

The parable of the prodigal son in the Bible

Jesus told the story of the lost son in Luke 15:11 - 32:

Of all the parables that Jesus spoke, this one featuring the prodigal son may be the most touching and best remembered. Utter those three words “the prodigal son” and immediately, even those who have never darkened the doors of a church will understand the connection to Jesus’s parable. Described by *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* as “perhaps the crown of all the parables,” this story appears once in the Bible in Luke’s Gospel.

“Prodigal” can mean being wastefully extravagant. In this parable the son is prodigal recklessly and wastefully spending his inheritance. “Prodigal” can also mean having or giving something on a lavish scale. In this parable the father is prodigal lavishing his unconditional love on his wayward son, a love as vast as an ocean if you will.

In the context of this parable, the prodigal son symbolises those who live without God bound in their sin and also someone who has, wandered away from God and returned after an absence.

We all have heard sermons preached on or been taught this parable in Sunday school and therefore we may feel we have a good understanding of what it means. But this morning let us take a little time to think about what isn’t commonly understood about this story and what this understanding should motivate us to do.

We need to remember that a parable is a story to illustrate a spiritual point. It is common to understand that Jesus is using this parable to teach us of God the Father’s love for those who are lost. What we commonly do not emphasised in teaching from this parable is that God wants us to repent. We can get so fixated on the other great truths that we overlook one of the other truths that Jesus wants to teach us from this parable. Throughout the Bible we see that God desires for us to repent and be reconciled to Him. He “commands all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30) or “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

(2 Peter 3:9). In Luke 15 this teaching on repentance is emphasized through a progression of three parables, the third being the one about the prodigal son.

Considering the background of a biblical passage often helps us to better understand its meaning, and this is indeed the case with this parable. The setting is provided in Luke 15: 1 - 2, where we find the Pharisees and scribes deriding Jesus for receiving and eating with sinners. These Jewish religious leaders of the first century, for whatever reason did not think it was appropriate for a righteous person, Jesus, to interact in such ways with those who were unrighteous, the tax collectors and sinners.

This opposition by the Pharisees and scribes set the stage for three parables in which Jesus taught these Jewish authorities and us today how God deals with those lost in sin.

Sometimes important principles are repeated in the Bible for emphasis. Such was the case when Jesus three times implored Peter to feed His sheep (John 21:17). In response to the opposition from the Pharisees and Scribes, Jesus spoke three parables to emphasize His message.

The first parable was about a lost sheep (Luke 15: 4 - 7). In this story, the shepherd had 100 sheep. When one became lost, he left the 99 to search for the errant sheep. After finding it and bringing it home, he rejoiced with his friends and neighbours. In the Bible, God's people are commonly referred to as sheep or God's flock (Matthew 26:31). Pastors are admonished to shepherd "the flock of God" (1 Peter 5:2), and Jesus is referred to as the "Chief Shepherd". The point of the parable is that God desires to bring those who are lost, sinners, into a relationship with Him, and importantly God and all heaven rejoice when this happens.

The second parable is that of a woman losing a silver coin. The woman lights a lamp and sweeps her house as she carefully searches for the missing coin. After finding it, she also rejoices with her friends and neighbours (Luke 15: 8 - 10). Some have wondered why such importance was placed upon the loss of a single coin. Commentaries have suggested one possible reason is that the missing coin may have been part of a set of ten silver coins strung together and worn on the woman's forehead

to symbolized a wedding vow—similar to what a wedding ring represents today. Therefore, this coin would have been of significant emotional and cultural importance as well as being part of a valuable piece of jewellery. When the woman finds the coin she gets her friends together and there is rejoicing.

Whether it was a lost sheep, a lost coin or a lost son, there is rejoicing when that which was lost is found.

There is also an interesting progression in these parables. In the first it was a lost sheep, a loss which might soon be replaced, and which would soon be forgotten; in the second it was a lost coin, which, as we have seen, could have been part of a valuable piece of jewellery not easily replaced, while in the third it is the loss of a child, surely one of the greatest losses there is”

All three of the parables in Luke 15 address the objections of the Jewish authorities and typified by the older brother in the third parable—whether it was appropriate for Jesus to care about and even mingle with sinners. The parables show that God does care about all people and He rejoices when they repent, and so should have the Jewish leaders and so should we.

