

Bible Study Guide: Week of 3-21-2022

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” 3So he told them this parable:

11Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. 12The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. 13A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout 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 to his fields to feed the pigs. 16He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18I will get up 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 like one of your hired hands.”’ 20So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21Then 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 slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. 25“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ 28Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ 31Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” 3So he told them this parable:

The tension between Jesus and the religious authorities continues to build in this passage. Their complaints against Jesus tend to focus on his lack of respect for traditions, his failure to follow the Law (at least their interpretation of the Law—for example healing on the Sabbath), and his tendency to associate with those whom the religious leaders define as unworthy. Jesus tells “this parable,” which is actually a series of three parables; the so-called “lost” parables. This parable—the parable of the Lost Son—follows two others (vs. 4-10): The parable of the Lost Sheep and the parable of the Lost Coin. These three form an important unit. The parable we are considering here is the longest, most detailed, and most familiar of the three. I would wager it is the best known of Jesus’ parables and, perhaps, the best known part of Luke’s gospel with the possible exceptions of the Christmas and Easter stories.

11Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. 12The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them.

The younger son acts disrespectfully here, as he is essentially telling his father to drop dead so that he can get his money now. The son chooses material goods and wealth over relationship with the father. The father would be under no obligation to divide the property at this request. In fact, as shocking as the son’s behavior is, the father’s behavior is more shocking.

13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. **14** When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. **15** So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. **16** He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

A professor once taught this parable in both the US and in St. Petersburg (formerly Leningrad), Russia. He noticed a curious pattern. When he asked students in the US to summarize the parable they seemed to omit the famine. When he asked the students in Russia to do the same they omitted the dissolute living and mentioned the famine as the cause of the son's problems. The students in St. Petersburg were living with the corporate memory of the siege of Leningrad during WWII during which there were terrible famines. It is interesting how our life experiences color our interpretation of scripture. In any case, the son wasted his riches and then was hit by famine. His job caring for pigs shows how far from grace this presumably Jewish son has fallen.

17 But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! **18** I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; **19** I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" **20** So he set off and went to his father.

Notice the son practices his speech before setting off. Notice also that he is not so much contrite as he is hungry. He is not so much sorry for his sins as he is sorry that he has lost everything. Yet he trusts his father will at least not see him starve, but offer him a job as a servant.

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21 Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' **22** But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. **23** And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; **24** for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

The father is already watching for his son and runs to greet him—again, foolish and reckless behavior for one of the father's stature, yet he runs to his son out of love. He doesn't let the son finish his grand speech, but instead commands him to be welcomed back using the property that presumably now belongs to the older son.

25 "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. **26** He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. **27** He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' **28** Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. **29** But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. **30** But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' **31** Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. **32** But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

The older son is justifiably upset. His father has given his share of the estate to welcome back one who has already dishonored the father and squandered his own share. The celebration and feast of this parable clearly parallels the fact that Jesus "eats with sinners." The reckless mercy of the father in the parable clearly echoes the fact that Jesus "welcomes them." The righteous indignation of the older son mirrors the indignation of the religious leaders who confront Jesus. The question for the older son and for the leaders is this: Will they join the party or not? Will they rejoice with the Father, or remain outside sulking?

I prefer to call this the Parable of the Lost Son (to emphasize the common themes with the other two "lost" parables that precede it), but it is often called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The term "prodigal" means "wastefully extravagant." Surely the younger son is prodigal, but so is the father. In fact, the name "Parable of the Prodigal Father" is also appropriate because the father is foolishly lavish with his love and property. So it is with God's love for us.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. To which character in this parable do you most relate? Why?**
- 2. What do you think the older son will do? Why?**
- 3. Can you think of a time when someone was prodigal toward you in welcoming you back?**