

March 7, 2010 by Steve Brandon



## A Fresh Look at a Well-Known Parable

### Luke 15:11-32

1. Is Your God Like This?
2. Are You a Younger Brother?
3. Are You an Older Brother?

I want to take us into the parable of the Prodigal Son. It's a well-known parable. But, in recent weeks, I have been shown some things in this passage that have stirred my heart afresh in the wonders of God's grace and the depth of my own sin. I've seen a short movie clip that depicted the story of the Prodigal Son that stirred my heart to think about what God is really like. [\[1\]](#) I also read a book by Tim Keller entitled, "The Prodigal God," which pierced my heart as well, especially regarding my own sin.

And so, my message this morning is because I have a burden to share with you the things that I am learning. May the Lord give us a fresh look at this well-known parable.

Luke 15:11-32

And He said, "A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.

But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."' So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate.

Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"

There are three characters in this parable: the father, the younger son, and the older son. The father is a representation of God. The sons are representations of sinners, like you and me. By way of outline, I want to ask three questions of you, one question per character.

First of all, ...

#### 1. Is Your God Like This?

When we look at the father in this parable, there are several things that are perplexing about his actions. In terms of human experience, we might even call the father a bit foolish. For instance, when the younger son asked for the inheritance, the father gave it to him. Had the father asked around for advice from his friends, I don't believe that anyone would have given the father the counsel to give the inheritance to his son.

First of all, such a request--to have the inheritance now--would have come at a great insult to his father. By making this request, the son was, in effect, saying that he wished his father to be dead. Second, the son's behavior could have been predicted. What we know about the son and his sinful desires was certainly evident in him before he asked for the inheritance. Certainly, there were some seeds in his behavior that would have indicated what the younger son would do with the money. Verse 13 says that "*not many days later*, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living." It took only a few days before he left with everything. I would suspect that all who were around the son saw his laziness and saw his desire to get gain without

working for it. Nobody was surprised that the younger son did what he did.

And yet, knowing all of this, the father still gave his wealth to this wasteful son. The father had worked hard to build his estate, and then he gave it away, only to be wasted. What wealthy man would give away a large portion of his wealth to be wasted in sinful living?

When Jesus chose to depict God, he depicted Him in this way: letting this sinful son insult him, letting this sinful son waste his hard-earned resources. What strange behavior! Yet, such is the picture of God that Jesus gives us. And I would say that God does this with people all the time. There are many people in this world of ours that insult God. And yet, God shines his grace and favor upon them.

Jesus said that God "causes His Sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45). This is often called by theologians, "Common Grace." That is, God's kindness, even upon those who rebel against Him. Psalm 145:9 says, "The LORD is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works." And even when people rebel against the Lord, His kindness still comes. When Paul spoke with the idolaters in Lystra, he said it this way, "In the generations gone by [God] permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:16-17). How many people do you know who are rebelling against the LORD, and enjoying themselves? God in His mercy is satisfying their hearts with food and gladness.

Such is the case with the younger son. He went away. The father let him go away, just like God often does. See, God isn't one to restrain our hearts and curtail every form of wickedness that our heart desires. Rather, He is often like the father in the story, letting people insult him and spend their lives in the lusts and pleasures of their hearts even at great cost to Himself.

When we look at how God is represented in this parable, we might even think God to be a bit foolish in allowing such nonsense to take place in this world. Rare is the father who would allow his sinful son to waste away his wealth like this. But, such is God.

The Bible says that the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). But, God doesn't always give us what our sins deserve. Now, to be sure, if we don't repent of our sins and trust in Christ, we will spend our eternity in eternal death. But, He doesn't give us death right away. Instead, He is merciful and withholds His wrath from us.

The greatest illustration of this is with Adam and Eve. The promise was made, "In the day that you eat from [the tree] you will surely die" (Gen. 2:17). By God's grace, Adam and Eve continued to live after they ate of the fruit. The reason they were allowed to live was because of God's mercy. We are alive today because of God's mercy. His grace covers creation. Do you see it? Is your God like this? Or, is your God like yourself, wise and careful about wasting your mercy. Do you dispense kindness to others freely? Or, are you wiser than that? Do you say, "He doesn't deserve my mercy?" Imagine that you encounter someone who has wronged you in a great way. Perhaps you see them in a store or at a family gathering. Do you return their hatred toward you with anger? Or, do you extend grace to them? Are you "lavish" in your mercy?

Is Your God Like This? Or, is your God like us, who wouldn't possibly give away half of our wealth to be squandered like this. Why is God like this? Hear it fresh: He is very wasteful in His mercy toward us.

