

**Luke 15:11-32**  
**The Prodigal Son**  
or  
**How to Respond when Good Things Happen to Bad People**

**Part 1, The Younger Son**  
**Luke 15:11-20**

When I taught algebra, students often had a difficult time remembering what sign to use when they multiplied positive and negative numbers. To help them, I created a chart and a little saying that seemed to clarify things. In math, if you multiplied a positive number by a positive number the answer was positive. If you multiplied a negative number by a negative number the answer was also positive. But if you multiplied a positive number by a negative number, the answer was negative. To help them remember, we substituted good for positive and bad for negative. The saying we learned was that if something good happened to someone good, that's good. If something bad happened to someone bad, that's good. But if something bad happened to someone good, or something good happened to someone bad, that's bad. It may have been good math, but it was terrible theology.

How we respond when good things happen to bad people is an unmistakable indicator of our spiritual maturity. It is so easy to be resentful when the wicked prosper. But such a response shows not only our own forgetfulness that we too are sinful, but demonstrates a heart for the lost that simply is not aligned with God's heart.

As an educator, I love that Jesus told many stories. It was one of His favorite teaching methods. To take profound spiritual truths and encase them in a homey, easily followed story was something at which Jesus excelled. While the disciples, and others, did not always understand the deeper meaning behind the stories, the stories, themselves, were clear enough to be understood by even the least sophisticated in the audience.

We have already encountered several of these stories. We have looked at the parable of the Sower (Luke 8:4-15), the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), the parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21), the parable of the Mustard Seed (Luke 13:18-19), the parable of the Great Feast (Luke 14:15-24), the parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:1-7), and the parable of the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10).

Many people today are familiar with at least one of those stories. Depending on one's spiritual background and attention to Scripture, many have heard those parables taught in sermons or perhaps studied one or two themselves. But when it comes to the parable of the Prodigal Son, it seems as if everyone knows this story. Elements of the narrative were used by Shakespeare in *Henry IV* and *The Merchant of Venice*. We even have phrases such as "fatted calf" that are simply a part of our vocabulary. It is part of our common culture.

I think one reason this story endures is that the reader can relate to all the main characters. While commonly referred to as the Prodigal Son, there are three main characters in the drama - a younger son, a father, and an elder son. Each has his own moment on the stage, and each has his story told in such a way

that is evocative and memorable. We can all relate to the foolishness of the young son, the heartbreak of the father, and the bitterness of the elder son.

As with other parables told by Jesus, this parable was spoken in a particular culture to a particular audience, and that context must be fully understood to appreciate the meaning and the application of the parable to His listeners. In this case, Jesus was telling the third of three parables to a group of Pharisees and scribes who had criticized Him “saying, ‘this man receives sinners and eats with them’” (Luke 15:1). The great difference between Jesus and the Pharisees was that they focused on a God Who punished sinners and Jesus revealed a God Who saved them. Jesus told these parables to demonstrate the heart of God toward the lost, and to challenge those Pharisees and scribes to examine their own attitudes towards sinners. The Prodigal Son was the longest and most elaborately told of the three parables, and is worth looking at in some detail. We will take each character in turn, today looking at the younger son.

### **Request**

Jesus began His third story simply, “a man had two sons” (v. 11). This would seem like a good omen to His listeners. Sons were more valuable than daughters. Sons were necessary in a culture which was agrarian and, therefore, land based. Sons worked the land. Daughters married and went to live with their husbands. A family without sons would eventually see their wealth and property pass to another family. This man had two sons, thus guaranteeing that his inheritance would stay within the family. This was an assurance of stability. Unfortunately, the remainder of the story did not bear out the encouraging opening.

At some point, the younger of the two sons approached his father. We are not told what brought on this conversation. No details are given as to the upbringing of the two sons. Perhaps one was favored over the other. Though the mother is not mentioned in the story, perhaps she loved one boy and the father the other, as in Jacob and Esau. Perhaps the two sons did not get along. Perhaps the elder brother was verbally and physically abusive to the younger. Perhaps he lorded it over him. That he never intervened to stop his foolish younger brother indicated the lack of a strong and positive relationship between the two young men. We simply do not know.

In any case, “the younger of them said to his father, ‘father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me’” (v. 12). This was an extraordinary request. Remembering that Jesus’ audience was composed of Pharisees and scribes, they must have bristled at such a disrespectful demand. It was greedy. It was arrogant. It was a demand that reflected ingratitude. How much had the father already provided in the raising of this son? How many hours had been spent providing a good home? How much prayer had been invested? And all for this! To have the young man look him in the eye and demand his share of the estate.

The biblical command the young man was violating was clear and unmistakable, “honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you” (Exodus 20:12). There was no way the young man could justify his actions. But he also knew the Law, “he shall acknowledge the firstborn . . . by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the beginning of his strength; to him belongs the right of the firstborn.” (Deuteronomy 21:17). The young man knew he

was eventually entitled to one-third of his father's possessions. But the inheritance came upon the death of the father. Essentially, then, the young man was telling the father that he wished he was dead.

