

Called to Return

Luke 15:11-24

SS Lesson for 03/17/2019

Devotional Scripture: Hosea 11:1-9

OUTLINE

LESSON BACKGROUND AND KEY VERSE

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Key Verse: Luke 15:22, 24

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

MAJOR THEME ANALYSIS

THE SIN - REBELLION (15:11-13)

Rebellion usually starts with impatience

Impatience for wanting what we don't have (James 4:2)

Impatience because we expect great miracles when simple things will help (2 Kings 5:11-12)

Impatience for what we call fairness (Luke 9:54)

Impatience to do what we want and disregarding God's priority (Luke 10:40)

Rebellion thrives on thinking we know what's best for us

Youthful thinking and decision making sometimes leads us to rebellion (Ps 25:7)

Rebellion by trying to follow the desires of our heart (Eccl 11:9)

Rebellion through arrogance (Deut 1:43)

Rebellion through following our corrupt and sinful nature (2 Peter 2:10)

Rebellion through trying to run from God (Jonah 1:1-3)

Rebellion ends in loss

Loss of life and possessions (Num 16:30)

Loss of forgiveness (Ex 23:20-21)

Loss of God's intimacy (Isa 63:10)

Loss of God's blessings (Lev 26:14-20)

THE REPENTANCE - COMING TO OUR SENSES (15:14-19)

Repentance begins with an unfulfilled need

The need to clear ourselves of guilt (2 Cor. 7:11)

The need to find satisfaction (Amos 4:6)

The need to enjoy the fruits of our labor (Haggai 1:6)

Repentance involves circumstances that causes us to rethink our situation

Rethinking our decisions that got us in the situation (Jonah 2:7-10)

Rethinking our attitude of pride (Job 40:1-5)

Rethinking our understanding of who God is (Acts 9:3-6)

Repentance results in a humbled changed mind

Humbled by seeing our weakness (Luke 22:59-62)

Humbled by being made to feel ashamed (2 Thess 3:14-15)

Humbled by knowing that God's grace is sufficient (2 Cor 12:7-10)

Humbled by a changed lifestyle and service (Philem 10-16)

THE FORGIVENESS - A RECONCILING FATHER (15:20-24)

Forgiveness starts with God's compassion

Compassion because God is slow to anger and abounds in love (Psalm 86:15)

Compassion that God longs to provide (Isaiah 30:18)

Compassion that resulted in us not being consumed (Lament. 3:22)

Compassion that causes God to relent from what we deserve (Joel 2:13)

Forgiveness involves confession

Confession that confirms guilt (1 Chron. 21:8)

Confession that agrees with God's view (Psalm 32:5)

Confession of sins to God leads to forgiveness (1 John 1:9)

Confession along with repentance leads to healing (2 Chron 7:14)

Forgiveness results in rebirth and joy

Results in rebirth and joy because of being made perfect forever (Heb 10:14)

Results in rebirth and joy because Jesus was sacrificed once for all (Heb 9:28)

Results in rebirth and joy because forgiveness sanctifies (Acts 26:17-18)

Results in rebirth and joy because of being rescued from a dominion of darkness (Col 1:13-14)

CONCLUSION AND OTHER THOUGHTS

COMMENTARY THOUGHTS FROM BOB DEFFINBAUGH

The Tale of Two Sons (Better Known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son) (15:11-32)

The Younger Brother

The Father

The Older Brother

The Differences Between the Two Sons

Similarities in the Sons

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FROM THE NIV STANDARD LESSON COMMENTARY

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FROM THE ECHOES COMMENTARY

Lesson Background and Key Verse

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

“That is just unforgivable.” Have you ever said something like that, or heard someone say it? We all believe in the importance and necessity of forgiveness. We all rely on forgiveness, from other people and from Almighty God. But some wrongs seem impossible to forgive. They are too heinous, too painful. We can hardly imagine forgiving those who committed history’s great crimes against humanity. But more practically, we struggle to forgive those whose deeds have deeply hurt us personally. Likewise, we may struggle to believe we can be forgiven. Our wrongs go with us every moment. We cannot escape the deep regret we have for the harm we have done to others. Forgiveness is as hard to receive as it is to give. Forgiveness is a scandal. We question those who offer it, question whether we can receive it, doubt whether it can really happen, doubt whether it should happen. The opponents of Jesus questioned both his ability to forgive sin (Luke 5:20, 21) and his association with those most in need of it (15:2). How Jesus responded is highly instructive yet today.

