

“The Parable of the Prodigal Son” | Luke 15:11-35

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Introduction

Alongside the Parable of the Sower and The Good Samaritan, The Parable of the Prodigal Son—today's passage—is one of the most recognized and beloved Bible verses of all time.

It's probably also the number one place (or maybe, the only place) that people today regularly encounter the word 'prodigal,' which means to be 'reckless with one's resources' or 'extravagantly wasteful.'

I cannot think of another passage of scripture that so concisely, creatively, and emotionally conveys the essence of the Gospel, the heart of God, and the universal human experience. It's a parable of reckless living and reckless self-righteousness. Of one brother who travels a great distance to get away from God; and another who ends up equally far from God without ever leaving home. And that's how we'll approach today's passage, in two parts organized around the two sons and the father's responses to them both.

[Transition]: Let's begin by look at what it means to be prodigals in a distant land, verses 11-24.

I. Prodigals in a distant land (Luke 15:11-24)

1a. “Give me my share of the property”

Our first encounter with the younger son begins in verse 12 with the son asking his father for his share of his inheritance in advance. “Ask” might be too gracious of way to describe it; he abruptly *commands* his father, saying

“**Give me** my share of the property that is coming to me.”

By the very next verse (v. 13), he has already gone “into a far country” and “squandered” it all in “reckless living.”

In verse 12, the two words translated here as “property” are actually two different words in the original.

- The first, literally means “my being.” It would include property, of course, but more. It stands for “**everything keeps me existing.**”
- The second is the word *bios*, from which we get “biology,” and it means life. Here it represents life in the sense of ‘the resources needed to maintain life’ or more simply one’s “livelihood.”

The point is that out is that **the younger son put his faith in the power of his livelihood**. He goes out thinking that this would ultimately sustain him. But when his “being” ran out and his “livelihood” ran out, the passage says “he began to be in need.”

Living on the assets of this world apart from the sustained provision of the father leaves him destitute, hungry, and so devoid of “life” that even the pigs were experiencing a better existence than him. Basing his life on his “being” and his “bios” (the literal terms used here) left him **without being** and **without life**.

Verse 13 even tells us he wasted his life by “living” recklessly—another literary play on the idea of **living** in a way that leads to **death**.

In verses 14-15, we learn it gets so bad that he “hired himself out to “a citizen of the region.” This citizen then sends him out to feed pigs.

- The language here is commercial, but its significance is deeper than that.
- The language indicates a “joining with” or “being uniting to” a gentile, far away from Jerusalem, in close contact with animals well known to be unclean to the Jews (Lev 11:7).
- This is the ancient Jewish way of saying: **he’s hit the bottom**.

While it is certainly true that this is the younger of the two brothers, I think it’s a mistake to only apply this parable to:

- People who have never come to faith, and
- to “young people”

While most of us have family members, older children, friends and co-workers who might fit the category of the younger prodigal, we should remember that the attempt to “**feel young**” by **being reckless** can happen at any stage of life, and more than once. It’s the quintessence, for example, of both the quarter life and midlife crisis. The prodigal son in a distant land is applicable to all of us.

Therefore, I want to encourage all of us to apply the younger prodigal’s path to our own, particularly in the area of backsliding.

[Application: Backsliding]

Imagine healthy a healthy spiritual life as a garden city on the top of a mountain. We live there. We experience fellowship with God there. We worship, grow, and walk with the Lord there. But every so often we feel prompted to trek back down the mountain, away from God, to **forage a few thrills from the shrubs of sin** to spice up the perceived blandness and repetitiveness of holiness.

We think, we can probably sneak right back up the path, to the mountain top, past the father’s presence and grace, undetected, under the cover of night, like a teenager trying to evade their parents as they try to sneak back home past curfew.

The idea of the dusty path downward feels comforting at first. We sigh as we walk down. We reckon its sigh of relaxation or satisfaction; but we eventually realize it's a sigh of defeat and disappointment—we've given in, again. Eventually we start sliding, slipping, tripping down the mountain rather than voluntarily walking down it. The path is worn, we've been here before. It's at once like an old friend; and an old foe. And then we start uncontrollably *tumbling* down.

Sometimes we can grab hold of a curiously placed root or branch (God tends to save us from ourselves). Other times, we hit bottom, like the prodigal son. And then, we look behind us. The path of 'easy return' is not only steep, it has been destroyed through the avalanche of the inertia of prodigality. And we find ourselves there again. We swore we wouldn't, **but we've been willing to lie to other people, now we're learning just how easy it is to lie to ourselves**. Then, whether it is our first time in the pig sty or just another reckless return visit via an old worn path, we, like the prodigal, "come to ourselves."

Ib. "And he came to himself"

That's what verse 17 say, "he came to himself."

And here's the point: **he cannot come to himself until he comes to the end of himself**. And it's the same with you and me.

