

The Parable of the Two Lost Sons

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

¹Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. ²But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³Then Jesus told them this parable

¹¹Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

¹³"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' ²⁰So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

²²"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

²⁵"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

²⁸"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

³¹" 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "

Week One – The People Around Jesus

“All gathering around to hear him.”

Who were the people around Jesus when He told the story of the two lost sons? In that day, an unusual mix of people. Tax collectors and well-known “sinners”, as well as the religious Pharisees and scribes listened as Jesus spoke.

Two groups—one outwardly rebelling against God and His ways and one prideful that they always did the right thing. Both thinking they’d figured out how to “do life”; both actually alienated from God. And then Jesus told a story of two sons. One group of listeners was given hope; one was offended.

Listen carefully to what Jesus is saying in the parable. Will you be incensed and offended or will you be given insight, repentance, and a new way of thinking?

Memory Verse:

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.

Luke 19:10

Definitions and Translations from the Greek

Tax Collectors (*telōnēs*)--as a class, detested not only by the Jews, but also by other nations, both on account of their employment and of the harshness, greed, and deception, with which they did their job.

Sinners (*hamartōlos*)--

- 1) devoted to sin; pre-eminently sinful; especially wicked; all evil men
- 2) specifically of men stained with certain definite vice or crimes; tax collectors; heathen

Pharisees (*Pharisaios*)--sought distinction and praise by outward observance of external rites and by outward forms of piety, such as ceremonial washings, fastings, prayers, and alms giving; and, comparatively lax of genuine piety, they prided themselves on their fancied good works. They were bitter enemies of Jesus and his cause and were in turn severely rebuked by him for their greed, ambition, empty reliance on outward works, and affection of piety in order to gain popularity.

Scribe (*grammateus*)—well educated in the Mosaic law and in the sacred writings; an interpreter; a religious teacher. Scribes examined the more difficult and subtle questions of the law, added to the Mosaic law decisions of various kinds thought to explain its meaning and scope, and did this to the detriment of religion. Because of their knowledge, their advice was often needed to settle difficult matters and they are mentioned in connection with the priests and elders of the people.

Religion-- Man’s obligation to obey God’s commands, in a state of reward and punishment, and in man’s accountability to God. The practice of all moral duties. Godliness or real piety in practice, consisting in the performance of all known duties to God and our fellow men.

Religious-- Devoted to the practice of religion. Exact; strict; such as religion requires.

Read the Introduction and Chapter One of *The Prodigal God*.
Highlight thoughts that stand out to you and ideas you'd like to discuss.

From your reading:

1. The definition of *prodigal* is “recklessly spendthrift” (Introduction, PG page xiv). Keller states that “the father’s welcome to the repentant son was literally reckless, because he refused to ‘reckon’ or count his sin against him or demand repayment. This response offended . . . (PG page xv).”

a) How might this type of response offend you and/or your church community?

b) **Read 2 Corinthians 5:16-21**. How do these Scriptures support this extravagant idea of forgiveness?

2. Keller says that Jesus “is on the side of neither the irreligious nor the religious, but he singles out religious moralism as a particularly deadly spiritual condition (PG page 13, paragraph 2).”

a) How would you describe *religious moralism* and why is it so spiritually deadly?

b) What do you think about the idea of Christianity emerging as a *non-religion* (PG pages 13,14)?

3. “If the preaching of our ministers and the practice of our parishioners do not have the same effect on people that Jesus had, then we must not be declaring the same message that Jesus did (PG pages 14,15).”

a) What was the primary focus of the message Jesus declared?

b) What is the primary focus of the message you declare or hear declared in today’s church culture?

c) Ask the Lord what needs to be done in your heart and in our church community to reconcile the two.

Read the *Parable of the Lost Sons*, Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32, on SG page 4 or in your Bible.

Digging into the Scripture:

4. Look at who is hearing this parable as well as whom it is about:

a) On SG page 3, underline (or highlight) the words “tax-collectors, sinners, younger son” and all pronouns (he, him, his, I, my, you, your) pertaining to them.

b) Underline with a squiggly line (or highlight in another color) the words “Pharisees, teachers of the law, older son” and all pronouns (he, him, his, I, my, you, your) pertaining to them.

c) Circle the word “father” and all other words pointing to him.

5. **Read Matthew 9:9-13**. Jesus calls tax collectors and ‘sinners’ _____. He calls Himself _____.

- a) Why do you think Matthew followed Jesus immediately?
- b) What did the Pharisees miss out on?
- c) Ask God if you’re missing out on anything He has for you.

6. **Read Luke 7:36-50**.

- a) What do you see about the heart of God?
- b) Ask the Holy Spirit if He would like to change your perception of anyone (or any group).

7. **DIGGING DEEPER (for those who want more): Read Matthew 23**.

There are seven woes listed in this chapter. Write down each woe (use the back of the page) and for each one, ask Jesus if He has a warning or an invitation for you.

8. a) Looking at the definitions on SG pages 1 and 3 and the scriptures in this lesson, in your own words, **write a description** in the parentheses below of the people Jesus was talking about. Also include who these people might be in our culture today. An example is given.

¹Now the *tax collectors* (for example: people who are hated because they take advantage of others; ones who are greedy and deceitful; loan sharks; officials who take bribes; con artists _____) and "*sinners*" (_____) were all gathering around to hear him. ²But the *Pharisees* (_____) and the *teachers of the law* ((*scribe*) _____) muttered, "This man welcomes *sinners* (_____) and eats with them."

- b) How does this bring new understanding or depth to these verses?

9. As you “gather around to hear Jesus” (attend Bible study or church, read the Bible, etc.), ask God to show you specific ways you sometimes have attitudes like:

a) the younger son, tax collectors, and sinners

b) the elder son, Pharisees, teachers of the law, and scribes

Ask the Holy Spirit how these attitudes alienate you from God? (See PG page 7, paragraph 1)

10. This week, what are two or three things that stand out to you about God?

1.

2.

3.

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

To him be glory both now and forever! Amen. (2 Peter 3:18)

11. **Write a prayer** giving God permission to change any ways your thinking does not line up with His. Thank Him specifically for ways you saw Him through this week’s study. Give Him praise.

Be Aware: As we consider the author’s description of God as “The Prodigal God,” be sure to look at the whole message. This is not a mandate to give our children whatever they want or to always rescue others. Along with “recklessly spending,” we will see how the father in Luke 15 removes his umbrella of provision and protection, how he waits, and how he invites but does not force his will. Extravagant love has many aspects and we need the Holy Spirit’s guidance in every situation and relationship.