Today’s text, one of the most beloved (and misapplied) of Jesus’ parables, is one of a series that he spoke in response to his opponents. Jesus was surrounded by publicans (tax collectors), hated in his time as collaborators with the oppressive Roman Empire. Sinners of various stripes flocked to him. None of this sat well with religious leaders opposed to Jesus. They grumbled about his associating with such people, and especially about his eating with them. With Luke 15:1, 2 noting the above, Luke 15:3 marks the beginning of Jesus’ response. That response consists of three parables, each about the recovery of something: a lost sheep (15:4–7), a lost coin (15:8–10), and an errant son (15:11–32). When Jesus used parables to address Jewish leaders, the stories were often meant to be “in your face” tweaks aimed at their hypocrisy. In the parable told at his house, Simon the Pharisee was to understand that he was the debtor who “loves little” (Luke 7:47). “The chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders” were to know that the parable of the tenants was directed at them (Mark 11:27; 12:1–12). The three parables in Luke 15 are similar: they were meant to be rebukes of pious leaders who disdained Jesus because he “welcomes sinners” (Luke 15:2).

Key Verse: Luke 15:22, 24

22 "But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. 24 for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry.

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

Jesus combated the religious leaders by teaching again that some who were considered to be hopeless and sinners will be in the kingdom. Here are perhaps the best known of Jesus’ parables—The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, and The Prodigal Son. All three parables teach the same message—that God is vitally concerned with the repentance of sinners. But the third story goes beyond the others, applying that truth to the situation in which Jesus found Himself—being accepted by the outcasts of society while being rejected by the religious leaders.

15:1-2. Much to the disgust of the religious leaders, Jesus associated with those who were thought of as hopeless and “sinners.” The opposition to Jesus was once again, as almost always in Luke, **the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law.** Because of this opposition Jesus told three parables. All three speak of things or a person being lost and then found, and of rejoicing when the lost is found. Some view these

parables as teaching a believer's restoration to fellowship with God. One cannot lose something he does not own, they reason, so the first two parables must represent children of God who come back to Him. Also, a son is already a son, so the third parable must be teaching that people who are believers can be restored to fellowship with God. Others understand the parables to teach that lost people (i.e., people who are not believers) can come to Christ. This view seems preferable for two reasons: (1) Jesus was speaking to Pharisees who were rejecting the message of the kingdom. Their objection was that sinners were coming to Jesus and believing His message. In no way could these two groups be adequately represented in the third parable if the point of the parable is a restoration to fellowship by a believer. (2) Verse 22 indicates that the son who came back received a new position which he did not have before. The Jews were God's "children" in the sense that they had a special covenant relationship to Him. But each individual still had to become a believer in God. It was their responsibility to accept the message Jesus was preaching—that He was the Messiah and that He would bring in the kingdom for the nation.

15:3-7. The Parable of the Lost Sheep teaches that **there is... rejoicing in heaven** when a **sinner... repents**. Jesus was not saying **the other 99** sheep were not important. Instead, He was emphasizing that the one **sheep** not in the fold corresponded with the sinners with whom Jesus was eating (vv. 1-2). The **99 righteous persons** refer to the Pharisees who *thought* themselves righteous and therefore in no **need to repent**.

15:8-10. The Parable of the Lost Coin teaches that **there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels** when a **sinner... repents**. This is the same message as the first but it emphasizes the thoroughness of the search. The woman continued to **sweep the house and search carefully until she** found the **coin** which was a thing of great value. A *drachma*, a Greek silver coin referred to only here in the New Testament, equaled about a day's wages. The point would have been clear to Jesus' listeners: the sinners with whom He was associating were extremely valuable to God. (Cf. similar wording in vv. 6, 9.) Jesus then told the Parable of the Lost Son and His Older Brother to explain that God is inviting *all* people to enter the kingdom.

15:11. **A man... had two sons;** the contrast between his sons is the point of the parable.

