

Luke 15:11-32 (Common English Bible)

¹¹ Jesus said, “A certain man had two sons. ¹² The younger son said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the inheritance.’ Then the father divided his estate between them. ¹³ Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living.

¹⁴ “When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have more than enough food, but I’m starving to death!’ ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands.’” ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. ²¹ Then his son said, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ ²² But the father said to his servants, ‘Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet!’ ²³ Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting ²⁴ because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Now his older son was in the field. Coming in from the field, he approached the house and heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. ²⁷ The servant replied, ‘Your brother has arrived, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he received his son back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ Then the older son was furious and didn’t want to enter in, but his father came out and begged him. ²⁹ He answered his father, ‘Look, I’ve served you all these years, and I never disobeyed your instruction. Yet you’ve never given me as much as a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours returned, after gobbling up your estate on prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.’ ³¹ Then his father said, ‘Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.’”

We love stories of joyful homecomings. But often, there are many sub-plots working at family reunions. It is no different in this parable about a father and his sons.

I used to live in Boston, noted for its traffic roundabouts, wherein a whole bunch of roads feed into a single traffic circle, enabling people to fly in from one direction and fly out another. Roundabouts are especially suited to Boston since it often seems like there is nary a 90-degree corner in the city.

Today’s parable is one of the most well known of all the stories Jesus told. Like a roundabout, there are many paths into this story and many paths out. Any decent preacher could build a whole series out of this one parable of a father and his two sons. Is the story about the father who pours out lavish grace on the wayward son? Or perhaps the runaway son himself and his repentance? Or the older son and his resentment toward his brother?

You probably know today’s scripture passage as “The Parable of the Prodigal¹ 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. Yet I have on my shelf at least nine different commentaries on this parable and each one takes a somewhat different tack (even the academics find themselves on the roundabout!). 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. Again, all of these are

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

helpful, for this is an incredibly rich and complex story that will repay many re-readings.

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

1. This parable and the two that immediately precede it (see the text box on this page) 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.

2. 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

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.

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.

3. 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 would 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.

4. 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?

5. 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 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 was 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.

One more angle

In keeping with our roundabout theme, N. T. Wright sees the story as about Israel's return from exile. This is from his book, *Luke for Everyone*, which is in our library.

But of course the most remarkable character in the story is the father himself. One might even call this 'the parable of the Running Father': in a culture where senior figures are far too dignified to run anywhere, this man takes to his heels as soon as he sees his young son dragging himself home. His lavish welcome is of course the point of the story: Jesus is explaining why there is a party, why it's something to celebrate when people turn from going their own way and begin to go God's way. Because the young man's degradation is more or less complete, there can be no question of anything in him commending him to his father, or to any other onlookers; but the father's closing line says it all. 'This my son was dead and is alive; he was lost and now is found.' How could this not be a cause of celebration?

Inside this story there is another dimension which we shouldn't miss. One of the great stories of Israel's past was of course the Exodus, when Israel was brought out of Egypt and came home to the promised land. Many years later, after long rebellion, Israel was sent into exile in Babylon; and, though many of the exiles returned, most of Jesus' contemporaries reckoned that they were still living in virtual exile, in evil and dark days, with pagans ruling over them. They were still waiting for God to produce a new Exodus, a liberation which would bring them out of their spiritual and social exile and restore their fortunes once and for all. For Jesus to tell a story about a wicked son, lost in a foreign land, who was welcomed back with a lavish party—this was bound to be heard as a reference to the hope of Israel. 'This my son was dead, and is alive'; ever since Ezekiel 37 the idea of resurrection had been used as picture-language for the true return from exile.

Yes, says Jesus, and it's happening right here. When people repent and turn back to God—which, as we've seen, meant for Jesus that they responded positively to his gospel message—then and there the 'return from exile' is happening, whether or not it looks like what people expected. His answer to the Pharisees and other critics is simple: if God is fulfilling his promises before your very eyes, you can't object if I throw a party to celebrate. It's only right and proper.²

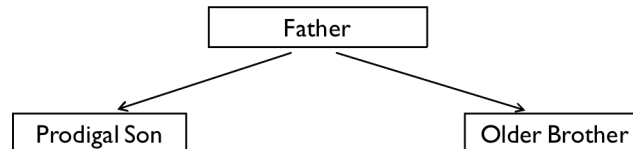
² Wright, T. (2004). *Luke for Everyone* (pp. 187–188). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

Interpreting the Parable of the Prodigal Son

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 second 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?

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.

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!

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Genesis 26:34 – 28:4 Another story of a father, two sons, and rivalry.</p>	<p>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?</p>
<p>Wednesday, Isaiah 43:25 – 44:3 Israel's welcome home (return from exile) will mean that Israel's sins have been forgiven.</p>	<p>Thursday, Zephaniah 3:14-20 A song about Israel's coming home (see v. 20)</p>
<p>Friday, Luke 16:1-13 The parable of the dishonest steward. Why might this parable immediately follow the "lost/found" parables?</p>	<p>Prayer List</p>

