

Repentance and Faith

Devotional Reading: Mark 1:14–20

Background Scripture: Isaiah 1:10–21; Ezekiel 18:20–23, 27–32

Luke 15:11–24

11 And he said, A certain man had two sons:

12 And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.

13 And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.

14 And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want.

15 And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

16 And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

17 And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!

18 I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee,

19 And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.

20 And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

21 And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

22 But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet:

23 And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry:

24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

Acts 2:38–39

38 Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

39 For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

Key Text

This my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.—Luke 15:24

Enduring Beliefs of the Church
Unit 2: Grace and Reconciliation
Lessons 5–8

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the actions of the younger son and the father in the parable.
2. Explain why each of us must welcome others returning to God.
3. Commit to sharing God’s generosity with others.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

A. Leaving Home

B. Lesson Context

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Wait Until Your Dad Gets Home

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- B. The Promise (v. 39)

A Long Way in the Wrong Direction

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- A. Homecoming
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Colossians	Kuh- <i>losh</i> -unz.
Ephesians	Ee- <i>fee</i> -zhunz.
Galatians	Guh- <i>lay</i> -shunz.
Gentiles	<i>Jen</i> -tiles.
Pentecost	<i>Pent</i> -ih-kost.
Pharisees	<i>Fair</i> -ih-seez.
prodigal	<i>praw</i> -dih-gull.

Introduction

A. Leaving Home

At age 16, armed with a job, car, and license, I experienced true independence for the first time. I exercised this freedom by telling my parents I would no longer join them at

their church. Instead, I intended to explore and find a religion of my own. To my surprise, my parents did not resist. But what I initially viewed as rebellion transformed into a genuine quest for truth.

Each Sunday, my girlfriend and I would explore churches of different doctrinal convictions and styles of worship. The search led us to a particular church where visitors were encouraged to complete a visitor's card. I completed a card to have something to "contribute" to the offering plate since I needed my money for gas. The card led the pastor to our home and me to a relationship with Christ. My parents proudly sat in the congregation the day I was baptized. What I had mistaken for a departure from my roots was, in truth, a journey toward Christ.

In today's lesson, we will revisit one of the most beloved but often misunderstood Bible passages: the story of the prodigal son.

B. Lesson Context

In Luke 15 (see also Lesson Context for Lesson 3), tax collectors and sinners gather to hear Jesus. Nearby, Pharisees—adherents of the Law of Moses and their traditions—murmur their disapproval (compare Mark 7:1–8). This setting underscores the meal-sharing tradition in first-century Judaism as a sign of acceptance (see Mark 2:16; 1 Corinthians 5:9–11; Galatians 2:11–14).

Jesus' use of parables was a teaching method and a profound way to convey spiritual truths. These parables, often simple earthly narratives, were vehicles for deep spiritual meanings. While the exact number of parables Jesus taught is a topic of discussion, it's widely agreed that He presented at least 30 unique ones. Figurative language, in which "this" stands for "that," predominates in parables. A failure to recognize figurative language is to repeat the errors of Jesus' disciples and the Pharisees (Matthew 16:5–12; Mark 7:18; John 10:6; etc.).

Acts 2 depicts Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came and filled believers, causing many to speak in foreign tongues (Acts 2:1–12). In Acts 2:14–39, Peter addresses the Jews gathered to behold this miraculous sight, sharing the good news of Jesus. Peter quotes an Old Testament prophecy stating that God's Spirit would be poured out on "all flesh" (Acts 2:17; Joel 2:28), and that "whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord" will be saved (Acts 2:21; Joel 2:32). While Peter likely did not have Gentiles in mind yet, as this was prior to his vision and encounter with Cornelius (see Acts 10), he perhaps meant at least that God's Spirit would not be limited to prophets, priests, and kings. It is possible that Luke had the Gentiles in mind while writing this account, perhaps showing that just as Jesus' followers are charged to take the gospel to Jerusalem, Samaria, and the rest of the world (1:8), so would God's Spirit be given to all those He calls and who turn to Him in faith.

I. Jesus' Parable

(Luke 15:11–24)

Jesus speaks this parable against the religious leaders and their attitude, as evidenced in Luke 15:2. They undoubtedly realize Jesus' intent to challenge their position, as Luke 20:19 later indicates.

