (3-7), a lost coin (8-10), and the lost son (our text). The similar themes include the following: (1) something valuable is lost, (2) the lost thing is found, and (3) celebration ensues.

Now, Jesus told these parables because some of the most respectable people of the day (Pharisees and teacher of the law) became quite concerned with the company that Jesus kept. As Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners, he was breaking the social barriers of his day. Throughout his ministry, Jesus associated with people whom the religious leaders considered unclean.

Those people included Jewish tax collectors who collected taxes for the ruling powers. Tax collectors were hated and considered traitors because they assisted the Roman Empire and acted corruptly (Luke 3:12-13).

Another group that Jesus frequently associated with was “sinners” (Matthew 9:11, Luke 15:2). This title identified people who had failed to follow the Law of Moses as interpreted by the religious leaders of the day.

Of course, Jesus fellowshiping with these people was not limited to public gatherings. He shared meals with them before they had sought the proper means of forgiveness and restitution as prescribed by the law. His association with them was critical to his mission to seek those who are lost (note Luke 19:10) and bring repentance and salvation (5:29-31).

I. The Dishonorable Son

Luke 15:11-19

We note at the outset that the characters in Jesus’ parables were generally left unnamed (examples Luke 14:16, 16:1 and contrast 16:20, 23). This practice hinted to the audience that he

was teaching by way of a parable and not speaking of real individuals. Jesus' introduction of "a man" and his "two sons" continues that trend. Today's lesson, however, will only focus on the interactions between the younger son and the father. The story of the older son (15:25-32) will not be included.

In verse 12a, the younger one said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate." Now, children traditionally did not receive their father's inheritance until the father's death (see Numbers 27:8-11). The younger son's request for his share of the inheritance was essentially saying, "Father, I wish you were dead."

12b. "So, he divided his property between them."

Jesus did not describe the measure by which the father divided the inheritance. But based on the Law of Moses, the oldest son would have received a double portion (see Deuteronomy 21:15-17). Either son's portion could have included a house, land, or other items of wealth. The son's request implied tremendous dishonor toward the father and exhibited a rebellious attitude toward the family. Now the Law of Moses described harsh consequences for a son who displayed stubbornness and rebellion toward his family (see Deuteronomy 21:18-21). Rather than responding to the letter of the law, this father before us responded with mercy and grace. This father sought no retribution, despite his son's vile and dishonorable request.

Question! How should believers respond when they are insulted or dishonored?

We note in verse 13 that the younger son gathered all he had and set off for a distant land. For him to gather all he had and leave the land of his family added further insult to the situation. By leaving nothing behind as he left for his journey implied that he did not intend to return. By not mentioning the name of the "distant country" Jesus wants to keep the focus of the parable on the attitudes and actions of the son. Not only did the son want nothing to do with his father but he physically distanced himself through his own relocation.

Next, we are told that the son "squandered his wealth in wild living." To be sure, the son did not lose the "wealth" of his inheritance through shrewd-but-failed investments. Instead, he "squandered" it through undisciplined behavior, when he "squandered (the) property with prostitutes" (Luke 15:30). The son piled shame upon shame thus bringing further disgrace to his father and family name—all for gluttonous, "wild" living (compare Proverbs 28:7).

But after the younger son had spent his whole inheritance there was a famine, and he was in need. Famines were frequent in biblical times, just as they are in parts of the world today. These famines would occur when crops failed because of drought or an infestation of insects or because of warfare where the fields went unharvested. The effect of the "severe" famine, not its cause, was most important for the teaching point of the parable (example, Joel 1:2-10).

During a famine, people relied on the generosity of their relatives, neighbors, and leaders (example, Genesis 45:9-11). But the younger son had no such social network to provide care during this crisis nor did he have any money.

The younger son's desperation led him to take degrading work as the hired hand of a "citizen" of the famine-inflicted county. "Pigs" were considered unclean by the Law of Moses (Leviticus 11:7,8). Jesus' Jewish audience would have considered this job to be humiliating. Because the "citizen" owned pigs, he was likely a Gentile non-Jew. The son's work would remind him of the extent of his abandonment of his family and their heritage.

Note here that the son suffered three levels of shame: he wasted his wealth, became a servant, and took a job feeding pigs. For Jesus' audience, the son had received the appropriate consequence for his dishonorable acts. He had brought shame to his father and household, and now multiple levels of shame rested on him. The parable seemed to fulfill an ancient proverb. "The righteous eat to their hearts content, but the stomach of the wicked goes hungry" (Proverbs 13:25).

In verse 17, the son becomes desperately hungry. However, any food provided (if at all) was so unappealing that it made the food that "the pigs" were eating seem desirable. The exact nature of the "pods" is unknown, but students have proposed that they come from the pods of a carob tree. The point is that the pigs received better care than the son. He was without support or hope—living up to the designation "prodigal."

In verse 17, we note that this young son came to his senses. He came to himself. In the son's case, he had to come to the place of desiring pig food to realize his foolishness; he had wasted the material blessings he had received. Though he had not repented at this point, the statement "he came to his senses" implied the first step of repentance. He recognized the sad direction of his life and felt sorrow as a result (see II Corinthians 7:10).

This younger son's sorrow and regret were based on his first hand knowledge of his father's generosity. While the son desired pig food, he remembered his father's lavish generosity—all in the father's house had more than enough to eat.

As a result, the son viewed his father's generosity from the perspective of the "hired servants." Servants worked on the estate and lived there. But "hired servants" were various kinds of tradesman and craftsmen who lived in local villages and earned a wage.

