

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

Luke 15: 11-32

Rev. Carl Taylor



South Carolina Synod

This 4-session Bible study will delve into the Parable of the Prodigal Son, found in Luke 15:11–32, and explore the perspectives of the father, the younger son who left, and the elder son who stayed. Each day will focus on a different aspect of the parable, encouraging participants to reflect on their own spiritual journeys and relationships with God. We will also integrate Martin Luther’s thoughts, especially on God’s limitless grace as seen in the father’s actions.

About the author:

The Rev. Carl Taylor is an associate pastor serving Living Springs Lutheran Church in Columbia, SC. A 2020 graduate of Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, Pastor Taylor was ordained in February 2021 and has the distinction of being the first African American ELCA male to be ordained in South Carolina.

Please send any questions or respectful comments to: pastorcarl@livingspringslutheran.org

About the Contributor for the Youth Adaptations:

Deacon Deborah Poole serves as the South Carolina Synod Coordinator for Children and Youth. She recently retired after 30 years as Coordinator for Family Ministries at Mt. Hermon (1993-2005) and Pisgah (2005-2023) Lutheran Churches. Deborah lives in Lexington, and enjoys reading and gardening.

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Session 1: The Father's Unconditional Love and Grace

Luke 15: 11-24

¹¹Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.’ So he divided his assets between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to his senses he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

Focus

Today, we will concentrate on the character of the father, who represents God in this parable. His actions are a portrait of God’s unconditional love, mercy, and grace extended to both sons, regardless of their behavior.

Theological Reflection

- The father’s response to his son’s return is extravagant, marked by immediate forgiveness, celebration, and restoration.
- Martin Luther understood God’s grace as an unearned gift, freely given to us despite our sinfulness. The father in this parable embodies this grace, welcoming his son back without demanding repayment or punishment.
- In Luther’s view, God is both father and judge, yet He leans into grace over judgment when His children return in repentance. The father does not ask for justification but instead extends love and reconciliation.

Questions for Reflection

1. The father doesn’t hesitate to forgive and restore his son. How does this challenge or confirm your understanding of God’s grace in your own life?
2. Are there areas in your life where you find it difficult to believe that God could love and forgive you as freely as the father does in this parable?
3. If you were the father, how would you have responded to a child who had squandered your resources?
4. How does the father’s action of running to the son impact your view of how God responds to us when we repent?

Closing Thought

Just as the father runs to the son, so God eagerly seeks to embrace us when we turn back to Him. This is the depth of divine grace—undeserved, unearned, and yet freely given.

Session 2: The Younger Son—Recklessness, Repentance, and Restoration

Luke 15: 11-24

¹¹Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.’ So he divided his assets between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to his senses he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

Focus

The younger son represents humanity’s tendency to stray from God, seeking independence but often finding emptiness. Today, we will explore his journey from rebellion to repentance and, finally, restoration.

Theological Reflection

- The younger son’s request for his inheritance can be seen as a rejection of his relationship with his father. He wants the benefits without the responsibility, mirroring humanity’s frequent desire to enjoy God’s gifts without acknowledging Him as the source.
- Luther believed that sin is rooted in a self-centered will that turns away from God. The younger son epitomizes this in his pursuit of freedom, only to find himself enslaved by his desires.
- His turning point comes when he “came to himself” (v. 17), realizing the depth of his folly and desiring to return, not as a son but as a servant. Luther would affirm that true repentance involves recognizing our inability to save ourselves and turning wholly to God’s grace.

Questions for Reflection

1. The younger son sought independence but ended up lost and broken. Are there ways you see this pattern in your own life—pursuing independence from God and finding yourself in a spiritual wilderness?
2. The younger son hit “rock bottom” before realizing his need for his father. What do you think it takes for someone to “come to themselves” and seek God?
3. How does the father’s response to the son contrast with what the son expected? How does this reflect God’s response to our repentance?
4. In what ways do you identify with the younger son’s journey?

Closing Thought

Though the younger son believed he was unworthy to be called his father's child, the father's love overpowered his sin and shame. So it is with God, whose grace is stronger than our sin.

Session 3: The Elder Son—Resentment, Self-Righteousness, and Misunderstanding Grace

Luke 15:25–32

²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field, and as he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command, yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’ ”

Focus

Today, we explore the elder son’s response to his brother’s return. His resentment reflects the attitude of self-righteousness that can hinder our ability to accept God’s grace, not only for ourselves but for others.

Theological Reflection

- The elder son stays home, faithfully fulfilling his duties. Yet, when his brother returns and is celebrated, his heart reveals bitterness and entitlement. He believes his obedience should have earned him more favor, reflecting an “earned grace” mentality that Luther vehemently opposed.
- Luther’s teachings emphasize that all of us, no matter how obedient, stand in need of God’s grace. The elder son’s refusal to enter the feast is symbolic of those who rely on their own righteousness rather than grace. In his mind, his brother doesn’t deserve the father’s grace—but neither does he.
- The elder son’s misunderstanding of grace mirrors the human tendency to think in terms of fairness, but God’s grace operates on a different logic: one of love and mercy, not merit.

