

Today we are going to look at a parable that Jesus shared with his disciples.

What is a parable?

Matthew 13:3 says, "*He (Jesus) spoke many things unto them in parables...*" . Before this time, whenever Jesus taught, He spoke in clear terms. However, many people refused to listen to Him so He began to teach parables that weren't able to be understood. Before this point, there is no record of Jesus having spoken in parables.

In verse 10 Jesus' disciples asked Jesus why He spoke in parables." Jesus answered, "*Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.*"

Before Jesus began to speak in parables He gave some wonderful allusions and figures of speech, but no parables. A parable, when left unexplained, is a riddle that cannot be understood. When the people refused to listen to what they could have understood, Jesus began to speak in riddles that they couldn't understand.

Jesus' speaking in parables marked a turning point in His ministry. But to those who believed, He explained every single detail of what He said.

Three characters are involved in the parable we are going to look at: A younger brothers; an older brother and a father. We are going to look at each of these people and then extract some lessons about life.

Luke 15:11 Then He (Jesus) said: "A certain man had two sons.

Luke 15:12 "And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.' So he divided to them his livelihood.

This parable is commonly known as the *Story of the Prodigal Son*¹. What you may not know is that this a parable of *two* lost sons. It is also a parable that sheds light on the kind of a loving and patient Heavenly Father that God is.

Notice at the end of Luke 15:12 that the father divided the wealth between "*them*"-- apparently both sons were present at the time of the request, with the younger son serving as the spokesman.

According to the customs of the Middle East, when a son demanded an early inheritance from his father, he was displaying great disrespect to his father. But here in this parable, the father was gracious and gave them their inheritance.

Luke 15:13 "And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living.

Luke 15:14 "But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want.

Luke 15:15 "Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

¹ Prodigal \Prod"i*gal\, a. [L. prodigus, from prodigere to drive forth, to squander away; pro forward, forth + agere to drive; cf. F. prodigue. Given to extravagant expenditure; expending money or other things without necessity; recklessly or viciously profuse; lavish; wasteful; not frugal or economical; as, a prodigal man; the prodigal son; prodigal giving; prodigal expenses. (www.dictionary.net)

Luke 15:16 "And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything.

He ended up feeding pigs—"unclean animals" according to Jewish ceremonial law. He became so hungry he wanted to eat pig feed, but apparently he could not do it. The Bible says that no one gave him anything to eat (16b), so more than likely, he was starving.

I will always remember the time in my life when I lived in New Jersey as I attended tech school. My mother would send me money each month and one particular month I had run out of money early. The cupboards in my apartment kitchen were virtually bare and I had no food. I managed to find some change in the seats of my car (or from my roommates) and had just enough gas to get to the store and buy some raisin bread. Needless to say, I ate the entire loaf of bread.

Now you need to know that I wasn't starving. Real hunger can drive a person to do many things he or she ordinarily wouldn't do under normal circumstances.

Records of the English colonies that settled in Jamestown during 1609 revealed some horrifying behaviors by the colonists. The writings of George Percy, a prominent member of the original band of Jamestown settlers, offer an insight into the mind-set of those early colonists.²

Now all of us at James Town, beginning to feel that sharp prick of hunger which no man truly describe but he which has tasted the bitterness thereof, a world of miseries ensued as the sequel will express unto you, in so much that some to satisfy their hunger have robbed the store for the which I caused them to be executed. Then having fed upon horses and other beasts as long as they lasted, we were glad to make shift with vermin as dogs, cats, rats, and mice. All was fish that came to net to satisfy cruel hunger as to eat boots, shoes, or any other leather some could come by, and, those being spent and devoured, some were enforced to search the woods and to feed upon serpents and snakes and to dig the earth for wild and unknown roots, where many of our men were cut off of and slain by the savages. And now famine beginning to look ghastly and pale in every face that nothing was spared to maintain life and to do those things which seem incredible as to dig up dead corpses out of graves and to eat them, and some have licked up the blood which has fallen from their weak fellows. And among the rest this was most lamentable, that one of our colony murdered his wife, ripped the child out of her womb and threw it into the river, and after chopped the mother in pieces and salted her for his food.

The prodigal son was experiencing real hunger. There were no food stamps. There was no Temporary Cash Assistance to hold him until his circumstances changed. There was no food bank; he was suffering from true hunger.

