

## Luke 15:11 - 32 The Prodigal Son

11 And He said, "A certain man had two sons; 12 and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' And he divided his wealth between them. 13 "And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. 14 "Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be in need. 15 "And he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 "And he was longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. 17 "But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! 18 'I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; 19 "I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."' 20 "And he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him. 21 "And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 "But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; 23 and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry; 24 for this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' And they began to be merry. 25 "Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 "And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things might be. 27 "And 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.' 28 "But he became angry, and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began entreating him. 29 "But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a kid, that I might be merry with my friends; 30 but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with harlots, you killed the fattened calf for him.' 31

*“And he said to him, ‘My child, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 ‘But we had to be merry and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.’”*

The first thing that comes to my mind is that all of the hidden complexities of this parable, all of the depths of information and truth about that cultures lostness and our cultures lostness and God's love for His people that are revealed in this story that only takes about 3 minutes to read in it's fullness could only have come from the mind of God.

No one can outline in 3 minutes the truth's about man's lost state and the love and care of God for unworthy lost sinners, the rejoicing of God over those who repent and return to Him, and the quiet desperate bitter lostness of the self righteous legalist religious ones who think they are not lost at all.

And those are the two groups that Jesus is speaking to on this day. And we'll recall that this parable as well as the one about the lost sheep and also the lost coin are all given together on the same day in response to the pharisees and scribes accusation that Jesus is no messiah because He is gracious to sinners.

*Lk. 15:1 Now all the tax-gatherers and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. 2 And both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”*

Luke's gospel is broken up into three parts. Early ministry and miracles abounding for most of the first 3 years in the region of the Galilee's. The second part, we are in now is the final weeks and months of His life in the region of Perea. And beginning in chapter 19 we will enter the third part which is His false trials and His death and resurrection.

We are exactly in the middle of part two, and this 15th chapter is the pinnacle of the heart of Jesus teaching. These words in this 3 minute story encompass the predicament and the solution of all lost men since the fall in the garden.

And we see again in this story as also in the previous two parables the

exuberant joy of God over sinners who, as the story puts it, "come to their senses" and they return to God with sorrow over their sin against heaven, and God receives them with joy.

We'll need to spend a little time this morning explaining the norms of their culture at that time because when we fully understand all of the ramifications of the norms of that culture it adds depth that we would miss in 2020 with a quick reading.

History has titled this story, the prodigal son. And until recently you could mention the prodigal son and almost everyone had some idea of the gist of this story. Even today, the word prodigal is an ancient English word derived from Latin and no longer in use, except for this single story which has kept the word alive.

The word literally means a wasteful spendthrift. Someone who wastes money they didn't earn foolishly and has nothing of value to show for the lost wealth. So it's a good word. Except this story is about so much more than the prodigal son.

There are two sons and a loving father in this story, and all of those interactions are important. It'll be fun to drill down a little bit in this story. So let's begin.

*11 And He said, "A certain man had two sons; 12 and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' And he divided his wealth between them.*

In order to mine the richness we need some background on the culture Jesus is speaking to.

In Israel, from the time of the 12 tribes taking the promised land and dividing it up amongst the tribes, ownership and family has been key. You are part of a tribe, and part of a family in that tribe, and if fortune has smiled, you own a portion of land that is productive in an agrarian society.

Centuries have come and gone, and talent, hard work, good fortune and other factors have found some people wealthy and others who are not wealthy at all. Land ownership was key. And as we read through this story it becomes apparant that this father was wealthy.

In vs. 17 we see that his father has "hired men". In vs. 22 we see that there are slaves. In vs. 26 we have servants. And we'll look at each of those words because they are all slightly different. But for now we'll simply surmise that this man's wealth was not insignificant.

And just that one fact is of interest in our culture. With the current trending towards cultural marxism, we're being bombarded with the idea that somehow if some people have more than other people it's immoral. Marxism says this man is immoral because he is wealthy. Everybody should be the same. Everything should be owned in common with no person being wealthier than the next.

The Bible doesn't teach that. This father is both wealthy and gracious. He has more than most and he is generous. This book draws no conclucions about his wealth, only what he does with his wealth.

And so we have a man of substance, a man who owns property, and he has two sons; And up to this point the pharisees are listening with interest. They can see themselves in this situation very well so far. They either are this man or they wish they were. The only thing better than land is sons to work along side of you on that land. Therefore this man has everything.

