

Lesson 6 | January 9, 2022

Return of a Wayward Son

Study Text: Luke 15:11–32

Central Truth: God’s heart is to see lost people lovingly reconciled to Him.

Key Verse: Reference

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 (KJV).

His father said to the servants, “Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet” (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students should examine the detailed image of God’s love for the sinner in the Parable of the Prodigal Son.
- • Students should better appreciate God’s love toward all those who turn from their sin and receive forgiveness in Christ.
- • Students should examine their hearts to see if their attitudes align with God’s love and priorities regarding all people.

Introducing the Lesson

Say: The Parable of the Prodigal Son, one of the most familiar of all of Christ’s parables, **encapsulates our free will to disobey God, our choice to repent, the Father’s love for the rebel, and the responsibilities of the community of believers—all in one amazing story.**

Opening Activity—Leaving Home

Ask: Why is the desire to leave home so strong in young people? Some answers may include: desire to establish a life of their own; problems with siblings or parents; wanting to take part in behaviors not condoned by one’s family.

Say: Many young people spend years waiting for the chance to leave home, making plans long in advance of when it becomes possible. For most, it is a desire for independence, to begin life as an adult. Sadly, for others it is a desire to escape a difficult or dangerous situation. And for still others, it is a matter of rebellion—which is the focus of the parable examined in today’s lesson.
(Share your highlights from the following text.)

Jesus saves all who are willing to follow Him in faith, but this bothered those who criticized His openness to associate with sinners (Luke 15:2). To illustrate God’s joy

over all who turn to Him, and to confront leaders with their own wrong ideas about who God loves, Jesus told three parables. **The first two dealt with a lost sheep and a lost coin (verses 3–10). The third, most often called the Parable of the Prodigal Son, is the most detailed. It uses a broken family to reflect an individual’s broken relationship with God, as well as God’s deep desire for restoration to take place.**

Part 1—Degradation of Wasteful Living Squandered Wealth

Luke 15:11–13

[Luk 15:11-13 KJV] 11 And he said, A certain man had two sons: 12 And the younger of them said to [his] father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth [to me]. And he divided unto them [his] living. 13 And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.

[Luk 15:13 NLT] 13 "A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living.

Say: Jesus often used parables—simple stories that illustrate spiritual truths—to convey teachings He wanted His hearers to know. Sometimes He delivered parables even if those teachings weren’t immediately understood. In Luke 15, He used the heartbreak and love of a parent with a rebellious child, a situation that is all too familiar in any culture and time period, to teach of the Father’s love and forgiveness. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The Parable of the Prodigal Son begins as a wealthy man—who had land and servants—was approached by the younger of his two sons. Not wanting to wait until his father died to receive his inheritance, the son asked for it immediately (Luke 15:11–12). **According to the Law, the firstborn son received a double portion of his father’s estate; accordingly, the younger son in the parable was entitled to one-third of his father’s wealth** (see Deuteronomy 21:15–17). The father acted immediately, dividing his property between his two sons.

It seems clear that the younger son had wanted to depart for some time, desiring a lifestyle of serving only himself, far from his home. As the parable continues, his lack of preparation for the future becomes painfully apparent. He saves none of his inheritance, wasting it all on “wild living” (Luke 15:13, NLT).

The son’s journey to a distant land was not only physical—a journey of miles—but spiritual. Leaving his family behind, he reveled in the opportunity to cast off all restraints of wisdom and godliness. Instead, he plunged into loose, foolish,

and reckless living. As he wasted his inheritance, he surrounded himself with others wasting their lives as well.

Discuss

? How, and why, can matters of wealth and inheritance create a rift, even in Christian families?

? What are some kinds of “distant country” temptations that present themselves today, and how can we overcome them?