15:12-20a. This section of the parable describes the actions of **the younger** son. He requested an unusual thing when he asked **his father** to **give** him his **share of the estate**. Normally an estate was not divided and given to the heirs until the father could no longer manage it well. This father acquiesced to his son's demand and gave him his share of the inheritance. **The younger son** took that wealth, went far away, and **squandered it in wild living**, involving himself presumably, as his older brother said, with prostitutes (v. 30). The hearers immediately would have begun to understand the point of the story. Jesus had been criticized for associating with sinners. The sinners were considered people who were far away from God, squandering their lives in riotous living. In contrast with the younger son, the older son continued to remain with the father and did not engage in such practices. A **famine** occurred and the second son ran out of money so that he had to work for a foreigner feeding **pigs**, something detestable to a Jew. Perhaps the far **country** was east of the Sea of Galilee where Gentiles tended **pigs** (cf. 8:26-37). In his hunger he **longed** for the **pods**—the food he fed **the pigs**. As a Jew, he could have stooped no lower. The pods were probably carob pods, from tall evergreen carob trees. In this low condition, **he came to his senses** (15:17). He decided to **go back to his father** and work for him. Surely he would be better off to work for his **father** than for a foreigner. He fully expected to be **hired** by **his father** as a servant, not to be taken back as his son.

15:20b-24. The third section of the parable describes the father's response. He had been waiting for his son to return, for **while he was still a long way off the father saw him**. The father, full of **compassion** for his son, **ran to** him, and hugged **and kissed him**. The father would not even listen to all of the young son's rehearsed speech. Instead **the father** had **his servants** prepare a banquet to **celebrate** the son's return. He gave the son a new position with a **robe... a ring... and sandals**. Jesus intentionally used the banquet motif again. He had previously spoken of a banquet to symbolize the coming kingdom (13:29; cf. 14:15-24). Jesus' hearers would have easily realized the significance of this feast. Sinners (whom the young son symbolized) were entering into the kingdom because they were coming to God. They believed they needed to return to Him and be forgiven by Him.

15:25-32. The parable's final section describes the attitude of the older brother, who symbolized the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. They had the same attitude toward the sinners as **the older son** had toward the younger son. **The older brother**, coming home from working **in the field** and hearing what was happening, got **angry**. Similarly the Pharisees and teachers of the Law were angry with the message Jesus was proclaiming. They did not like the idea that people from outside their nation as well as outcasts and

sinners in the nation were to be a part of the kingdom. Like the older son who **refused to go** to the feast, the Pharisees refused to enter the kingdom Jesus offered to the nation. Interestingly the **father went out and pleaded with** the older brother to go to the feast. Likewise, Jesus ate with Pharisees as well as sinners. He did not desire to exclude the Pharisees and teachers of the Law from the kingdom. The message was an invitation to everyone. The older brother was angry because he had **never** been honored with a feast even though, as he said, **All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders** (v. 29). Those words betrayed the fact that the older brother thought he had a relationship with his father because of his work. He served his father not out of love but out of a desire for reward. He even thought of himself as being in bondage to his father. **The father** pointed out that the older **son** had had the joy of being in the house all the time, and now he should rejoice with the father in his brother's return. The words, **You are always with me and everything I have is yours**, suggest the religious leaders' privileged position as members of God's Chosen People. They were the recipients and guardians of the covenants and the Law (Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4). Rather than feeling angry, they should rejoice that others were joining them and would be a part of the kingdom.

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

(NOTE: Lesson major points and cross-references were copied from a previous lesson dated 02/24/2016)

The Sin - Rebellion (15:11-13)

11 Then He said: "A certain man had two sons.

12 And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.' So he divided to them his livelihood.

13 And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living.

Rebellion usually starts with impatience

Impatience for wanting what we don't have (James 4:2)

You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God.

Impatience because we expect great miracles when simple things will help (2 Kings 5:11-12)

11 But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. 12 Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage.

Impatience for what we call fairness (Luke 9:54)

When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?"

Impatience to do what we want and disregarding God's priority (Luke 10:40)

But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

Rebellion thrives on thinking we know what's best for us

Youthful thinking and decision making sometimes leads us to rebellion (Ps 25:7)

Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you are good, O LORD.