*12 and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.'*

OK this is the first gasp of many in this story for the pharisee's. This story has just become a drama in this society. Why? Because in that land at that time no son thinks about his inheritance, because inheritance only comes when the father is dead. To wish your father dead so you can have his wealth is a dis-

honor.

So in effect this son has just told his father, I wish you were dead, but since you are not dead, I want a divorce. This would be considered a great wickedness. An unimaginable evil. A son who does not love and honor his father, and in fact, has the audacity to walk up and say, I want a divorce. Give me whatever you think is mine and I'm walking away. Effectually it's a divorce. Shockingly evil!

The younger son wants a divorce. He wants to be severed from any ties. He wants freedom from any further expectations, demands, love, honor, family, property once the division of it is settled, anything. He wants a clean break from this family.

We could stretch things a little and compare what has happened here with Adam in the garden of Eden. Adam had a wildly wealthy Father who had given him everything to enjoy with one exception. One fruit. And with very little convincing from Satan, Adam and Eve believed that God was withholding something they should have, that God was a liar, and that they could manage that wealth better without Him. So they dis-obeyed their Father.

The story is a picture of man's divorce from God, and how that works out for him. Give me whatever it is that's mine, and I'm going to go as far away from you as I can get. The shocking hatred and treatment of a loving Father who sought only good for His children.

As I studied this story this week, I couldn't help thinking of how this story is playing out in a grander scale in our nation. Our country has divorced God, and has gone as far away from Him as we can get, although evil people are dreaming up new ideas to get us even more distant daily, and we are in a far country squandering the wealth that was never ours in the first place. The parallels are frightening.

*12b And he divided his wealth between them.*

Think about this now. This father, as far as we might surmise, was not the sole originator of the wealth. In that country, wealth was inherited from previous generations. So you took wealth that you didn't originate, mostly that would be the land itself, and you built upon it and passed it on to your children.

So when this evil son demands a divorce and a settlement, he's demanding wealth that he never earned. It was wealth that had been handed down and carefully built upon by generations before him. And he says I want my share, and I don't want to wait for you to die, I want it now. That was a great evil to these pharisees who listened.

Again the parallels to our country are broad. We are squandering a wealth that we didn't earn or build. It was handed down by the work of previous generations. And now it's not only gone, but we've borrowed on the value of it and wasted that too.

In that culture, remember, Jesus is careful to tell us this is the younger son. Since there were 2 sons, the older would get 2/3 and the younger would get 1/3 of the estate upon the fathers death. This wicked son demands his share now as settlement in this divorce from his father that he hates. And the father complies. That shocks the pharisees too. They are shocked that the son asked and they are shocked that the father gave in to him.

The father complies with the evil wishes of the wicked son. In Romans chapter one we read the mechanics of God doing just this with wicked men. It says over and over and over, He gave them over. God gave them over. God gave them over. God removes the restraints and allows man to go deeper and deeper into sin. This father is a picture of God, giving men over to their sin.

This is how free will works in the Bible. Free will isn't men deciding to be saved. Free will is God giving men over to go deeper into sin. This father allows this young man to cause himself harm and disaster. That's how free will works in scripture. *And he divided his wealth between them*

Now in that culture, even a settlement like that would still have to wait for death. But what this evil son has gained is grant deed and title upon death to 1/3 of his family's wealth and holdings. 1/3 of the land, 1/3 of the cattle, 1/3 of all the future wealth that can come from what is owned. He's going to cash it out for what he can get.

*13 "And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living.*

What happened was he had a fire sale. He had grant deeds to future wealth and he sold it to some other wealthy person at a huge discount in order to cash out. They would buy grant deeds like that the same as we would buy futures in something. The value is there, but the realization will be upon death of the father.

So in effect you're buying 1/3 of a ranch or a farm and you don't get to occupy until the current father is dead. Obviously there's a discount in order to do that. We do that all the time. Someone wins one of those publisher clearinghouse prizes that pays \$500 a week for life and the gamble is on how long the person will live.

So you want all of the cash, not the weekly thing, and someone will buy that paper at a discount. You realize 1/2 or 1/3 or 1/10th in order to cash out and not wait. Jesus tells us it only took a few days for this wicked son to turn his inheritance into cash. He sold the futures for what he could get. It's a divorce and he's walking away from his land, his family, everything that would have been his, for whatever cash someone thought that would be worth.