Research shows that at the top of the list for the effects of starvation is tiredness, followed by intense appetite, muscle soreness, irritability, apathy, sensitivity to noise, and hunger pain and I imagine that this young man was experiencing the debilitating effects of having gone without food for an extended period of time.

The prodigal son's circumstances had reduced him to doing something no Jewish person would do—care for pigs. There was an old saying among the Jews that said, "*May a curse come upon the man who cares for swine.*" That's how low it was for this young man, he stooped so low that he would have filled his belly, verse 16 says, with pig food but they wouldn't even give him that.

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http://jamestownechesapeakebaycompany.com/PDF/Jamestown_1609_1610_Starving_Time_George_Percy_A_True_Relation.pdf

As we continue to read this parable we are brought to the realization that the prodigal son was not only hungry for food; he was hungry for fellowship. He was hungry for home; he was hungry for his father.

Luke 15:17 says , *“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!’”*

Psalm 63:1 writes of this kind of hunger: *“O God, You are my God; I shall seek You earnestly; My soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”*

The prodigal was out of the will of God and was beginning to realize it. He was in a far country where no one gave him anything. He was famished spiritually—he had no joy and no peace. The circumstances of life were beginning to overwhelm him and he was thinking about going back home to get right with his father.

It’s like that for some Christians. They’ve left the Father and have come to the point where they are tired of eating from the garbage cans of the world.

They set off from a place of blessing—they took off much like the prodigal son, with an inheritance—great health and vitality, a wonderful family, a roof over their head—but sadly the world has swindled them out of their inheritance. The flesh and the devil picked their pockets until they were empty—all they started out with they’ve run out of.

Can you think back to a time when things were going better for you? Was it better for you when you were in the Father’s house? Were things brighter when you were regularly in the Father’s presence? You regularly read your Bible; you regularly prayed; you regularly attended church and served the Lord in a ministry.

This was the case with the younger son. He was reflecting on all that he had while with his father—when he lived under his father’s roof and served his father. But now he had fallen so far that he realized that his father’s servants were eating better than he was.

By the way, the word "hired servant" does not refer to a household slave; it doesn't mean a contracted servant, it means a day laborer. The prodigal son came to the realization that even the people passing down the road that my father hire for one day's work have food to eat.

He had spent all and lost all. He went from a prince to a pauper in a short amount of time. Now he’s had some time to think and the Bible tells us in verse 17 that, *“He came to himself.”*

What does it mean that, *“He came to himself”*?

1.) *He came to his senses concerning the empty promises of the world (Vanity Fair).*

This truth is on display with many of the “As Seen on TV” products.

- Some consumer groups have concluded that *Cham Wow* wonder towel is a Sham...wow.³
- Those vegetable green bags weren’t working like the woman said they would.

³ http://www.popularmechanics.com/blogs/technology_news/4294482.html

- What about those detox foot pads that turn a “yucky black” as they pull toxins from your body? They will look and smell the same way if you let them spend the night over a glass of water.
- If you order the Slap Chop, you’re going to want to slap the man on the commercial for telling you to throw away your chopper.

The world is as good as those commercials when it comes to making empty promises. They lead you to believe that you’ll be popular if you buy their car, drink their beer, or use their product.

The Prodigal Son set out with his inheritance thinking he would live it up and he soon came to his senses that the world’s promotions aren’t all they’re cracked up to be.

- a) The Bible tells us that the world is under the sway or control of the “wicked one”, the devil.
- b) The world is exalts the desires of the flesh, eyes and boastful pride of life over the Father.
- c) The world is passing away (Only what’s done for Christ will last.)

He came to his senses concerning the empty promises of the world.

2.) *He came to his senses concerning his evil desire for money.*

- a) His desire for money was the root of the evil in his life. He couldn’t wait for his inheritance—he had to have it now! His trust was in money, not in God’s plan for his life.
- b) His desire to be rich brought destruction. His money went through his hands like sand. 1 Timothy 6:9 reads, *“But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction.”*

First, he came to his senses concerning the empty promises of the world. Secondly, he finally came to realize that he had an evil desire for money.

3.) *He came to his senses about how good he had it with his father before he set out to do his own thing.*

The grass always seems to look greener when it is in someone else’s back yard. This young man went out and found that the green grass was really Astroturf. It was a façade. The world was frontin’ him.

