

The Prodigal Son
Luke 15:11–32
Sunday, October 11, 2026

Let us pray: Speak your word to us, Lord. Help it take root and grow in us, so that *we* can be rooted and grow in Christ. Amen.

Like we saw last week with the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the “Prodigal Son” is a parable or even just an *idea* that many people in our culture are familiar with. And most of us who are familiar with this parable focus on the younger son. The one who asks for his inheritance, goes away and blows it, comes back home in disgrace, and is received with love by his father. We see this story as being *about him*. We read it from his perspective. It’s the parable of the prodigal *son*. We *identify* with *him*.

Because for many of us, there has been a time in our lives when we have messed up, made a mistake that we’ve felt *guilt* or *shame* over. And in the midst of all that, someone has received us with *love*. Maybe it was a friend or family member. Maybe it was a total stranger. Maybe it was God. But there’s a part of us that can identify with being lost and then *found*, being dead and then *alive* again. Starting over. Receiving grace and acceptance and forgiveness and *another chance*, when we have done *absolutely nothing* to deserve it.

Or maybe there’s a part of you that *wants* to be that younger son. You’ve messed up, made a mistake, and you *need* someone to receive you with love and forgiveness, and it hasn’t happened yet. Maybe you’re still on the way home. But whatever the reason, there is a part of *all of us* that can identify with that younger son. That’s the perspective from which we are used to experiencing this parable.

One of the most powerful things about this parable, though, is that there are a *lot* of different ways to look at it. And if we go a little deeper, we will discover that we can identify with *every single person* in this

story. We can see this story from *their* point of view, we can see *ourselves* in *them*, and we can learn something about what it means to follow Jesus and live a life of faith.

Most of the time when we read this parable, we associate the father with God. We say, “This is like how *we* stray away from God, and then when we repent and come back, God receives us with love.” That’s how we typically understand this parable. But what if the father doesn’t represent *God*? Jesus never says that he does. What if we can read this another way? What if *you* are supposed to be the father? Extending love and acceptance and forgiveness, *grace*, to people in your life who *need it* and haven’t necessarily done *anything to deserve* it. What if that’s *your* role?

The father is a really interesting person in this parable. His son comes to him and says, “I want my share of the inheritance *now*.” Which is basically like saying, “You’re only good to me for your *money*. I don’t want to wait until you’re *dead* before I can *enjoy* it. So just go ahead and give it to me *now*. You’re as good as dead to me. I *wish* that you were dead, so I could have my inheritance now.” That’s what’s being implied here. And that had to *hurt*. We don’t hear the father’s reaction to it, but that’s an incredibly hurtful way to treat someone who loves you. The father goes along with it, though. He’s like, “Alright, here you go. Enjoy.” He doesn’t hold it *against* his son. He’s not worried about his *pride*. And we see that again when the son returns home.

It says while he was still far off, his father *saw* him and *ran* out to meet him. Ran. That’s a really subtle detail that gets lost on us. In Jesus’ time, men wore tunics, like long robes. We saw this back during the summer when we talked about Jacob’s son Joseph in the book of Genesis, and how his father gave him a long robe that essentially said, “I do not expect my son to do physical, manual labor.” He *wouldn’t* have been able to do it while wearing a long tunic. If you want to work or *run* in a tunic, you have to pull it up so that you can move your legs, and you risk exposing yourself to everyone around you. For a man to *run*

through the streets in that culture was a source of *shame* or *embarrassment*. People would have *laughed* at him. They would have thought he was a *fool*. But again, he didn't *care*. He wasn't *worried* about how he *appeared*. He wasn't worried about his *pride*. He wasn't worried about being *right*. He was focused on the compassion and the love that he felt for his *son*.

What if *we* had the opportunity to live out the role of this father in *our* lives? Extending love and forgiveness and acceptance, *even* if it costs us our *pride*. What if we were less worried about *being* right than we were about *doing the right thing*?

If you notice, the son didn't actually ask for his father's forgiveness until *after* his father had already received him with love. The father sees him, and before the son can even say a word, the father runs out, throws his arms around him and kisses him. He doesn't *know* if his son has changed. Maybe he's just coming back home to ask for more money. He doesn't know. But he doesn't *care*. He loves his son. And he doesn't place any conditions or requirements on his love and acceptance.

