

March 31, 2025

Luke 13:1-3, 11-23

This parable, known as the “Prodigal Son” may be one of Jesus most famous and most beloved parables. Clearly, it had an impression on the builders of this congregation because they included it on their stained glass windows. It’s also poorly named. The word “prodigal,” according to Webster’s dictionary, means one who spends or gives lavishly, even foolishly. That was the younger son, but as you look deeply in this parable, you realize something: In reality, it’s the Father who is truly prodigal, shockingly lavish with his mercy, forgiveness, patience, and wealth. This parable is about a prodigal Father and how he deals with two rebellious, not one rebellious, two rebellious, wicked sons. In this parable, Jesus shows us that Christianity and the Gospel is not simply a religion among religions: it’s absolutely, radically, and I mean radically, off the charts. It’s different. Because our God, unlike all the rest, is a **Prodigal Father**. And we’ll see how he shows his mercy **1. To The Younger Brother. 2. To The Older Brother. 3. Through The True Brother.**

1. The Younger Brother. In Luke 13, we see some Pharisees and teachers of the Law- religious experts and supposedly righteous, holy, religious men who are deeply bothered by Jesus. It’s not *what* Jesus is teaching, but *whom* he’s teaching. Tax collectors and sinners. The lowest rung on the Jewish social ladder. People who had abandoned God’s rules and hurt their families and friends through their greed and selfishness. Yet, they are listening to Jesus, and are repentant for what they’ve done, and Jesus gives them forgiveness and even shows it in the fact that he *eats with them*. That’s a big deal. In the ancient world, to eat with someone is to publicly declare, “We are friends. We are united. We have a relationship.” And the Pharisees can’t figure out how Jesus, a Bible teacher who calls people to repent for their sins, can stand to eat with these nasty sinners. So Jesus tells a parable. A father has two sons, and evidently he’s very wealthy- land, animals, servants, hired men, and his two sons are going to inherit all of it when he dies. But for one son, that day can’t come soon enough, and he goes to his father and says, “give me my share of the inheritance *now*.” Imagine that- your child comes to you and says, “the money that I get when you die, I want it now.” I’m sure you’d be offended, but this is so, so much worse. This son is saying to his father, “I do not love you. I do not care to have a relationship with you. I have no desire to be near you, and I’m tired of faking it. I’m tired of waiting for you to die so I can have my money, so give it to me now.” This is unforgivable. If this actually happened in Jesus’ day, which would be unimaginable, that son would be expelled from the family and would have received verbal and physical blows, and rightfully so. But even more shocking than what the son did, is what the father did. He does it. And if you look at the Greek, it literally says he divided up his *bios*, which is where we get the word, “biology,” the study of life. He divided up his life, his livelihood. In that age, wealth wasn’t stored in money, but in land, property, animals, and servants. So the Father would have had to sell a third of his land, a third of his animals, a third of everything he had, and liquidate it for cash to give to his son.

And the son leaves. He goes as far away as possible, leaving behind not only a broken family, but his people and his God as he squanders his father's wealth on parties, booze, sex, gambling, and pleasure. And then he's left with nothing, and he's so desperate that he sells himself into slavery to a pig farmer- remember, pigs were unclean animals to the Jews. And he became so hungry that he was jealous of the pigs, the little pods they ate were usually the food of the dirt poor and used to fatten pigs, and he longed for those but no one pitied him- why would they? He deserves this. Then, literally, he "comes to himself" and realizes that even hired men in his father's house have bread. So he makes a plan. It's a good plan! He will go back and confess to his father, and he knows he can't be a member of the family, he's lost that privilege, but he could be a hired man. That way, he can earn an honest living and begin to pay his father back for what he squandered. So he goes, and while he's still far away, the father sees him and his heart explodes with compassion. There's no anger, no resentment for the way he dishonored him, pure love and *he runs*. Middle-eastern patriarchs, rich men of status did not run. Children and women and poor men ran. He would have looked like a fool, but he didn't care. And he threw his arms around his son covered in swine filth and kissed him, and doesn't even let him try to earn his love back. He gets the best robe- *his robe* and a ring and sandals and says, "my son, my boy was lost and now he is found. Slaughter the calf. We're partying." Even more prodigal and scandalous than what this son did to his father, is what the father did for his son. But that's not where the story ends.