Physical and Spiritual Poverty

Luke 15:14–16

[Luk 15:14-16 KJV] 14 And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. 15 And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

Say: Some people have to hit rock bottom before they are ready to admit their need for a Savior. As long as we feel that we can be good enough on our own, or that we are spiritually self-sufficient, we will not experience the salvation by grace through faith that Jesus came to provide. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The wayward son’s lack of foresight and preparation would soon catch up with him (Luke 15:14). Just as his wealth was gone, the entire country he was in experienced a famine. (These calamities usually resulted from adverse weather or crop disease.) In the context of the parable, it seems this development happens as if by God’s own hand, in the same way that God sent both the storm and the great fish in the life of the rebellious prophet Jonah (see Jonah 1:4,17). Suddenly, the son was in need, on the verge of starvation.

Having worked only for his father, the younger son now sought to work for a local farmer (Luke 15:15). **The setting of the parable is Gentile territory, and this Jewish man found himself in the degrading work of feeding pigs—unclean animals, forbidden for consumption by Jewish law (see Leviticus 11:7–8). As a result, Jesus’ Jewish listeners would have easily recognized the depth to which the younger son had fallen.**

In this time of famine, the son did not earn enough to meet his needs, and no one else was offering him anything either (Luke 15:16). All he could think of was how good the pigs’ food looked—pods that some identify as those of the carob tree, an evergreen native to the Mediterranean region and the Middle East. **Sadly, the younger son had gone from eating at his father’s table to wishing he could dine on the disgusting food of pigs, all because of his reckless, sinful choices.**

Resource Packet Item 1: Steps of Repentance

Distribute the work sheet. Read the passages and discuss the questions as a class or in groups.

Discuss

? How did the younger son's terrible choices prepare him for his eventual, humble return to his father? What can this teach us about sin today?

? Do you think God might use poverty and pain to lead someone back to Him? Give examples from the Bible, or even your own experience?

Part 2—Penitent Return and Joyful Reception

A Harsh Realization

Luke 15:17–19

[Luk 15:17-19 KJV] 17 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! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, 19 And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.

[Luk 15:17 NLT] 17 "When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger!

Say: Having reached a low point in his life, the son began to think about his father's house. When he compared his current condition to the life he could be living there, he realized that he had to go home. In a sense, humanity as a whole became a prodigal when Adam and Eve fell into sin in the Garden of Eden. As each of us awakens to our own hopeless situation, we can be reconciled to God. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The turning point of the Prodigal Son's life takes place when he "came to his senses" (Luke 15:17, NLT). He realized his father's kindness and generosity, even toward his hired workers. **When he lived in his father's house, his judgment was clouded by his desire to escape the bounds of responsibility and right living. Now, suffering in hunger among a herd of pigs, he could picture the "food enough to spare" (NLT) enjoyed by those working for his father.**

The Prodigal's return was better planned than his departure into a life of sin. Most importantly, he was not only returning to his friends and home; he was returning to his father, the very one who was central to the account of his leaving (verse

18). Knowing he had fallen short of both his earthly father's standards and those of God himself, he planned to open his appeal by admitting his wrongdoing.

Realizing that his actions did not reflect the values of his father, the son would also confess his unworthiness to bear his father's name (verse 19). Further, he would not expect to return to his previous status as son, but would take his place among his father's hired servants. **In all this, the actions of the Prodigal revealed that he trusted his father to receive him—at least as a hired laborer.**

Discuss

? In what ways can temptation to sin blind a person to the blessings God has placed in his or her life?

? Why is it crucial that those coming to Christ realize they have sinned not only against loved ones and human authority, but against God himself?

A Welcoming Father

Luke 15:20–24

[Luk 15:20-24 KJV] 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. 21 And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. 22 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: 23 And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill [it]; and let us eat, and be merry: 24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

Say: The father of the Prodigal Son never gave up hope. **What a beautiful picture of the patient longsuffering of God, as He is merciful, patiently waiting for us to come to Him. He is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9, KJV). (Share your highlights from the following text.)**

The father had been looking for his son's return, and his wait was finally over (Luke 15:20). The father responded with compassion. Instead of lecturing his destitute son about his moral and financial errors, he ran to him and welcomed him with open arms. Instead of hardening his heart toward the son who insisted on leaving the estate, his heart was filled with a love that had anticipated his return.