A. Son's Request (vv. 11–16)

11. And he said, A certain man had two sons.

The way Jesus starts this narrative signals its nature as a parable. Just as when a story begins with “in a land far, far away,” listeners recognize that what Jesus is about to relate is not a historical account. In the Gospel of Luke, several parables begin with the introduction of *a certain man* (Luke 12:16; 14:16; etc.). A distinctive feature of these parables is their lack of named characters, setting them apart as figurative rather than historical. This storytelling technique enables listeners to place themselves within the narrative. It also makes it less obvious that Jesus is the one highlighting their sin.

The emphasis of this parable is frequently placed on the prodigal son. Nonetheless, Jesus presents three characters: a father and his *two sons*. Every character plays a role in the narrative, allowing listeners to identify with at least one.

12. And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.

Then as now, inheritance is passed along to descendants only after the death of the testator (Hebrews 9:16). However, an advisory in a Jewish non-biblical text to not do otherwise suggests that there were instances where an inheritance was indeed distributed before death (Sirach 33:19–23).

According to the Law of Moses, the eldest son was entitled to a double share of his father's estate (Deuteronomy 21:17; compare Genesis 25:31). Given the declaration that (1) this man has two sons and that (2) the one making the request is *the younger of them*, this means that (3) the son desires one-third of his father's *living*. Jesus doesn't find it necessary to specify exact ages; He merely mentions the request of the younger son.

The audience of Pharisees and scribes knows that such an outlandish request is indicative of a rebellious son who is subject to the death penalty (see Deuteronomy 21:18–21). But the father doesn't go there; instead, he grants the younger son's desire. This response from the father likely strikes Jesus' audience as unorthodox and unexpected.

What Do You Think?

What might have compelled the father to give the younger son his share of the inheritance?

Digging Deeper

How might the father have felt after this series of events?

13. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.

The younger son, having gained possession of his inheritance (*substance*), moves a significant distance away from his father. The specifics of how the money was squandered are not detailed, though Luke 15:30 may suggest one such avenue.

14. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want.

In great contrast to the comfort in which he was raised, the son becomes impoverished as bankruptcy coincides with *a mighty famine*. The two lacks join to deal a severe hit on the son; food shortages cause food prices to rise as the law of supply and demand asserts itself (compare 2 Kings 6:24–25; 7:1, 16).

15. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

Driven by his situation, the young man seeks employment. Scripture expects those physically capable of working to earn their food (Proverbs 10:4–5; 12:11; 19:15; 2 Thessalonians 3:10; 1 Timothy 5:8). Moreover, Jesus introduces an additional cultural layer to the narrative: the man indentures himself into the service of a Gentile, *a citizen of another country*. The conclusion that the citizen is a Gentile is established by the fact that he has *swine*, animals considered unclean according to the Law of Moses (Leviticus 11:7; Deuteronomy 14:8).

16. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

The man's dire hunger serves the purpose of bringing him to a new depth of desperation—now, even the pigs' food seems enticing to him. In Jewish tradition, Gentiles were considered unclean, leading Jews to abstain from dining with them (see Acts 10:28; 11:3; Galatians 2:12). Desiring the pigs' food was another thing entirely.

B. Son's Return (vv. 17–20a)

17. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!

This is a critical turning point in the story. The young man, having reached his lowest point, regained his clarity of mind. Self-examination is a recurring motif in Scripture, invariably serving as the initial step toward repentance (2 Corinthians 13:5; Galatians 6:4; Revelation 2:5; etc.).

18. I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee.

Repentance requires returning to his *father* and admitting wrongdoing. However, his offense, as is the case with all transgressions, is chiefly *against* God, as implied by the term *heaven*. Undoubtedly, the listeners well acquainted with God's laws recognize the son's conduct as dishonoring his father and thereby breaking the law of God (Exodus 20:12; Matthew 15:4).

19. And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.

Declaring himself unworthy of sonship, the young man's sentiments are deeply rooted in the honor and shame dynamics prevalent in that era. By squandering his inheritance, he has tarnished his father's reputation. Legally, his father is no longer obligated to provide for him. Thus, he resolves to request the bare essentials from his father through the position of a servant. Even this status will be preferable to starving as he watches pigs feed.

What Do You Think?

When do you think the younger son was at his lowest?

Digging Deeper

What experiences enable you to relate to the younger son?

20a. And he arose, and came to his father.

