

# The Prodigal Son

*October 27, 2024*

## Lesson Summary

### **Main Passages**

Luke 15

### **Session Outline**

1. Two Sons (Luke 15:11-13)
2. The Journey Away (Luke 15:14-19)
3. The Return Home (Luke 15:20-32)

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### **Theological Theme**

God is the perfect Father who demonstrates His love for us by offering forgiveness, mercy, and grace. He searches for us when we are lost and delights when we are restored to Him.

### **Call to Action**

In the parable of the prodigal son, the passage also focuses on the older son, his conviction, and what he had to deal with to forgive his lost brother and welcome him back into the father's house. Are we actively praying, seeking, and welcoming the lost and conflicted into the Father's house?



## Leader Guide

# The Prodigal Son

### Introduction

Have you ever been lost with no idea how to get where you needed to be? It is a terrible feeling to realize you're not on the right path and have no clue how to reach your destination. Although most people today have GPS available in various forms, it is still possible to find yourself taking a wrong turn or exit or on a path in the woods that leads the wrong way.

Anyone who has been lost can testify to the feeling of relief that comes with being found. Any parent who has lost sight of a child in a store or on a playground can testify to the driving need to find that child as soon as possible. Today, we are considering what we can learn for our lives from a well-known parable about lostness.

- ❓ When have you experienced being lost? How do you typically respond in these moments?
- ❓ How do you respond when someone else is lost and you are the one searching for him or her?

### Session Summary

Each of the three parables in Luke 15 are focused on a lost thing being found and the joy that accompanies that restoration. Whether a lost sheep, lost coin, or a son who lost his way, the common truth is that God the Father searches for what is precious to Him.


He looks for us when we are spiritually lost, and we are never so far away that He won't welcome us back. We also see that we are never out of His sight or so far away that He stops looking for us. Realizing the depth of the Father's love for His people and the great value He places on our lives should encourage us.

## 1. Two Sons (Luke 15:11-13)


Luke 15 records three different parables around a common theme Jesus told to teach a valuable lesson. Each was about something lost. From a lost sheep to a lost coin to a lost son, Jesus described who God is and challenged the religious leaders' attitudes. These three stories give insight into and help paint a picture of God as Father and God as the great Shepherd.

Those listening to Jesus would have connected with the images He used. Those with hearts to receive and ears to hear would also have received the spiritual teaching in each. The same is true of those who read the Bible today. When your heart is open to what God says through His Word, then you can receive the spiritual principles and application of the Bible.


While the first two parables focused on a lost item or animal, the third described a beloved son who chose to leave. The main characters in the story were a father and two sons. While the father in the parable represents God, the sons can be any of us. Some people refer to this story as the prodigal son while others use a different description.

 What are some ways that you have heard this parable titled? How does that shape the way we understand it?

The different labels for the same parable have much to do with the perspective you use when looking at the story or the character you are focusing on. At first glance, we might consider the older brother the “good son” while the younger earns the title, “prodigal.” But as we dig deeper, we will realize both sons were separated from the father.

 What about the younger son makes it clear that he is separated from his father?

Although a father in this time could bestow inheritances at any time, this was usually given after the father died. The younger son, motivated by foolishness and greed, asked for a special exemption from waiting for his father to pass away and sought to receive his share of the family resources early. The son valued the father's things over the father. This father likely realized that his younger son was not ready for what he asked, but he still granted the request. At times, God may grant your requests even if they are not in your best interests or if He knows the result will be painful for you in the long run. But He will always use these instances for His purposes.


 Application: Where are you valuing the things God has over God Himself?

### The Inheritance:


The younger brother's portion was only a third of the estate if the entire estate were divided. By law, the older brother got a double portion (Deuteronomy 21:17).

## 2. The Journey Away (Luke 15:14-19)

The younger son could be described as wasteful. This son left home with his inheritance and, according to these verses, wasted it on reckless living. You may have experienced something similar. The younger son gave in to the desire to live according to his own wishes regardless of what his father wanted or expected for him. Although he had a strong family and a place in the world, he was not content with that, and he chose to chase after things of the world.


 In what ways are we naturally like the younger son?

Things didn't go well for the younger son. There was a clear point in which the son realized what his choices had cost him. He was serving in the vilest of places for a Jewish person and was still not getting what he needed. He hit rock bottom and ran out of viable options. He learned his lesson the hard way, but it was effective. We often learn the most from the toughest times in our lives, especially when those times reveal the truth about our need for God.

