



THE AUTHENTIC JESUS | STORYTELLER (1)

March 12, 2023

Luke 15:11-32

PURPOSE

To discover and experience Jesus Christ in our midst
To cultivate mutually encouraging relationships
To participate in God's mission to the world

ICE BREAKER QUESTION

10 MIN

What makes a gift good and precious?

WORSHIP

10 MIN

OPENING PRAYER

O Lord our God, grant us grace to desire you with our whole heart: that desiring you, we may seek you; and that seeking you, we may find you; and that finding you, we may love you; and that loving you, we may hate those sins from which you have delivered us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

RESPONSIVE PRAYER—Psalm 23

¹The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

²**He makes me lie down in green pastures.**

He leads me beside still waters.

³He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

⁴**Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.**

⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

⁶**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.**

SCRIPTURE READING

¹¹And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹²And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. ¹³Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷"But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."²⁰And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against

heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’²²But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet.’²³And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.²⁴For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵“Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.²⁶And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.²⁷And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’²⁸But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him,²⁹but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.³⁰But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’³¹And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.³²It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

BIBLE STUDY Summary and Connection

40 MIN

The parable of the prodigal son is regarded as the finest of all the parables of Jesus. The universal appeal of the story lies in its core message—God’s forgiving grace, generous love, and all-embracing acceptance for undeserving sinners. Before we delve into the parable itself, we have to understand the significance of parables in Jesus’ ministry. Why did Jesus speak in parables? What purpose did Jesus’ stories and parables serve in the grand scheme of God’s redemption of sinners? Australian Jesuit priest and academic Gerald O’Collins makes an insightful observation. He writes, “The parables that Jesus told and the images he used let us into his mind and heart. They let us see what he prayed and thought about, and what he wanted to share with us. They convey the vision of the world and of all that God offers us. They show us how he saw reality and what he truly treasured. Above all, they disclose his deepest and richest answers to the questions: What is God like? What is God doing for us?”

In Luke 15, we read about a large crowd drawing near to listen to Jesus’ teaching. Luke specifically mentions the presence of tax collectors, sinners, and the Pharisees among the crowd. The Pharisees, who were the elite religious leaders, were indignant about Jesus. These religious leaders were scandalized by Jesus’ teaching and his character—the way he conducted himself and the people he called friends. The Pharisees accuse Jesus by saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2). Jesus, completely aware of the Pharisees’ indignation, uses the opportunity to teach the crowd in parables. The parable of the lost son is the last of the three parables based on the “lost and found” motif. Jesus begins with the parable of the lost sheep. In verse 17 we see Jesus fleshing out the theme of his parables—the unparalleled joy in heaven over one sinner who truly repents of his sinful condition. Jesus contrasts the joy with the despair for the 99 self-proclaimed righteous persons who see no need for repentance and forgiveness. In his second parable about the lost coin, Jesus reinforces the theme of joy in heaven—the dwelling place of God— when one sinner repents.

The parable of the lost son stands out from the other two parables in its degree of relevance. The characters in the story of the lost son represented the family structure of Jesus’ day. The crowd surrounding Jesus would have readily identified the societal value of a patriarch in the ancient near eastern Jewish culture. The crowd, even the sinners and

tax collectors, firmly believed in the roles and responsibilities of the sons towards their fathers and the household. After the introduction of the characters, Jesus' story takes an unexpected turn. We see the youngest son asking for his share of his father's property. This demand from the son is radical for two main reasons. Firstly, in the Jewish culture, the distribution of inheritance was a matter of final will and testament. In other words, demand for share in the property while the father was alive was tantamount to shaming the father by declaring him as good as dead. Secondly, the father's response to his son's scandalous demand was utterly radical and unheard of. The father, instead of disowning the son for his blasphemous request, obliges and divides his property. The father accepts the shame by granting his son's request.