The younger son's repentance will be meaningless if he remains where he is. Hence, the penultimate act of his repentance is to get his feet moving toward home.

C. Father's Response (vv. 20b–24)

20b. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

The narrative transitions to the father's perspective. Apparently, the *father* has been eagerly awaiting his son's return. The father's joy is a motif that echoes across the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin just before (Luke 15:1–10). To the audience, the sight of an elderly Jewish man running likely seems unusual and undignified. Yet, his act underscores the father's profound longing to be reconciled with his son.

21. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

The son's reaction echoes that of David in Psalm 51:4 as *the son* humbles himself before his *father*. It's easy to imagine that the son has rehearsed his apology many times during the long journey back.

What Do You Think?

What circumstances of repentance and return call for public confession of sin? Why?

Digging Deeper

Do the circumstances depend on whether it is a sin of commission or a sin of omission?

22. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet.

Before the son can suggest becoming a servant as he has planned, *the father* interrupts by embracing him as a son instead (compare John 15:15; Galatians 4:6–7). The finest *robe*, likely the father's own, and the *ring* both signify the father's acceptance of the young man as a son again, with the ring perhaps also symbolizing authority (compare Genesis 41:42).

23. And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry.

The father's subsequent command suggests he plans to host a celebration. Traditionally, a family reserves a fattened *calf* for significant events (example: Genesis 18:7), such as when a young man reaches adulthood. Since the son's previous actions and disrespect toward his father had undoubtedly spread through the village, it is appropriate for the father to organize a festivity to spread a counteracting message. As a bit of speculation,

the pronoun *us* may indicate that the neighbors are invited to witness the son's transformation and the father's demonstration of love, acceptance, and forgiveness.

24. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

This celebration mirrors the rejoicing in this chapter's parables of the lost sheep (Luke 15:6) and the lost coin (15:9). From the father's point of view, his son's departure had led him to mourn as though he had lost him to death. The son's return symbolizes a reversal of that.

What Do You Think?

Can you think of an example of radical forgiveness in your life, such as is exhibited by the father?

Digging Deeper

What enables the father to respond with lavish grace and love?

Wait Until Your Dad Gets Home

When I was a little girl, I loved to change outfits throughout the day, discarding clothing all over my bedroom floor without a thought. When my mom would see my messy room, she would demand that I clean it up—immediately. I usually obeyed. But when I didn't, then came Mom's dreaded words: "Just wait until your dad gets home."

Knowing I was going to be in trouble with my dad was enough to leave my stomach in knots for the rest of the day. However, my fearful expectations rarely matched reality. Although my father was stern, his rebuke and discipline were not as terrifying as I had feared.

To the prodigal (which means "wastefully extravagant"), the best-case scenario upon returning to his father was to become a servant. The worst case would have been to be cut off entirely. The reality, however, was nothing less than unmerited, unexpected grace, mercy, forgiveness, a homecoming celebration, and a restored relationship.

How should this parable affect how you consider approaching the Lord with your own confessions of sin? Will you make excuses and try to justify yourself? Or will you accept responsibility and repent? Before you answer, see 1 Samuel 15:13–21; Psalm 51; and Luke 18:9–14.

—B. R.

II. Apostle's Teaching

(Acts 2:38–39)

A. The Gift (v. 38)

38a. Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Peter's declaration is in response to a question the crowd poses following his address to them. The previous verse depicts the people's realization of guilt that prompts the question, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). In reviewing the two imperatives *repent, and be baptized*, we conclude that other elements are implied that only later will be stated explicitly. First, notice that faith isn't mentioned. But given the requirement for repentance, faith must be present as well. The implicit connection between repentance and faith will be made explicit later (Acts 20:21; Hebrews 6:1).

Also unexplored at this point are various elements regarding baptism. Jews are familiar with the use of water in ceremonial cleansings and would naturally make a mental connection with baptism (Ezekiel 36:25–26; Mark 7:3–4; John 2:6; 3:25). Various instances of baptism are recorded in Acts (Acts 2:41; 8:36–39; 9:17–18; 10:44–48; 16:15, 30–33; etc.), but only later will more robust explanations of baptism receive treatment (Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:12; 1 Peter 3:21; etc.).

Likewise, the phrase *in the name of Jesus Christ* implies allegiance to God in its fullest sense. What is implied here is made explicit in Matthew 28:19, which specifies baptism "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Taken together, all these elements signify the beginning of a new relationship.