 Consider a time when you realized the consequences of poor decisions in your own life. Share with the group as is appropriate and you feel comfortable.

When we try to live on our own terms and ignore God, we reap the consequences at some point. Sometimes we must experience the depths of our own depravity and sin to understand and appreciate love and obedience toward God.

A famine heaped even more misery on this son. In his quest to be independent from his father and family, the younger son put himself in a terrible position. Although he likely enjoyed spending his inheritance, it only lasted a short time. Imagine the feelings and emotions that accompanied his realization that there was no more money to fund his escapades. Just like for this son, sin never fulfills us.

 Application: What are some ways we are tempted to believe living according to our own wisdom will satisfy? Why is this never ultimately the case?

### 3. The Return Home (Luke 15:20-32)

Finally, with nowhere to turn, the younger son came to his senses and realized how badly he messed up. He didn't blame anyone else, and he didn't try to rationalize his mistakes. He owned his choices. This is evidence of true contrition over his rebellion. We cannot be restored to the Father and others we have harmed if we refuse to take responsibility for our wrongs.

- ❓ What are some ways we might be sorry for the consequences of our sin but not for our sin itself? Why is important that we reach a place of true sorrow over sin?

Not only did the son recognize his responsibility for the situation, but he also began to practice what he would say to his father when he made it home. The person who gave him the freedom to choose his own path was the same person he wanted to humble himself before. Our heavenly Father offers us freedom to make decisions for ourselves, but He is always the One we ultimately need.

If we turn to Him fully, God is waiting to show us love and compassion, no matter what we have squandered or the depths to which we have fallen. The father in the parable stands as a picture of God, waiting for those who have rejected Him to return home. The shock of the story is the father doesn't meet the son with returned rejection or disdain, but with love and joy over his return. A beautiful restoration took place when the younger son turned back to his father.

- ❓ How have all who are in Christ received restoration like that of the younger son in this parable?

But the story isn't over. There is much to be learned from the older son also. The older brother was also separated from the father, believing he had earned the father's love through his loyal service. If we aren't careful, we will also turn this way, believing God owes us favor because of what we've done for Him. When we do this, we cannot receive others in the same way the Father does. Instead of condemning others for their choices and turning them away to live in misery, we need to be like the father who ran to receive his son back into the fold. Because we have been forgiven for much, we also are to forgive much and welcome others who come to the Father.

But notice the father was not only compassionate to the younger son but also to the older. Jesus wanted the religious leaders of the day to repent of their rejection of God so that they might be received and restored. The parable is left open ended—a challenge to the Pharisees whose response to Jesus was not yet complete.

- ❓ Application: In what way are you prone to respond to others like the older son in this story? What did both the older and younger son need to realize about the father?

## Conclusion

In each parable in Luke 15, joy comes when a lost thing is found. Although it takes time and effort, finding the lost thing or person is worth the wait and work. Joy also comes in being found. Think about how loved you have felt when you have been received back into the fold in some way. Just as you experienced the miracle of salvation and being forgiven for your sins, others are to be received in the same way.

We are to trust the Father and not insist in our own way or timing. When we do make foolish choices, we can turn back to the Lord knowing He is waiting to receive us with love. We don't need to continue chasing things of the world until we hit rock bottom. We can be assured that the Lord is waiting and watching for us to turn back, and He will receive us with love and acceptance. But we must also consider ways we believe God owes us for our loyalty to Him. Both the younger and older sons were loved deeply by the father and lavished with grace. How much more is this true of our Father in heaven?

- ❓ What relationship of yours needs restoration? How will you seek that restoration?
- ❓ Evaluate where in your life you have been like either of the brothers. Confess this before the Father and seek restoration with Him.
- ❓ How does this story affect the way you see God as your Father? Who can you tell about God's love for those who have rejected Him?

## Prayer of Response

*Thank God for loving you and accepting you even when you have rejected Him. Ask for help to show God's unconditional love to those around you.*

## Memory Verse

*Because this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found! So they began to celebrate. —Luke 15:24*

## Additional Resources

- *Luke by Trent Butler*
- *The Prodigal God by Timothy Keller*
- *Luke 12-24 for You by Mike McKinley*

## Disciples Multiplying Disciples





# Historical Context of Luke

## Purpose

The Gospel of Luke is a carefully researched (1:3), selective presentation of the person and life of Jesus Christ, designed to strengthen the faith of believers (1:3–4) and to challenge the misconceptions of unbelievers, especially those from a Greek background. Its portrait of Jesus is well balanced, skillfully emphasizing his divinity and perfect humanity.

