

Luke

The Gospel for Everyone

Study 24 | Luke 15:11-32

News and Needs

Upcoming Events:

- **Resurrection Prayer Night** - On the second Thursday of every month at 7:00 PM, we will gather at the church to pray for the needs of our church, our neighborhood, and the world. Join us to worship God and ask him as a Father for all that we need. The dates for your calendar are: **March 11**, April 8, and May 13.

Opportunities to Serve:

- **New Orleans Mission Trip** - Our churches will be sending our 5th team to partner with Redeemer Presbyterian Church of New Orleans. We will continue to engage in the rebuilding efforts post Hurricane Katrina of 2005. Construction/maintenance skills are appreciated, but not required to attend this trip. Children under 12 are not recommended to attend. Children 12-18 require a parent/guardian to attend. **April 24-May 1**

\$275 per person covers lodging, lunch and breakfast for the trip, 5 dinners eating in, 1 lunch out, and car rental. NOT INCLUDED is airfare, 2 dinners out, and personal food items. Reserving a spot requires a \$100 non-refundable deposit. Final sign up deadline and entire balance due by April 4th.

If you are interested in raising financial support to cover the cost of your trip, please first contact Brian Steadman for guidelines and help.

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“Prodigal Son”

1. Describe everything involved in the son’s progression from verses 11 through 16. What does he seem to want from life? What does he do wrong? How does it turn out for him? What are some specific connections from this part of the parable to the ways we as sinners treat God, our Father?

Try to get your group to slow down and consider the details in this story, even reading between the lines a little, perhaps. This story is so familiar to many of us that its power is diminished. To recover its power we need to imagine how different family and social norms were in the time and culture Jesus was speaking into. The story involves a father and his two sons. They would have worked their property together and this is where their family would have earned whatever financial value they had. Land like this often stayed in the same family for generations, so that neighbors would have known one another’s land and value. Children did not ordinarily move away, as we so easily do in our culture. Instead the sons would have been expected to stay and take care of their father as he aged and to work the land. An inheritance was passed on to the children only upon death. So in this milieu the younger son walks into his father’s presence one day and asks for his share of his father’s property, which is akin to saying, “Father, you are dead to me, and might as well be actually dead; furthermore I will not care for you or our property.” Think not only of how this would have devastated the father, but how much shame it would have brought on he family in the community as the father complies with the wishes and they go through the very public process of handing down deeds and rights and splitting the property in half and the brother makes a public sale of the land to someone else outside the family. Then after all of that the son takes the money and abandons his family and goes far away to waste his money in profligate living. He then sells himself into indentured servitude. Then he, a Jew, is reduced to working with unclean pigs and is so destitute that he longs to eat with them!

Note that this parable is told as an allegory of God and Mankind at large (and Israel, see Questions under 3 below). It even has some specific parallels to the captivity and Exodus of Israel under Egypt, if you include the rest of the parable. But the point is that Jesus means for us to see the Father in this parable as a reasonable stand-in for God himself, and ‘sinners’ as like unto the younger brother. What do we learn about sin itself, about ourselves as sinners who’ve treated God in this way, and about the Father from this section of the parable?

2. What has changed in the son's attitude in verses 17-19? How does the father react in 19-24? And what reasons does he give for this lavish celebration? Do you find it hard to believe that God feels that way about us when we repent? In what ways? And how can we help each other experience this kind of love from God?

It seems fairly obvious that the son has finally come to the end of his rope. It is very much a final realization of his own destitution and miserable circumstances that causes him to re-think his course of action. He thinks not of regaining his former status; instead he now aspires only to be an 'unworthy' servant in his father's household, for anything would be better than where he is now. And he comes up with a plan of repentance that just might secure the smallest and lowest place in his father's house. He will go home. And that is the most important step for him. When he gets there he will confess his sin before God and to his father; he will acknowledge his lack of worth and fling himself on his father's mercy; he will beg to be a servant.

Dignified patriarchs in the Ancient Near East do not run. Ever. And they don't often allow themselves to be publicly shamed if they can help it. But in this story the father sees the son far away, but coming home. His heart is filled with compassion for his son, and he runs. It has been said that this parable might be better named "The Parable of the Running Father," for this scene is the most shocking in the story so far. Tim Keller recently published a book called *The Prodigal God* in which he argues that the father's own prodigality (liberality) of mercy is the focus of this passage more than the sinful prodigality of the son. The father doesn't even let his son finish his pre-written speech. He interrupts him and orders the greatest honors for his son and declares a feast. His reasoning, "We *must* celebrate, because of resurrection. My son was dead to me (and me to him) but now he is alive again and we are reconciled! He was lost but now is found. There is nothing to do but celebrate."

How do you find it hard to believe that this is more than a neat story? That this is an accurate representation of how God feels toward you? Of how he will always treat you? Why is this so hard to believe and feel? How would you live differently if you really felt deep in your bones that this was true of God and you? How can we practically help one another to believe such about God and ourselves?

3. Why does the parable go on after verse 24? What's Jesus' intent in including this section? What's the opposite danger from prodigality, and how does the older brother live it out? How do we sometimes fall into this attitude and how does it show itself in our lives? What's the antidote?

Now here's the surprising thing. This parable is only 2/3 of the way over. There's an entirely different theme that Jesus is going to finish with, making this theme in many ways the focus--the last impression for his listeners. The older brother is angry at the father for the way he treats the younger brother. Dig into his attitude a bit: he won't participate in the feast and stands outside missing out on the joy; he calls his brother "this son of yours," etc. And before you demonize him, think about the real injustice he had received on behalf of his brother's foolishness. His property had been diminished in half and all further production from it had ceased the day it was sold. He alone had been working with and caring for his father. He had lived day after day with the public shame put on his family because of his brother. He is a good son. He never disobeys. He works hard and dutifully year after year. So we might understand when he's jealous that his prodigal brother gets feast and celebration the likes of which he's never seen or come close to receiving himself. But the key is that he 1) doesn't understand his father, 2) refuses to follow his father's lead by celebrating. The parable ends in an open-ended manner: we do not know if he decides to join the feast or not. And this is Jesus' point in concluding this way. He is speaking to the Pharisees who want to know why Jesus feasts with tax collectors and sinners. They sit on the sideline feeling dutiful and looking down on those who've been profligate. They do not think 'sinners' deserve such celebration or welcome from God. If anything they are waiting dutifully, patiently, and joylessly for their inheritance way down the road. And it's not right that someone claiming to be the Messiah would spend the kingdom and prodigal 'sons' of Israel and Gentiles such as the people whose presence he seems to enjoy. Jesus is saying that sinfulness is not the only danger in life that threatens to remove you from God's presence; the other is a quiet, dutiful, but ultimately ungenerous *self-righteousness* and lack of gratitude and generosity. The older brother didn't want the younger son to share in the feast because he didn't think he deserved it as much as him. What are ways that we do this, too? How do we think God owes us? What do you sometimes resent giving up for God? What do you get angry that others receive when you don't? When do you refuse to celebrate another's good blessings? Who will you not welcome to God's feast and why? The parable ends with an invitation to the older son, by extension to the Pharisees? What will they do? What will we do? The antidote to self-righteousness is celebration of others and God's mercy, according to this parable. A comic ending is for the older brother to walk into the feast and reconcile with his younger sibling. And the motivation for doing so--the reason--is *resurrection*. The father says that the

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son was dead and is now alive. So it's "fitting" to celebrate. Will we see resurrection in this world because of God's mercy? And will we join the feast?

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