In the mind of the listeners, the pharisees, this is shameful! All of it! Unbelievably, shockingly shameful. For one thing, the commandment is that you are to honor your father and your mother.

This is a great dis-honor in a land whose culture was based on honor. In effect

this son has told his father he wishes he were dead and he wants whatever he can get because he's walking away. This is a divorce and the father would be the broken hearted innocent party. This is a wicked as you can get. But it gets worse.

*the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living.*

Now if the guy was Henry Ford, and he broke his father's heart and invested the cash into a factory to build cars we would say, he had to make hard choices. But in the end it worked out. We can understand that a little bit. Initial pain required in order to build a separate empire. Perhaps.

But in this case, the wicked son takes his wealth, goes into a distant country, and by that it is understood, a gentile country, and he goes whoring and living a dissipated life until the money is depleted. Unbelievable. Again, an unmistakable parallel to our nation. I'm sorry if you find this as political. I apologize, but the parallel is frightening. We've gone whoring and squandered our wealth.

And you can get away with that for a while. This guy has a whole circle of new friends. Funny how that works. When you're buying rounds at the bar, you're the most popular guy in town.

After boot camp, when I was drafted and had to join the Naval Air Reserve, we were in dorms and going to A school. And we would get a paycheck from Uncle Sam. I forget if they were bi-weekly, I think that's how it worked. Ancient history 101. But I would take that paycheck and open my bottom drawer in the dorm room and lift up my neatly folded articles of clothing and throw that check in with the rest of them.

And then invariably after about 3 days, guys would begin to ask me if I could loan them a couple of bucks for beers or whatever. Their paychecks were gone. In 2 or 3 days. Whoring, beer, and pizza's. And my answer was always the same. I'm penniless, which was true. I had zero cash. Everything I

needed was provided. Food, bed, work. Uncle Sam took care of every need.

It's part of the human condition that most people can't see much past their noses into the future. What did this son think was going to happen when the whoring was done? Did he ever even think of that? At all?

Am I just as guilty? Driving around in shiny antique cars instead of investing whatever cash I could get for those in heaven. I think about that. And I hope there's a balance between what the Father gives me because He loves to see me enjoying things, and what I should have invested in heaven.

You can get away with it for a while. The whoring. This son, though wicked, he could have probably lasted a long while in that distant land. Except for a second problem unforeseen. Providence.

*14 "Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be in need.*

A limos ischyra. A famine. A scarcity of bread. And not just any famine, it was severe. The word denotes powerful. Magnified.

We have no concept of any such famine. But in an agrarian world and culture, if the crops fail . . . a couple of times in a row, there's nothing to eat. Literally. People begin to starve pretty quickly.

You can get away with whoring for a while, and then providence will hit. What then. What happens here when the house of cards financial system that we all know is bankrupt collapses? It'll make this severe famine look like a picnic. Providence will catch up with whoring. It always does. It did in this story.

Break all of God's laws and get away with it. For a while. Perhaps. But providence will happen. We've spent our bank account, and our kids bank account and our grandkids bank account. Now what? Do we really think providence will never happen?

14 *“Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be in need.*

All of his new friends have vanished. They don't have enough for themselves and they certainly aren't going to share anything with this good time charley. He's desperate for a job. He's starving.

15 *“And he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 “And he was longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.*

Another gasp from the audience. These pharisees keep having the bottom lowered and you can just hear the gasps. A good jewish boy dis-honors his father, steals his family's wealth, goes to a gentile country, wastes his families money with immoral drunken whoring, and ends up on a pig farm feeding pigs and wishing he could have a few of the pods the pigs are eating.

Pretty smart farmer if you think about it. Send a jewish boy to feed the pigs. You don't have to worry about him cooking one of them. The pods were likely carob pods. Inedible for humans. He is at the bottom of the bottom. He would eat the bitter carob, but he has to fight the pigs to get some. He is literally starving.

17 *“But when he came to his senses,* Some people have to hit bottom bottom before this happens. And for others, this never happens. But when he came to his senses . . .

Jonah fled from God. He was trying to get as far in the opposite direction from God as he could get. On a boat sailing in the opposite direction from the land God had ordered him to go to and prophecy. Jonah wanted a divorce from God. And it took 3 days in the belly of a fish for Jonah to "*come to his senses*". That's a pretty severe bottom to have to get to. But God persue's those who are His.

