

MAIN POINT

The Father's door is always open, and the Father's message is always "welcome."

INTRODUCTION

Share about a time when you deliberately disobeyed your parents, or when one of your kids deliberately disobeyed you.

How did your parents respond when they caught you? (Or, how did you respond when you caught your kid?) Did anything surprise you about their (or your) response?

The parables in Luke 15 were given before an audience of tax collectors and sinners as well as scribes and Pharisees, all of whom misunderstood what matters to God. The Pharisees viewed themselves as the ones who defended the law of God, but they were actually the biggest offenders of the law of God because His law is love—something that they lacked. As we continue through the parable of the prodigal son this week, we see a great picture of the love and compassion God has for His children, both for the law keeper and the law breaker.

UNDERSTANDING

> READ LUKE 15:11-21.

When the younger son approached his father and asked for his inheritance what, in essence, was he saying to his father (v. 12)?

How would a normal father have responded in this scenario? How did the father in the parable respond?

Why do we often seek all the blessings of our Father, but without any of the relationship that goes with it? What does that reveal about our hearts?

When the younger son asked for his inheritance, he was essentially saying, "I wish you were dead" because inheritance passes from a son to a father only at his death. What makes this request particularly galling is that it was the younger son who asked. Typically his older brother would have inherited before him. Most fathers would have refused, but this father granted the son's wishes without protest. So often we only turn to God when we are in trouble, not when things are good. However, when we do this, we miss the most amazing benefit of knowing God—a relationship with Him.

Did the son actually find the freedom that he was seeking? How did the son use the wealth that he inherited from his father?

In what ways do our ideas of what will make us free fail us?

What did the son remember about his father? How did those thoughts guide him to come home, despite the sense of embarrassment and shame he would have experienced when he returned?

The son realized what he had done and remembered how well his father treated his servants. Rehearsing his apology over and over, the son approached, but before he could speak, he was embraced and welcomed by his father. It would have been completely undignified for the patriarch of a family and a man of standing to run. However, the father threw standards to the wind, embraced his son, and celebrated his return. Our Father in heaven is not waiting on us to return so He can scold us, but so He can embrace us. He looks and waits for us while we are astray and celebrates when we return home.

> **READ LUKE 15:22-24.**

What is your impression of the father in this parable? What words would you use to describe him?

What does the father's example teach us about God our Father?

One of the ways God shows us His compassion is by being long-suffering toward us. What is one reason you are grateful for God's long-suffering nature today?

The father required nothing. Though he did not need to welcome the son, out of his grace and love he welcomed the son back, restoring him into his family and celebrating his return. Forgiveness was immediate, and the son's confession came in the midst of the strong show of compassion and joy. This is how God treats all those who are lost. It is God's joy to welcome us, and He does so with love, mercy, and compassion. The father in this parable reminds us of how gracious God has been to all forgiven sinners. Regardless of the depth of sin, every Christian is a product of amazing grace.

> **READ LUKE 15:25-32.**

How must the father have felt hearing the words of his son in verse 29? Through what lens did the older son see his relationship with his father?

Re-read verse 30. How does self-righteousness change our relationship with other people in addition to our relationship with the Father?

The older son only found out that his brother had returned because of the noise of the party that was thrown to welcome his brother home. He had to find out from a servant what happened. When the father came out to check on him, the older son responded in verse 29 using language that would befit a servant. The older son saw his position in his father's house not as a relationship but as a service agreement. He would do all his father asked and all that was expected of him to one day inherit all that belonged to his father. The older brother was so angry with his father that he neglected to see what a gift it was that his brother returned.

What had the older son missed (vv. 30-32)? What do we miss when we are more pleased with ourselves than the work God is doing all around us?

When we draw near to a relationship with God, we will always be pleased to see lost sinners come home. Our hearts begin to reflect God's heart for the lost. A life filled with activity for God is not the same as a life lived in relationship with God. The closer we become with God the Father, the more we see the gospel is for both the unrighteous and the self-righteous. Both need to be redeemed by the blood of Jesus on the cross.

How does the cross of Jesus cover the sins of both the older and the younger son? What does it say to both?

APPLICATION

When have you gone your own way only to discover that the freedom you were seeking wasn't really freedom or worth the price you paid to secure it? What response do we owe the "little brothers" among us?

How should an understanding of the depth of God's love and grace affect the way we pray? What is something that our group can pray about for you this week?

Among the many truths of this parable, we learn that God values us. Who do you know that needs to hear that truth today? What is one step you can take to reach out to that person this week with the reminder of God's love and grace?

PRAY

Thank God that in His mercy, He made you alive with Christ when you were dead in sin. Pray that you would have a greater appreciation of God's love for you and a greater compassion for others as you reflect on the truth of the gospel and the shame from which God saves you.

