

The Prodigal Sons

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[0 : 0 0] So this has often been called the greatest of all the parables. It's definitely the most famous of all the parables that Jesus ever gave, the parable of the prodigal son, as it's typically titled. It is a story. Jesus gave us stories. And this is a short story that's fundamentally about grace and the radical nature of God's grace, the rootedness of God's grace. And we've been working our way this summer through parables, and we've been looking at kingdom parables. So parables where Jesus very specifically says the kingdom of God or heaven is like this. We've done eight of them, seven of them are in Matthew 13. This is not one of them. Jesus doesn't say the kingdom of heaven is like this. But we're going to finish our series today with this most famous of all parables.

And it is a kingdom parable. All the parables are kingdom parables, and it really wraps everything together. It brings all the kingdom parables together. Because really the one thing that's most important to say about the kingdom of God is the kingdom of God is the power of God through Jesus Christ to bring sinners home and to give them a feast. And that's what we read about here.

And you can look at this parable and you can learn, you know, if you could reduce it all down to just one sentence. What's the Bible about? What's Christianity about? Do you really understand the Christian message? And it's that humans are sinners and God gives grace. And sin is just that we ran away from home and God wants to bring us home again. That's sin, that's grace.

That's the message of Christianity. And it's all right here in this parable. So you might be aware if you read widely maybe in the Christian tradition as of late that there has been so much work done on this parable over the last 10, 15, 20 years. Lots of books published about it. And so we've got insights here that we've recovered from the past. And so all I want to do this morning is really give you what other people have come to understand about this parable that I've received from other people this morning. And what that is is that this is a parable with two acts, a story with two big acts. One is Act One, the prodigal son, the younger brother, Act Two, the elder brother. And you've got to look at both really to understand the whole parable.

And one thing to say is that this really is about all of us, about every single person in this room. It doesn't matter if you're a Christian today or not, no matter the tradition you come from, the background, the culture, the religious experiences you've had or not, every single person can find themselves in this parable. And it is about two men, two sons, two boys.

[2 : 49] But those are just symbols. Every man, every woman, it's for all of us. And so just ask yourself this morning, who am I? Who am I as we come to read this? And so let's see three things. One, who needs grace? Secondly, what grace is? And then finally, the whole story of grace, very briefly at the end. So first, who needs God's grace? Jesus introduces this parable, verse 11, Douglas read for us. And he says at the very beginning, verse 11, a man had two sons. So there are three characters, a father, an older son, and a younger son. And people have pointed out very regularly that this parable has been misnamed for a long time. We often call it the parable of the prodigal son, but at least it's got to be called the parable of the prodigal sons. And really, if you're thinking about it, I think as Jesus was teaching it, it should have been called the parable of the prodigal elder brother or the parable of the elder brother, not the prodigal son. And the reason for that is that the audience, you've got to look at the audience. We've got to look at the audience to really understand what Jesus is saying here. It's so important. And so if you have a Bible, you can look back with me at the very beginning of chapter 15 at verse one and two, which is where we learn who he's talking to, which explains everything. And in verse one, we learn that Jesus was standing in a crowd and the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to him. Now Jesus always attracted tax collectors and sinners. And these are people who are what we might call traditional sinners, typical sinners, the kind of sinners that you think about when you think about sinners, right? People who have experienced scandal in their lives, people who are very public sinners, who have been publicly canceled, perhaps in our modern world for something. This is the type of person that it's the bad people. And tax collectors are people who have committed essentially treason against their own people by working for the Romans against the Jewish people. And sinners, this is a euphemism, typically for those who have experienced public scandal of some kind.

Typically, it's a word that stands for those who are involved in sexual scandal in the first century, but it could be anything, addicts, the greedy, reckless with your money, gambling, sexually scandalous, drunk in public, criminals, prisoners, traditional sinners. That's what's represented here. And then in verse two, it says, as people who have experienced public sin came near to Jesus and drew near to him, as was always the case in his public ministry, verse two says, and the Pharisees, the scribes, they grumbled about it. And so under their breath, the word they're muttered means passive aggressive whispering amongst the crowd of the religious elite there. And they're angry that Jesus not only welcomes tax collectors and sinners, but he sits down to eat with them at the dinner table all throughout his ministry, which was a big deal in the first century. And so Jesus responds. Well, who is he responding to? He's not really responding to the tax collectors and sinners who are drawing near to him. No, he's responding to the Pharisees and scribes who grumble and mutter under their breath, angry about the fact that Jesus would hang out with these public sinners. And so it says, and so Jesus told them parables. Now, in Luke 15, there are three parables, not one, and all of them are building on top of each other.