Here we have a Jewish boy from a good family out in gentile lands feeding pigs and literally starving to death. The providence of God finally got him to the place where he comes to his senses. Sin is definitely fun for a while but after a little while, reality kicks in. It never ends well. It can't. Here's why.

God. All that God is. All of His combined attributes that He has graciously revealed to us in His book. I've been thinking of a grossly over-simplified way to understand God and sin.

If we think of God and all of the attributes of God as a mighty wind moving over the land and the sea, and then we think of sin, the breaking of His moral laws, as something like moving against the force of the wind. When we sin we're going against the wind's force. It's difficult and costly. But when we obey His commands we're moving in the same direction as the wind. It goes well. And finally, when we're in Christ, we're inside God going His direction and it's effortless.

We could use gravity for a similar understanding. It just is. We are smart enough not to jump off of a 4th story railing. We know the consequences. God's laws are like that. There is safety and thriving when we respect His moral laws the same as His natural laws. It just goes well.

Going against God's given laws is like trying to walk into a 120 mph wind or jumping from a high place. It can't end well.

Christians like to say we're not under law, we're under grace. But the giving of the law was actually a magnificent grace. Here's the wind and the direction it's blowing. Do these moral truths and you're moving with the wind. Break these moral truths and you're fighting against the wind. It was absolutely and magnificently gracious that God revealed those truths to us so that we could thrive.

No, they have nothing to do with our salvation. But yes, they have everything to do with our thriving. This young Jewish man decided it would be fun to be

divorced from God. And I'm sure he had a blast being the good time Charley, buying the rounds of drinks, selecting the harlot of his choice. Sin is fun.

But sin never leads to thriving. Sin is exhilarating for a while. But then gravity kicks in and you realize yes, the free-fall was really exciting and fun, but the ground is getting closer and closer. It can't end well. It never does.

I've been comparing this young man's wild ride as a parallel with our nation in 2020. This is where the parallel has to end. An individual can reach the bottom and if God is gracious, they can come to their senses like this young man does. But the parallel breaks down there for nations.

Our nation sought a divorce from God and has been on a wild ride of sin until we have passed up that verse that says *there was no remedy*, 2Chronicles 36:16 a long while back. I believe gravity has gripped us and we are in free-fall and the bottom is coming at us fast. I don't believe that this nation will collectively come to their senses like this young Jewish boy does.

What we need to do in this moment is be prepared to give every man an answer when the bottom comes. There will be individuals who do come to their senses if God brings a providence like the severe famine in our story. We should be ready to provide the gospel answers when that providence happens.

Back to our story. Jesus tells us the way out of the bottom of the bottom. This may be the best picture of true repentance in the whole Bible. Repentance is a return to God.

*17 "But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! 18 'I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; 19 "I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."'"*

He came to his senses. That's where repentance begins.

I would invite any young person who is dreaming of all that sin is going to get for them to come to me and Pam's house. It isn't as exciting as sin. But it's not that bad. In the end we've had more and enjoyed more and experienced more than anyone that I can think of who chose to go against God.

If you add up all the blessings that God has showered on us, it could be an argument for coming to your senses. It doesn't look very exciting by this world's false standards. But nearing the end of my life I can tell you, we can't think of many people we've ever met who are richer than we have been.

Coming to the sense that fighting against God is a losing proposition is where repentance begins. Let's follow the flow of it in this young man.

*he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger!'*

That lines up with what I just said. He says, even the lowest category of the folks at my father's house are doing better than I am here in my chosen sinfulness.

There are three different words in the story for workers who have a relationship of dependence at some level on this wealthy father. The *hired men* are the lowest of the three in category. That will surprise you. The slaves have a better gig.

Biblically, the word for these hired men is occasional laborers. These are the guys at the donut shop waiting for some foreman to come along and hold up 3 fingers, and 3 of them jump in a pickup truck and get a days work.

This isn't a steady gig. In ancient times these men would wait at a prescribed place just like the donut shop guys do today. Hoping for a days labor. And old testament law said that they had to be paid each day for their labor. The laws said you couldn't withhold their wages for later. Their children would go hungry.

That's why in the parable about the laborers they're all lined up at the end of the day getting paid. It was the law. They would take the days wages and go buy food. If they couldn't get work, no food.