The vivid detail Jesus used represents, in a sense, the way that God the Father treats those who go to Him in repentance. The Prodigal's father running,

embracing, and kissing his errant son provides a picture of total welcome and acceptance. Note that Luke 15 begins with the religious leaders complaining that Jesus welcomed and ate with sinners (verse 2). God's attitude toward the lost contrasts starkly with that of these self-righteous individuals, people who were content both to ignore and to reject those they considered beneath them.

The parable continues with the father interrupting his son's planned speech (verses 21–22). **Before the son could ask to become a hired servant, the father did the opposite of what the son was expecting. Having heard his son's confession of sin, he commanded his servants to treat the son like royalty. The robe was fitting for a guest of honor. The ring was not only a sign of luxury and wealth; it also stood for family authority. The sandals signified status; his footwear may have worn out on the journey home.**

The father spared no expense in the celebration, ordering that the fattened calf—kept ready for such an occasion—be killed for a feast (verse 23). The reason for the celebration was simple; his son, feared dead, had returned alive. Lost to those who loved him, he was now found. **The terminology of “dead” and “alive” refers elsewhere in the Bible to the difference between a sinful condition and salvation (verse 24; see Ephesians 2:1–5). In addition, “lost” and “found” connect this parable with those of the lost sheep and the lost coin earlier in Luke 15; in each of these three parables, God's joy in a restored relationship with penitent sinners is at the forefront.**

[Eph 2:1-5 NLT] 1 Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins. 2 You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God. 3 All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. By our very nature we were subject to God's anger, just like everyone else. 4 But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, 5 that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!)

Discuss

? Why is it important for Christians to emphasize God's great love when they share the gospel with others?

? What are some ways we can declare God's joy over new believers and backsliders who have returned to God.?

Part 3—Jealous Spirit Reproved Refusing To Celebrate

Luke 15:25–30

[Luk 15:25-30 KJV] 25 Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. 26 And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. 27 And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. 28 And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him. 29 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: 30 But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.

Say: Remember, Jesus was telling this story because the religious leaders were complaining that He was associating with sinners. Now that they are listening carefully to His words, He comes to the character that represents them—the jealous older son. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

In Luke 15:25, the older son—not mentioned since the beginning of the parable—returned from his work in the field. From the house came the sound of music and dancing. (Note that this terminology is used in various biblical instances to celebrate God and His works; see Exodus 15:19–21; 2 Samuel 6:14–15). **Interestingly, the older son had no idea what was going on. (This detail of the parable may infer that the older son had distanced himself from the family to some degree; see verses 26–31.) When the older son found out the reason for the great celebration—his younger brother’s safe return—he refused to take part (verses 26–28).**

In verse 20, the father had gone out deliberately to receive the repentant younger son. In verse 28, he deliberately went out to plead with his proud, stubborn, older son to join the celebration. His love for both of them is evident. In the same way, God’s love reaches out to the unsaved, to the new believer, and to those struggling to grow in their walk with Christ.

Resource Packet Item 3: Because of God’s Love

Distribute the work sheet on the results of God’s love. Have students work in pairs to fill in the blanks, then discuss the work sheet in class.

The younger son had confessed his wrongdoing. Now, the older son drew attention to his own years of faithful, but heartless, service (verse 29). This verse includes a strong imperative word in Greek, which can be translated “Lo!” (KJV); “Look!”; “Behold!”; or “See!” In this setting, it was a very disrespectful word for the older son to use toward his

father, as seen in what follows in verse 29. One can sense a degree of animosity toward the father in this.

The older son complained that despite all of his work, he had never been given even a young goat for a feast—a lesser gift than a fattened calf—as a reward. He also distanced himself from his younger brother, calling him “this son of yours” when speaking with the father (verse 30, NLT). He was disgusted that his father celebrated the return of his sinful, wasteful brother. Like the religious leaders whom Jesus was addressing, the older son could not understand the forgiveness and acceptance of someone who had strayed so far away from God’s plan.

Discuss

? What are some lessons you can learn from the parable thus far?

? How might long-term believers be tempted to feel jealousy for the attention given to new believers or returning backsliders?