And you see what he says down in verse three, he told them a parable. Who's the them? It's the Pharisees. And then he asked this, what man of you having a hundred sheep if you lose one would not race out of your home into the far country to get that one sheep back?

Now, who is he talking to? He's talking to the Pharisees, the elders of the people, the religious, the good people, the decent people, the respectable people, the people who know that they are better than the tax collectors and the sinners all around them. That's who he's talking to. And he's saying, which one of you, if you had a hundred sheep would not go out into the far country to get that one and bring it home again? So he's asking them to think about that as leaders, would you go rescue your lost sheep? Parable two, would you flip your house over to get that one coin that you had lost out of the hundred coins, that one? Would you flip your house upside down to go and find it?

And so he's talking directly to the religious people, the good people, the decent people, the moral people. And so what we have here is a story, a play with two acts. And in the first act, it's the prodigal son, because the tax collectors and the sinners, public sinners, are all around Jesus represented in the prodigal son. And then we have second act, the elder brother represented by these Pharisees, these religious elite, these morally upright, good, respectable citizens.

[7 : 50] And he's talking to both of them in two acts. But who is he particularly talking to? He's talking to the Pharisees. He's talking to the elder brothers. He's talking to the religious moralists that are standing all around him. He's simply talking to anybody here today who deep down at the depth of their soul thinks, I'm basically a good person. I'm a decent human being, you know.

I'm not one of the bad people. I'm one of the good people. I've basically lived a moral life. And that's the object of this parable, most acutely, most importantly. And this is Jesus's genius here, his brilliance, as he's telling us, there are multiple ways to be alienated from God.

You know, you can be a prodigal, you can be alienated from God on the outside, very visibly, but you can be just as far from God, just as alienated from God on the inside, that you can hide from God actually by being a good person, by being basically good. There's two different ways to hide from God. And so the main point of the parable is that it's actually a warning to the reputable, not to the prodigal. All right, what is grace? Let's think about these two acts and think, okay, well, what is this grace that Jesus offers here? In the first act, the act of the prodigal son, the younger brother, we've got a series all throughout. Every single scene is a scandal of some kind. And the first is in verse 12. It's the scandalous request that the younger son makes. And so the younger son in verse 12 comes to his dad and says, give me the share of the property that it's coming to me. In this culture, if you have two sons, when the father dies, the elder son would receive two thirds of the inheritance, the younger son would receive one third. So the younger son comes here and says, I want my third.

And what he's essentially saying to his father is, Dad, I wish you were dead. I'm ready for you to die. I want my money. This is a huge scandal in the first century.

And in the first century, the expectation upon a request like this is that actually the father would go so far maybe as to do violence against his son for this. So the son could be arrested and punished for this, for a statement like this. And he comes and he is essentially saying, I hate you and I want you dead. And the expectation is that this dad, this father is going to disown a son and one of the real shocks, maybe the bigger scandal than that is in verse 12 that the father actually does it. So the father actually gives him what he asked for. And in the first century, to liquidate and give your son a third of the inheritance, you don't go down to the bank of Scotland and take your son's trust fund that you started when he was a baby. There are no trust funds. There is no cash. And so to do this, what he has to do is he has to liquidate. He's got to go sell land. He's got to go sell cattle. He's got to go get rid of his sheep. He's got to lose his stuff to give a third away. And the father does it. He liquidates. He gives it away and he sends him.

[11 : 11] And one of the things that comes to mind here, I think, is that from the very beginning of human history, we sons and daughters have been coming to God and saying, I wish you were dead. I don't want you to be my master. I don't want you to be in charge of my life. I want the goods and the benefits that you offer to me in this life, the stuff. I'll take my third and you can go and die.

And from the very beginning, that's the message of humanity against God that sin is basically just telling God, I wish you were dead. I wish you weren't my master. I wish you weren't my father. And taking the stuff, the benefits that he's given us and running away with it.

And it's been pointed out again and again and again since Genesis chapter three, four, that God, we shake our fists at God and God keeps just giving us great stuff.