These guys are at the bottom. And when the young man comes to his senses he says, even those guys are thriving while I'm starving. What a fall. He used to be at the top of the scale. Now he's below the guys at the bottom. But in his father's world, the bottom rung is even thriving. There is plenty of wealth to go around. The bottom rung is thriving. He says they have more than enough.

God set up this world with natural laws and with moral laws. Natural laws are things like gravity. Mathematical givens. Things we can find out. But He also set up this world with moral laws. God's moral laws work like gravity. When you respect and obey His moral laws like you respect His natural laws, thriving is the result.

Even if you don't know God, or anything about God, if His laws are obeyed, thriving just happens. The American experiment was a picture of that. We began as a christian nation based upon God's moral laws and even though most of our citizens didn't know God, the thriving just happens when you live in the boundaries of His moral laws.

This father's household is thriving. There is plenty. Even for the day workers there is plenty. Perhaps he tells his day workers, bring your little ones and we'll sup together and then I'll give you your wages when your bellies are all full. *'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread,*

God's household thrives and the abundance spills over on everyone around. This son remembers that in his desperation and comes to his senses.

*18 'I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; 19 "I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."'*

This is repentance. You confess to God that you have gone away from Him and His laws and His safety and you have made a train wreck of your life. *make me as one of your hired men* Father, I want to come back into the safety of your wealth and supply and thriving, even at the bottom level, thriving within your realm and care is better than sin and divorce away from you.

He's asking to come back under the realm and rule of his father, even at the lowest possible place, it's so much better than the train wreck of sin. That's repentance. I want to come back under the realm of your authority to reign. At any level. Make me a hired day laborer. Anything. Just allow me to come under the canopy of your rule. Because that's where thriving is.

This is real repentance. I've wandered around in the authority to reign of Satan in this world. I've gone down all of the dead end roads. I'm not thriving. I'm spiritually starved. I've come to my senses and believe that being anything, anything at all in God's authority to reign is better. Thriving is dwelling in God's authority. I want God to rule and reign over my life. Sin has nearly destroyed me. Thriving is with God. I want to leave the sin and join His family.

That's what's going down with this son who has come to his senses. He's dying. Sin has led only to starvation, physically and spiritually. Sin leads only to emptiness. He is bankrupt. His fathers lowest workers are thriving. He can thrive if his Father will restore him in any sense at all to be under his rule and realm.

Repentance is a returning to God. We return to the umbrella of thriving that comes to all who are in His household. We return to plenty, and joy that radiates out from His care.

The modern church wants to tell people that you don't have to leave your sin behind in order to have God. You can keep your sin. God wants you anyways.

How would that work in this parable? The kid writes a letter and says, Dad, can you send me a weekly check to spend? I like the harlots. Can you just bless me anyways? That's basically what the modern church is teaching. You can keep your sin and have Jesus too. How do you make that work in this parable of Jesus'?

Actually it works the other way. You can return to God's law and not be a son anymore and even though you aren't a son you are at least under the umbrella of thriving. That's what this son said he would do when he returned to his senses. I won't be a son but I'll be under my father's umbrella of thriving. That is a real possibility. You don't have to be a christian to enjoy the thriving that comes from obeying God's moral laws. It's just built into nature that way.

But it's absurd to say I want to keep the divorce, live in dissipation and harlotry but I'd like the benefits of being a son. Please send a weekly check. And that's what the church is selling these days to try to draft people in.

What a deal? Sin and blessings and heaven. Not according to this parable. And not accord to the natural laws God has designed boundaried by His moral laws.

The story has three characters. Two sons and a Father. Next week we'll look at the Father. He's full of surprises. This Father doesn't do any of the things the pharisee's who are listening would expect. We'll enjoy and perhaps finish the story next week.

Proverbs 6:

12A worthless person, a wicked man,  
Is the one who walks with a false mouth,

13Who winks with his eyes, who signals with his feet,  
Who points with his fingers;

14Who with perversity in his heart devises evil continually,  
Who spreads strife.

15Therefore his calamity will come suddenly;  
Instantly he will be broken, and there will be no remedy.

16There are six things which the LORD hates,  
Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him:

17Haughty eyes, a lying tongue,  
And hands that shed innocent blood,

18A heart that devises wicked plans,  
Feet that run rapidly to evil,

19A false witness who utters lies,  
And one who spreads strife among brothers.