Rebellion by trying to follow the desires of our heart (Eccl 11:9)

Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment.

Rebellion through arrogance (Deut 1:43)

So I told you, but you would not listen. You rebelled against the LORD's command and in your arrogance you marched up into the hill country.

Rebellion through following our corrupt and sinful nature (2 Peter 2:10)

This is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the sinful nature and despise authority. Bold and arrogant, these men are not afraid to slander celestial beings;

Rebellion through trying to run from God (Jonah 1:1-3)

1:1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: 2 "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." 3 But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.

Rebellion ends in loss

Loss of life and possessions (Num 16:30)

But if the LORD brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the grave, then you will know that these men have treated the LORD with contempt."

Loss of forgiveness (Ex 23:20-21)

20 "See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared. 21 Pay attention to him and listen to what he says. Do not rebel against him; he will not forgive your rebellion, since my Name is in him.

Loss of God's intimacy (Isa 63:10)

Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. So he turned and became their enemy and he himself fought against them.

Loss of God's blessings (Lev 26:14-20)

14 "'But if you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands, 15 and if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws and fail to carry out all my commands and so violate my covenant, 16 then I will do this to you: I will bring upon you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and drain away your life. You will plant seed in vain, because your enemies will eat it. 17 I will set my face against you so that you will be defeated by your enemies; those who hate you will rule over you, and you will flee even when no one is pursuing you. 18 "'If after all this you will not listen to me, I will punish you for your sins seven times over. 19 I will break down your stubborn pride and make the sky above you like iron and the ground beneath you like bronze. 20 Your strength will be spent in vain, because your soil will not yield its crops, nor will the trees of the land yield their fruit.

The Repentance - Coming To Our Senses (15:14-19)

14 But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. 15 Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, 19 and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants." ' "

Repentance begins with an unfulfilled need

The need to clear ourselves of guilt (2 Cor. 7:11)

See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.

The need to find satisfaction (Amos 4:6)

"I gave you empty stomachs in every city and lack of bread in every town, yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD.

The need to enjoy the fruits of our labor (Haggai 1:6)

You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it."

Repentance involves circumstances that causes us to rethink our situation

Rethinking our decisions that got us in the situation (Jonah 2:7-10)

7 "When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. 8 "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. 9 But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD." 10 And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

Rethinking our attitude of pride (Job 40:1-5)

1 The LORD said to Job: 2 "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!" 3 Then Job answered the LORD: 4 "I am unworthy-how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. 5 I spoke once, but I have no answer- twice, but I will say no more."

Rethinking our understanding of who God is (Acts 9:3-6)

3 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" 5 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. 6 "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

Repentance results in a humbled changed mind

Humbled by seeing our weakness (Luke 22:59-62)

59 About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean." 60 Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. 61 The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." 62 And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Humbled by being made to feel ashamed (2 Thess 3:14-15)

14 If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. 15 Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

Humbled by knowing that God's grace is sufficient (2 Cor 12:7-10)

7 To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 10 That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Humbled by a changed lifestyle and service (Philem 10-16)

10 I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. 11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. 12 I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. 13 I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. 14 But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. 15 Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good— 16 no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

The Forgiveness - A Reconciling Father (15:20-24)

20 And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.

21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

22 But the father said to his servants, '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 fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry;

24 for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry.

Forgiveness starts with God's compassion

Compassion because God is slow to anger and abounds in love (Psalm 86:15)

But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.

Compassion that God longs to provide (Isaiah 30:18)

Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!

Compassion that resulted in us not being consumed (Lament. 3:22)

Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.

Compassion that causes God to relent from what we deserve (Joel 2:13)

Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.

Forgiveness involves confession

Confession that confirms guilt (1 Chron. 21:8)

Then David said to God, "I have sinned greatly by doing this. Now, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing."

