Prodigal Son Bible study

Luke 15:11-32. 3 sessions of about 45 minutes, or one longer session. For small groups and personal study.

Jesus tells the story of a father and two sons in answer to complaints that he welcomes sinners and eats with them. The younger son leaves, wastes his inheritance, and returns confessing his sin. The father welcomes him with compassion. The older brother resents the celebration, and the father goes out to him too. The story ends with an invitation to share the father's joy, without telling us whether the older brother accepts it.

READ TOGETHER: LUKE 15:11-32

11 Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger son said to him, ‘Father, give
me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. 13 After a few days, the younger
son got everything together and journeyed to a distant country, where he squandered his wealth in
wild living. 14 After he had spent all he had, a severe famine swept through that 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 into his
fields to feed the pigs. 16 He longed to fill his belly with the pods the pigs were eating, but no one
would give him a thing. 17 Finally he came to his senses and said, ‘How many of my father’s hired
servants have plenty of food? But here I am, starving to death! 18 I will get up 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 in the distance, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He
ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. 21 The son declared, ‘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 us 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, and as he approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of
the servants and asked what was going on. 27 ‘Your brother has returned,’ he said, ‘and your father has
killed the fattened calf, because he has him back safe and sound.’ 28 The older son became angry and
refused to go in. So his father came out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, ‘Look,
all these years I have served you and never disobeyed a commandment of yours. Yet you never gave
me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours returns
from squandering your wealth with prostitutes, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ 31 ‘Son, you are
always with me,’ the father said, ‘and all that is mine is yours. 32 But it was fitting to celebrate and be
glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

Scripture from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), public domain.

BACKGROUND

Begin with the complaint

Luke 15:1-3 names the setting: tax collectors and sinners gather around Jesus, while Pharisees and scribes complain about his welcome and shared meals. The parable is part of his response. Begin there before turning the story into a general account of parenting.

The lost sheep and lost coin stories come first. Both end with joy over finding what was lost, and Jesus connects that joy with repentance. The two-son story carries the same movement into a family scene, then leaves a listener with the older brother's response to consider.

> *Now all the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around to listen to Jesus. So the Pharisees and scribes began to grumble: "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Then Jesus told them this parable: (Luke 15:1-3)*
>
> *In the same way, I tell you that there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous ones who do not need to repent. (Luke 15:7)*
>
> *In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of God's angels over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:10)*

Follow what the narrator tells you

The younger son asks for his share, travels away, spends it, faces famine, and takes work feeding pigs. He plans a confession and returns. Compare his plan with the words spoken to his father, but do not invent an interruption or decide how sincere he is from a detail the narrator does not explain.

The older son hears the celebration, becomes angry, and refuses to go in. His father comes out and appeals to him. The conversation, rather than the younger son's return alone, is the ending. The study therefore gives the older brother a full session.

THE STORY OF THE FATHER AND TWO SONS

Mark who moves, who speaks, and who is invited in. Keep the narrator's words separate from imagined cultural explanations.

Leaving and losing (15:11-16)

The younger son's choices and the famine bring him to need. The text identifies both his spending and an external crisis. Begin with those details rather than adding a speech about what he must have meant by asking for his inheritance.

Planning and returning (15:17-20)

The son remembers his father's provision, prepares a confession, and gets up to return. Hunger is stated, and confession is stated. The story does not give a complete analysis of his private motives.

Compassion and celebration (15:20-24)

The father sees him at a distance, has compassion, runs, embraces, and kisses him. The robe, ring, sandals, and feast express welcome. Ask the group why the father describes this return as life after death and finding after loss.

An angry brother outside (15:25-30)

The older son refuses to enter and describes his service in terms of commands and rewards. He calls the returning son your son rather than my brother. His claim about prostitutes belongs to his speech; the narrator earlier says wild living without supplying that detail.

An appeal without a recorded answer (15:31-32)

The father addresses him as a son, affirms his presence and inheritance, and speaks of your brother. Joy is fitting because the lost one is found. The story does not narrate the older brother entering or leaving; readers should not supply his final decision as a fact.