The Father’s Great Love

Luke 15:31–32

[Luk 15:31-32 KJV] 31 And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. 32 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

[Luk 15:31-32 NLT] 31 "His father said to him, 'Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. 32 We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!'"

Say: The father loved the Prodigal Son just as much as the son who stayed with him, and he reminded the older son that it was right to celebrate the return of his brother. God loves those who faithfully serve Him from their childhood just as much as those who come to Him later in life, or even stray away from Him and return later. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

When the younger son returned, the father did all that was needed to celebrate his well-being and repentance. For the older son, the father did all that was needed both to assure him of their relationship and to emphasize the need to celebrate the wayward brother’s return (Luke 15:31–32).

Addressing him tenderly as “dear son” (NLT), the father then acknowledged the son’s continued presence over the years. The father also affirmed the availability of his wealth

to him; **the older son would lose nothing as a result of the grace showed to his younger brother.**

However, the father also pressed the need to celebrate the Prodigal's return (verse 32). Yet, **it was not only appropriate to celebrate the younger son's return; but it was morally necessary. The son had been lost and apparently dead, yet now he had come back safe and sound into the loving arms of his father.**

In all three parables of this chapter, there is a call to rejoice when the lost sheep, lost coin, or lost son is found. The Parable of the Prodigal Son illustrates this need the most completely of the three. **Mature believers must guard against attitudes of self-righteousness, and celebrate whenever someone receives Christ, as well as whenever a prodigal returns in repentance.**

Resource Packet Item 3: A Cause for Celebration!

Distribute the case study on celebrating salvation and discuss the scenario. Ask class members to share ways to encourage new believers in Christ.

Discuss

? What are some examples of the "wealth" God's children enjoy in this life?

? How can a church balance ministry to the lost, discipleship of new believers, and long-term discipleship for mature believers?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: How should we treat those coming to Christ, as well as those returning to the faith? Although tempted to inspect their sincerity, our primary response must be joy—great joy. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus used an earthly father to illustrate God's response to each and every human being who turns to Him and receives the forgiveness available in Christ. The Prodigal Son was received with gladness, compassion, and extravagance after coming to his senses and returning home to his father. Since Scripture describes rejoicing in heaven over the repentance of the lost (see Luke 15:7), Christians—as individuals and as the Church—should celebrate as well when a person enters the family of God. Such a response not only honors God, who saved them, but it also provides a rich and memorable welcome in the church to those who have accepted Christ.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Examine your attitude toward new believers. Are you judgmental or supportive about their new life in Christ?
- Find ways to include new believers in activities with mature believers. Be intentional about making connections that can last a lifetime.
- Ask God to work through you to draw non-Christians to Him, and prodigals back to Him.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Jacob and Esau Reconciled.
Genesis 33:1–11

[Gen 33:1-11 KJV] 1 And Jacob lifted up his eyes, and looked, and, behold, Esau came, and with him four hundred men. And he divided the children unto Leah, and unto Rachel, and unto the two handmaids. 2 And he put the handmaids and their children foremost, and Leah and her children after, and Rachel and Joseph hindermost. 3 And he passed over before them, and bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. 4 And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him: and they wept. 5 And he lifted up his eyes, and saw the women and the children; and said, Who [are] those with thee? And he said, The children which God hath graciously given thy servant. 6 Then the handmaidens came near, they and their children, and they bowed themselves. 7 And Leah also with her children came near, and bowed themselves: and after came Joseph near and Rachel, and they bowed themselves. 8 And he said, What [meanest] thou by all this drove which I met? And he said, [These are] to find grace in the sight of my lord. 9 And Esau said, I have enough, my brother; keep that thou hast unto thyself. 10 And Jacob said, Nay, I pray thee, if now I have found grace in thy sight, then receive my present at my hand: for therefore I have seen thy face, as though I had seen the face of God, and thou wast pleased with me. 11 Take, I pray thee, my blessing that is brought to thee; because God hath dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough. And he urged him, and he took [it].

