

Parable of the Prodigal Son, Part One
Luke 15: 11-24 (The Prodigal and His Father)
Good Shepherd Bible Chapel
Pastor John E. Dubler

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is much the same as the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin insofar as the joy of the finder recovering what was lost, but adds an important dimension in revealing the bitterness of spirit concerning the elder brother. The elder brother, like the Pharisees, could not readily comprehend the meaning of forgiveness.



Giovanni Francesco Barbieri,(1591-1666). This 1619 painting is the first of two by Barbieri. The painting captures the idea of the prodigal returning, clothed with nothing but rags. Both paintings show a well-muscled and well-nourished lad, inconsistent with what we may imagine when reading the parable.

The spiritual state of the prodigal brother rises during the parable while the spiritual state of the older brother falls. The father remains constant—he demonstrates love toward both and is consistent in demonstrating the love of God. He is a type of our heavenly Father. The younger son represents prodigals everywhere while the older brother represents all those who, through hardness of heart and meanness of spirit want to bring down judgment on all those who are trying to make straight their paths.

Here is the parable from Luke 15:11-24: [The remainder of the parable, dealing with the elder brother and his reaction to the good news is contained in verses 25-32, and is dealt with in part two.]

And He said, “A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.’ So he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. But when he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.”’ So he

got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly 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 fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate."¹

The Context of the parable (Luke 15:1-2)

The first two verses of the chapter give us the general situation that the parable is addressing.

Tax collectors and sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. However, it did not please



the Pharisees and the Scribes to see sinners fellowshipping with Jesus and listening to His every word. Nor were they happy when they repented and changed their ways. The faultfinders were having their day, and doing what they do best, they began to grumble saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

The Pharisees and Scribes intended their comment to be a stinging indictment against our Lord, but the reverse was true. The three parables He tells in response to their hardness of heart expose their blackness of spirit in stark terms and convict the religious establishment of His day and even ours.

Some commentary on the parable of the Prodigal Son, Part I.

1. Vs. 11-12 The estate divided. 12 *"A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them."*

We are given the situation, but not in great detail. The older brother should at least receive the double portion and would also be expected to inherit with the bulk of the estate, the responsibility of caring for the parents, and even other members of the family if necessary. So the most the younger son could expect to receive in "the share of the estate that belongs to me," was one third of the saleable assets. The land could not be sold—and if it was sold because of extreme distress, the sale was not considered to be a permanent transfer of land. The land must be returned to the seller, free and clear, in the year of Jubilee.

Some suggest that even the one third of the father's assets given to the younger son could be sold but not transferred to him. In such a case the younger son would borrow on his expectations. When he returns to his father, he probably returned in debt having spent the principle that he borrowed. Since the parable does not specify the details we are left to wonder. However the fact

¹ All scripture references are from the New American Standard Updated Version, unless otherwise noted.

that the younger son received a sizeable chunk of money is as obvious to all as it was vexing to the older brother.

2. Vs. 13-16 Squandering his wealth.

a. *“And not many days later:”* To the fool, money is to be spent and not saved. The fool and his money are soon parted. It doesn’t take long for the foolish younger son to get everything together and strike out on his own. Some young people cannot wait until “independence day,” so they can leave their families, “finally free,” or so they imagine. The world promises freedom but gives bondage. The younger brother cannot imagine what bondage and pain await him.

b. *“. . . the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country.”* We know from the affection of the local farmers for raising swine that the distant country is gentile and not Jewish. Now he is completely isolated from his family. He has not the benefit of their counsel nor the astringent of their restraint. He has wounded himself without knowing it. His wound will widen and fester.

c. *“. . . and there he squandered his estate with loose living.”* GK: “loose,” ἀσώτως “asotos,” meaning riotous. *Easy come, easy go*, as my pappy always said. The Bible says, “An inheritance gained hurriedly at the beginning will not be blessed in the end,” Proverbs 20:21.