SESSION 1 OF 3

Why Jesus tells this story

Read Luke 15:1-3. Locate the two sons within the complaint about Jesus' welcome.
Also read: Luke 15:7; Luke 15:10.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. Who approaches Jesus, and who complains? What exactly is the complaint?

2. Read verses 7 and 10. What response to repentance does Jesus describe?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. How might this setting change a reading that only asks which son resembles me?

4. Why should celebration matter in a story answering a complaint about shared meals?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

5. Where can your group make a returning person feel unwelcome through resentment or suspicion?

6. What would a warm welcome look like without pretending accountability never matters?

SESSION 2 OF 3

The son who returns

Read Luke 15:11-24. Observe the return and welcome without making up missing motives.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. List the steps from the younger son's request to his return.

2. Compare the planned speech in verses 18 and 19 with the spoken words in verse 21. What is present in both?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. What does the father do before and after the confession?

4. What explanation does the father give for the feast in verse 24?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

5. What makes admitting wrong difficult? Answer generally if a personal example would be too exposed.

6. How could you receive someone's honest confession without humiliating them or promising to remove every consequence?

SESSION 3 OF 3

The son who stays outside

Read Luke 15:25-32. Hear the father's appeal and leave the ending open where Jesus does.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. What makes the older son angry, and what does he refuse to do?

2. Compare your son in verse 30 with your brother in verse 32. What relationship does the father restore to the conversation?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. How does the older son's complaint connect to the complaint in verses 1 and 2?

4. What does the father affirm in verse 31 while still challenging the refusal to celebrate?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

5. When another person receives mercy, what comparison or grievance can prevent your joy?

6. Name one way to celebrate another person's return without making their story public against their wishes.

ONE-SESSION PATH

Both brothers in one evening

Read all of Luke 15:11-32. About 45 to 60 minutes.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. Read Luke 15:1-3 and 11-32. What complaint introduces the story?

2. Track the father's actions toward each son. When does he go out?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. Why does the younger son return, according to the details actually narrated?

4. How does the older brother's complaint echo the opening setting?

5. What changes when the father says your brother rather than your son?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. What invitation in the story do you need to respond to: return, welcome, or join the joy?

7. Choose one response for this week while respecting other people's privacy and safety.

FOR THE LEADER

- Session 1 should connect the feast to the opening complaint. Jesus' welcome of sinners and the listeners' reaction are explicit. Do not turn every character into an exact equivalent of a named group or ethnicity.
- In session 2, distinguish the planned speech from the spoken one. Verse 21 records confession and unworthiness; it does not explicitly say the father interrupts him. Do not build a doctrine on that imagined interruption.
- In session 3, notice that the father approaches the older son and reasserts the brother relationship. Leave his final decision open. Do not report that he eventually enters the feast.
- The reference to prostitutes is in the older son's accusation, not the narrator's earlier account. Invite careful reading about who makes a claim, even inside a familiar story.
- Family estrangement can make this passage painful. Do not use the parable to require contact with an unsafe relative or demand a public confession. Discuss its theological invitation without issuing a one-size-fits-all family plan.

WHERE CHRISTIANS READ IT DIFFERENTLY

Which son is the main point?

Focusing on the younger son highlights return and welcome. Focusing on the older son highlights resentment at mercy and the opening complaint. The complete story contains both. This guide follows the father's actions toward each rather than deleting one half to choose a single character.

Does the story teach repentance or unconditional welcome?

Luke 15:7 and 10 explicitly connect the surrounding stories with repentance, and the younger son confesses sin. The father's compassion and action are also central. Treating repentance and welcome as competing summaries misses the way this chapter presents them together. It does not provide a procedural checklist for restoring someone to a role of responsibility.

SOURCES

Luke 15:11-32, Berean Standard Bible. Berean Bible. Public domain. Primary text for the story, both speeches, the welcome, and the open ending.

Luke 15:1-10, Berean Standard Bible. Berean Bible. Public domain. The opening complaint, lost sheep and coin, and joy over repentance.

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