

The Prodigal Son

Luke 15:11–32

Learning Objectives

- Discuss unconditional forgiveness and reconciliation related to God and us
- Examine the responses of the three main characters in this parable and discuss how these responses parallel group members' attitude and behavior

? When have you heard the term “prodigal son” used? Have you known any “prodigals” that would fit that description? What did they do to earn that?

Possible Answers: Responses will vary! The term “prodigal son” is usually used to describe someone who goes their own way but then returns to the status quo or in-group. People often earn this by choosing to go their own way, often through making bad decisions or mistakes, before returning to seek reconciliation.

? Alternative icebreaker question: What is your place in your family birth order? Do you feel like you fit the stereotypical role from that description?

Possible Answers: Responses will vary. This is a fun question to talk about personality and relationships between people. If people are not aware of birth order stereotypes, feel free to skip this question.

Leader Read Out Loud: Our main cast includes the (younger) prodigal son, the older son, and the father. Pick a character and put yourself in their place as you read this parable. What would that character think and feel during their experiences in the parable?

Luke 15:11–32 (NIV)

¹¹ Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

¹³ “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have

sinned against heaven and against you.¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²² “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.’²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

³¹ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 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.’”

? Have you ever been impatient for something good to happen? What did you do to pursue it?

Possible Answers: Responses will vary. All of us have been impatient for things to happen at one time or another. This is a good way to talk about what avenues people use to pursue things they want.

? What was the younger son impatient to receive? Why was asking his father for his inheritance like that so shocking and distressing?

Possible Answer: The younger son was impatient to live his life the way he wanted, and he wanted to use his inheritance for that now, not later! His request was so shocking because he basically wanted to act like his father was dead so he could do what he wanted.

? How did his decision to take his inheritance early and leave turn out for the younger son? How do you feel about that outcome?

Possible Answer: He found himself lonely and starving, far from home. It's both a reasonable outcome that one could predict, and a distressing one, because no one should have to starve far from home.

Participants' reactions may vary based on their perspectives.

? We've all needed forgiveness for our actions in the past. What do you think is the most difficult part of asking forgiveness? What is the most difficult part of giving forgiveness?

Possible Answers: People's answers will vary. The most difficult parts of asking forgiveness may be: admitting you were wrong, talking about your mistakes, acknowledging how you hurt someone, accepting responsibility for your actions, knowing you may not be forgiven, etc. The most difficult parts of giving forgiveness may be: acknowledging how much the other person hurt you, reliving the hurt experience, feeling resentment and a desire to keep power over the other person by not forgiving them, not wanting to have to be open to the other person in any way (guarded), etc. Let your group members talk and share what they feel comfortable with, and explore the hard parts of a very good thing.

? What was the younger son's motivation in returning to seek forgiveness?

Possible Answers: The younger son was starving and upset over what his life had become. He acknowledged his sin against his father and God.

? Did the younger son's motivation affect his father's response to him?

Possible Answers: No, it did not! The father did not ask him for his reasons or justification or a detailed apology. His father ran to him and kissed him and hugged him before he said a word. No matter what his reasoning or motivation may have been, the father extended forgiveness and love.

? What does the older brother's response show about his heart?

Possible Answers: It potentially showed the built-up resentment and bitterness he had for his younger brother and also his father. It showed his entitlement and showed that he felt like he was more deserving based on his actions.

? What does the older son say to his father about why he won't go into the party in verses 29 and 30?

How do you think the older brother is feeling?

Possible Answers: The older son is angry, he talks about his faithful service ("slaving away") and his responsibility, and how he's never received any reward ("you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends"). He contrasts it with his ne'er-do-well brother ("squandered your property with prostitutes") who is now being spoiled all over again with a party. The older brother likely feels

angry, resentful at both the brother and father, entitled to the money that is being wasted on his younger sibling, and disgusted that the whole past is being ignored.

? What does the father say to the older son in verses 31 and 32? How do you think he feels about his two sons in this moment?

Possible Answers: The father acknowledges the older son's faithfulness ("you are always with me") and his rightful claim to the father's property in the end ("everything I have is yours"). He also says that the return to relationship is like returning to life and finding what was thought forever lost; something to be celebrated richly! The father likely feels concerned and upset that his sons don't get along, and hopeful for reconciliation between the two of them as well as between the father and his younger son.

? How is this parable encouraging to us?

Possible Answers: We are the younger son - we have sinned against our heavenly father and He joyfully welcomes us back when we come back to Him. At times we are also like the older brother and the father's response is also kind and gentle to the older brother.

? How is this parable a picture of the Kingdom of God?

Possible Answers: Regardless of what we have done in the past, God is overjoyed when a child comes back to him. There is forgiveness and grace. Celebrating is good :)

? Do you relate more to the younger or older brother's response and attitude?

Possible Answers: Answers will vary.

? Neither the younger son nor the older son had the right attitude in this parable. The father was the one who sought and led to reconciliation and full forgiveness. How can we seek to have an attitude like the father's, who is loving in the same way that God freely offers us love?

Possible answers: We can seek to have a loving and forgiving attitude by asking God for help with forgiveness, by focusing on love and God's best, and by being willing to forgive even when it would hurt our pride, image, feelings, or other aspects of ourselves. NOTE: Forgiveness does not mean a reset relationship. Just as the younger son would no longer get anything from his father after his death as he had already taken his inheritance, so a relationship that has undergone a break only resumes with consequences. You can forgive while acknowledging permanent change in a relationship!

For Discussion and Accountability

? Is there an area in your life where you could have a response like the father's where you currently have the response or attitude of one of the brothers?

? Is there someone God is asking you to forgive?

? When you experience resentment or bitterness or anger, what are ways you extend genuine forgiveness and grace despite how you feel?