Confession that agrees with God's view (Psalm 32:5)

Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord"— and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Confession of sins to God leads to forgiveness (1 John 1:9)

9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Confession along with repentance leads to healing (2 Chron 7:14)

14 if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

Forgiveness results in rebirth and joy

Results in rebirth and joy because of being made perfect forever (Heb 10:14)

14 because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

Results in rebirth and joy because Jesus was sacrificed once for all (Heb 9:28)

28 so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

Results in rebirth and joy because forgiveness sanctifies (Acts 26:17-18)

17 I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them 18 to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

Results in rebirth and joy because of being rescued from a dominion of darkness (Col 1:13-14)

13 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

The Tale of Two Sons (Better Known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son) (15:11-32)

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

I am now convinced of one thing: the parable of the prodigal son is not recorded in Scripture primarily as instruction to parents of wayward children. I understand this parable in its context as Jesus' response to the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes because of Jesus' acceptance of and rejoicing with repentant sinners. If the first two parables reveal to us that the Pharisees did care (too) much about "lost possessions," this parable exposes why they are not concerned about lost people. In Luke 15, this parable serves as the Lord's final, forceful response to the grumbling of the Pharisees at His response to sinners.

There are really three persons in focus in this parable, not just one: the younger brother, the father, and the older brother. In order to understand and interpret this parable accurately, I will focus our attention briefly on each of these three characters. I will also forewarn you that I will not be as sentimental in my interpretation of this parable as some have tended (wrongly, in my opinion) to be. For us, this story may seem to be a very heart-warming incident, only slightly tarnished by the sulking older brother. For the Pharisees, this was a humiliating exposure of their sin and their hypocrisy. It did not produce "warm, fuzzy feelings," at least not for those Pharisees who understood what Jesus was saying to them. Let us concentrate, then, on each of the three central characters of this parable.

The Younger Brother

The younger of two brothers one day approached his father with the request that he allocate to him his share of the inheritance earlier than would be customary, although not altogether out of the question:

"A man might leave his goods to his heirs by last will and testament (cf. Heb. 9:16f.), in which case he was bound by the provisions of the Law. This meant that the first-born received two thirds of the whole (Dt. 21:17). But he could make gifts before he died and this gave him a freer hand (SB). The rules for disposing of property are given in the Mishnah (Baba Bathra 8). If a man decided to make gifts, he normally gave the capital but retained the income. He could then no longer dispose of the capital, only of his interest in the income. But the recipient could get nothing until the death of the giver. He could sell the capital if he chose, but the buyer could not gain possession until the death of the donor."⁴

The father granted the son's request, and shortly thereafter the son left his father, his family, his country, and departed to a distant country, where he squandered his possessions in a sinful lifestyle. The money eventually ran out, and at the same time, a famine fell upon that part of the world, bringing this young man to desperate straits.

The young man was forced to hire himself out as a slave, and his job was the unpleasant task of caring for swine. Even the pigs, it would seem, were better cared for than he. It was in this state of want that the young man came to his senses. He recognized that he could live better as a slave of his father than as a slave in this foreign land. He knew that this would necessitate facing his father, and so he rehearsed his repentance speech, one that he was never allowed to finish.

The young man realized his folly and he returned to face his father. He had hoped only to be received as a slave; his father received him as a son. He had hoped, at best, for a little bread; his father provided a banquet. The young man did not gain all the material possessions he had lost, but he did regain the joy and privileges of his status as a son.

Let me emphasize two aspects of this story which relate to the younger brother. **First, there is no attempt to minimize the seriousness or the foolishness of the sins of the younger son.** Jesus did receive sinners and eat with them, but He never minimized sin. The seriousness of the young brother's sins can only be understood in the light of his identity (I am assuming) as an Israelite. As an Israelite, this young man would understand several things about the blessings which God promised His chosen people. God was going to bless His people **in the land**. The young man left the land and went to a distant one. God was going to bless His people for obeying His law. This included the necessity of living a life that was very distinct (holy) from that of the heathen. This young man went and lived among the heathen as a heathen. Then Old Testament had very specific legislating to assure that the inheritance of each family was kept within the family, and that the children cared for their parents. This young man deserted his family, permanently lost his portion of the inheritance, and left his father in a potentially precarious position (he had just lost 1/3 of his father's resources, and had lost his ability to look after him). For an Israelite, nothing could be lower than to be the slave of a heathen, and to have as one's job the care of swine.⁵ This younger son, I say, acted in a very wicked and foolish way. I can envision Jesus' audience sucking in their breath in shock and horror at what this man had done. I can see the Pharisees becoming bug-eyed and red-faced with anger at this man's sin. Jesus did not attempt to minimize this younger son's sin.