His friends told him he was “somebody” while he had the money, but when the money was gone so were his friends.

Somebody said, “A Christian is one who does not need to consult his bank balance to see how wealthy he is.” This young man was already wealthy before he got his inheritance but he didn’t realize this until he came to his senses about how really good he had it when with his father.

In Luke 15:18-19 - *“I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.”*

The younger son, who was Jewish, had hit rock bottom so hard, he was tempted to eat the pods of grain that were being fed to the pigs. He realized that if he did not change his circumstances, he was going to die.

There may be some among us who are in dire circumstances right now.

Perhaps you have hit rock bottom physically. I talk to people each week that are homeless. This past week I talked with a woman who has several college degrees but pushes a cart around and sleeps under an awning at a mall.

Perhaps you have hit rock bottom emotionally. Perhaps you are fighting anger on almost a daily basis. For some, your anger has turned into bitterness. Could there be some among us today who are battling fear?

Have you hit rock bottom spiritually? Have circumstances caused your desire for God to fade?

Did you know that God is the God of your circumstances? Nothing happens in your life without His permission. In fact, God sometimes allows pain into our lives as a form of discipline in order to get our attention and bring us back to Himself.

Heb 12:9 Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live!

Heb 12:10 Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.

Heb 12:11 No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

God uses pain to let us know that something is wrong; something needs to be changed; something needs to be fixed.

The song writer said, *“He’s so wonderful; my God is - He’s a burden bearer and a heart fixer, He’s a soul saver and a mind regulator.”*

Someone said, *“He is a keeper, a deliverer, a waymaker, a door-opener and a door-closer”* and oftentimes we do not know and appreciate these truths until we go through something.

Sometimes we just don’t get it until we go through something—a trial—a tribulation—some suffering.

You’ve got to go through somethin’ or you’ll amount to nothing.’ The strongest trees have endured the strongest winds. James puts it this way, *“Count it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials; the trying of your faith produces endurance—let endurance have it’s perfect work that you might be mature and complete lacking in nothing.”* (James 1:2-4)

The prodigal son had to go through something. In fact, what he went through is common to those who are on their way back from disillusionment in the far country to delight with the Father.

1. *Ruin (Bankruptcy) - Luke 15:14 - After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.*
2. *Recklessness - He would attempt to apply a fleshly solution to a spiritual problem - Luke 15:15 - So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.*

3. *Realization - Learning that the fleshly solution doesn't work - Luke 15:16 - He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*
4. *Repentance - A change of mind - Luke 15:17 - 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!'*
5. *Return - A change of direction - Luke 15:18 - I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.*

He went from ruin to recklessness, to realization, to repentance, to return. Out of his suffering circumstances he returned to his father.

Let me say here that this is where many people get stuck in the mud. They know they are out of the will of God. They know that it would be better for them if they returned to the Father. But pride keeps them from doing the right thing.

Pride keeps you from moving from realization to repentance.

Pride keeps you repenting and returning to the Father.

Pride keeps you from humbling yourself before people and seeking their forgiveness.

Pride keeps you from humbling yourself and seeking the Lord for His forgiveness.

Someone has said that *"Pride is the only poison that is good for you when swallowed."*

The younger son swallowed his pride and began to accept responsibility for his condition. He comes to his senses and says, *"I will ... go.... I will say to him."*

Luke 15:20 "And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.

Luke 15:21 "And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

He first admitted that he had he sinned against "heaven" (God). The Jewish person believed that it was not respectful to say the word, "God." So when the son said, *"I've sinned against heaven,"* he was actually confessing his sins before God.

Secondly, he admitted he had sinned against his human father. You see, we not only sin vertically against God, we sin horizontally against people. We need to deal with both areas of sin as did the prodigal son.

Now here is where we begin to see the reason for which Jesus told this parable. This parable is not about the younger son as much as it is about the father's love.

Many of us can identify with one or more aspects of the son—*"all we like sheep have gone astray."*

How many of us have squandered the blessings of God?

How many of us have lived recklessly?

How many of us have ever hit rock bottom?

Many of us can identify with one or more aspects of the son and many of us may be able to identify with his remorse and repentance—we all have "been there and done that" and can see the wisdom in returning to the father.

Luke 15:20 "And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.