When you **come the end of yourself** → you come to yourself, → and you realize **you're by yourself**—and that's not how God created us to be.

When you try to find yourself, and to be yourself, *by yourself* . . . you lose yourself, you destroy yourself, and quite possibly the people around you, many of whom become the collateral damage for your recklessness. You come to yourself—and all you have left *is yourself*, and even that is barely hanging on.

Ic. "I will arise and go . . . and he arose and went"

And it is in the depths of despair and human brokenness that we began to see glimmers of hope. Into the dust of the prodigal's pig pen he says in verse 18: **"I will arise and go"** (v. 18, future).

"Arise!" On the surface level, it's meaning is simple: I'll get up. But this parable is operating far above the surface level. In the context of a parable that describes the son as having been "dead" and made "alive again"—**arising language is resurrection language**.

In fact, it's the same word used in the gospels to speak about Jesus' resurrection. And the point here is that it is by God's resurrecting grace, *and his grace alone*, that at the bottom, in the midst of our deepest brokenness, we can dare to hope, or *even think to say* "I will arise and go to my father."

And those whispers of Satan in the wilderness break in again. Like a wounded animal deciding if it has the will to get up and heal by the stream or just die in the dust, you're vulnerable. And he lurks, waiting to vanquish you in your vulnerability. Waiting to cull you into quitting, when you feel like you've already lost. In your weakness you hear:

“You had a good run, leave it at that. Stay here a while, rest, rest in the dust, return to the dust, fade away.”

["I will arise and go to my father"]

“It’s over, you saw the path—an avalanche. You can’t go back even if you wanted to. Besides, he wouldn’t take you back, not again, *not after what you’ve done?*”

["I will arise and go to my father"]

“Give in. Give up. Give up.”

["I will arise and go to my father" . . . AND HE AROSE and went to his father.]

And God, seeing us from a distance, sheepishly, unconfidently coming home, does not begrudgingly, with a furrowed brow, sigh at the burden of the return of his prodigal child, **he runs to you!** He embraces *you*. He clothes you with his salvation, and his favor, and his glory. He restores you, he redeems you, he renews your life, he celebrates your return.

The whole process exists not because you’re **a genius who turned a troubled life around** but because **God is gracious father who rose a dead man from the dust.**

You left home; God called you back. You spent your life; God caused you to come life again. You were lost; **and you didn’t find your way**—he came and found you.

[**Transition**]: This is the first type of prodigal—a prodigal in a distant land. But in the elder brother we find another type of prodigal—one who never even left home.

II. Prodigals in close proximity (Luke 15:25-29)

Ila. “He was angry and refused to go in”

We see the elder brother enter the story in verse 25 when he hears the music and celebration of his younger brother’s party. In verse 26, he inquires of a servant who tells him:

‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’

And, the passage concisely conveys his response:

“he was angry and refused to go in”

Every other character in the story exhibits redemptive movement in the story. The younger brother **goes back** to the father in repentance. The father **runs out** to the son in compassion; and then **goes out** to the elder son to invite him in.

It is only the elder son who “refuses” to go in, to move toward grace.

He doesn’t desire to **celebrate and fraternize**; he desires to **pontificate and criticize**. The true mark of a religious person who has lost the plot; or perhaps more likely, who never properly understood it in the first place.

IIb. “I have served you these many years”

This reveals something profoundly important about heart of the elder brother, and indirectly about our own hearts: the elder brother relates to the father less like a son and more like a servant; and if we’re not careful, so will we.

In verse 29, the older son then begins to list his character credentials.

- “I have served you” and,
- “I have never disobeyed your command” for “these many years.”

Notice the commerce language “I have served you.” He *deserves* the young goat, “*because he has served*” not because he is a son—he’s earned it!

This is the essence of **religion that gets fixated on our own goodness**.

- What we waste is our access to his grace.
- We are prodigal about our privileged proximity to God’s peace, joy, fullness—to the favor that is right in front of us, fully on offer—but that is not detected because we wrongly relate to God on the basis of our own self-righteousness.

We become **prodigals in close proximity**. Recklessly ignoring the grace right before our very eyes, because our eyes are so fixed on *ourselves*.

It is helpful to recall **how chapter 15 begins**. Hear the word of God:

“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’

The elder brother figure was originally aimed at the ancient Pharisees, but it is not it’s not *only* aimed at them. It speaks to the older brother in all of us. Whenever a critical spirit and judgmentalism take up residence in the self-righteous, religious heart of a prodigal who never left home.

While one prodigal’s path ends in a far-away place; the other often takes up residence in a pew. The elder brother *in us* becomes angry with God when he fails to meet *our* expectations. We criticize others; rather than celebrate their return. We feel a bit bigger; when others seem a bit smaller. We feel like we can only score a win if someone else suffers a loss. Our prodigality is not because of a moral failure; it’s because of *moralism*.