## Author

The author of the Third Gospel is not named. Considerable evidence points to Luke as its author. Much of that proof is found in the book of Acts, which identifies itself as a sequel to Luke (Ac 1:1–3). A major line of evidence has to do with the so-called “we” sections of the book (Ac 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–37; 28:1–16). Most of Acts is narrated in third-person plural (“they,” “them”), but some later sections having to do with the ministry of the apostle Paul unexpectedly shift to first-person plural (“we,” “us”). This indicates that the author had joined the apostle Paul for the events recorded in those passages. Since there are no “we” passages in the Gospel of Luke, that fits with the author stating that he used eyewitness testimony to the life of Jesus (1:2), indicating he was not such an eyewitness himself.

## Setting

Since Luke wrote both the Third Gospel and the book of Acts (Ac 1:1–3), it is relevant to consider the dating of both books together. The events at the end of Acts occurred around AD 62–63. That is the earliest point at which Acts could have been written. If Acts was written in the early AD 60s from Rome, where Paul was imprisoned for two years (Ac 28:30), the Third Gospel could date from an earlier stage of that period of imprisonment. The other reasonable possibility is during Paul’s earlier two-year imprisonment in Caesarea (Ac 24:27). From that location, Luke would have been able to travel and interview the eyewitnesses to Jesus’s life and ministry who were still alive.

## Special Features

The Gospel of Luke is the longest book in the New Testament. Focusing on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, this Gospel is part one of a two-part history, the book of Acts being part two. Both were dedicated to “most honorable Theophilus” (Lk 1:3; Ac 1:1).

## Extended Commentary

### Luke 15:11-32

15:11–12 Although this well-known parable (vv. 11–32) is usually called the parable of the prodigal son, the other son and the father are also important characters. It was unusual, but not unheard of, for a father to settle his estate before his death. Since the older son got a double portion of his father’s estate, the younger son’s share (share . . . I have coming to me) would have been one-third of the estate.

15:13–16 The younger son had no intention of returning to his family. It is impossible to know whether his foolish living included prostitutes (v. 30) or if that was just an angry accusation made by the older brother. The irony of the penniless younger son’s new job was that pigs were unclean animals to Jews (Lv 11:7). Pods were seed casings of a tree used as food for cattle, pigs, and sometimes the poor. He was at rock bottom in his new life.

15:17–19 It took extreme poverty and hunger to prompt the younger son to come to his senses and realize that, in spite of all he had done, the correct course of action was to return and become one of his father’s hired workers. To do so, however, it would be necessary to confess that he had sinned greatly and was not worthy to be called his son. This is a vivid picture of a person “hitting bottom” and finally realizing the magnitude of his sin.

15:20–23 That the father saw his son coming from a long way off indicates that he habitually looked for his return. Perhaps the normal parental reaction to the younger son’s return would be anger or at least deep disappointment, but this father’s response displayed: (1) compassion, (2) love (threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him), (3) celebration (a feast), and (4) joyful restoration of status for his son (a robe of distinction, signet ring of family authority, sandals worn by a son, in contrast to barefoot slaves).

15:24 This is the point at which the parable ties in to the two previous stories about God’s joy in saving the lost. The father’s celebratory attitude depicts the way in which God the Father receives repentant sinners. This contrasts with the contempt the Pharisees and scribes displayed for sinners who came to Jesus (v. 2).

15:25–30 Instead of the story ending on a note of joy and celebration, as might be expected, the spotlight shifts to the older brother. Unlike the father’s positive attitude, the older brother (1) was surprised at the return of his sinning brother, (2) was offended and jealous at the father’s celebration, (3) became angry at the father’s forgiving love, (4) declared his own self-righteousness, and (5) focused on his brother’s sinfulness rather than his newfound repentance. Jesus’s representation of the religious leaders in the character of the older brother was a scathing rebuke of their self-righteousness.

15:31–32 The rebuke of the religious leaders continues. They did not understand (1) the opportunity for a close relationship with God, (2) the generosity of his grace, (3) his joy at the salvation of sinners, or (4) the profound transformation of conversion. Perhaps most crucial of all, however, is the reminder of kinship to the sinners intended in the phrase this brother of yours. Like the older brother in this story, the religious leaders refused to accept their Jewish brethren, the “sinners.”<sup>1</sup>

## References

1. A. Boyd Luter, “Luke,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1638–1639.