The rest of the parable provides a character study of the father and the two brothers. The second son, abandoning his father and his responsibility towards the father, departs to a foreign land. His life is characterized by uninhibited debauchery and reckless indulgence. Tragedy strikes the younger brother in two ways—he squanders all his money and the famine hits the land. We see the desperation and the moral degradation of the younger brother as he sells himself to a pig breeder. The Jews regarded pigs as the most unclean of all animals and pig breeding as the most despicable of all vocations. Such was the desperation of the younger brother that he was denied the access to the pods that pigs ate. He resorts to stealing the pods to quench his hunger. In his state of utter helplessness and desperation, the younger brother remembers his father, and his father's house. He realizes the intensity of his sin against God and his father. He decides to return to his father's house—not as a son, but as a slave. The father sees the younger brother from a distance, and his response is shockingly radical. In a culture where the patriarchs never ran as lifting the garment and exposing legs are considered shameful, we see the father running towards the son. In a culture where the son who shames his father would be punished, we see the father embracing, and profusely kissing the shame filled, and morally and physically unclean son. We see the heart of the father at full display as he covers the spiritual and physical shame of the son by his loving embrace and providing an expensive robe. The father not only forgives the younger brother, but he also restores the dignity of his son by putting a ring on his finger as a sign of acceptance. The theme of unparalleled joy over a sinner's repentance in heaven is seen here in the extravagant party the father throws to publicly welcome his son who was once lost and dead and now found alive.

Finally, we see the character of the older brother who is utterly humiliated by his father's forgiveness and acceptance of his sinful younger brother. The older brother is so hyper focused on the purity of his righteousness and on the wickedness of his younger brother that he fails to experience the power of the father's love and forgiveness. The older brother was so consumed with self-righteousness that he was totally oblivious to the joy of what it means to be a son. In other words, since he did not understand what it means to be a son, he failed to understand what it means to be a father. The older brother's character shows us how the proud and the self-righteous always feel they are not treated as well as they deserve. The self-righteous older brothers are incapable of participating in the unparalleled joy of heaven as the joy is not earned by merit but received by grace alone. We see the love of the father towards his older son. He does not discriminate between the sons. Father pleads with the older brother by reminding of his status in the family and appeals to him to join in the celebration. The love and mercy of the father is equally accessible for both the self-righteous older son, and the self-seeking younger son. It is freely available to all who acknowledge their sinful condition, and their need to be saved.

Jesus ends the parable without a resolution. Jesus does not tell us whether the older brother responded or not, nor does he tell how the younger brother lived. The open ended nature of the parable is a challenge to the readers. Who do we identify with in this story? How do we respond to the father's forgiving grace, and embracing love? Do we receive with gladness, or do we complain that we are not appreciated as we rightly deserve? Do we rejoice with the younger brothers, or do we refuse to join in the celebration? Jesus' parable reveals God's steadfast love that challenges us to examine our hearts to see who we truly are in the parable, and to humbly admit our need for God's forgiving grace, and all-encompassing love.

1. Looking at the Bible

What does the text say? What according to you is the theme of this passage?

- In Luke 15:1 we read about the crowd drawing near Jesus to hear him speak. Luke specifically mentions two kinds of people. Who were they? How does their presence influence Jesus to share the parable of the lost son?
- In Luke 15:12 we read about the younger son's request. What makes the son's request scandalous? What makes the father's response to his son's request radical?
- What can we learn about the father's love for both the older and younger sons in this parable? How does that point us to God's love towards us?
- What is the significance of Jesus ending the parable without any resolution?

2. Looking at Jesus

At Central we believe that all of Scripture points to Jesus. In other words, Jesus is the theological center of the Bible. Every passage not only points to Jesus, but the grand narrative of the Bible also finds its fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus.

- Jesus shares the parable of the lost son to show us the heart of God the father in forgiving and welcoming lost sinners into the kingdom of God. What can we learn about the significance of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection from this parable?

3. Looking at our Hearts

In this parable we learn about two brothers and their lostness. In his book *Prodigal God*, Tim Keller describes lostness as two basic ways people try to find happiness and fulfillment: the way of moral conformity (older son) and the way of self-discovery (younger son).

- Can you personally identify any merit based (moral conformity) tendencies, or self-discovery mindset in your own relationship with God? How does the gospel help you to reorient your mindset?

4. Looking at our World

The parable of the lost son not only challenges us to examine our hearts individually, but also to examine ourselves as the church community in the city.

- How does this passage help us to grow as a community of God that welcomes not only the lost younger brothers, but also the self-righteous older brothers?

SHARING Share your prayer requests, thoughts, hopes and fears for the coming week, and as you do
15 MIN consider how this passage might give light to what you are sharing.

KINGDOM Pray that we would see ourselves called by God.
PRAYER Include other prayer requests.
15 MIN

SENDING God's word is a lamp to our feet.
5 MIN Christ's teachings are a light to our path.
May God's word take root in our lives.
May Christ's love nourish and sustain us.
Amen.