This story is often called the story of the prodigal son. The word, "prodigal," simply means, "wasteful" or "lavish" or even "recklessly spendthrift." To be sure, such a word describes the son. But, this story is every bit about the prodigal God as well. This is what God is in His mercy. From our perspective, God wastes it. He wastes it when he gave the son his inheritance. He also lavishes it when he receives the son back into his home. Look at verse 20, ...

Luke 15:20

So [the younger son] got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

Without a word from his son, the father pours out his mercy upon him. He doesn't wait for the son to say anything to him. He doesn't wait for the son to confess his sins. Merely returning home was sufficient for the father to lavish his mercy upon his son with embraces and kisses.

Note that this is the same son who had insulted his father. This is the same one who had spent all of his father's money. And yet, without a word, compassion was lavished upon his son. And when the son attempts to confess his sin, it's almost as if the father doesn't even want to hear it. His return home was enough. Verse 21, ...

Luke 15:21-24

The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found." And they began to celebrate.

This is lavish grace! He wasn't brought back into the house, only to be a servant. No, he was fully restored as the lost son! And the father threw an expensive party for the lost son! He had great joy that his son had returned home! Let us not lose this point. This is the climax of the other two stories that Jesus told on this same occasion.

When the lost sheep was found, the shepherd "calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!'" (verse 6). When the woman found the lost coin, "she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!'" (verse 9). And after both of those expressions, Jesus said, "I tell you that in the same

way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (verse 7). "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (verse 10). The same takes place in our parable, "They began to celebrate" (verse 24)!

And now, we see God's prodigal mercy in action, sparing no expense to give a lavish party and sharing his joy with all around him! And we are called to rejoice with him!

Is Your God Like This? Is He abundantly ready to give mercy? Is He lavish in His grace? Does He abound in lovingkindness? I believe that it's the mercy of God that brings the son home. Had the son known that the father was hard and vengeful, I doubt that he would ever have returned.

Or, is your God so smothered in wrath, that you never see His mercy? This parable is all about the mercy of God, even to those who insult God and spend their lives in their own selfish pleasures. God is merciful to let them go their own way, rather than destroying them. God is merciful to take them back in. Oh, church family, may we think rightly about our God. He wastes His mercy! Oh, may such thoughts of God fill our hearts and minds and cause us to rejoice in Him! Because there are many who don't get it, may God give us eyes to see His mercy!

My next question ...

2. Are You a Younger Brother?

When we think about this parable, this is the one we often focus upon, and rightly so. He is the one who shows off the mercy of God. He gathers together everything that his father had given to him (verse 13), travels to a distant country (verse 13), and squanders his estate with "loose living" (verse 13). Only when everything was gone and he had nowhere else to turn did he think about returning to His father. Jesus paints his conditions about as bad as you can paint them.

Rather than being rich, he was living in poverty (verse 14). Rather than being waited upon, he was hired out to be a servant. Rather than mixing with the Jews, the chosen people, he was serving foreigners (verse 15). And lowest of all, he was herding pigs (verse 15). To a Jew, it seemingly can't get any lower than this. Pigs were one of the unclean animals forbidden to eat, much less care for. When this younger brother found himself longing to eat pig slop, he reached rock bottom (verse 17). (I have seen pig slop on my uncle's farm, but have never tasted the stuff—it's too repulsive).

But, by God's mercy, it's there in the pig sty that the younger son "came to his senses" (verse 17). In other words, he began thinking rightly about his life. He said, starting in verse 17, ...

Luke 15:17-20

How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men." So he got up and came to his father.

That's repentance. He saw his sin. He saw his lost estate. He knew that he didn't deserve anything from his father. He was willing to come back as a servant to his father. And he came back. In God's incredible mercy, the father accepted him back, not as a servant, but fully restored as a son!

This is the story of some of you. I've heard your testimonies. I've heard how you have strayed. I've heard how you have sinned. I've heard how low you have come. Whether it's been in drugs and alcohol, in sensuality, in immorality, in pornography, in idolatry, in materialism, in depression, in anger. There are some of you here this morning that have been entrapped in all those things. And you have been brought to the end of yourself, and have turned to Christ. He has been gracious and has forgiven your sin.

Your life today is a testimony to the mercy of God. If we would take the time, we could call many of you up here and your testimony would be like that of the younger brother. Many of you could say with John Newton, "I once was lost, but now I'm found."

Now, it may just also be the case that you are here today and are lost. You are not in a far away country. But, you are lost here at home. Children, you are rebellious toward your parents. The way you resist and argue with you parents is a representation of how you argue against God and resist His authority! Would the truth be known, you are longing to travel away to a far away land and enjoy the sinful pleasures of your youth, only you lack the resources right now to do it. Children, perhaps there are some sins that your parents know not of. You are hiding them. But, if you were free, you would be gone in an instant.

