

# The Parable of the Phenomenal Father

Text  
Luke 15:11-32

Topic  
A father looks every day for the return of his prodigal son and,  
when he sees him returning, he runs to embrace him

Title  
*"The Amazing Embrace"*

## Introduction

The main character in the Parable of the Prodigal Son is not the prodigal son. It's not his pouting brother, either.

I suggest to you that the main character is their father. He is the central person around which the story revolves and upon whom it focuses. His actions and reactions are the stuff that would have most affected Jesus' original audience.

As we will see, he was a most unusual father, not at all what you would expect. Jesus intended the parable to represent your heavenly Father as a most unusual Father – not at all what you would expect!

What can we say about our heavenly Father after reading this amazing tale? We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 You Have A Father In Heaven Who Runs To Receive You, and #2 You Have A Father In Heaven Who Rushes To Revive You.

#1 You Have A Father In Heaven  
Who Runs To Receive You  
(v11-24)

The Parable of the Phenomenal Father is the last in a series of three in this chapter. The other two are the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin. All three

answer the complaint of the religious leaders, when they said about Jesus (in verse two), “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

All three parables explain that it is precisely to receive sinners that Jesus came into the world. More than that, all three parables describe the joy of your heavenly Father when a sinner is saved.

The Jewish leaders had their own ideas about God and sinners. In their minds God was pleased whenever a sinner perished from the planet – getting what they deserved by being sent to Hades to suffer. They considered themselves righteous – performing all the required tasks that earned them the right to go to heaven.

So Jesus crafted this most beloved parable.

- He introduced a prodigal son to represent the sinners that were seeking Him for salvation.
- He introduced a pouting son to represent the Pharisees and scribes that were upset at the grace and mercy of God in saving sinners.

The focus is on the father who loved them both.

Let’s take a closer look at the prodigal.

Luke 15:11 Then He said: “A certain man had two sons.

Luke 15:12 And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.’ So he divided to them his livelihood.

You received your father’s “goods” as your inheritance when he died. To ask for them early was, in a sense, to wish he were dead already. Maybe it’s too strong to say that the prodigal wished his father dead. But he certainly did not care for his father’s life. From the father’s point of view, he may have well wished him dead, because all the prodigal thought about was getting away from him.

We can identify with the prodigal. He’s like any rebellious son or daughter. That’s probably why we think the parable is mostly about him. But in the Jewish culture of the first century, it was the father’s reaction that would

have stunned Jesus' hearers. The fact that he complied with the request would have blown their minds.

Notice, too, that it says the father divided it "to them." Apparently he gave *both* sons their inheritance. Keep that in mind for later.

Luke 15:13 And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living.

As soon as he could, the younger son split the scene. The words, "far country," mean he went outside of Jewish territory into Gentile lands. "Prodigal" means *wasteful*. He wasted his possessions with wasteful living.

It's interesting to me that we refer to getting loaded or drunk as 'being wasted.' It's usually portrayed as something positive, to be pursued, but by our own use of the word we expose the reality of what we're doing.

We automatically think that he wasted his inheritance on immoral activities. After all, doesn't his brother say, "he has devoured his livelihood with harlots?"

**The older brother had no idea what his younger brother had been doing.** No where in the text are you told specifically that he wasted his inheritance on immoral activities. He may have; but he may not have.

Before you come to Jesus, many of you wasted your substance and yourself on immoral things. Others of you wasted your substance and yourself on many so-called refined activities.

The Gospel is not just for people in the gutter! While we may be drawn to the more extreme testimonies of people who were involved in all sorts of crazy activities, those who seem more mainstream are just as much in need of the Gospel.

Luke 15:14 But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want.

The prodigal ran out of money just as the local economy took a nosedive. It was God's providence for his life. It would bring him to a place of realizing his true needs, and of recognizing where his true needs could be met.

I suggest God is also working, behind the scenes, to reveal a person's true needs, his or her spiritual needs.

Luke 15:15 Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

Luke 15:16 And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything.

Swine were considered unclean by Jewish Law (Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14). The whole thing in the Old Testament, about foods and what you could and could not eat, was not really ever about health and hygiene. It was about being separate from the surrounding nations. It was spiritual, not physical. The division of clean and unclean foods corresponded to the division between Israel as God's chosen nation and the rest of the Gentile world. Israelites were thus reminded at every meal of their redemption by God to serve and honor Him. As they distinguished between clean and unclean foods, they were reminded that holiness was more than a matter of meat and drink but a way of life.

As for us, today, all things are considered 'clean.' We can enjoy all foods in moderation.

For a Jew, under the Old Testament Law, to be working with swine, well, that was rock bottom. To add to his spiritual misery, the swine ate better than he did, and no one showed him any charity.

Luke 15:17 "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!

Luke 15:18 I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you,

Luke 15:19 and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.'"

The thinking of the prodigal reveals the attitude the Jews had towards God:

1. If He was a father at all, He was a distant father.
2. He had to be approached cautiously, with rehearsed words.
3. You were not worthy to be in His presence, but you could serve Him, and perhaps earn your position.

Jesus was about to blow the lid off of centuries of misunderstanding about the nature of God.

Luke 15:20 “And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.

The first thing you note is that the father was daily looking for his son and desiring his return.

Then you see that, when he returned, he received him just as he was.

For the father, running was undignified. It showed the depth of his compassion.

