

# THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL STORIES AND SIGNS

## JESUS THE STORYTELLER

### *The Father of Two Lost Sons*

One of the well-known facts of Jesus' ministry was that He was a Friend to sinners and that brought complaints. **Luke 15:1-2 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him.* <sup>2</sup> *And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."* Their grumbling and complaining prompted Jesus to tell three stories. Today, we will study His third story most often known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son but also frequently called the Parable of the Loving Father. Our writers today have chosen to title this parable as The Father of Two Lost Sons.

Countless sermons have been preached on this parable but it is always good to remind ourselves of even the familiar scriptures. Let's revisit the story to discover which of the two sons we can most identify with and to remind us of how we have a loving Father who is always waiting for us no matter how we have strayed.

Like the younger son we've rebelled against our Father and squandered His good gifts.

**Read Luke 15:11-14 (ESV)** <sup>11</sup> *And he said, "There was a man who had two sons.* <sup>12</sup> *And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.'* *And he divided his property between them.* <sup>13</sup> *Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.* <sup>14</sup> *And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need.*

According to Jewish law, an elder son received twice as much as the other sons as well as the leadership role in the family. Although a father might distribute his wealth during his lifetime, it was scandalous for a son to ask for such a thing. It would be as though he were saying to his father, "I wish you were dead!" How many children in fits of anger have said similar words to parents only to regret them later? The scripture says that the loving father *divided his property between them*. It appears that the father did keep control of the inheritance of the older son because the father would later say: *Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.*

Anywhere away from God our Father is a 'far country.' We go off into the 'far country' for many reasons. Sometimes as in the case of this son, the reason is rebellion – wanting to do things our own way. But, oftentimes, we wind up in the 'far country' without really intending to go there. It may be something as simple as the cares of this world that send us to the far country – like Martha slaving in the kitchen instead of sharing a place at Jesus' feet with her sister, Mary.

Since we are created in the image of God, we have the freedom of choice. The father, like our Heavenly Father, allowed his son to exercise his own free will. Free will is the ability the Creator gives us to make decisions whether right or wrong. The father did not predetermine his son's choice just like our Heavenly Father does not predetermine our choices. When the younger son's choices did not work out well for him, he first tried to fix his own problem. When that didn't work out, he chose to go home to his father.

**Read Luke 15:15-19 (ESV)** <sup>15</sup> *So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs.* <sup>16</sup> *And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.* <sup>17</sup> *“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger!’* <sup>18</sup> *I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.* <sup>19</sup> *I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.’”*

The Israelites were forbidden to eat swine. (**Leviticus 11:7**) Pigs were considered ceremonially unclean and were a ‘figure of speech’ for uncleanness. In Jewish thinking, a person could not sink any lower than feeding swine. Somehow I always pictured the son as groveling with the pigs for the remainder of the corn left on the cob. But, it was not cobs the pigs were eating. It was pods. Pods are the dry coverings split when beans and similar plants are shelled. Notice: *no one gave him anything*. The people in the far country were not even willing to share their ‘pig food’ with him. We have people all around us – those who are living in ‘far countries’. We should be quick to share the ‘Bread of Life’ with them because people need the Lord remembering ‘there but for the grace of God go I.’

The story tells us that son *came to himself*. In other words, he came to his senses and refocused his thoughts on the father he left behind. Some question the son's motives. His own brother would do that. As followers of Christ, it is not up to us to discern the motives of others. It is the Father who sees into His children's hearts. Seeking the Father's forgiveness begins with repentance. Repentance involves turning – turning from something – that something is sin – and then turning to something – the Father. It was not the son's intention to return as a son – he now had the ‘heart of servant’ because he was determined to ask to be one of his father's hired servants. He turned from the pig sty and proclaimed: *I will arise and go to my father*.

In 1757 after living a life he described as carnal and full of spiritual wickedness, Joseph Hart turned to Christ. Two years later, he wrote these famous words in a now famous hymn: I will arise and go to Jesus – He will embrace me in His arms –in the arms of my dear Savior – O there are ten thousand charms.