38b. for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Peter highlights two blessings for those who respond as he has just directed.

Forgiveness, another word for *remission of sins*, is possible because of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. There, He paid sin's price for us (Romans 3:9–26; Hebrews 1:3; 1 Peter 2:24; etc.) and cleared our debt completely (Colossians 2:14). This act initiated the new covenant, under which God has pledged to forget our sins and lawless actions (Jeremiah 31:34; Luke 22:20; Hebrews 10:17–18). The Holy Spirit, promised by Jesus (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7), empowers believers to support the Christian community and embody virtues like love, joy, and peace (1 Corinthians 12:4–11; Galatians 5:22–23).

Additionally, the Spirit assists in prayer and affirms an individual's salvation (Romans 8:16, 26; see Lesson 4).

B. The Promise (v. 39)

39. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

The promise of the previous verse is not only to those asking the question of Acts 2:37 (*you*) but also *to your children*, which reflects Isaiah 44:3. The same promise *to all that are afar off* reflects wording in Ephesians 2:13, referring to Gentiles.

Peter likely does not yet understand the full implication of his words at the time, given his surprise at the inclusion of Gentiles in Acts 10:44–46. This issue sparked significant debate in the first-century church, prompting the gathering of a council in Jerusalem to deliberate on whether Gentiles needed to embrace the practices of Judaism in becoming followers of Christ (Acts 15:1–29).

A Long Way in the Wrong Direction

Last year, some friends and I took a weekend trip to the beach. The car ride down was filled with excitement. The ride back was a different story. We were tired, sunburned, and not a little reluctant to get back to our normal routines. At some point, Jen took an exit, thinking it was a shortcut to drop off our friend Dot. After about an hour, she realized the shortcut had taken us 50 miles in the wrong direction!

As soon as we realized the mistake, we found the first safe place to turn around and head back the right way. We can laugh about it now, but at the time, it wasn't very funny. One wrong turn was all it took.

Until we recognize our need for Christ, our lives are like that car going a long way in the wrong direction. When we hear the good news of the gospel, we are awakened to our need to repent—to turn around—and begin heading in the way of Christ. As followers of Jesus, we are called to be road signs that tell those around us, “You’re going the wrong way! Repent! There is hope and healing for your life!” How well is your life functioning as a “road sign” for others?

—B. R.

Conclusion

A. Homecoming

I recall the most bountiful spread of food from my childhood at our annual church homecoming. This is a tradition that, as a child, I looked forward to more than any other Sunday. Everyone dressed up and brought their finest homemade dishes and pies to share. After the service, we gathered at a long table under a shady tree for a meal, followed by an afternoon of worship. Although many faces were unfamiliar to me during

these homecoming celebrations, their ties to our little church granted them a place at our table.

The two segments of today's lesson share a common element of God's love for and inclusion of those once far off. Jesus' parable in Luke 15:11–32 emphasizes the joy over the repentant return of the wayward. The prodigal son represents the publicans and sinners who gathered to hear Jesus speak (Luke 15:1). The elder brother (not considered in today's texts, see Luke 15:25–30) represents the attitude of Jesus' opponents, the Pharisees and scribes (15:2). Acts 2:38–39 communicates a similar theme, calling for repentance, expressing what the repentant shall receive. Though initially addressing Jews, this passage (in light of the rest of Scripture) points toward the inclusion of the Gentiles to come. The message of Acts 2:38–39 is relevant to those who had departed and returned as well as to those who had always been far off until first being brought near.

In churches everywhere, individuals step into a congregation for the first time, while others return after a lengthy absence. God greets each one with a welcoming embrace, and there is jubilation in heaven for every soul that repents. In the parable, God is depicted as the father, and those of us who have remained in the church are invited to join our Heavenly Father in welcoming the repentant with open arms as well. When we see the prodigal return—or the unbeliever come to faith for the first time—may we be compelled by our Father's love to offer them a seat at the table and welcome them home as our brother or sister in Christ!

What Do You Think?

Do you find it more difficult to welcome new believers or those who return after a time of rebellion?

Digging Deeper

How do these Scripture passages encourage you to welcome both well?

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, we are grateful for Your boundless grace and mercy. Teach us to seek Your forgiveness wholeheartedly and extend that grace to others. Grant us wisdom that we may avoid learning lessons “the hard way.” We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

The Father eagerly waits to welcome us home!