It also may have been necessary! The prodigal had been a rebellious son; he deserved to be stoned to death by the elders of the city. Those men usually sat at the gates or entrance to the city to hear disputes and render judgments. Seeing the prodigal son they may have barred his return or, worse, determined he should be stoned to death under the Law. Before they had a chance to do anything, the father raced to embrace him.

If they wanted to stone him, they'd have to kill the father, too, as he embraced his son and accompanied him home.

Luke 15:21 And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

The prodigal attempted to recite his rehearsed prayer. The father’s reaction teaches you that formal prayers can be words without any importance to God. He sees your heart – so you may as well speak to Him informally, as you would to your earthly father.

Luke 15:22 “But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet.

Luke 15:23 And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry;

The whole scene is an illustration of salvation:

1. Sinners are described in the Bible as being dressed in filthy rags. When you come to Jesus, it’s likened to Him removing your filthy rags and replacing them with a pure white robe, a robe of righteousness you could not earn but which is given to you.
2. The ring indicated you had all the power and position of your dad. When you get saved, everything that is God’s belongs to you as a gift. You have access to all spiritual blessings in heavenly places.
3. Slaves went barefoot. Getting sandals meant you were a son, not a slave.

A “fatted calf” was always in reserve for a special occasion. The killing of the fatted calf simply indicated that there was joy and partying over the return of this sinner.

Luke 15:24 for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ And they began to be merry.

The extent of salvation is celebrated. From lost to found; from dead to alive.

Again – It’s about the father, to illustrate for you your heavenly Father. He runs to receive sinners!

Does that seem unusual? Unwise? Undignified? Unconditional? You bet! But that is how God the Father wants you to see Him in His love for you.

Two questions suggest themselves:

1. Is that how you picture God the Father?
2. Is that how you portray God the Father?

The answer to both questions needs to be, “Yes!”

Jesus was addressing the complaint of the Pharisees and scribes that He “receives sinners and eats with them.” He next put them in His story.

## #2 You Have A Father In Heaven Who Rushes To Revive You

(v25-32)

Up to this point you might have forgotten that there was an older brother. He’s going to play a prominent role. He’s going to represent the Pharisees and scribes, with their bad attitude toward sinners.

Luke 15:25 “Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.

Luke 15:26 So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.

Luke 15:27 And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.’

Luke 15:28 “But he was angry and would not go in...

The older brother had left his father without ever leaving the farm! All of his outward service and dignity were a cloak for a heart full of anger.

Spiritually speaking, his garments were as filthy as his brothers. His were sins of the spirit rather than outward rebellion. The older brother’s attitude was as deadly and as ugly as any of his younger brother’s sins. Maybe moreso because they were self-righteous.

Luke 15:28 “But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him.

Luke 15:29 So he answered and said to his father, ‘Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends.

Luke 15:30 But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.’

Listen carefully to the older brother’s comments:

1. The word for “serving,” in verse twenty-nine, indicates *slavery*. He considered working for his father a kind of involuntary slavery.
2. He claimed he had never done anything wrong. *No one can claim that!* This is pure self-righteousness.

3. He found no joy in his father's house – but blamed it on his dad. He didn't think his dad would let him have a party with his friends. As it turns out, his dad never restricted him in that way.
4. He resented sinners – even his own brother. He even accused his brother of sins he may not have committed.

These comments are intended to paint a picture of the warped religion of the Pharisees and scribes. It described a religion of works, by which you believe you can earn your righteousness. But, in such a religion, God is a taskmaster, not your father; and you are his slave. There is no joy. You go around thinking you are better than others, and accusing them of their supposed sinfulness.

This is what the religious leaders had done to the Hebrew Scriptures. It's what they believed and taught. How very, very sad.

Perspective is important. It is all too possible to read and study all about God, but misunderstand the material. You must approach your reading and studying about God from the point of view that He loves you as a Father, with an everlasting love.

Instead of seeing God as a cruel, or even a benevolent, taskmaster, they should have sought Him as their Father.

Again, I remind you that this parable is about the Father. He ran out to the prodigal son but also rushed to the pouting son. God rushes even to people confused with religion, and wants to revive them.

Jesus was holding out hope for these Pharisees and scribes. They could still know God as their Father. That's why, in verses thirty-one and thirty-two, the parable is left open-ended:

Luke 15:31 “And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours.

Luke 15:32 It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.”



You're not told the final reaction of the older brother. Did he repent? Did he experience revival? He could have.

Jesus was on earth, offering the kingdom of Heaven to the Jews. Even though the Jews were God's chosen nation, individual Jews needed to believe in Jesus by faith and be saved.

Many sinners were coming to the Lord to be saved; most of the religious leaders were not. There were exceptions, like Nicodemus. But for the most part they were working against Him. So Jesus told them this series of parables about God seeking all who are lost.

If you are a Christian, you'll want to portray God as a phenomenal Father Who is seeking sinners to save. You will want to check yourself to be certain you have none of the weird ideas of the older brother; and that you have none of his bad attitude. If, upon self-examination, you find you are more like the older brother... *God rushes to revive **you!***

Maybe you are not a Christian. You should identify with the younger son, the prodigal son. You may or may not be doing immoral things; but your life is being wasted because you have not discovered the Giver of life, nor your real purpose for living. You may have tried religion; but it didn't help you. You need to understand that, if you will repent of your sin, God will run to receive you!