MEMORIZE

So he got up and went to his father. But while the son was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him.
– Luke 15:20

COMMENTARY

LUKE 15:11-32

15:11-12. Jesus turned to the family setting for his concluding parable to illustrate why He associated with sinners. The story was told succinctly with only the points Jesus wanted to make elaborated. A younger son demanded his share of the estate and got it. There is no indication of why he wanted it or why the father so quickly gave it to him. Later we will see the older brother's attitude and surmise sibling rivalry here, as in the Old Testament stories of Jacob and Esau and of Joseph and his brothers. The younger brother's portion was only a third of the estate if the entire estate were divided. By law, the older brother got a double portion (Deut. 21:17). Although this well-known parable (vv. 11-32) is usually called the parable of the prodigal son, the other son and the father are also important characters. It was unusual, but not unheard of, for a father to settle his estate before his death. Since the older son got a double portion of his father's estate, the younger son's share would have been one-third of the estate.

15:13-16. The younger son had no intention of returning to his family. It is impossible to know whether his foolish living included "prostitutes" (v. 30), or if that was just an angry accusation made by the older brother. The irony of the penniless younger son's new job was that pigs were unclean animals to Jews (Lev. 11:7). He was at rock bottom in his new life.

15:17-19. It took extreme poverty and hunger to prompt the younger son to come to his senses and realize that, in spite of all he had done, the correct course of action was to return and become one of his father's hired hands. To do so, however, it would be necessary to confess that he had sinned greatly and was not worthy to be called his son. This is a vivid picture of a person "hitting bottom" and finally realizing the magnitude of his sin. The younger brother came to his senses: The day laborers on his dad's farm had enough to eat. Note how this ties the story back to the beginning of the chapter and the theme of sinners. No longer are we using animals or objects to talk about the lost. Now we have gotten down to basic facts. People are lost. People need to realize their lost condition and admit it. The younger son's first step is saying, "I am a sinner."

What is a sinner? An unworthy person. One who deserves nothing. Yet a sinner wants something. So the sinner searches for someone who loves the unworthy, who is willing to help the undeserving. The sinful younger brother had forfeited his position as son. He had no more claims on his father, so he applied for a new job—day laborer. Humans have the capacity to change. We do not have to remain in the pigpen. We do not have to continue to live as sinners. We can become responsible for our lives. We can quit our riotous living. We can come home.

15:20-23. Focus shifts from son to father. That the father saw his son coming from a long way off indicates that he habitually looked for his return. Perhaps the normal parental reaction to the younger son's return would be anger or at least deep disappointment, but this father's response displayed: (1) compassion, (2) love (threw his arms around his neck and kissed him), (3) celebration (a feast), and (4) joyful restoration of status for his son (a robe of distinction, signet ring of family authority, sandals worn by a son, in contrast to barefoot slaves). Even the joyful welcome did not deter the son from his determined course. He repeated the plea he had rehearsed. Somehow the last line never came out; the job application as a day laborer was never made.

15:24. This is the point at which the parable ties in to the two previous stories about God's joy in saving the lost. The father's celebratory attitude depicts the way in which God the Father receives repentant sinners. This contrasts with the contempt the Pharisees and scribes displayed for sinners who came to Jesus (v. 2). How could the father act like this? Did he not know what the son had done? Of course, but the son had been given up for dead. This was resurrection time. He was lost. We found the precious treasure for which we have hunted. The lost sheep is back. Certainly a lost and found son is worth much more than a coin or a sheep. What a picture of the Father in heaven. How He does celebrate when the lost are found, when sinners repent. What compassion and love He shows. Why does Jesus associate with sinners? Because heaven loves them and waits patiently for them to return and repent so the celebration can begin. Heaven's citizens are repentant sinners.

15:25-30. Instead of the story ending on a note of joy and celebration, as might be expected, the spotlight shifts to the older brother. Unlike the father's positive attitude, the older brother (1) was surprised at the return of his sinning brother, (2) was offended and jealous at the father's celebration, (3) became angry at the father's forgiving love, (4) declared his own self-righteousness, and (5) focused on his brother's sinfulness rather than his newfound repentance. Jesus' representation of the religious leaders in the character of the older brother was a scathing rebuke of their self-righteousness.

15:31-32. The rebuke of the religious leaders continues. They did not understand (1) the opportunity for a close relationship with God, (2) the generosity of His grace, (3) His joy at the salvation of sinners, or (4) the profound transformation of conversion. Perhaps most crucial of all, however, is the reminder of kinship to the sinners intended in the phrase this brother of yours. The religious leaders refused to accept their Jewish brethren, the "sinners," as the older brother in this story.