

# Luke 15:11-32 – The Prodigal Son

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## Context

- ❖ Why did Jesus tell this well-known parable of the prodigal son to the Pharisees and the teachers of the law?
  - The answer is found in vs. 1-2: the tax collectors and sinners were now all gathering around to hear Him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

## Form and structure

- ❖ Before the Lord starts telling this parable, He gives two similar parables: the one of the lost sheep (vs. 3-7) and the one of the lost coin (vs. 8-10). All three are related to each other. Let’s have a look at them.
  - There are 100 sheep; one got lost and was found again.
  - There are 10 coins; one got lost and was found again.
  - There are 2 sons; one got lost and was found again.
    - 100 > 10 > 2! The Lord is making a point.
- ❖ Two parables have a similar ending:
  - Vs. 7: “I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

- Vs. 10: “In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”
- But, there is no vs. 33: “In the same way, I tell you...” The Lord invites the listeners to draw the same conclusion for themselves. See the application.
- ❖ Each parable consists of three different scenes:
  - Initial situation. The loss of the sheep, the coin and the son (vs. 4a, vs. 8a, vs. 11-16).
  - The search for the sheep and the coin (vs. 4b, vs. 8b).
    - The father is not searching for his son, but there is an important turning point in the story when “he came to his senses” (vs. 17-20) – and the Father saw him, while “he was still a long way off” (vs. 21).
  - The joy shared with friends and neighbors (vs. 6, vs. 9 and vs. 32): “But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

## Exposition

### General remark

- ❖ For the exposition of this parable, it is important to compare the different verses and also to feel the emotion contained in them. This story is full of emotion which should be expressed when reading this parable aloud by yourself or in front of the congregation.

### Verse 11

- ❖ This is the introduction to the story. Remember the initial situation. There are two sons, the younger one who is a tax collector, and the older one who is a Pharisee. And there is the father of both, God in Jesus Christ, who receives sinners, welcoming them back into the family of God (vs. 1-2).

### Verse 12-16 (part 1)

- ❖ The onset of the parable is very astonishing. The younger one said: “Father, give me my share of the estate.” He wants to have his share of the heritage which is normally only given after the death of his father.
- ❖ The reaction of the father is also very remarkable. Without any comment, “he divided his property between them.” BOTH get their share, the younger and the older son. This is important because of vs. 29!
- ❖ To put off his family (and the listeners to this parable), he sells everything, showing no respect for the family property, which was important to the Israelites, and sets off for a **distant** country. He “squandered his wealth in wild living”. Compare with vs. 30!

- ❖ But the circumstances change. And he finds himself feeding the pigs, which are unclean animals to the Jews. “He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.” This shows the contempt people were showing towards him after they have had fun together.
  - Jesus is probably referring to the contempt that the tax collectors and sinners met with in Israel in those days.

#### Verse 17-24 (part 2)

- Now the younger son realizes what he has done. “He came to his senses” (Jer. 31:19; Ezek. 18:28; Ps. 32:5).
- ❖ When he asked for his part of the heritage, he declared the death of his father, but now: “here I am starving to death!” He wants to go back home, though not as a son, but as a “hired man.” Look at vs. 30! (Isa. 55:2.)
  - See also the sharp contrast between vs. 16 and 17:
    - Vs 16: “He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but **no one gave him anything.**”
    - Vs 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!’”
  - “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.” This is an expression of deep remorse. And again, Jesus is probably using this expression to describe the inner feelings of the tax collectors and sinners, who gathered around Him (vs. 1-2).
- ❖ The father knew he would come back and was already filled with compassion when he saw him from afar, and before(!) his son could reveal anything of what he had done and what had occurred to him, after he had left home.
  - Jesus is depicting Himself here as the compassionate one.
- ❖ The father is filled with joy. There is no sign of reproach or rejection; he receives him back as the son, who “was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found”.
  - Please note the following. The youngest son wanted to say: “I am no longer worthy to be called your son; **make me like one of your hired men**” (vs 19).
  - When he meets his father he says: “I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” And then follows very strongly: “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.**’”

#### Verse 25-32 (part 3)

- ❖ When the older son heard the music and the dancing, he asked one of the servants what was going on. He refused to go in. He even became angry. Again the father seeks his son and pleads with him.
- ❖ Note the contrasting words:
  - Vs. 29: “Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.” All these years, he has been acting like a hired man!
  - Vs. 29: “Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.” He has forgotten that his father divided his property between **THEM**. He never lived at his father’s house as a son.  
What is the difference between “I could celebrate with my friends” and “wild living” (vs. 13)? In essence he was longing for something his younger brother had actually done.

- Vs. 30: “But when this son of yours who has squandered...” Yes, this is true. But: “your property with prostitutes”, how could he know that? Vs. 13 speaks of “wild living.” He condemns his brother on the basis of suspicion and contempt.
- Vs. 30: “this son of yours.” He is not my brother. He is not only rejecting his younger brother, but also his loving father.
- ❖ Verse 31: “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.’” My son is here emphatically used, full of love and compassion.
- ❖ We should celebrate. Compared to the other two parables, Jesus doesn’t say: “there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents.” He wants his listeners to draw this conclusion for themselves now that tax collectors and sinners are repenting.

## Application

- ❖ Caveat. It is not the purpose of this parable that we should moralize and condemn all the things that the younger son did wrong. He even wished for his father to be dead. It is the older son who is moralizing and condemning. Tim Keller wrote: the church is often full of older sons and daughters.
- ❖ Jesus invites the listeners to rejoice over anybody coming to faith, returning to his Father’s house.
- ❖ See also the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Lk. 18:9-14).
- ❖ Jesus applies a lot of practical psychology and wisdom in this story and He confronts his listeners:
  - The father (God, the Father through Jesus Christ):
    - The father in his wisdom gave both their share, without comment.
    - The father in his wisdom and compassion knew that younger one would come back.
    - The father doesn’t ask any questions, because he knows what his son has gone through.
    - The father loves both “my son(s)”.
  - The younger son (tax-collectors, sinners):
    - He came to himself. This is (often) necessary when people come to faith. He discovered his failures in life. He really has a contrite heart. People often deny their failures. They blame the circumstances or other people or use stereotypes, such as: “everybody makes mistakes” (see also Tit. 3:3).
  - The older son (Pharisees and teachers of the law):
    - He forgot to live as a son, a child of God! He was listening to the orders of his father as a labourer listens to his boss.
    - He was jealous, because his younger brother had enjoyed(?) life and the things he would have liked to do with his friends, but never dared.

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