

the Parable of the Prodigal Son



Luke 15:11–32

The Father Who Had Two Sons A Theological Essay on the Parable of the Prodigal Son

Setting the Scene

Jesus tells this story as the third movement in a single chapter of loss and recovery. A man has two sons. The younger asks for his share of the estate while his father is still living—an insult that, in the honor culture of first-century Palestine, amounted to wishing the father dead. The father grants the request. The younger son liquidates what he has received, travels to a “far country,” and wastes it in reckless living. Famine follows. He hires himself out to feed pigs, an image of utter degradation for a Jewish hearer. Hunger drives him to “come to himself.” He rehearses a speech of repentance and sets out for home.

The father sees him while he is still far off, runs, embraces, and kisses him. Before the son can finish his prepared confession, the father clothes him with the best robe, a ring, and sandals, and orders the fattened calf killed. Celebration begins. The older son, coming in from the field, hears music, learns the reason, and refuses to enter. The father comes out and entreats him. The older son answers with resentment: years of service, no goat for his friends, and now a feast for “this son of yours” who has wasted the property with prostitutes. The father replies: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. **It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.**”

The parable ends there. The older brother’s decision is left open.

Context

Luke 15 begins with a complaint, not a question. Tax collectors and “sinners” draw near to hear Jesus. Pharisees and scribes mutter: “This man receives sinners and eats with them” (**Luke 15:1–2**). Table fellowship was a public claim about belonging. Jesus does not deny the charge. He answers it with three parables unique to Luke: a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son.

The first two stories emphasize search. A shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep; a woman lights a lamp and sweeps until she finds one coin. Heaven’s joy over one repentant sinner is greater than over ninety-nine who “need no repentance.” The third parable shifts the image. The father does not go into the far country; he waits, watches, and runs when the son appears on the horizon. Search and welcome belong together. The older son stands where the Pharisees stand: near the house, yet outside the feast.

The story is therefore not only a portrait of individual conversion. It is Jesus’ defense of his mission and a revelation of the Father’s heart. The younger son images those whom the religious establishment counted lost. The older son images those who stayed close to the house yet measured belonging by merit. **The father images God.**

Observations

The younger son’s fall is both moral and relational. He does not merely spend money; he severs himself from the father’s house. “Give me the share that is coming to me” treats inheritance as a right rather than a gift. The far country is geography and theology at once: distance from the source of life. Pig-feeding and hunger expose the lie that autonomy satisfies. “He came to himself” is not yet full conversion; it is the first honest inventory of his condition. His planned speech still tries to negotiate a hired-servant status. He has not yet imagined restoration as sonship.

The father’s response precedes and exceeds the confession. He sees, feels compassion, runs—an undignified act for an elder patriarch—and embraces the son before the speech is finished. The robe, ring, and sandals restore status, authority, and belonging. The fattened calf is not a modest meal; it is public joy. The refrain “dead and alive, lost and found” names resurrection language inside a family story. Grace does not wait for a completed moral résumé.

The older son is also lost, though he never left. He speaks of “serving” and “never disobeying,” as if sonship were wage labor. He will not say “my brother”; he says “this son of yours.” He stays in the field of duty and refuses the house of joy. The father goes out to him as well. The same compassion that ran toward the younger son now pleads with the older. The estate is already his: “all that is mine is yours.” What he lacks is the father’s gladness.

The parable holds two prodigals. One wastes the father’s goods in a distant country. The other wastes the father’s heart at home. Both need the same mercy. Only one has yet received it in the story as we have it.

Joy is not optional. “It was fitting to celebrate.” Heaven’s economy is not a ledger of **comparative worth**. Recovery of the dead is reason enough for music.

Questions

The parable leaves the hearer standing in the yard with the older son.

- **Will those who have kept the rules enter the feast when the unworthy come home?**
- Is repentance mainly a speech we compose, or a turning that the Father interrupts with an embrace?
- What does it mean that the father divides the property *before* the younger son leaves, and still calls him “my son” when he returns empty?
- **Can a person live in the father’s house and still be a stranger to the father’s joy?**
- If “everything I have is yours,” why does the older son feel poor?
- Does the church more often resemble the running father, the starving younger son, or the angry older brother?
- **The story ends without the older son’s answer. What would it cost him to go in?**

These questions are not decorations. They are the point at which the parable becomes address rather than illustration.