The prodigal son and the two parables preceding it in Luke 15 all point toward God’s love for mankind. However, we need to be careful that do not miss the teaching within them that is the basis for God’s and all heavens celebration.

After He spoke the parable of the lost sheep, notice Jesus’ explanation: *“I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”* (verse 7). And after speaking the parable of the lost coin, Jesus said: *“In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”* (verse 10). In these verses Jesus clearly identifies the reason for God’s and heaven rejoicing the repentance of sinners.

Before moving on to look at repentance it is interesting to note that the father appears to be eagerly watching for and anticipating his son’s return. As the text puts it: “But

while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” (verse 20).

Widows story. The father was waiting on his younger son to return to him, to repent of the life he had chosen when he demanded his share of the inheritance.

Similarly, God greatly desires is for us to repent of our sins and return to Him. God loves mankind so much that He sent His Son to earth to die for our sins (John 3:16). Furthermore, God is “longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

Jesus’ emphasis on repentance was not a new subject for Him to address. He often spoke of the need for us to repent. When He began His public ministry, Jesus said, “*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matthew 4:17). Summarizing four major elements of Christ’s teaching, Mark recorded Jesus telling people: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. *Repent*, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

Because repentance is such an important subject for all who wish to be part of God’s eternal family, it is not surprising that Jesus included this teaching in the parable of the prodigal son and in the two parables that precede it in Luke 15.

So, what does it mean to repent? Well Jesus very helpfully gives us an example of repentance in this parable and that is the youngest son.

He turns from his previous life. In verse 17 he came to his senses. This crucial first step in repentance occurs when the Holy Spirit makes plain to us utter meaninglessness of our selfish desires and how we have ignored God’s will for us and fallen short of the standard God set for our lives, this selfish obsession and failure the Bible calls sin.

He confesses his sin. In verse 18 the son confesses and accepts that he has sinned against Heaven and his father. The younger son in that act of confession is clearly seeking forgiveness. This is the second step in repentance when we tell those who we have sinned against what we have done and admit our need for their forgiveness.

There also needs to be a recognition there is nothing we can do to undo our sins but that is only through Jesus's sacrifice on the cross that we can be forgiven.

He agrees to live under his fathers' roof and abide by his authority. In verse 19 he decides to return to his father house and live as a hired hand. This is the final crucial step in repentance, the decision to no longer live your life as you will or behave how you want and to accept that your life is not your own. **Funeral story.** It is not repentance if you recognise your sin, confess to God it is sin, seek forgiveness and then go back to your old way of being or doing. For it to be repentance there needs to be a change from living life your way to living life as God commands and that is both to stop sinning and to start doing good through and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Remember earlier I said that the younger son has represented both those who live without God bound in their sin and also someone who has, wandered away from God and returned after an absence. So, it is not just the lost sinner who needs to repent but also those who know God. Like the older brother, we who are part of God's family have behaviours, attitudes or habits that we have need to repent of. Yes, we are saved but we are not yet perfect, we are after all jars of clay.

In 1517 Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to All saints Church door in Wittenberg. The words of Luther's first thesis I think is appropriate for us here this morning.

Luther wrote, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said "Repent," he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance. All of the Christian life is repentance. Turning from sin and trusting in the good news that Jesus saves sinners isn't merely a one-time inaugural experience but the daily substance of Christianity. The gospel is for every day and every moment. Repentance is to be the Christian's continual posture."

As we have just read repentance should be part of our everyday life, this I know to be true from my own life. I have journey with God for more than thirty years and in those thirty plus years I have had to repent each and every day; returning to God, confessing

my sin, asking for his forgiveness through Jesus and for the help of the Holy Spirit to stop doing wrong and to start doing that which is right.

The parable of the prodigal son is an amazing and wonderful story. More important, is its overlooked message is that we must repent.