If the younger brother came to father by **coming to the end of himself**; the elder brother comes to the father by realizing that he is **full of himself**. We need to remember both because both lead us further into ourselves and further away from God.

Conclusion (Luke 15:30-32)

As we move to conclude, look at verses 30-32 to see how the story ends. The elder son, says in verse 30.

... when **this son of yours** came who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’

Notice, that he doesn’t say ‘my brother.’ Instead, he distances himself from his younger sibling by referring to him sarcastically and insultingly as ‘this son of yours.’

In verses 32, the father corrects him, reestablishing the elder son’s relational connection to his sibling. “My child” (a term of both endearment and familial connection): not ‘**this son of yours**’ but ‘**this brother of yours**.”

[Concluding Application: The Prodigal Mayor]

As I was reflecting on this passage this week, a video came across my social media feed. It was police footage of the mayor of New Jersey being pulled over in front of her home for a DUI. The video starts with the woman letting her toddler-aged child out of his car seat. The little boy quickly scurries off down his driveway to the front. The camera pans to reveal significant damage to her car. Huge gashes along the passenger side of the vehicle—*the side the child was on*. A passenger side mirror barely hanging on, completely destroyed.

At first, I was drawn to the seriousness of the crime: she's lucky she didn't injure or kill someone. How irresponsible! And, she's a public servant? And, there was a *kid* in the car!

But then I saw the woman glance back toward her front porch, beyond the flickering lights of the police cars, just as it set in that she was failing the sobriety test. And, it struck me: **she was glancing toward her little son**. I knew the look on her face. It was the look of a person who had come the end of themselves.

Oh, all the voices and scenarios that must have been playing through her mind at that moment:

"There is no path of return for me. I've wasted it. I am lost. I feel dead inside."

"My son, oh I've let my poor baby down."

"My career, everything I worked for, it's all gone."

"Will my husband abandon me, or will help me get well? Am I even capable of *getting* well?"

"I feel guilt, but more than that, I feel shame, and I feel alone. I'm right outside my house; but I feel far from home."

You read the comment section:

'Good. She got what was coming to her.'

'I hope they take her away her kid.'

And you begin to weep at a world (and sometimes, a religion) that has become so self-righteous that it has no room left for redemption.

Then, without excusing the seriousness of her error, you, the Christian—returned alumni prodigals that we all are—you start weeping *with her* in her misery. You know what it feels like to reach the bottom; and everything in you *wants her to rise*.

You long to jump through the screen, into her midst, to comfort her, not with generic pity, but with gospel hope.

To say to her, just like you heard, when you were there, at the end of yourself, by yourself:

“Arise and go to your father.”

“He will run to you. He will embrace you, he will help you get well, he will take your shame, he will bind up all your wounds, he alone can heal the broken-hearted.”

To be able say, not with the scorn and detached disdain of the elder son – “this daughter of yours has wasted it all” – but to say with the celebration and the compassionate heart of a child of God; “this *sister* of mine was dead and she lives again; she was lost but now she is found.”

Narrow is the way that leads back home to life but wide are the open arms of the compassionate father and the outstretched arms of his crucified son. There is a path back to the father for every prodigal near or far. For the younger son, for the elder son, for the wayward mayor, and everyone in between. For them. For her. For *you*.

Discussion Questions

1. In the parable, in verse 17, after finding himself destitute financially and spiritually, the younger son “comes to himself.” When we “come to the end of ourselves,” that’s often the time that we “come to ourselves.” Reflect on times that you have come to the end of yourself. How has God used that realization to cause you to rely more on him and to rest in his provision and promises?
2. In addition to being prodigals in a far-off place, we can be **prodigals in close proximity** (like the elder brother). Recklessly ignoring the grace right before our very eyes, because our eyes are so fixed on ourselves. What are the areas in your life that threaten to eclipse your perceived need for God, and either distract you or cause you transfer your ultimate comfort and confidence to something that you can control, generate, or take pride in, thus taking the place of God?
3. The attempt to “**feel young**” by **being reckless** can happen at any stage of life, and more than once. It’s the quintessence of both the quarter life and midlife crisis. To the extent that you feel comfortable in this setting, what are the well-worn paths down the mountain that tempt you to backslide? How can recalling the darkness of the bottom and the acceptance of the father deter you from treading these paths again?
4. In the same way, how can the extravagant love of the father, his embrace, his celebration—how can these things, wrongly ordered in our hearts, take up a ‘double occupation’ of sin and holiness in our hearts? How can the greatness of God’s mercy promote permissiveness and cheap grace, if we presume upon it rather than treasure it?
5. Spend some time in prayer, remembering when God called you and said “arise and come to the father” in your life. Share your testimonies (but don’t be as wordy as my questions) and, marveling at his grace, give great thanks to God. If you have already shared testimonies, share another instance of God ‘raising you up’ from darkness, sin, and despair.