

Repentance and Faith

Devotional Reading: Mark 1:14–20

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

Today's Scripture: Luke 15:11–24; Acts 2:38–39

I. Jesus' Parable Luke 15:11–24

¹¹ Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

¹³ “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’

²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

“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.

²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.”

11. 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 man* or “a certain man”; the Greek version of this verse shows the modifier even though the English does not. 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 fre-

quently 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. Then as now, inheritance is passed along to descendants only after the death of the testator. 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.

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

13. *The younger son*, having gained possession of the *wealth* of his inheritance, moves a significant distance away from his father. The specifics of how the money was squandered are not detailed.

14. The son quickly becomes impoverished as bankruptcy coincides with *a severe famine*. Food shortages cause food prices to rise as the law of supply and demand asserts itself.

15. Driven by his situation, the young man seeks employment. Scripture expects those physically capable of work to earn their food. 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*.

16. 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. Desiring the pigs' food was another thing entirely.

17. This is a critical turning point in the story. The young man, having reached his lowest point, regains his clarity of mind. Self-examination is a recurring motif in Scripture, invariably serving as the initial step toward repentance.

18. Repentance requires returning to his *father* and admitting wrongdoing. However, his offense, as is the case with all transgressions, is chiefly *against God*. This is implied by the term *heaven*. Undoubtedly, the listeners recognize the son's conduct as dishonoring his father and thereby breaking the law of God.

19. 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.

20a. 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.

20b. 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 (Luke 15:1–10). To the audience, the sight of an elderly Jewish man running is unusual and undignified. Yet, his act underscores the father's profound longing to be reconciled with *his son*.

21. 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.

22. Before the son can suggest becoming a servant as he has planned, *the father* interrupts by embracing him as a son instead. The *best 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.

23. The father's subsequent command suggests that he plans to host a celebration. Traditionally, a family reserves a *fattened calf* for significant events, 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* in the contraction *let's* may indicate that the neighbors are invited to witness the son's transformation and the father's demonstration of love, acceptance, and forgiveness.

24. 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.

II. Apostle's Teaching

Acts 2:38–39

³⁸ Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

38a. 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, “Brothers, 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.

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.

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 Spirit.”

38b. Peter highlights two blessings for those who respond as he has just directed. Forgiveness is possible because of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. There, he paid sin's price for us and cleared our debt completely. The Holy Spirit, promised by Jesus, empowers believers to support the Christian community and embody virtues like love, joy, and peace. Additionally, the Spirit assists in prayer and affirms an individual's salvation.

39. The promise of the previous verse is not only to those asking the question (*you*) but also to their *children*, and *all who are far off*, referring to Gentiles.

Peter likely does not yet understand the full implication of his words, 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).

Involvement Learning

Repentance and Faith

Into the Lesson

Recall a time when you or someone close to you moved away. What specific details stand out from that experience?

Today's lesson explores the well-known parable of the prodigal son. One intriguing element of this story is the vivid detail about the father's actions and the specific gifts he presents to his son upon their reunion. Jesus employs earthly language through this parable to convey a heavenly message about how the Father welcomes us into his home.

Into the Word

Read Luke 15:11–16. List characteristics, actions, or phrases from the passage that describe each character.

The Prodigal Son: _____

The Father: _____

What does the son's journey teach about repentance and reconciliation?

What does the father's response reveal about God's love?

Read Acts 2:38–39. List Peter's instruction and God's promise in these verses.

Peter's instructions: _____

God's promise: _____

Key Text

" 'This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'
So they began to celebrate."

—Luke 15:24

Into Life

What actions did the father take to show his love?

List ways to demonstrate God's generosity to others.

Thought to Remember

The Father eagerly waits to welcome us home!