From its earliest days, the nation of Israel had codified rules relating to property. Keeping estates in the family was paramount. In fact, to keep land in the family, all land lost or sold was to be returned to the family in the year of Jubilee (every fifty years). Furthermore, to demand his inheritance while his father was living was unthinkable. It simply could not be done. The *Mishnah* allowed for sons to be given authority over portions of the family estate, so they might learn how to manage affairs, but the land always remained in the possession of the father. Only after the father's death could the sons inherit and actually *own* the property..

Not only was the request a violation of social custom and Jewish law, but because the young man's inheritance included not just land but all the family possessions, it had practical complications as well. That the family was rather well off is indicated by the fact that they had hired servants, could kill a calf for a great feast, and even hire musicians and dancers for the accompanying celebration. This was an affluent family, and that meant it had a significant amount of possessions to divide. By asking for his portion of the possessions as well as the land, the demand showed how inappropriately the young man viewed his inheritance.

Why was the young man in such a rush? Perhaps the father was still in his prime, physically and mentally strong and looking fit and healthy. Perhaps the men in that family had lived long lives, and the father had many years ahead. In such cultures there was always the possibility of tension between grown sons and their fathers as the young men could not assert their independence fully until they were, perhaps, in their thirties. This was the case even if they married and started their own families because if they chose to remain at home, they were under the authority of their father no matter how old they were.

The young man's request was risky. It would not have been inappropriate for the father to disinherit his son for such impudent behavior. He could be banished and, as the context of the story suggested, considered dead. In a sense, we learn from the rest of the parable that that was how the father viewed it. To him, this act had rendered his son dead (v. 24, 32). They may even have performed the *kaddish*, or funeral prayer, after the young man left.

That the request was more of a demand is indicated by the nature of what was asked. The son did not want to take control of his portion of the estate and learn to manage it and build up his portion of the inheritance. He wanted to liquidate his holdings. This meant the father likely had to sell part of the land to provide the ready money for the younger son. This was a great sacrifice and counter to the usual wisdom of the times which recognized that estates were more valuable if they were kept intact. Since the new owner would have to eventually return the land to the father's family (Year of Jubilee) the father could not demand too high a price. And since the son wanted his money now, the father had to sell at a value that was probably much less than the land was worth.

News of the request must have spread rapidly throughout the local area. As we can infer from the rest of the story, the elder brother was furious. No doubt he condemned his younger brother among his friends. And part of his frustration must have been the reaction of his father. The father, instead of rebuking or disinheriting his son, simply sold what was needed and "divided his wealth between them" (v. 12). The

Pharisees in the audience must have been shocked. They would have expected the father to extend no leniency, let alone to acquiesce in the disrespectful demand. They must have shook their heads and muttered in disgust they way people do today when they see disobedient children left undisciplined by their parents.

We know that it is common for young people to desire freedom. Young people are often impatient and are very short-term thinkers. Their immaturity is often reflected in their choices. This young son was no different. Old enough to think he was able to survive on his own, he wanted his independence, and his father let him have it.

### **Rebellion**

Demanding his inheritance was not the end of the younger son's downward path, it was only the beginning, for "not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country" (v. 13). The phrase "gathered everything together" implies that he sold whatever tangible possessions he could and left. He had no intent of returning. This was not a vacation, it was an abandoning. He left nothing behind. There was no reason to ever return.

He went to a "distant country," that is a land outside of the Jewish controlled areas of Israel. The specifics are not given, but the point is clear that the young son renounced his family and with it all accountability. He traveled beyond those who knew him. There was no one to report on his actions, and no one to report them to. He was on his own as he had never been before. The Pharisees in the audience must have seethed with indignation at such rebellious behavior.

His going to a distant country reminds us of Jonah fleeing God as far as he thought was possible. "Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord" (Jonah 1:3). Not content to get away from his family, he went to an area outside of Jewish control. There would be no Pharisees there to judge him.

He had gained complete independence. So naturally, when he arrived "he squandered his estate with loose living" (v. 13). This was not surprising. Man follows his own sinful nature. We are self-willed. We avoid the things of God. We are poor judges of the best use of time and resources. We are fallen.

"All of us like sheep have gone astray,  
Each of us has turned to his own way" (Isaiah 53:6).

We are spiritually blind,

"They do not know nor do they understand;  
They walk about in darkness" (Psalm 82:5).

The son was reckless. The word used for 'squandered' means to scatter, the way a farmer would scatter his seed into a plowed field. He literally threw his money away. He was wasteful, he was reckless, he was uninhibited. We know not how long it took, whether days, weeks, or months is irrelevant, but eventually the young man "had spent everything" (v. 14). Desiring freedom, he had become enslaved to his own lusts. His short-term thinking left nothing in reserve. He spent all of his inheritance. He did not

stop until it was all gone. Then disaster struck, for “a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished” (v. 14).

Famine was feared in the ancient world. Most people lived harvest to harvest, and only the richest (like the family from which the young man had come, ironically) were able to stockpile provisions (or money) in case the harvest failed. Whether caused by drought during the growing season, or rain during the harvest, or an infestation of insects, or plant disease, or a warring army, there had not been sufficient food brought in from the outlying areas to provide for the needs of the people. Food shortages meant that prices naturally increased, and with no money left, the young man had no choice but starvation.

