



THE GOSPEL OF  
**Luke**

**SESSION OBJECTIVE: LUKE 15:11-32**

To understand to more about the parable of the Prodigal Son.

## Greyhound Cares About Runaways

In 2019, Elizabeth Wolfe and Saeed Ahmed wrote an article for CNN called “Greyhound Is Giving Free Tickets to Runaways Who Want to Return Home.” They wrote:

“For over a decade, Greyhound Lines has partnered with the National Runaway Safeline—an organization that seeks to keep runaway and homeless youth safe--to reunite young people with their families and guardians. Since 1995, the Home Free program has helped over 16,000 families by providing free bus tickets, according to the National Runaway Safeline. To get a free ticket home, a person between the ages of 12 and 21 must call the NRS helpline (1-800-RUNAWAY). They also must be named on a runaway report and be willing to return to their family. The family or guardian also needs to agree to receive them at home. If the individual hoping to return home is under the age of 15, Home Free also provides a free ticket for the child's parent or guardian. Before a young person begins their journey home, National Runaway Safeline works with them and their guardians to create a plan for their return. It also locates resources in the community that will be able to provide support once they are settled. After the family is reunited, the group says it follows up to make sure the family member arrived home safely and provides additional resources.”

Runaways, or commonly referred to in Christian circles as “prodigals,” matter to the heart of God. In Luke 15:11-32, Jesus tells the Parable of the Prodigal Son to illustrate something about the heart of God towards the lost: “For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.” (Lk. 15:24).

## The Parable of the Prodigal Son

Jesus' parable of the prodigal son is one of the lengthier parables that Jesus tells. There are several key details that add to the overall richness and depth of the story, but as is true with all parables there is a simple point being conveyed. Below is a breakdown of the pertinent details needed to understand the big idea.

### **INHERITANCE**

The parable begins with a well-known Jewish custom, albeit turned backwards. Deuteronomy 21:17 demands that the property of a man would pass down the male side of his progeny beginning with the firstborn and moving on. However, this parable begins with "the younger of them" demanding his inheritance: "Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me" (Lk. 15:12a). This demonstrates a kind of arrogance in the younger son that is presumptuous to what he believes he is owed. It isn't that he asks for more than he is deserved (usually the younger son receives one third of the property as opposed to two thirds of the property for the firstborn), but it's that he requests his inheritance prior to the death of his father (Num. 27:8-11). Nevertheless, the father acquiesces: "And he divided his property between them" (Lk. 15:12b).

### **UNCLEAN**

After taking all that he had and moving "into a far country" (Lk. 15:13), he then "squandered his property in reckless living," and "spent everything" (Lk. 15:13-14). In order to survive, he began to work for another individual who "sent him into his fields to feed pigs" (Lk. 15:15). This illustrates two realities; 1. He really did travel to a far country, away from Jewish customs and cultures, which is evidenced by, 2. Pigs are seen as unclean in Jewish culture and yet he is demanded to feed them (Lev. 11:7; Deut. 14:8; See also 1 Macc. 1:47). The idea of moving into a foreign country and associating with unclean animals was unheard of for a practicing Jewish person (Acts 10:28), and so this detail demonstrates how reckless this younger son really was.

### **ISOLATION**

This parable illustrates two kinds of isolation. The first is obvious in the younger son. He is alone, he is reckless, and because of his misfortune ends up becoming hopeless as well. His isolation eventually leads him back to his father in shame. The other, older brother also lives in a kind of isolation though. Upon hearing the news of the celebration, the older son "came and drew near to the house," but instead of asking his father, "he called one of the servants" and asked him instead (Lk. 15:25-26). This reveals that while the older son may have been in close proximity to the father, he was isolated relationally.

### **SLANDER?**

Another troubling detail that reveals that inner-state of the older son is found in verse 30. The older son says to the father in disgust: "But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!" Apart from the clear separation in his wording ("this son of yours"), the older brother also adds the detail of prostitution which is notably missing in Luke's details in the first part of the parable. Most scholars attribute this to the older brother's saltiness towards his younger brother and as a bit of slander or over-embellishing sinful habits of his younger brother that were purely conjecture.