Think about your life and you ask, what do you have in your life this morning that you actually made? Have you put all the atoms together that can get the oxygen into your lungs, that you're breathing today? Who is it that provides that? We shake our fists and say, I don't want you to be my father. I don't want you to be my master. And God just says, I will give you your share. It's common grace. We begin to see that God's grace is his unending kindness and patience with us, even when we say, I wish you weren't alive. I wish you weren't my master.

And so the father, he gives it away, he sends a son and then act one, seen to is the scandal of the pigs, as it has been called. So this son, this prodigal son, he goes and he lives recklessly. That's the word prodigal. We learn in verse 13, he does reckless spending, he spends everything and then he becomes homeless. And so he's publicly shamed and then we learn all the way down in verse 30 that the elder brother says, your son traded the property you gave him, the money you gave him for prostitutes. And so he's committed all sorts of public sins and here he is homeless. And the outcome is that he has started working in a pigsty and he's living in the pigsty in the muck of the pigs. And it's even worse than that because in the first century, who's the primary audience, the Pharisees? And boy, they know the Old Testament, they know the Levitical law. And the Levitical law, there's nothing worse than being less than pigs. The most unclean of all animals, that your contact with a pig means you cannot be near God's people or the temple. And so they see him as morally bankrupt, spiritually bankrupt, ceremonially bankrupt, completely outside the people of God in every way. He is a, he's very literally to them, a filthy sinner, dirty inside and outside. He's a beast in their minds as they hear this parable.

[14 : 14] And then that leads to the final scene of Act 1, the scandal of grace, where in verses 17 to 24, it says that he comes to himself, he's pricked in his heart and he realizes, he says, I'm a sinner.

And I know what I deserve. He says that very explicitly. And he says, I just wish I could go home and become like one of my father's farm hands, a hired servant and just work day in and day out.

And at least then I could be near the home, near my father once more. And so this is what he plans to do. Now the rabbis in the first century, through their oral tradition, it would later be written down in a book called the Mishnah or a oral law that was eventually written. They taught that if you had violated the community standards to this degree, you deserve to be completely disowned forever. But in unusual circumstances of mercy, it was never going to be sufficient that you would simply come home and ask for forgiveness. Instead, if you wanted to come home, you were going to have to make it just, make it right, restitution. And so there were different amounts of years that you needed to work off your debts. And so that's what he has in his mind. I will come home and maybe, maybe, maybe if I give myself completely to serving my dad as a slave, as a hired hand, one day he could love me again. That's what he thinks. And the Pharisees, of course, when they hear that, they're like, they're nodding. Yes, exactly. That is exactly what needs to happen here.

And he thinks he'll pay it off. And so what happens, the scandal is in verse 20, his dad sees him on the horizon. And another scandal in the first century, he pulls his robe up so he can run. No patriarch would ever do that. And he runs out to the horizon as he sees his son.

And against every social standard, he skips about like a calf running from its stall at last. And he, it says in the Greek that he embraces, that's the English word, it's that he fell upon him.

[16 : 26] He fell upon his son. And he kissed him. He kissed him. And he said, no, you know, and then the son says, well, let me do what I plan to do. He says, Dad, I'm not worthy.

If only you would make me a hired servant. And his father interrupts him and says, turns to his own servant and says, go and get the best robe. What's the best robe in the house?

What's the best robe in the house? It's dad's robe. It's the father's robe. And then he says, go and get the ring. What's the ring? The ring is verse 22, the signet ring. It's the family seal. It's what you used in the first century to sign a contract. You would put your ring down on papers, family seal with wax. And then he says, go and get him shoes. Because in Ezekiel, we're told by God, one day I will cover your bare feet. And then he says, now go and kill the fatten calf, because the fatten calf is the most expensive animal on the property. And it's a calf you save for the holy pilgrimage festivals every year. And he throws him an utter feast. Now listen, what do we learn? No matter today, no matter what you've believed in in your past, no matter how far you've run away from God, and we all have, no matter what you've done, no matter what you've thought about, no matter the sins of your life past and present, no matter how scandalous it has been, no matter how much shame you have brought upon yourself and your family, no matter how much you've run, no matter how much you've hated God, there is a real cut is a God of mercy who wants you to come home today. He wants you to come home and he wants to welcome you home and when you do come home, he will throw his best robe upon you and he will throw a feast for you. Our God is a God who welcomes sinners home and throws a feast for them.