The son did the right thing—he returned to his father! Yea! Praise the Lord! It's at the juncture that many preachers close their message with a prayer. But hold up! There are some important truths we need to consider. There are a few things that we may have missed.

- The son's life would have been short-lived if the *father* would have not received him back as a son.
- The son would have still been in poverty if the *father* would not have had compassion on him.
- The son would probably have died of hunger—there was a famine in the land—if the *father* would not have forgiven him.

Luke 15:20 says, *"And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.*

Verse 20 hints that the father had more than likely been looking everyday for his son's return.

He could have been working in the front yard and would occasionally look out over the plain. The father could have been in the house and would occasionally look though the window—"maybe today."

He could have been doing business in town and would see someone who resembled his son, *"Is that my son!?"*

Verse 20 also tells us that when the son returned and while he was a great distance away, the father saw him. Notice that the father didn't wait for the son to reach him; he ran to his son and embraced him and hugged him and kissed him!

You need to know that in those times, Middle Eastern men did not run. Running was undignified.

If you were wearing Middle Eastern clothing before you could run you would have to gather and fasten up of the long garment. You would have to lift up your robe to run and to do this your legs would be exposed. Exposing the legs was a shameful thing to do.

The father runs to the son and falls on his neck and the son and Luke 15:21 says, *"And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.'"*

Luke 15:22 says, *"But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet.'"*

- The *robe* was a mark of honor. Can you imagine what the son looked like when he returned home? Now he not just "a robe" but "the best robe."
- The *ring* was a pledge of love and a sign of authority. This was the signet ring that had a seal which was used along with wax to authenticate a document. This son had the rights to everything his father owned.
- The *sandals* were a sign of sonship! Slaves worked barefooted but a nobleman's son wore sandals.

Luke 15:23-24 – *"And bring the fatted calf here 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."*

- Middle Easterners ate little meat when compared to the other kinds of food they consumed. So to kill a *fatted calf*—this was a sign that it’s party time—you had to invite others over to help eat it!

The rest of this parable we meet again the older son who is filled with jealousy.

Luke 15:25 "Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.

Luke 15:26 "So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.

Luke 15:27 "And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.'

Luke 15:28 "But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him.

Luke 15:29 "So he answered and said to his father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends.

Luke 15:30 'But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.'

Luke 15:31 "And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours.

There is the attitude of the older son...I could preach a complete message on the older son.

The older son had no love for the father; he had no love for his younger brother—the only person he loved was himself.

There is no record of him trying to reason with the younger brother about the disrespectful request for his inheritance.

When he returns from the field and learns his brother has returned, he is not glad for his brother—he does not rejoice with his father. He wouldn’t even go into the party. The older brother is a picture of the hypocritical Pharisees and Sadducees.

The response of prodigal’s *father* is given to us so that we might know the heart attitude of our heavenly Father when a sinner repents of his or her sin.

The response of the prodigal’s father shows us that God is a gracious father. Psalm 51:17 says, “*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart; These, O God, You will not despise.*”

Ephesians 2:8-9, “*For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.*”

The songwriter writes...

*Marvelous grace of our loving Lord,
Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt!
Yonder on Calvary’s mount outpoured,
There where the blood of the Lamb was spilled.*

*Grace, grace, God’s grace,
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;
Grace, grace, God’s grace,
Grace that is greater than all our sin.*

C.S. Lewis has this really neat illustration. He says that in the incarnation, (God becoming man) Jesus was like a diver. He is God in heaven looking down into this dark, slimy, murky water. That's this sinful, polluted world. God dives in, He gets himself wet. And then God came up again, dripping, but holding the precious thing he went down to recover.

That precious thing was a lost sinner—it was you and me. He dove in to save sinners like us. That's how we get out of the slime of sin, the dross of immorality, the scum of wickedness like cheating, or lusting, or hating, or whatever other self-destructive sin we are buried in.

God in Christ descended down into the slime and rescued us.

Resolutions and vows to be better won't help; we don't have the power to keep them.

We are stuck on the sea bottom.

We have no power of our own to get up or out.

Sin has encompassed us; sin has gotten the best of us.

Like the prodigal son, all we can do is cry out for God's grace to lift us up, to rescue us.

Jesus saves us because he is seeking the lost.

Good resources for this parable!

<http://www.biblebb.com/files/MAC/91-3.htm>

<http://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/1227.htm>