If the younger son's sins were great, so was his repentance. **Second, let us look at the characteristics of the younger brother's repentance.** The younger brother's repentance was required by his sin, he very great sin, as we have just emphasized. The process of repentance began, I believe, when the younger brother began to suffer the painful consequences of his sin. It was only when he ran out of money and friends, and when he began to suffer hunger pangs that the young man "came to his senses." Repentance begins, then, with seeing things straight, with seeing things as they really are. Repentance begins by seeing one's actions as sinful, first in the sight of God, and then in the sight of men. Thus, the words of the son to his father, "I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight" (v. 18, NASB). The son's repentance then led him to his father, whom he had offended, and to whom he acknowledged his guilt and sorrow. The son's repentant spirit is reflected in his deep sense of unworthiness. He does not speak of or claim any rights. He hopes only for mercy. There are no demands. The son's repentance touched the heart of his loving father, and paved the way for his restoration and rejoicing.

The Father

While the sheep-owner and the housewife accurately depicted the concern of the Pharisees for their possessions, it is the loving father of this parable who depicts the heart of the loving Heavenly Father, who longs for the return of the sinner, who willingly grants forgiveness, and who rejoices in the return of the wayward. This father gave the son what he had asked for. He allowed the son to go his own way, even when he could have prevented it (at least he could have refused to finance the venture). The heart of that father never forgot the wayward son. It was no accident that the father saw the son coming "from a long way off" (v. 20). The father ran to meet the son. He did not force the son to grovel. He did not even allow the son to finish his confession.⁶ The father quickly restored the son to his position as a son.⁷ The father commanded that there be a celebration. And when the older brother refused to participate, the father sought him out and appealed to him to join in the celebration, which he saw not only as permissible, but as necessary.⁸ The father was as gracious to the older brother as he was to the younger. How great the love of this father. How much like the Heavenly Father he is.

The Older Brother

The older brother we know to be the one in the parable who represents the Pharisees and scribes, who grumble at Jesus' reception of sinners. Notice that the older brother is out in the fields working when the younger brother returns. The father, on the other hand, is apparently waiting and watching for the younger son's return. He does not know of the younger brother's return until his attention is aroused by the sounds of celebration coming from the house. He learns from a servant that his brother has returned, that the father has received him, and that a celebration has been called. The mention of the killing of the fatted calf is the "final straw" for the older brother. He became very angry and refused to go in to celebrate with the rest, even though this celebration was called for by the father.

When the father came out to his older son, to appeal to him to join in on the celebration, the older son refused. The words of the older son are the key to understanding his desires and attitudes. Give attention to those things which this son mentioned to his father, which are the basis of his actions, his anger, and his protest:

(1) I have worked hard, but you gave me no banquet. The older brother was at work in the field when his younger brother returned home. It would seem that this older brother thought that the basis for obtaining his father's favor was his works. The father's answer suggests the opposite. As a son, the older brother possessed all that his father had. He did not need to work to win his father's approval or blessing, he need only be a son. This emphasis on works is the error of the Pharisees as well. They were "hard at work" with respect to keeping the law, as they interpreted it, supposing that this was what would win God's approval and blessing.

(2) You have given your other son a banquet, when all he did was to sin. This is, of course, the flip side of the first protest. The older brother expected to be rewarded on the basis of his works, and he would likewise have expected his younger brother to have been disowned due to his works (sins). It was not the younger brother's sins which resulted in the father's celebration, but in his repentance and return. The older brother not only failed to comprehend grace, but he resented it. There are many similarities between the prophet Jonah in the Old Testament and this older brother.

(3) I have never neglected a command of yours. Not only does this son think that his works should have merited his father's blessings, he also is so arrogant as to assume that he has never sinned. How could he say that he had never neglected a command of his father when, moments before, his father had commanded that there be a celebration, and the older brother had refused to take part? Is this not disobedience? The Pharisees, too, thought of themselves as having perfectly kept God's commandments.