And no matter how big your sins are in your past, you cannot come to God today and work it off. You can't come before him and say, if you'll hire me, Lord, maybe I can repay my debt. You can't come and do that. And instead, you never earn your status as a son or daughter. It is something never accomplished, only received.

It's a gift. And you need to know today, perhaps that no matter what the world says about you, no matter what you say about you, God, the Father of mercy says, you are my son, you are my daughter when you come home and he will put his ring around your finger and he will throw a feast for you.

[19 : 21] Let me ask you, if you are a prodigal son or daughter today, do you think that God the Father sent his only begotten Son to die on the cross for you in order that for the rest of your life he could look at you with a frowny face? No, he, look, he's God the Father who sent his only begotten Son to bring you home. He smiles when he looks at you. Now, that's Act 1. Every prodigal is welcome to come home to the Lord today. But the point of the parable briefly is Act 2. And in Act 2, the main audience is the Pharisees, the religious, the moralist, the good people in this room who have been good their whole lives and decent people and look down on the bad people. And that's the main point. And you know, these guys that were listening to this would not have been moved to, by the grace of the Lord, no, they would have been mad.

They would have been mad, firing hot, angry at hearing how this dad welcomed this boy home. And the story would have ended so well at verse 22. It would have been great to stop right there, but that's not where Jesus stops. And so very quickly, the scandal of the older brother, in verse 28, he calls his father out of the feast because he's so enraged, very public embarrassment in the first century during the festival seasons to call the patriarch of the family out of the festival because of anger within the family. It's an honor and shame culture.

And that's a big deal. And so that's what happens. And then when he's asked, why are you so angry, my son? He's angry because he knows that he's going to lose 22% more property on this day.

Why? Because the younger son has already taken a third of the stuff and spent it. And now he's been welcomed back and he's going to get another third. And if you do the math, that's actually 22% loss. I had to have help on that. He's upset about that. And the first thing we learned about this elder brother, the moralist, the religious, the good person who's always been there and always been faithful to dad is that he actually only cares about the benefits of being a son of the father, not the relationship. He doesn't care at all about the relationship. He's mad because he is about to lose more stuff. In verse 28, his dad says, hey, come to the feast.

It says in fact, his dad entreats him. The father begs him, come son, I want you here too to the feast. And you learn all the more because he responds. He says, well, this son of yours, look at what he's done. He won't call his dad father and he won't call his brother brother.

[22 : 15] And so you see all the more he could care less about the relationships. He doesn't care about that at all. Instead, in verse 29, we learned that what he thinks about himself. He says, I've been serving you for years and I've never gotten a party like this. He says, in other words, he believes that his relationship with his dad, his father is entirely transactional.

So he means I'm a respectable, morally upright citizen of this household. I have rights. I should be getting what I deserve, what I'm owed. And yet here you are today giving away more of my property, the fattened calf to this son of yours. And what he's saying is that I have achieved my status before you. And so I want my rights. I want what I deserve. I want you to give what's coming to me. And then finally in verse 30, we learn all the more that he wants benefits, not the father. Now, who is the elder brother? The elder brother is anybody today who deep down in your soul. Maybe this is your has been you. You say, we're all prodigals in some way.

In some way. Maybe you say, I'm a good person, you know, I'm sure I've made mistakes. Haven't we all made mistakes, right? But I'm decent. I'm religiously committed. I'm respectable.

I do the right thing most of the time and I am not like them. And Jesus is saying, I've got you where I want you. That is exactly the elder brother at the deep parts of the soul. And what we learn here is that you can be prodigal by your outward behavior.

You can be publicly prodigal. You can be a public center. And you can be just as prodigal invisibly by your inward behavior. And what we learn here is that you can be alienated from God by your very visible sins. And you can be just as alienated from God by your goodness. By hiding from the Father, from God himself, by being a good person. And there's a wonderful little novel by Flannery O'Connor, one of the great writers of the 20th century. She wrote a book called Wise Blood.

[24 : 24] And the main character in Wise Blood is a guy named Hazel Notes. And he's just, she describes him like this. She says, there was a deep black, wordless conviction in Hazel that the way to always avoid Jesus was just to avoid sin. Hazel knew, I can avoid ever being told, I need Jesus if I just hide in my goodness, in my moralism, in my respectability, in my religion.

