

The Prodigal Son

Grace and Forgiveness · Parables of Jesus

This masterpiece of storytelling, delivered in response to Pharisees' criticism that Christ received sinners and ate with them (Luke 15:2), vindicates divine grace toward repentant sinners while exposing self-righteous legalism. The parable contains two sons representing two opposite paths to lostness: the younger through profligacy, the elder through pride. Both need the father's grace; only one receives it.

The younger son's descent follows a tragic pattern: demanding his inheritance prematurely (implicitly wishing his father dead), journeying to a far country (geographic and spiritual distance), wasting his substance with riotous living (dissipation), experiencing famine, joining himself to a citizen of that country (attachment to the world), feeding swine (ultimate degradation for a Jew), desiring to fill his belly with swine's food (hitting bottom). His 'coming to himself' marks the turning point—recognition of his condition, remembrance of his father's house, repentance ('I have sinned against heaven, and before thee'), and resolution to return confessing unworthiness.

Note: The word 'prodigal' (from Latin *prodigus*) means wastefully extravagant. While applied to the son's squandering, it equally describes the father's lavish grace. The best robe signified honor, the ring authority, the shoes sonship (slaves went barefoot), the fatted calf celebration. Each gift proclaimed full restoration, not probationary servanthood. The father's running (undignified for an elderly Middle Eastern patriarch) expressed eager, unrestrained love.

The father's response transcends expectation: seeing him 'a great way off' (had been watching), filled with compassion, running, falling on his neck, kissing him repeatedly (Greek verb form indicates continuous action). The

son's prepared speech was interrupted—the father called for the best robe, ring, shoes, and fatted calf before the confession concluded. Grace precedes and exceeds repentance.

The elder brother's reaction reveals the self-righteous heart: refusing to enter despite the father's plea, recounting his faithful service ('these many years do I serve thee'), complaining he'd never received recognition ('thou never gavest me a kid'), resenting grace shown to the undeserving ('this thy son... hath devoured thy living with harlots'). The father's gentle response—'Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine'—exposed the elder brother's error: he'd served as a slave seeking wages, not as a son enjoying inheritance. The parable ends without revealing whether the elder brother relented, leaving Pharisees to supply their own conclusion.

Key Verses

Luke 15:17-18

And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee,

Luke 15:20

And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

Luke 15:22-24

But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: and bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

Luke 15:28-29

And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:

Luke 15:31-32

And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.

Romans 5:20

Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound:

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