3. Vs. 14-19 Desperate circumstances help clarify his thinking.

a. 14 *“Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished.”* The prodigal son is in the School of Hard Knocks—as the contemporary proverbs goes, “school colors: black and blue.”

b. 15 *“So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.”* “From the uttermost to the guttermost,” as they say. He has to have a job; any job, anywhere. He gratefully accepts a position in the swine industry, doing what he would never have dreamed of only a few months before.

c. 16 *“And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.”* He has indeed sunk very low. He is lower on the pecking order than swine. Of course this is entirely repugnant to every good Hebrew boy.



d. 17 *“But when he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger!’”* It has been said “When the prodigal was getting hungry he would have gladly eaten what the pigs were eating, but it was not until he was starving that he came to his senses and resolved to go to his father. Proverbs 16:26 “A worker's appetite works for him, for his hunger urges him on.”

e. 18 “ *will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight;’*” The prodigal practices his confession. He will repeat most of this confession later on. If a person needs to go and make amends, it is best to follow his example and practice the wording before going. Otherwise it is possible to make things worse.

Notice that he identifies the problem as sin. This is very refreshing in a day and age when many are blame-shifting. We might have expected to hear, “I grew up in an overly strict home, so when I had a chance I left . . . my father is to blame.” Instead he said, “I have sinned.” Then he gets specific about who he has sinned against. The sin was against heaven. He could well have said, “against God,” but the sensitivity of the Jewish mind about using the name of God meant that it was more palatable to say, “against heaven.” David made the same clean approach to his sin in Psalm 51: 4 when he addresses God:

Against You, You only, I have sinned
And done what is evil in Your sight,
So that You are justified when You speak
And blameless when You judge.

The sin was with Bathsheba, but it was against God. It is God’s holy law that we violate when we sin.

f. 19 “*I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.*” Now he must acknowledge the truth to his father. “*I am no longer worthy to be called your son.*” He decides to ask for mercy: “*Make me as one of your hired men.*” He knows he has forfeited his right to be a son. He is willing to accept the position of servant to his father. He would be glad to be fed and clothed as the least of his father’s men.

g. 20 “*So he got up and came to his father.*” Some people think about doing the right thing but fail to carry out the plan that they know they should. The prodigal is thinking straight—now he is acting straight.

4. The father’s love for a lost son (vs. 20-24).

a. Verse 20 continues: “*But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.*” This is a very comforting picture. The father was looking for the son’s return. Having no idea when he would return, this heartbroken man must have been looking down the road every day, wishing, hoping, praying for his son to return. When the son was a long way off, he recognized him. This, in itself, was remarkable since the son’s visage was so remarkably altered. Gone were the fine clothes and the well-kempt appearance. Now the young man was clothed only in rags. As we will see in a moment, he had sunk so low he did not even have sandals. He went out in finery, fat and well shod; he came home in rags, emaciated and barefoot. But the father recognizes his own. It is the same today. No matter how far we stray, our Father in Heaven sees us—He never loses sight of us, never fails to recognize us.



Giovanni Francesco Barbieri again, this time later in his career, 1654-55.
The Return of the Prodigal Son

The father ran. How uncommon. I can visualize them running the last fifty yards toward each other and flying into the huge embrace. What joy was theirs. The father has accepted back his son without benefit of an interview. He does not hold him at arm's length in order to assess the situation.

He embraced and kissed him. This is before he knows what his son will say. Perhaps he has come home to ask for more money. Should he be so incautious? The father's love is limitless. The father's actions are in such stark contrast to those of the elder brother, as we shall see.

How great the Father's love for us
How vast beyond all measure,
That He should give His only Son
To make this wretch a treasure.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son,
that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” John 3:16

Here is a great truth: “It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all,” the apostle Paul wrote to his young protégé Timothy. (1 Timothy 1:15). God is ready to receive sinners. When sinners repent and turn to God, there He is, arms open wide.

b. 21 *“And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’”* The son launches into his practiced speech, but he is unable to finish before the father chimes in.

c. 22 *“But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly 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 fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’ And they began to celebrate.”* The robe in the story is one reserved for the honored guest. Wow, from riches, to rags, back to riches. He is given the family ring—a symbol of authority, and sandals. He is instantly lifted out of his miserable state.

Those saved from sin today have the same experience. We are “delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred in to the kingdom of His beloved Son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sin.” (Colossians 1: 13-14).

Here also are some important contrasts adumbrated in the speech of the father:

This son of mine was *dead*—has come to *life* again.

He was *lost*—and has been *found*.

Death to life; lost to found. What more clear picture of the Gospel of Love have we than this parable?

Ephesians 2:4-6 “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

As in the parables of the Lost Sheep and Coin: a celebration follows.