Many commentators believe that the son's strategy went something like this. The younger son had disgraced his family and therefore the whole community. He was "dead" to them, as the father describes it. We are told that the rabbis taught that if you had violated the community's standard an apology was not sufficient—you also had to make restitution. The son intends to say "Father, I know I don't have a right to come back into the family. But if you apprentice me to

one of your hired men so I can learn a trade and earn a wage, then at least I could begin to pay off my debt.” That was his plan, so he must have rehearsed that speech a thousand times.

In the son’s repentance, the first step would be to leave the foreign land where he had squandered his wealth. The second step involved showing repentance for the ways that he had “sinned.” Recognizing sin and confessing guilt are the initial steps of repentance (see Leviticus 5:5). The son acknowledged his sin: he had rebelled against his father, thus breaking the fifth commandment (Exodus 20:12). The son’s rebellion was also directed against God since heaven is the place where God resides.

By confessing his sin, the son hoped to receive mercy from his father (see Proverbs 28:13). For sure the son did not expect to be restored to his former status in his father’s household, but he did hope for pity and a place of service in that household, like one of the “hired servants.” In this role, the son would at least receive wages for his work.

“I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants” v.19). Sounds good, “humble and appropriate,” but it is actually “works righteousness,” the root of pride and other problems. Suffice it to say that the father would have none of it. The son was still a long way from home when the father saw him.

What do you think?

- 1. How should believers respond when they are insulted or dishonored?**
- 2. How do feelings of shame or sorrow lead a person to repentance?**
- 3. How would you explain the prodigal son’s “works righteousness?”**

II. The Compassionate Father

Luke 15:20-24

When the younger son comes within sight of the house, his father runs—“runs” to him. Regardless of the son’s disrespect, at the very least, the father had been scanning the horizon hoping the prodigal would return.

Back to the father’s running! As a general rule, distinguished middle eastern patriarchs did not run. As the owners of the great estates, they would not pick up their robes and bare their legs like some boy. But this father does. He runs to his son and, showing his emotions openly, falls upon him and kisses him.

Physical displays of affection, such as how the father wrapped his arms around his son and “kissed” him, were not uncommon (see examples Genesis 27:26, 27; 33:4). The father’s response revealed his heart of grace, mercy and forgiveness.

Jesus intended that the father’s forgiveness reveal the “compassion” of God. When God’s people rebel, he responds with mercy (example, Nehemiah 9:17-18). His compassion is like a loving

father toward his children (Psalm 103:13). But we realize at the same time that God's mercy has limits; he will not tolerate unrepentant, unending rebellion (example 2 Kings 22:10-17).

Undoubtedly, the father's response takes the younger son by surprise. This son tried to roll out his business plan for restitution. However, the father interrupts him, pays no attention to his rehearsed speech, but directly contradicts it.

Immediately the father gives instructions to his servants. He calls for a robe—the best robe in the house would have been the father's own robe, the certain sign of restored standing in the family. He calls for a ring for his son's finger and sandals for his feet.

The lavishness of the father can yet be seen again in his action to bring the fatted calf and kill it. Meat was not a part of the daily diet and was normally reserved for special festivals. The son's return, however, is an occasion for celebration. But no meat was more expensive than the fatted calf.

As one scholar put it, "what the father is saying to the son is, 'I'm not going to wait until you've paid off your debt; I'm not going to wait until you've duly groveled. You are not going to earn your way back into the family. I am going to simply take you back. I will cover your nakedness, poverty, and rags with the robes of my office and honor.'"

An author named Ray Anderson has written a book called "The Gospel According to Judas." The book is based on some words that Ray saw in a man's restroom in a San Francisco restaurant. The words were, "Judas, come home. All is forgiven." So much like the father's forgiveness in the parable!

The "son" had previously treated his father as if he were dead to him. And by abandoning his family, the son had effectively become "dead" to his father. Despite the son's previously selfish actions, he was restored and considered "alive" to the father—a reason for the father to be merry and "celebrate."

The other parables in Luke 15 depict celebrations that occurred after the recovery of something lost (Luke 15:5-6,9). These celebrations were intended to teach Jesus' audience of heavenly celebration that follow repentance (15:7,10).

In this parable before us, Jesus' audience of tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and teachers of the law (Luke 15:1,2) heard echoes of God's promise. To obey God leads to life, but to rebel against him leads to destruction (Deuteronomy 30:15-18). The implications are profound. For the tax collector and sinners, the promise is one of renewed acceptance upon this repentance. For the Pharisees and teachers of the law, the promise is one of warning made more explicit in Matthew 21:28-32, another parable of two sons. However, God promised to be generous and patient; celebration with joy and gladness would come when the people returned to him (see Isaiah 35:9-11; Ephesians 2:1-10).

Today's parable invites all people to embrace the upside-down nature of the family of God. In this family, God offers and desires reunion where broken relationships exist. We may feel shamefully unworthy, as the parable's younger son felt. However, like the parable's father, God is generous and merciful. He simply welcomes all people to become his beloved children in his family.

In conclusion, the late Henri Nouwen said, "Though I am both the younger and the elder son, I am not to remain those. I am to become the father." So, the real challenge of this parable, "Do I want to be like the father?"

Action Plan

1. In what ways is biblical repentance more than saying "I'm sorry"?
2. How can you be sure that future repentance will be followed by appropriate action (Matthew 3:8; Acts 26:20).
3. What do you think about Henri Nouwen's quote?

Resources For This Lesson

1. "2022-2023 NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, Uniform Series, International Sunday School Lessons," pages 225-240.
2. "The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 9 Luke John", pages 301-304.
3. "The Prodigal God" by Timothy Keller, pages 17-22.

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