Parents, perhaps Sunday morning is merely a show for you. There are some other things going on the home that are reflective of your true heart. Had you the boldness and courage, you just might pick up and leave, as the younger brother did. But, you lack the courage to do this. You fear, "What would others think of me?"

If this is you this morning, I call you to look long and hard at the younger brother. Know that God is merciful, and you will find abundant mercy at the cross of Christ.

How much better do you stand than the younger brother?! He had no promise of mercy. He had only an expectation and hope that he might be received back as a servant. But, you have a promise! You have a promise to be received into God's kingdom as a son! (Rom. 8:15-17). Jesus promised, "Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden" and I will give you rest (Matt 11:28)! Come to Christ! Experience His mercy!

My next question ...

### 3. Are You an Older Brother?

Of all questions to ask, I believe that this is the most important for us to hear. I say this, because I believe that this the main reason why Jesus told the parable in the first place.

Luke 15:1-2

Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

Jesus had a run-in with the Pharisees. They were the religious elite of the day. They were degrading the ministry of Jesus, because He was associating with the sinners of the world, a thing that they would never do. And so, Jesus told them these parables. Notice that these parables were not addressed to the tax collectors and the sinners. This parable was addressed to the scribes and Pharisees. "So He told them this parable" (verse 7). The reference here is to the scribes and Pharisees.

He told the Pharisees and the scribes these parables. He told of those who had lost what was precious to them. When they found what was lost, they rejoiced in what was found. The obvious teaching of these parables was to show the heart of God for the lost, who needed to be found. Jesus is obviously talking about those sinners who were eating with Him. They were lost and needed to be found. Jesus was doing the work of finding them.

The parable Jesus told here had two sons. There was the younger brother, who represents the sinners. But, there was the older brother, who represented the scribes and Pharisees. The older brother is in this story to pierce the hearts of the religiously proud, who also needed the mercy of God. And, I believe that for most of us, this is where our danger lies. Most of us are more like the older brother than we are like the younger brother.

I know that this is my danger. I was raised in the church. I have been in the church my entire life. Rare has been the Sunday that I haven't been in a church service. I remember during my high school years of the pride that I had in my religion. I remember thinking of how with it I had my life. I was a good student and a star athlete. And, on top of that, I was a Christian! How much better could my life get! Religious pride was (and is) my danger.

Sure, some of you have been the younger brother, but, I fear that years of church life can easily to turn many of you into the older brother. The sin of the younger brother is obvious to us all. In fact, when we think about sin, we usually think of it in younger brother terms. We think of sin as drunkenness and drugs. We think of sin as sexual immorality and homosexuality. We think of sin as abortion. We think of sin as being away from a worshipping community. We think of sin as rebelling against parents. We think of sin as murder and rape and prostitution. We think of sin as perjury and theft and lying. And all of these things are sinful. It's right for us to think this way.

But, there is another sort of sin, that's more subtle. It's the sins of the older brother. Oh, his sins aren't external and for all to see. In fact, his sins are often difficult to identify. Because the older brother is the faithful one. He is always around. He is always dependable. He's the one who does everything asked of him. And this is precisely where the temptation arises. We can begin to trust in our own righteousness, saying to God, "Look at us! Look at how good we are!"

This was the problem for the Pharisees. They "trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt" (Luke 18:9). That's why they were so angry with Jesus when he was associating with the sinners and eating with them: because they didn't think that they deserved to hear about God. It's we who are righteous that deserve the blessings of God.

So, when the younger brother came home, and the father began to show His mercy upon him, it angered the older brother (verse 28), just like the Pharisees were angry at Jesus for reaching out to the sinners. The older brother "was not willing to go in" to join them in the feast (verse 28), nor were the scribes and Pharisees willing to sit down and eat with these sinners. Why was the older brother so angry? Because he never received such treatment from his father. Verse 29, ...

Luke 15:29-30

But he answered and said to his father, "Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him."

Do you see what's happening here? The older brother, because of his righteousness and faithfulness to the father has come to expect the gifts from his father in his life. And when they don't come, he is angry! And, in his own heart, it's not fair that the unfaithful one would get more!

In other words, you might say it like this. The older brother was righteous for the blessings. He obeyed his father, because his father gave him good things. He was righteous, because he thought that such action was the best way for him to receive kindness from the father. He wasn't interested in the Giver; he was interested in the gifts.

Tim Keller tells the story to illustrate this truth. He writes, ...

Once upon a time there was a gardener who grew an enormous carrot. So he took it to his king and said, "My lord, this is the greatest carrot I've ever grown or ever will grow. Therefore I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you."

The king was touched and discerned the man's heart, so as he turned to go the king said, "Wait! You are clearly a good steward of the earth. I own a plot of land right next to yours. I want to give it to you freely as a gift so you can garden it all." And the gardener was amazed and delighted and went home rejoicing.