We all have our favorite parts of stories. In this parable of the loving father, the part I love best is the picture of the father seeing his wayward son while he was still a long way off. Could it have been chance that the father just happened to glance down the road that one particular day at that one particular time? I don't think so. I believe the father was intently looking down that road everyday – morning – noon and night – just like Jesus is always waiting with open arms for us. **Matthew 11:28 (ESV)** <sup>28</sup> *Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*

Like the father, God celebrates when a sinner returns to Him.

**Read Luke 15:20-24 (ESV)** <sup>20</sup> *And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.* <sup>21</sup> *And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'* <sup>22</sup> *But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet.'* <sup>23</sup> *And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.* <sup>24</sup> *For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.'* *And they began to celebrate.*

Here Jesus answered the grumblings of the scribes and Pharisees against the tax collectors and sinners. The father **ran** to welcome his son. In the eastern culture it was not proper for a grown man to run yet he did for the sake of his son. The father was so excited that he did not wait for the son to finish the confession he had in his heart when he left the 'far country. The father interrupted him, forgave him, and then ordered the homecoming celebration to begin!

This father gave to his son a robe, a ring, and shoes, which are symbolic of the gospel that Christ brings to us.

- **The robe** represents the clean clothing of righteousness that our Father provides. **1 John 1:9 (ESV)** <sup>9</sup> *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*
- **The ring** signifies sonship. **Romans 8:15 (ESV)** <sup>15</sup> *For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"*
- **The shoes** signify that the son was beloved and free since slaves went barefoot. Our Father provides us with a complete wardrobe including shoes. **Ephesians 6:15 (ESV)** <sup>15</sup> *and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace.*

The son did not deserve any of these gifts, but the grace of the father bestowed them upon him. We do not deserve our Father's free gift of salvation and the wonderful spiritual wardrobe He provides, but because of His love and grace for us, we are privileged to enjoy all of those things and more!

Maybe you don't particularly identify with the son who rebelled and went to the far country. Could it be that you can identify more with the attitude of the son who remained at home? The truth is I used to feel sorry for him – it seemed he stayed home and did everything right and received no recognition but now I find that to be a childish interpretation of what was really going on.

Like the older son, some resent God's grace and cling to religious observance.

**Read Luke 15:25-32 (ESV)** <sup>25</sup> *"Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing."* <sup>26</sup> *And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.* <sup>27</sup> *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.'*<sup>28</sup> *But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him,*<sup>29</sup> *but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.'*<sup>30</sup> *But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!'*<sup>31</sup> *And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.'*<sup>32</sup> *It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'*"

As the story continues, Jesus put in a 'cast member' who resembled the scribes and Pharisees and often resembles us as well. What about me? What about me? The older son had a good case of the 'it's not fair' syndrome! We have all feel this way at times and can relate to him very well. But, just because we can relate to him, does that make how he acted okay?

He had some 'good' qualities. He was a hard worker and apparently had NOT disgraced the family. But, he was self-righteous and possessed an unforgiving heart. He was quick to see his brother's sins but blinded to his own. The Pharisees defined sin primarily in terms of outward actions, not inward attitudes. Even in Old Testament times, God looked at the heart. *1 Samuel 16:7 (ESV)*<sup>7</sup> *But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."*

The older son had never left his father geographically, but his spirit was even farther away than his brother's. The younger son returned to his father in repentance; the older son refused to even come to the father's celebration for the homecoming of the prodigal brother. In the long-run, the unforgiving son became the greater heartache to his father - the bitter one. Imagine the party - all the relatives and friends are rejoicing with the father and one son - but the older son won't come even put in an appearance even when the father went out to him. "Where's Bubba today? Why isn't he here?" The excuses follow - "Well, he's been working in the field all day, and he was tired." Or, "He's upstairs. I'm sure he come down later...." If you feel that you are not growing spiritually, could it be that you are harboring an unforgiving spirit? As Christians we are commanded to have a forgiving spirit - whether we feel like it or not.

Even though we may not have sunk so deep physically in our sin that we are forced to eat pods with the pigs, our hearts may be just as unclean or even more unclean. Jesus does not tell about a change of heart within the older son - probably because it never happened. Chances are the son who did all the right things never learned to share in the forgiveness of the father.

We all feel we may never be able to forgive someone at times. But, with the Lord's help we can. On the cross, Jesus said ... *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."* ... **Luke 23:34** The cross is where genuine forgiveness begins. We are forgiven by His grace! Let's be quick to forgive others like we have been forgiven!