The problem of the older brother, then, is self-righteousness. His self-righteousness is such that he expects, even demands God's approval and blessings. His self-righteousness is so strong that he resents the grace of God and refuses to rejoice in it. The older brother failed to see that he was a sinner, and he also failed to understand that God has provided salvation for all sinners who truly repent. What the older brother did not think he needed (repentance and salvation) he resisted and resented in others, and thus he could not, he would not share in the celebration.

The father's words to this son are significant. He reminded this older brother of the blessings which he had in staying home. He had, during those years when the younger son only had the fellowship of pagans and pigs, the fellowship of his father. The father said, "My child, you have always been with me..." (v. 32a). This, for the older brother, was not enough, for he would have preferred to have been with his friends (v. 29). The father's second statement was to remind the older son that he possessed all that was his: "... and all that is mine is yours" (v. 31b). This, too, did not seem enough to this older son.

The Differences Between the Two Sons

How different these two sons were, in some ways:

- (1) **The younger son left home; the older stayed home.**
- (2) **The younger son was prodigal (wasteful); the older son was productive (a worker).**
- (3) **The younger lost his inheritance; the older did not.**
- (4) **The younger did not any longer feel worthy of his father's blessings; the older did.**
- (5) **The younger realized his sins; the felt righteous.**
- (6) **The younger repented; the older resented.**

Similarities in the Sons

I have always thought of these two sons in terms of their differences. It was only in my study for this message that I came to realize the many similarities in the two. Consider the similarities in these two sons with me for a moment.

- (1) **Both sons wanted a celebration—a banquet.** The younger brother "partied" with the pagans in a foreign land. The older son protested to his father that he had not been given a party.
- (2) **Both sons wanted to celebrate WITHOUT THEIR FATHER.** The younger brother partied in a foreign land, with the wrong kinds of friends. The older brother refused to celebrate with his father (and younger brother), but he indicated a strong desire to have been allowed to have a banquet WITH HIS FRIENDS.
- (3) **Both sons seemed to feel that joy and celebration were not possible with their father.** The younger brother left his father, his family, and even his nation to have a good time. Joy, to this fellow, was not possible in the confining environment of his faith and his family. The younger brother, too, seemed to feel that joy was not possible with his father, and thus he wanted to celebrate with his friends, not his father. Slaving seemed to be the principle governing him in his relationship with his father, not celebrating. I understand the "fatted calf" to have been the symbol of celebration. The father's words to his older son seem to say, "The fatted calf (celebration and joy) were yours to enjoy at any time." The older brother did not think so. Neither did the Pharisees, for their early protest to Jesus had to do with His celebrating (cf. Luke 5:27ff.).
- (4) **Neither son seems to have really appreciated or loved their father, even though he loved both of them.** The younger son did not enjoy his father, so he left him. The older brother did not leave him, but did not enjoy him either. In response to the father's words to the oldest son, "My child, you have always been with me," the older son's response, though unstated, seems to have been, "So what?" or, "Big deal!."
- (5) **Both sons were slaves.** The younger son was first of all enslaved by his passions (sins), and also by a foreign employer. He returned to his father, hoping only to be received as a slave, but not dreaming that he could be a son again. The older brother was really a slave, too. Listen to his words to his father,

"But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders'" (Luke 15:29).

Because this brother thought he had to work for his father's approval and blessings, he was no less a slave than his younger brother.

(6) Both sons were materialists. The younger son loved material things—money—more than his father or than his family, because he asked for his portion at the expense and risk of his family. The younger wanted his inheritance to spend on himself. The older brother, too was a materialist. His anger toward his brother and his unwillingness to receive him back was due to the fact that he had squandered part of his father’s possessions. If the younger brother wanted money to spend, the old brother wanted it to save, and thus (it would seem) to make him feel secure. Both sons loved money; they only differed in what they wanted to do with it, and when.

(7) Both sons were sinners. The Lord had left unchallenged, at the beginning of this chapter, the assumption on the part of the Pharisees that while others might be “sinners,” they themselves were righteous. But this final parable proves this assumption to be entirely false. The sins of these two sons were very different in their outward manifestations, but inwardly they had the same roots.

