

An Unforgettable Tale

Scripture: Luke 15:11–32, Luke 15:2

Code: A115

The Prodigal Son is one of the most beloved (and most misunderstood) stories of all time. Discover for yourself what Jesus was *really* driving at—you'll never read it the same again.

Most people today are somewhat familiar with the parable of the prodigal son, found in Luke 15:11–32. Even those who know next to nothing about the Bible know something about this tale. Its themes and its language are deeply ingrained in our spiritual and literary traditions.

Shakespeare, for instance, borrowed plot points and motifs from the parable of the prodigal son and adapted them in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Henry IV*. The Bard also alluded to this parable repeatedly in his other dramas. Arthur Sullivan used the exact words of the biblical text as the basis of an oratorio titled *The Prodigal Son*, Sergei Prokofiev cast the plot in ballet form, and Benjamin Britten turned the story into an opera. At the opposite end of the musical spectrum, country singer Hank Williams recorded a song called “The Prodigal Son,” comparing the prodigal’s homecoming to the joys of heaven. The world’s great art museums are well stocked with works featuring scenes from the prodigal son’s experience, including famous drawings and paintings by Rembrandt, Rubens, Dürer, and many others.

Contemporary language is likewise full of words and imagery borrowed from the familiar parable. It is fairly common to hear a wayward child referred to as “a prodigal son” (or daughter). People also sometimes speak of “killing the fatted calf” (a metaphor for extravagant celebration) or “riotous living” (a dissolute or profligate lifestyle). You may have heard or read those allusions without recognizing their source. They are borrowed directly from the King James version of this best known of Jesus’ parables.

A Story to Remember

The parable of the prodigal son is one of several memorable parables recorded only in Luke’s Gospel. It stands out as the choicest of these parables for many reasons.

Of all Jesus’ parables, this one is the most richly detailed, powerfully dramatic, and intensely personal. It’s full of emotion—ranging from sadness, to triumph, to a sense of shock, and finally to an unsettling wish for more closure. The characters are familiar, so it’s easy for people to identify with the prodigal, to feel the father’s grief, and yet still (in some degree) sympathize with the elder brother—all at the same time. The story is memorable on many levels, not the least of which is the gritty imagery Jesus invokes. The description of the prodigal as so desperately hungry he was willing to eat husks scavenged from swine food, for instance, graphically depicts his youthful dissolution in a way that was unspeakably revolting to His Jewish audience.

Another thing that makes this tale unforgettable is the poignancy demonstrated in the father’s

response when his lost son returns. The father's rejoicing was rich with tender compassion. The younger son, who had left heedless and insolent, shattering his father's hopes for him, came back an utterly broken man. Heartbroken and no doubt deeply wounded by his younger son's foolish rebellion, the father nevertheless expressed pure joy, unmingled with any hint of bitterness, when his wayward son came dragging home. Who would not be moved by that kind of love?

Yet the elder son in the parable was *not* the least bit moved by his father's love. His steely-hearted resentment over the father's mercy to his brother contrasts starkly with the dominant theme of Luke 15, which is the great joy in heaven over the return of the lost. The central message of the parable, then, is an urgent and sobering entreaty to hard-hearted listeners whose attitudes exactly mirrored the elder brother's. The parable of the prodigal son is not a warm and fuzzy feel-good message, but it is a powerful wake-up call with a very earnest warning.

That point must not be lost in our understanding and appreciation of this beloved parable. Unfortunately, the lesson of the elder brother is often overlooked in many of the popular retellings. And yet it is, after all, the main reason Jesus told the parable.

The Central Lesson of the Prodigal Son

The picturesque descriptions in the parable are not provided to add multiple layers of meaning; they are cultural details that help us understand the story in the context of first-century agrarian village life. By understanding the context, the main point of the story comes to light.

This parable spreads itself across twenty-two verses in this pivotal chapter in Luke's Gospel. With so much lavish coloring, dramatic pathos, and fine detail carefully woven into this word picture, it seems clear that the vividness of the parable is deliberately designed to highlight the parable's central meaning. We're expected to notice and make good sense of the personalities and plot turns in this amazing story.

Indeed, the context of Luke 15, with its theme of heavenly joy over earthly repentance, makes perfect sense of all the major features of the parable. The prodigal represents a typical sinner who comes to repentance. The father's patience, love, generosity, and delight over the son's return are clear and perfect emblems of divine grace. The prodigal's heart change is a picture of what true repentance should look like. And the elder brother's cold indifference—the real focal point of the story, as it turns out—is a vivid representation of the same evil hypocrisy Jesus was confronting in the hearts of the hostile scribes and Pharisees to whom He told the parable in the first place (Luke 15:2). They bitterly resented the sinners and tax collectors who drew near to Jesus (v. 1), and they tried to paper over their fleshly indignation with religious pretense. But their attitudes betrayed their unbelief and self-centeredness. Jesus' parable ripped the mask off their hypocrisy.

This, then, is the central and culminating lesson of the parable: Jesus is pointing out the stark contrast between God's own delight in the redemption of sinners and the Pharisees' inflexible hostility toward those same sinners. Keeping that lesson fixed firmly in view, we can legitimately draw from the larger story (as Jesus unfolds it) several profound lessons about grace, forgiveness, repentance, and the heart of God toward sinners. Those elements are all so conspicuous in the parable that almost everyone should be able to recognize them.

Seeing Ourselves in the Parable

There's a good reason this short story pulls at the heartstrings of so many hearers. We recognize ourselves in it. The parable reminds us of the most painful aspects of the human condition, and those who take an honest look will recognize themselves.

For believers, the Prodigal Son is a humbling reminder of who we are and how much we owe to divine grace.

For those who are conscious of their own guilt but are still unrepentant, the Prodigal's life is a searing reminder of the wages of sin, the duty of the sinner to repent, and the goodness of God that accompanies authentic repentance.

For sinners coming to repentance, the father's eager welcome and costly generosity are reminders that God's grace and goodness are inexhaustible.

For heedless unbelievers (especially those like the scribes and Pharisees, who use external righteousness as a mask for unrighteous hearts), the elder brother is a reminder that neither a show of religion nor the pretense of respectability is a valid substitute for redemption.

For all of us, the elder brother's attitude is a powerful warning, showing how easily and how subtly unbelief can masquerade as faithfulness.

Regardless of which of those categories you fall into, my prayer for you as you listen to the series or read the book is that the Lord will use it to minister grace to your heart. If you are a believer, may you bask in the Father's joy over the salvation of the lost. May you gain a new appreciation for the beauty and the glory of God's plan of redemption. And may you also be encouraged and better equipped to participate in the work of spreading the gospel.

May listeners and readers who, like the Prodigal, have come to the end of themselves be motivated to abandon the husks of this world. And above all, may this message sound a reveille in the hearts of any who need to be awakened to the awful reality of their own sin and the glorious promise of redemption in Christ.

(Adapted from [*The Prodigal Son*](#).)

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