His foolish choices, his lack of resources, and his abandonment of family and friends all haunted him now. When the famine hit, he was destitute. He had no resources upon which to fall back. He was out of options. He was in a strange land, and there is no reason to expect that his profligate lifestyle would be an encouragement to any to lend him money. Desperate, he resorted to an extreme, “he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine” (v. 15). The Pharisees listening to Jesus must have shuddered.

That the man to whom the young man attached himself was a citizen indicated that he was a person of some influence. Roman citizenship was a privilege that not everyone enjoyed. Also, the fact that the man had pigs that he did not sell during the famine showed that he had sufficient resources to hedge his bets and hope for even better prices. How the young man had made the acquaintance of such an influential person is not stated; perhaps he had befriended himself when he had money to spend. In any case, he hired himself out to him. The word literally means “joined himself to” and implies the act of nagging and following a person like a beggar on the street, unwilling to be put off until he received some token of a handout. So the citizen offered him a job that was actually an offense; he let this young Jewish man take care of his pigs.

Can we really appreciate what it took for a Jewish man to herd pigs for a Gentile employer? The pig was the epitome of uncleanness, “the pig, because it divides the hoof but does not chew the cud, it is unclean for you. You shall not eat any of their flesh nor touch their carcasses” (Deuteronomy 14:8). Furthermore, he was merely a day laborer, at the whim of his employer as to whether or not to return the next day. Clearly he was not paid enough to survive on because “he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him” (v. 16). So little was the amount earned, and so much did these people need it to survive, that the Law forbade not paying at the end of the day “the wages of a hired man are not to remain with you all night until morning” (Leviticus 19:13). The context suggests that even though he fed the pigs, he still needed to beg for his livelihood.

We are reminded that the wages of sin is death, but it is also disappointment, lack of contentment, and sorrow. “The way of the treacherous is hard” (Proverbs 13:15). Having dishonored his father, greedily taken all that would one day be his, and wasted it unwisely, he now suffered humiliation, hunger, and homesickness. He had wanted freedom, but wound up merely a slave to his own sin. Like the prodigal son, we, too, are given the freedom to choose by our Heavenly Father. If what we want is this world, we are allowed to have it. As we think of the young son, let us not view him with the contempt with which the Pharisees must have viewed him. Instead let us view him with pity, for after all, the difference between him and us is not one of nature but one of degree.

## **Repentance**

Finally, the young man “came to his senses” (v. 17). The consequences of sin have a way of clarifying our thinking wonderfully. He wondered to himself “how many of my father’s hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger!” (v. 17). Again, these hired men were merely day laborers, at the bottom of the economic ladder. He realized that the generosity of his father was such that even those men had enough to eat, and here he was starving in a strange land.

So he resolved to “get up and go to my father” (v. 18). This was no small act. While he may have been starving in the foreign land in which he found himself, he was anonymous. At home he would be recognized. His sin would be remembered. His humiliation would be public. His shame would know no end. And despite whatever hopeful memories he channeled of his father’s generosity, there was no guarantee his father would welcome him home.

Recognizing that it was bound to be an awkward moment, he rehearsed what he would say, “<sup>18</sup>father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men” (v. 18-19). The young man realized that his actions were not just unwise, not just unfair, but truly sinful. Furthermore, he understood that he had sinned against heaven. We are reminded of the penitential strains of Psalm 51,

“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” (Psalm 51:4).

In another sense, the phrase can mean that his sins were so great that they accumulated *into* heaven. Think of Ezra who cried out on behalf of Israel, “O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to You, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads and our guilt has grown even to the heavens” (Ezra 9:6).

He was willing to be simply a hired man. This would have made sense to Jesus’ listeners. They only possible hope was a lifetime spent earning atonement for his sins against his father and the family. He had no expectations of being welcomed into the family. A day's wage for a job done was all his hopes entertained.

The young man did more than resolve to go home. He did more than plan what he would say upon his arrival. “He got up and came to his father” (v. 20). It must have been an arduous journey. He was far away and he was without food or money. The journey home was the opposite of his journey out. There was no money for food and shelter. No well prepared meals and comfortable beds in roadside inns. He ate what he could find or beg and he slept under the stars.

We must remember that awareness of our sin is not conversion. It is the beginning, not the end of our salvation. We must repent. We must turn. Like the young son, we must acknowledge that we are slaves to our sins, “do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in

righteousness?” (Romans 6:16). We need to return to our father. We need to acknowledge His authority over us. We need to recognize that we deserve nothing and graciously accept what the new heart He offers. As God promised the repentant Israelites, “<sup>19</sup>I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, <sup>20</sup>that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God” (Ezekiel 11:19-20).

The prodigal’s desire for repentance was a problem in the story for the Pharisees. So far, they had been tracking with Jesus, nodding in approval at the young man’s descent into hell. But to think he could be redeemed. That was impossible.

### **Takeaways**

We, too, have “an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven “ (1 Peter 1:4). Too often we succumb to the temptation to want the riches of this world instead. May God give us the grace to not be prodigal with our inheritance.