Questions for Reflection

1. The elder son felt justified in his anger. How do you react when you see others receive grace, especially when you feel they don’t deserve it?
2. Are there areas in your life where you feel you have “earned” God’s favor? How does this mentality conflict with the concept of grace?
3. Why do you think the elder son refused to celebrate his brother’s return? What does this say about how we often struggle to accept God’s grace for others?
4. How might the elder son’s attitude reflect the religious leaders of Jesus’ time, who struggled with Jesus’ association with sinners?

Closing Thought

The elder son’s bitterness shows that proximity to the father’s house doesn’t always mean a heart aligned with the father’s love. We, too, are invited to align our hearts with the extravagant grace of God.

Session 4: Finding Ourselves in the Parable—Grace for All

Luke 15:11–32 (Full passage)

¹¹Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.’ So he divided his assets between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to his senses he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

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Focus

Today, we will bring the whole parable together and reflect on where we find ourselves within the story. The father’s grace extends to both sons, but each must choose how they will respond to that grace.

Theological Reflection

- The parable is not just about the younger son’s return but also about the elder son’s refusal to join the celebration. Both are in need of the father’s grace, though in different ways.
- Luther’s view of God’s grace as “freely given” extends to all humanity, whether they are prodigal or self-righteous. Both sons reflect the human condition, and the father represents God’s boundless grace that calls us all to the table.
- The challenge of the parable is not just to accept grace for ourselves but to embrace the idea that God’s grace is for all, even those we feel don’t deserve it. Both sons must reconcile with the father’s radical love.

Questions for Reflection

1. Do you identify more with the younger son or the elder son? Why?
2. How does the father's grace challenge your understanding of fairness? How can you embrace God's logic of love rather than merit?
3. What steps can you take to either return to God as the younger son did or to let go of bitterness as the elder son was invited to do?
4. In what ways does this parable challenge you to extend grace to others, even when it's difficult?

Final Closing Thought

God's grace is radical and freely given, inviting all—whether prodigal or self-righteous—to come home. How will you respond to His invitation?

Youth Activities for the Parable of the Prodigal Son

Adapted by Deacon Deborah Poole
Coordinator of Children, Youth, and Family Ministry

Act it Out

This story is a fun one to act out with students. Teens can be divided into groups to read the story and create a skit. Of course, taking turns to read and discuss the parable is an option, as well.

- Divide the students into groups of 6-8 people and give each group a Bible.
- Say: Each group is going to read the story found in Luke 15:11-32. Read the Scripture and come up with a creative way to share the story. Make sure to involve every person in your group because once you are done, we will have a chance for each group to share their retelling of the story. Also, try to tell us what you think Jesus was trying to get across through this story.

The Pig Food Race can be tied to the theme of humility found throughout the Bible. In the story of the Prodigal Son, the younger son reaches a low point in his life, feeding pigs and longing for their food. The game gives youth a small taste of this humility by having them crawl on the ground, like the son who lost everything. It helps them reflect on how sin can bring us down, but also how humility is needed to return to God.

This game can also be linked to the theme of repentance. The Prodigal Son realized his mistakes and turned back to his father. In the same way, youth can learn that no matter how far they stray, they can always come back to God through repentance. The act of pushing the ball with their noses reminds them of how turning back to God might seem difficult, but it's always possible.

The game also touches on the theme of God's mercy. Just as the father in the parable welcomed his son back with open arms, God is always ready to forgive. Youth can reflect on how, even after making mistakes, God loves them and will always accept them when they seek forgiveness. This game helps open up conversations about the boundless mercy of God.

Materials:

- Open play area (gym, cafeteria, or hard surface)
- Soft foam balls (one per participant)
- Tape or cones to mark starting and ending points

Setup:

1. Mark a starting line on one end of the play area.
2. Mark an end point at the other end of the play area.
3. Make sure each participant has a foam ball.

How to Play:

1. Have each participant line up at the starting line with their ball in front of them.
2. Explain that they can only use their nose to push the ball forward.
3. On your signal, have them start pushing their ball toward the end point.
4. The first person to get their ball to the end point wins.

Additional Notes:

- If space is limited, make the play area shorter or have fewer participants in each race.
- For a longer game, have them go to the end and back to the starting line.
- The game works best on a hard surface like a gym floor. Grass or carpet can make it harder.

Videos

Listen Youth & Adult (The Prodigal Son) | Bible Engagement Project

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1rfOJWKzuE>

Luke 15 | Parables of Jesus: The Prodigal Son | The Bible

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_QCQ5i7NKs

