

Repentance and Faith

Luke 15:11-24; Acts 2:38-39

SS Lesson for 01/11/2026

Devotional Scriptures: Eph 2:1-10

OUTLINE

LESSON BACKGROUND AND KEY VERSE

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Key Verse: Luke 15:24

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Rebellion usually starts with impatience (11-12)

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 (12)

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 (13)

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The need to find satisfaction (Amos 4:6)

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

Compassion that causes God to ensure that His elect will survive (Matt 24:22)

Compassion that allows Jesus to be a sympathetic mediator (Heb 4:15)

Forgiveness involves confession (21)

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

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Baptism into one Spirit (1 Cor 12:13)

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The Father

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CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FROM THE NIV STANDARD LESSON COMMENTARY

Lesson Background and Key Verse

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

In Luke 15, tax collectors and sinners gather to hear Jesus. Nearby, Pharisees, adherents of the Law of Moses and their traditions, murmur their disapproval (compare Mark 7:1-8). This setting underscores the meal-sharing tradition in first-century Judaism as a sign of acceptance (see Mark 2:16; 1 Corinthians 5:9-11; Galatians 2:11-14). Jesus' use of parables was a teaching method and a profound way to convey spiritual truths. These parables, often simple earthly narratives, were vehicles for deep spiritual meanings. While the exact number of parables Jesus taught is a topic of discussion, it's widely agreed that he presented at least 30 unique ones. Figurative language, in which "this" stands for "that," predominates in parables. A failure to recognize figurative language is to repeat the errors of Jesus' disciples and the Pharisees (Matthew 16:5-12; Mark 7:18; John 10:6; etc.). Acts 2 depicts Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came and filled believers, causing many to speak in foreign tongues (Acts 2:1-12). In Acts 2:14-39, Peter addresses the Jews gathered to behold this miraculous sight, sharing the good news of Jesus. Peter quotes an Old Testament prophecy stating that God's Spirit would be poured out on "all people" (2:17; Joel 2:28), and that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord" will be saved (Acts 2:21; Joel 2:32). While Peter likely did not have Gentiles in mind yet, as this was prior to his vision and encounter with Cornelius (see Acts 10), he perhaps meant at least that God's Spirit would not be limited to prophets, priests, and kings. It is possible that Luke had the Gentiles in mind while writing this account, perhaps showing that just as Jesus' followers are charged to take the gospel to Jerusalem, Samaria, and the rest of the world (1:8), so would God's Spirit be given to all those he calls and who turn to him in faith.

Key Verse: Luke 15:24

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

Major Theme Analysis

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

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 (11-12)

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 (12)

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 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 (13)

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 (14-15)

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 (16-17)

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 (18-19)

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 - An Accepting 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 (20)

Compassion that resulted in being made alive in Christ (Eph 2:4-5)

4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved.

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 not being consumed (Lam. 3:22)

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

Compassion that results from God's unfailing love (Lam. 3:32)

Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love.

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.

Compassion that causes God to ensure that His elect will survive (Matt 24:22)

If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.

Compassion that allows Jesus to be a sympathetic mediator (Heb 4:15)

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin.

Forgiveness involves confession (21)

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.

Forgiveness results in rebirth and joy (22-24)

The blessings of a Spiritual Life (Isa 61:10)

I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

The delights of God's word (Jer 15:16)

When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, O LORD God Almighty.

Desire to know and understand God's word (Acts 8:5-6)

5 Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. 6 When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said.

Joy of reconciliation (Rom 5:11)

Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Faith through the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38-39)

38 Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

39 For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

Baptism for the remission of sins (38)

Baptism that was commanded (Matt 28:19)

19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

Baptism into one Spirit (1 Cor 12:13)

13 For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free — and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

Baptism and clothed with Jesus (Gal 3:27)

27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

Baptism that results in a good conscience toward God (1 Peter 3:21)

21 and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also — not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

Promise of the Holy Spirit (39)

Promise of the Holy Spirit that confirms we are not our own (1 Cor 6:19)

19 Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own;

Promise of the Holy Spirit that is the power to obey God (Ezek 36:27)

27 And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

Promise of the Holy Spirit that provides spiritual life (Rom 8:11)

11 And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

Promise of the Holy Spirit that guides us in truth (John 16:13)

13 But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

The Tale of Two Sons (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, the 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 older 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

A man recalled the most bountiful spread of food from his childhood at our annual church homecoming. This is a tradition that, as a child, he looked forward to more than any other Sunday. Everyone dressed up and brought their finest homemade dishes and pies to share. After the service, they gathered at a long table under a shady tree for a meal, followed by an afternoon of worship. Although many faces were unfamiliar to the man during these homecoming celebrations, their ties to their little church granted them a place at a table. The two segments of today's lesson share a common element of God's love for and inclusion of those once far off. Jesus' parable in Luke 15:11-32 emphasizes the joy over the repentant return of the wayward. The prodigal son represents the tax collectors and sinners who gathered to hear Jesus speak (Luke 15:1). The elder brother (not considered in today's texts, see Luke 15:25-30) represents the attitude of Jesus' opponents, the Pharisees and teachers of the law (15:2). Acts 2:38-39 communicates a similar theme, calling for repentance, expressing what the repentant shall receive. Though initially addressing Jews, this passage (in light of the rest of Scripture) points toward the inclusion of the Gentiles to come. The message of Acts 2:38-39 is relevant to those who had departed and returned as well as to those who had always been far off until first being brought near. In churches everywhere, individuals step into a congregation for the first time, while others return after a lengthy absence. God greets each one with a welcoming embrace, and there is jubilation in heaven for every soul that repents. In the parable, God is depicted as the father, and those of us who have remained in the church are invited to join our heavenly Father in welcoming the repentant with open arms as well. When we see the prodigal return, or the unbeliever come to faith for the first time, may we be compelled by our Father's love to offer them a seat at the table and welcome them home as our brother or sister in Christ!