Tuesday:

Ruth's Kinsman-Redeemer.
Ruth 4:1–10

[Rth 4:1-10 KJV] 1 Then went Boaz up to the gate, and sat him down there: and, behold, the kinsman of whom Boaz spake came by; unto whom he said, Ho, such a one! turn aside, sit down here. And he turned aside, and sat down. 2 And he took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, Sit ye down here. And they sat down. 3 And he said unto the kinsman, Naomi, that is come again out of the country of Moab, selleth a parcel of land, which [was] our brother Elimelech's: 4 And I thought to advertise thee, saying, Buy [it] before the inhabitants, and before the elders of my people. If thou wilt redeem [it], redeem [it]: but if thou wilt not redeem [it, then] tell me, that I may know: for [there is] none to redeem [it] beside thee; and I [am] after thee. And he said, I will redeem [it]. 5 Then said Boaz, What day thou buyest the field of the hand of Naomi, thou must buy [it] also of Ruth the Moabites, the wife of the dead, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance. 6 And the kinsman said, I cannot redeem [it] for myself, lest I mar mine own inheritance: redeem thou my right to thyself; for I cannot redeem [it]. 7 Now this [was the manner] in former time in Israel concerning redeeming and

concerning changing, for to confirm all things; a man plucked off his shoe, and gave [it] to his neighbour: and this [was] a testimony in Israel. 8 Therefore the kinsman said unto Boaz, Buy [it] for thee. So he drew off his shoe. 9 And Boaz said unto the elders, and [unto] all the people, Ye [are] witnesses this day, that I have bought all that [was] Elimelech's, and all that [was] Chilion's and Mahlon's, of the hand of Naomi. 10 Moreover Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of Mahlon, have I purchased to be my wife, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance, that the name of the dead be not cut off from among his brethren, and from the gate of his place: ye [are] witnesses this day.

Wednesday:

Hosea Redeems His Wife.
Hosea 3:1–5

[Hos 3:1-5 KJV] 1 Then said the LORD unto me, Go yet, love a woman beloved of [her] friend, yet an adulteress, according to the love of the LORD toward the children of Israel, who look to other gods, and love flagons of wine. 2 So I bought her to me for fifteen [pieces] of silver, and [for] an homer of barley, and an half homer of barley: 3 And I said unto her, Thou shalt abide for me many days; thou shalt not play the harlot, and thou shalt not be for [another] man: so [will] I also [be] for thee. 4 For the children of Israel shall abide many days without a king, and without a prince, and without a sacrifice, and without an image, and without an ephod, and [without] teraphim: 5 Afterward shall the children of Israel return, and seek the LORD their God, and David their king; and shall fear the LORD and his goodness in the latter days.

Thursday:

Joseph Reconciled to Mary.
Matthew 1:18–25

[Mat 1:18-25 KJV] 18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. 19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just [man], and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily. 20 But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. 21 And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins. 22 Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, 23 Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us. 24 Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: 25 And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS.

Friday:

Zacchaeus Restored.
Luke 19:1–10

[Luk 19:1-10 KJV] 1 And [Jesus] entered and passed through Jericho. 2 And, behold, [there was] a man named Zacchaeus, which was the chief among the publicans, and he was rich. 3 And he sought to see Jesus who he was; and could not for the press, because he was little of stature. 4 And he ran before, and climbed up into a sycomore tree to see him: for he was to pass that [way]. 5 And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house. 6 And he made haste, and came down, and received him joyfully. 7 And when they saw [it], they all murmured, saying, That he was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner. 8 And Zacchaeus stood, and said unto the Lord; Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore [him] fourfold. 9 And Jesus said unto him, This day is salvation come to this house, forsomuch as he also is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.

Saturday:

Celebrate the Forgiveness of Sins.
John 20:19–23

[Jhn 20:19-23 KJV] 19 Then the same day at evening, being the first [day] of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace [be] unto you. 20 And when he had so said, he shewed unto them [his] hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord. 21 Then said Jesus to them again, Peace [be] unto you: as [my] Father hath sent me, even so send I you. 22 And when he had said this, he breathed on [them], and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: 23 Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; [and] whose soever [sins] ye retain, they are retained.