So many times we say, "Well, I'll forgive this person if they say they're sorry or show that they've changed." But what if we could be like this father who extends his love and acceptance and forgiveness and grace without any conditions? What if the forgiveness that we extend is what *causes* that person to repent or to change? What if that experience of grace that they receive from us is what *transforms them*?

We call this the parable of the *prodigal* son. That word *prodigal* means "lavish" or "recklessly extravagant." Because the son was recklessly extravagant with his money, he just *threw* it all out there, he's the *prodigal* son. But isn't the *father* recklessly extravagant with his *love*? He's *lavish* with his forgiveness. He just *throws* it out there. This could just as easily be called the parable of the prodigal *father*.

There are sometimes when we need to be a lot more reckless with our love; extravagant with our forgiveness and acceptance, even when they've done nothing to deserve it. There's a part of all of us that *needs* to be this father.

A lot of the time, our reading of the story ends there, with the son returning home, the father embracing him and throwing a party. It's a happy ending. What so often gets lost in this story is the fact that there is *another* son. That's how it starts off, right? "There was a man who had *two* sons." We tend to forget about the *other* son. An older son, a *good* son who works hard and follows the rules and does everything his father ever asks of him, and yet *he* is the only one in this story who is unhappy at the end.

He's coming in from the field, and he hears music and sees people dancing. So he asks one of the servants what's going on, and the servant tells him, "Your brother is back! And your father is throwing him a big party because he's safe!" And it says the brother became *angry* and *refused to go in*.

Can you *imagine* how he must have *felt*? He says to his father, "I've been working hard for *years*, doing *everything* you ever asked, *earning* everything I have. I've been *responsible*. I've loved you. I've been *good* to you. I've done everything I was *supposed to do* to be a faithful, dutiful son. And you've never thrown a party for *me*! But *this son of yours* disrespects you, hurts you, takes your money, blows it all, and he gets a *party* for it?! Are you *kidding* me?!"

And his father explains it to him and says, "We *have* to celebrate, because *this brother of yours*, he was *lost*. And now it's like he's been *found*. It's like he was *dead*, and now he's *alive* again." But you know what's funny? It doesn't ever tell us that the brother went in to the party. All Jesus would have to say at the end is, "And then he went in and welcomed his brother home." But he *doesn't*. Does he stay outside?

Does he pout? Does he stay angry and hold a *grudge*? For how long? Does he ever join the celebration? We don't know. Jesus leaves it *open*, because it's up to *us* to write that ending.

Sometimes we can totally identify with that older brother. When we're more worried about *being right* than we are about *loving*. When we just dig in to *our* point of view or our idea of how things should work, and we shut ourselves off to any other possibilities or perspectives. When we feel like *we* have earned it or deserved it more than *they* have. The world that we live in may be about earning it and deserving it, whatever *it* may be (money, success, love, forgiveness, *anything*). The *world* may be about *earning* and *deserving* all of that, but that is not how *Jesus* works. With Jesus it comes freely. Undeserved.

So what *we* have to do when we find ourselves in the position of that older brother, when *we* find ourselves jealous or angry or holding a grudge or unable to forgive or more worried about being *right* than loving, what *we* have to do is *choose* how this story is going to *end*. Will we just dig in further to our own idea of what is right and stay *outside* of the party and *miss out* on the celebration? Or will we be able to see a different perspective; to see things from that other person's point of view? And even if it means that we are *wrong*, we're able to get *past* that. Because God has got a *celebration* going on that God wants *us* to be a part of. Can we put our ego and pride to the side and join that party?

So you see, we can identify with every person in this parable. We can't just dig in to *one way* of seeing it and understanding it, because then we would miss out on all this other stuff. And so it is with everything else in our *lives*. We can't just dig in to one way of seeing and knowing and understanding; just entrench ourselves even further in our own perspective and point of view, whether we're right or not. Because Jesus calls us to *righteousness*, and righteousness is not about *being right*. It's about *living* right, in right relationship, living in *peace* and *love* with God, with each other, and with ourselves.

Jesus calls us to live lives that are *prodigal* – reckless and extravagant with our love and our forgiveness and our acceptance. He calls us to live lives that are *open* – to *God*, to our *neighbor*, to new *possibilities* and new *understandings*; open to seeing things and *people* in a new way, from a new point of view. Not to dig ourselves in deeper where we are, insist that we are right, and shut each other out. But to welcome each other home and join the celebration, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.