But there was a nobleman at the king's court who overheard all this. And he said, "My! If that is what you get for a carrot, what if you gave the king something better?"

So the next day the nobleman came before the king and he was leading a handsome black stallion. He bowed low and said, "My Lord, I breed horses and this is the greatest horse I've ever bred or ever will. Therefore I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you."

But the king discerned his heart and said "thank you," and took the horse and merely dismissed him. The nobleman was perplexed. Then the king said, "Let me explain. That gardener was giving me the carrot, but you were giving yourself the horse." [\[2\]](#)

And that's what the older brother was thinking. His righteousness was for himself. And when you are righteous for yourself, it ruins everything. When you are righteous and proud of it, you are on a dangerous path. You run the danger of expecting God to bless you with good things. Subtly you can come to love the gifts, rather than the giver.

I can do no better than to let Tim Keller explain the sin of the older brother. In encourage you to bear with the length of these quotes. They are pure gold. Tim Keller writes, ...

What did the younger son most want in life? He chafed at having to partake of his family's assets under the father's supervision. He wanted to make his own decisions and have unfettered control of his portion of the wealth. How did he get that? He did it with a bold power play, a flagrant defiance of community standards, a declaration of complete independence.

What did the older son most want? If we think about it we realize that he wanted the same thing as his brother. He was just as resentful of the father as was the younger son. He, too, wanted the father's goods rather than the father himself. However, while the younger brother went far away, the elder brother stayed close and "never disobeyed." That was his way to get control. His unspoken demand is, "I have never disobeyed you! Now you have to do things in my life the way I want them to be done."

The hearts of the two brothers was the same. Both sons resented their father's authority and sought ways of getting out from under it. They each wanted to get into a position in which they could tell the father what to do. Each one, in other words, rebelled--but one did so by being very bad and the other by being extremely good. Both were alienated from the father's heart; Both were lost sons. [\[3\]](#)

...

Why is [the elder brother] so angry with the father? He feels he has the right to tell the father how the robes, rings, and livestock of the family should be deployed. In the same way, religious people commonly live very moral lives, but their goal is to get leverage over God, to control him, to put him in a position where they think he owes them. Therefore, despite all their ethical fastidiousness and piety, they are actually rebelling against his authority. If, like the elder brother, you believe that God ought to bless you and help you because you have worked so hard to obey him and be a good person, then Jesus may be your helper, your example, even your inspiration, but he is not your Savior. You are serving your own Savior. [\[4\]](#)

....

At the end of the story, the elder brother has an opportunity to truly delight the father by going into the feast. But his resentful refusal shows that the father's happiness had never been his goal. When the father reinstates the younger son, to the diminishment of the older son's share in the estate, the elder brothers' heart is laid bare. He does everything he can to hut and resist his father. [\[5\]](#)

...

Jesus does not divide the world into the moral 'good guys' and the immoral 'bad guys.' He shows us that everyone is dedicated to a project of self-salvation, to using God and others in order to get power and control for themselves. We are just going about it in different ways. Even though both sons are wrong, however, the father cares for them and invites them both back into his love and feast.

This means that Jesus' message, which is 'the gospel,' is a completely different spirituality. The gospel of Jesus is not religion or irreligion, morality or immorality, moralism or relativism, conservatism or liberalism. Nor is it something halfway along a spectrum between two poles--it is something else altogether.

The gospel is distinct from the other two approaches: In its view, everyone is wrong, everyone is loved, and everyone is called to recognize this and change. By contrast, elder brothers divide the world in two: 'The good people (like us) are in and the bad people, who are the real problem with the world, are out.' Younger brothers, even if they don't believe in God at all, do the same thing, saying, 'No, the open-minded and tolerant people are in and the bigoted, narrow-minded people, who are the real problem with the world, are out.'

But Jesus says: 'The humble are in and the proud are out' (see Luke 18:14). [\[6\]](#)

...

When a newspaper posed the question, "What's Wrong with the World?" the Catholic thinker G. K. Chesterton reputedly wrote a brief letter in response: 'Dear Sirs: I am. Sincerely Yours, G. K. Chesterson.' That is the attitude of someone who has grasped the message of Jesus. [\[7\]](#)

I hope that you are not a younger brother. I hope that you are not an older brother. I hope that you are a humble brother, who rejoices in the mercy of God!

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on March 7, 2010 by Steve Brandon.  
For more information see [www.rvbc.cc](http://www.rvbc.cc).

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[1] <http://modernparable.com/watchfilms/prodigalsons>

[2] Tim Keller, *The Prodigal God*, pp. 60-62

[3] *Ibid*, pp. 35-36.

[4] *Ibid*, pp. 37-38.

[5] *Ibid*, pp. 38-39.

[6] *Ibid*, pp. 44-45.

[7] *Ibid*, p. 46.