### **TWO PATHS**

One observation from this parable is the paths to which both brokenness and indignation can lead. The younger son comes to terms with how badly he's wronged his father in verses 18 and 19: "I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" His brokenness leads him to a state of repentance and acceptance of the likely consequences of his actions. On the contrary, the older son is filled with indignation because he believes he's been perfectly obedient: "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” (Lk. 15:29). This indicates a direct correlation between the way we view our righteousness (or lack thereof) and what we believe we are owed.

### **GRACE**

One of the most striking qualities of this passage is the kindness and grace that the father continues to give. It is pretty evident with regard to the way he welcomes back his wayward son, but he also demonstrates kindness to his older, angrier son as well. Angry that his father has thrown a celebration for the return of his brother, the father replies: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours” (Lk. 15:31). In the Greek language, the term employed for “son” here is τέκνον (teknon), which is actually a word that means “little child.” In other words, this is a term of endearment. The father still sees his angry, oldest son as his precious little boy. The older son referred to his brother as “this son of yours;” the father mends this attempt to distance himself in verse 32 by referring to him as: “this your brother.” It is the father in this story who attempts to make peace between the two and demonstrate grace to each of them.

## **Pharisees and Gentiles**

The overwhelming consensus among scholarship is that this parable is a parable concerning the relationship of God and both the Pharisees and the Gentiles. The Pharisees represent the older, angry brother who watches as sinful Gentiles come to the father in repentance and are welcomed in. In their self-righteousness, they believe it is unjust that God would welcome them given how recklessly they’ve lived. By contrast, they see their own religiosity as evidence of righteousness. Given that Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees (Lk. 15:2), the parables in this chapter all are likely oriented towards them as a warning of sorts.

## **What About Now?**

One takeaway is to consider whether we believe we are in need of grace or deserving of blessing, and that can be determined (at least in part) by whether we see ourselves as righteous or broken and sinful. Another takeaway is that no matter how far you have strayed from God, you can always return to Him in repentance and be welcomed by Him as a loving father welcomes his prodigal son.

## **Study Questions**

### **Day One**

1. Read Luke 15:11-12. How does this parable begin? What is unusual about the younger son’s request?

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2. Read Luke 15:13-16. What did the son do with his inheritance? How did he try and solve his problems? What details reveal that he had traveled outside of Jewish territory?

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### **Day Two**

1. Read Luke 15:17-19. What did the son decide to do? What does repentance look like for him?

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2. Read Luke 15:20-21. What was the father's response upon seeing his son from a distance? What did the younger son say to his father?
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### Day Three

1. Read Luke 15:22-24. In your own words, summarize the words of the father to his younger son.
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2. Read Luke 15:25-27. How did the older brother discover the return of his younger brother? Who did he ask about it?
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### Day Four

1. Read Luke 15:28-30. How did the father approach his older son? What did his older son say?
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2. Read Luke 15:31-32. How did the father respond to his older son, and what did he say concerning his younger son?
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## Week 57 Discussion: Come Home

In Luke 15:11-32, Jesus tells the well-known parable of the prodigal son and reminds us of the loving Father we have who welcomes us with open arms when we come to Him in repentance. It doesn't matter how far you've strayed or what sin you've kept secret; He will welcome you as you come to Him in brokenness. Talk as a group about the great relief we have in this message.

1. Icebreaker: Have you ever been radically forgiven by someone when you didn't think you deserved it? What did it feel like?
2. Do you believe God is like the loving father of this parable? Why or why not?
3. Do you ever get angry when someone is forgiven and welcomed into the family of faith that you don't believe should be?
4. How difficult is it to confess your sin to the Father and to other people? Why?
5. Should Christians rejoice and celebrate when sinners are saved? Why or why not?
6. How can the church better imitate the loving acceptance of the Father?

## Takeaways:

1. Jesus tells the Parable of the Prodigal Son.
2. The parable illustrates God's willingness to welcome sinners who come to him in repentance.