You see, we tend to appraise sin (and “sinners”) by merely external standards and criteria. Jesus always looked at the heart. We quickly grant that stealing, murder, rape, and violence are wrong, especially when they are perpetrated on us. But Jesus goes on to show us in the gospels that prayer, giving, preaching, or showing charity can be sinful, when the motive of the heart is wrong. We would look at the compliant, hard-working older brother and commend him. There is no outward rebellion here. No, there is not, at least not until the celebration. But the inward attitudes and motivations of this older brother as just as evil, indeed, they are more evil, for there is much self-righteousness concealed behind his outward conformity to his father’s will and to his hard work.

(Adapted from URL: <https://bible.org/seriespage/50-lost-and-found-luke-151-32>)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

We must stress what should be obvious: Jesus was not using a heartwarming story to illustrate how a family reconciliation should occur. Rather, Jesus was telling the story of every person who has ever turned away from God and squandered the blessings of his love and grace. This observation explains the father’s startling behavior at the outset: God might not stop a person from turning to a sinful lifestyle. Even so, he is ready to take back the repentant. He may watch in silence as we depart, but he leaves the door open for our return. The older brother’s complaint (Luke 15:25–32) is not considered in this lesson so this point is not overshadowed. Jesus celebrated repentant sinners whom he had restored to fellowship with God. For the publicans and sinners, that meant admitting that what others said about them was true: they had ostracized themselves from God’s people. That meant they needed God’s mercy. They found that mercy in Jesus. The religious leaders of the day saw no relevance for Jesus in obtaining that mercy. But in fact, he was (and is) the only relevance in that regard. The fact that Jesus spoke this parable to stress the available mercy of the Father has another teaching point: we dare not think of anyone as “too far gone” to be eligible for God’s mercy. While the parable can be viewed on a personal level in illustrating God’s acceptance of repentant individuals, many students see a larger theme here: the prodigal son as representing the Gentiles. Surely the religious experts of Jesus’ day had read Isaiah 49:6, where God promised that his servant would not only “restore the tribes of Jacob” and “bring back those of Israel,” but also was to be “a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” (quoted in Acts 13:47). This speaks to how we are to view people-groups today (Matthew 28:19, 20).

Concluding Thoughts from the Echoes Commentary

The parable of the prodigal son highlights the love and concern of the heavenly Father toward all people. He longs for unbelievers to realize His compassion and become a part of His family. The principles of this parable also apply to Christians who turn from their faith for any number of reasons. The loving heavenly Father wants anyone apart from Him to repent and return.

Blinded by Selfishness - Jesus started this parable by describing a father with two sons. The younger demanded his share of the father's inheritance. It was customary for the father to leave his estate to his children, but at his death. In this case, the younger son, motivated by foolishness and greed, demanded his share immediately. The loving father allowed the rebellion, gave the son his share, and let him go. The son traveled far away from home, lived a wild extravagant lifestyle, and depleted all his funds. Around this same time, a severe famine arose in the area. This son, who at one time had everything, found himself starving and took a job feeding swine, animals unclean to Jews.

Awakened by Circumstances - While working this degrading job, the son finally saw himself and his situation clearly. He recalled the advantages of home and decided to return, specifically saying, "I'm going back to my father." He attempted to prepare a speech confessing the error of his ways, humbly asking his father to make him a hired hand since he felt unworthy to be recognized as his son.

A Father's Warm Welcome - As soon as the son came close to home, the compassionate father saw him coming and ran to his child. This act was completely out of character for the head of the household in biblical times. Fathers usually walked like royalty, never running like an athlete or a servant. Yet, this father laid aside customary practices, picked up his robes, and ran as fast as possible to meet his son. He smothered his child with kisses, and when the prodigal attempted to recite his speech, the father refused to listen. Instead, he immediately started the process of full restoration of sonship. He ordered the servants to bring a robe, ring, and shoes, and kill a calf for a celebration. The father wanted to publicly honor his child,

God's Amazing Love - Through this story Jesus wanted those listening back then, and those reading this account today, to hear God's affectionate voice: "I love you, I'm anxiously waiting for you. Turn back to Me, so I can welcome you again as My child, and celebrate your return."