2. The Older Brother. The older brother was the good one. The obedient one. He put his head down and worked hard for his father. And as he came back from the field, he heard something bizarre. Music. Dancing. He finds out that his brother, his rebellious, unforgivable brother has been forgiven and is now being celebrated with prime rib, wine, a robe, and music and dancing. And he refuses to be in that room. He refuses to celebrate at his father's banquet- which was also a deep, profoundly disrespectful gesture to his father. His father, like most, could have expelled him the family for dishonoring him like this, but his father appeals to him, and begs him to come in. And the son addresses him in a shockingly disrespectful way: "*Look, you.*" "I've been working my tail off for you and you haven't even given me anything- not even a young goat for me and my friends. And you give him the fattened calf- how dare you!" And we see her something very startling. Everything wrong with the younger brother is true about the older brother. The older brother is just as selfish and hateful as the younger, but the difference is that the younger brother expressed his selfishness through disobedience, the older brother through obedience. They were both using the father for his stuff, the younger was just more obvious about it, and the older was just waiting until he died to get his stuff. Neither of them loved their father. The difference, however, is that the younger brother came to his senses, repented, and the Father willingly and freely forgave him and threw a banquet for him. The older brother, however, stands outside the banquet, the Father is inviting him in, but in order to do so, he must let go of his pride and repent as well. Will he? Jesus doesn't say. But if he doesn't, it won't be because the Father doesn't love him.

3. The True Brother. If it isn't clear, Jesus is saying that God is the Prodigal Father, and we are the fallen, selfish, unforgivable sons. We have spat in the Father's face by taking the gifts that he's given us, our bodies, our spouses, our families, our money, our job, and we've abused and squandered them. Those are the obvious sins, the alcoholism abuse, sexual lust and pornography, worshiping the god of money, possessions, and success, lying and slandering others behind their backs, disrespecting authority and hurting others, sins that most of us realize are sinful, and God has at times allowed to fall so that we experience a taste of the hell that we deserve as our lives, our relationships, our marriages fall apart and we come to our senses and crawl back to God thinking, I'll get my life together, I'll behave, our pay it back with my good works, and God says, "*no you won't.*" He embraces us, cherishes us, accepts all for free. But how? How can a righteous, holy God of justice be a Father to those who've spat in his face? Because of Christ, our true brother. Look at what we sang today, I know the tune was a little difficult, but the lyrics explain this perfectly: "*Go forth, my son, the Father said, and free my children from their dread of guilt and condemnation. The wrath and stripes are hard to bear, but by your passion they shall share the fruits of your salvation.*" And the Son replies, "No! They don't deserve your love!" Of course not, "*Yes, Father, Yes, most willingly I'll do what you command me. My will conforms to your decree, I'll do what you command me.*" Jesus is the perfect Son who went and took on what the rebellious children deserved. Jesus was stripped naked so we could be clothed in the best robe- his perfection and beauty. Jesus was stripped of honor, hung naked while his enemies laughed, so we could have the ring of honor and the glory of God. Jesus was separated from his Father- the only time he doesn't address him as "Father" is when he says, "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?" Jesus was forsaken so that we the rebellious sinners could be embraced as God's children. And now that we're a part of his family, Heaven rejoices and parties, and each time one of us leaves the earth, the party grows by one.

So who is the Older Brother, who refuses to go into the feast? The Pharisees and teachers of the Bible. It's not because they don't understand the teaching and theology of God or haven't read the Word. It's not because God hasn't invited them to the feast. All he has is theirs! But they refuse to come in because they realize that if the tax collectors and prostitutes can be forgiven and saved, then it's by faith alone, and they have to repent as well. And Jesus is doing to them exactly what the Father is begging his older son to do: repent. "You are so angry about these people coming to me, repenting of their sins and trusting in me, being brought back home- these are your brothers and sisters who were lost and now they're found! How could you be angry about this? Don't you understand that you are just as selfish?" You see, there are two ways to rebel against God. Two ways to use him. Two ways to hate him. The first is obvious- the younger brother. Self-indulgence and self-discovery. But the second way is just as sinful and somewhat more dangerous because, often, those rebelling through disobedience know they are rebelling! The second way is to sin through obedience. Obedience out of ambition for God's blessing, out of fear of rejection, out of desire for the stuff of God, but not God, is just as selfish. My friends, the ones that were cutting themselves off from Jesus and the feast of Heaven were decent,

religious, church-going, Bible-studying, law-following folks, and you and I share the same temptations. Repent- not just of the bad things you do, but for the good things you do for the wrong reason. Our sin separates us from God, but often people's good works, their righteousness separates them from God just as much. Don't stand outside the feast- repent. Be honest about your anger and self-righteous bitterness- all of us are prone to it. And remember how the Father embraced you, kissed you, wrapped you in his robe even when you were filthy. That is who you are. Rejoice when others, when sinners come home and enjoy the feast with you. It's free, it's for sinners, and it's prodigal. Amen