And one writer puts it like this, a person can easily avoid the Savior by being good. This is called Salvation by Morality. If like the elder brother, you believe that God ought to help you and bless you because you have worked so hard to obey him and be a good person throughout your life, Jesus may be your helper, he may be your inspiration, he may be your example, but he is not your Savior. And at the very end of the parable, we say, okay, how does this thing end? And there is no ending. It just stops, if you notice. And I think the reason for that is because Jesus is talking to the religious moralists right in front of them, and he's leaving it open. He's asking them, will you come to the feast? And whether you're a prodigal son or daughter on the outside or a prodigal son or daughter today on the inside, every single one of us here, my friends, Jesus is leaving the ending open just to say, will you come home to the feast and be lavished by the Father?

Let's close with this, the whole story of grace, just a couple minutes. We learn here that the condition for coming home is just simply saying, I'm unworthy, I'm a sinner, I need to be rescued.

But there's also one more thing here, and that's this, some theologians, some biblical commentators over the past couple centuries have come to the prodigal son story and said, oh, what do we learn here? We learn that God will forgive you, and there's no need for this talk about the cross.

You know, there's no need for crucifixion, there's no need for substitutionary atonement, there's no need for justice to be served in the death of the Son of God, nothing like that. You see, the prodigal son is the ultimate pinnacle of God's grace, and what does it say? It just simply says, just come home, and God will lavish you with forgiveness and feasting. There's no need to talk about the cross of Christ, and what I want to say today is we learn here that you come home by saying, I'm unworthy, I've run from God, I've told God I hate you even, and you just say, I just want to come home, but then what else? And the second thing is it's implicit in the parable.

[27 : 07] The myths by those theologians, by those biblical commentators is not reading through the parable, all the way in, and just think about it, it only takes a moment to figure it out. Remember verse 1 and 2 of Luke 15, he spoke to the Pharisees as the tax collectors and sinners gathered near to him, and what did he say? Who among you, Pharisees, religious moralists, prodigals and art, who among you, if you lost one of your sheep, would not run into the far country and bring him home again? And then he said, who among you, audience, if you lost one coin, would not flip your house upside down to find the one coin you had lost? But he doesn't say it a third time in the third parable, instead it's implicit. You see, he's saying in the third parable, now as I say this, he's saying, who among you would not go and do what? If your little brother squandered his father's wealth, ran into the far country and was completely lost, who among you elder brothers would not go into the far country and bring your brother home?

That's the question that's implicit in the parable. What should, in other words, let's say it like this, what should a true and better elder brother have done in this story? You know, if you had a real elder brother, a true elder brother, one who loved you to the bottom, what would he have done?

He would have said, Father, stay here. I'm going to go into the far country and get my brother out of that pig's tie and bring him home. And if that costs me my life, so be it, because I love my brother and I'm going to bring him home. Look, you see what Jesus is saying, to come home, you just say I'm unworthy, but to come home, you need a better elder brother than the one we read about here. You need a true elder brother, one who would leave his father's home above, so free, so infinite that grace, and give himself, give away everything but his love for Adam's helpless race. You need an elder brother that would run to the far country to bring his brothers and sisters home again.

And in Jesus Christ, Hebrews 11, 2 says to you that Jesus was not and is not ashamed to call you today, brother and sister. In Jesus Christ, you've got a better elder brother. Jesus wants to feast with you. Will you come home with him today? Let us pray. Father, we thank you for the parables and we ask, Lord, that we would come home, help us, bring us home, Lord. We thank you, Jesus, that you are the brother who went to the far country. You are the brother who got into the pigsty. You are the brother who gave himself totally at the cross to bring brothers and sisters home. And so I just pray today for the prodigal sons and daughters in this room. There are folks here today, Lord, you know their hearts. I've heard some of their stories, Lord. You know us all that there is shame in our lives, secret sins, misdeeds dark, public sin, whatever it may be. And we, maybe there's somebody today that just wants to come home and be lavished in mercy. And so I just pray for that person and ask, Lord, that you would bring them home today. They would come to you, unworthy, but ready to receive the gift of sonship and daughtership. Lord, I pray for prodigal centers on the inside, us that are elder brothers and elder sisters that struggle with just being better than everybody and being more or less, Lord. We are so prone to religion in your religion, either direction.

So we just ask, Lord, for all of us that we would experience the feast today, the feast of mercy, the feast of grace, all of us prodigal, all of us unworthy. So I just ask, Father, touch somebody's heart, bring them home today, we pray. In Jesus' name, amen.