

Prodigals
[Luke 15:11-32](#)
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This is the story of the Prodigal son. That's what most people call it, anyway, even though you notice that that title, "The Prodigal Son", doesn't actually appear anywhere in the Bible itself. Prodigal means wasteful, extravagant, recklessly spendthrift. It comes from a latin word, *prodigere*, which means "to squander" - literally, *prod* means "from" and *agere* means "to drive away or expel." A prodigal is one who is so wasteful and reckless that they drive things away from them, forcing things out into the world.

So to call this the parable of the prodigal son seems to focus attention solely on the very first part of the parable, the part that describes the younger son, who comes to his father and demands his portion of the inheritance – he essentially tells his father, I wish you were dead, and I'm going to act like you are. He takes what his father gives him and goes out into the world, and squanders it – he takes the wealth and riches that his father gave him, the wealth his father worked his entire life to accumulate, and he drives it away from him into the hands of the saloons and the brothels and the casinos of some far country, and in doing so he drives himself away from his home and his family. He is intensely prodigal – the wealth that he has is squandered on activities that have no value and no meaning to them, and before long he is bankrupt. He is reduced to herding swine, which for an observant Jew would be a terrible fate, and surely the

listeners to this story would have recoiled in horror and revulsion to hear of this young man eating from the same trough as an animal that is ritually unclean and is not to be touched. The younger son, the prodigal son, has hit rock bottom.

And at this moment, he comes to himself – he realizes what he has done to himself, what he used to be and what he has now become. The servants working for his father are better off than he is now, far better off. Even though he has driven away all his wealth and abandoned his family connections, maybe they'll take him back. Maybe his father will hire him on as a servant, maybe he can use what little he has left, the strength of his hands, to work his way back into his father's household and have a bed to sleep in at night and enough food to eat. It's not much, but it's more than he can hope for as he starts to make the long trip home.

And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and was filled with love for his son. Keep in mind that the last time the father saw his son, he was clean and strong and well-fed and well-dressed and flush with confidence and hubris and ready to take on the world, and now on the horizon appears this filthy, malnourished, unclothed wretch, fresh from the pigsties, the stink and sweat of the swine still rolling off him, his head downcast, hesitating as he nears the farm, and through all that filth and muck and dirt, across the distance, the father recognizes his son, and he runs to meet him. Now, this story isn't taking place in 21st century Canada. 1st century middle eastern patriarchs are not supposed to run. They have far

too much dignity for that. Those long robes are not designed for short sprints, after all, and the roads are not nicely paved with sidewalks, and the footwear lacks arch support, and people just don't show off their emotion in the middle of the street. It isn't dignified. So if any of the neighbours happened to look up from their plows, or any of his own servants happened to be wandering past, they would have seen an elderly, respectable, well-to-do landowner with his robe hitched up around him, a look of wild excitement on his face, tearing over the rutted lanes towards a shambling, filthy vagrant, tackling him to the ground and kissing him. Can you imagine the scandal? The shocked looks on the faces of the people who had respected and feared and admired this pillar of their community as he carries on this ridiculous display in the middle of the road? And when the son tries to stammer out his practiced speech, his apology and his plea for a job, any job, he can't even get through the whole thing before his father is bellowing back up the road towards the farmstead, where the servants must have been clustered, mouths agape, wondering if the old man has finally lost it, and he starts calling for clothes, and jewellery, and food, and party preparations, for everyone in the neighbourhood to hear, because his son who was dead is alive again; he was lost, and now is found.

Now think about what that father did. He took all the dignity and respect and honour he had earned in the community through decades of self-discipline and decorum and restraint, and he squandered it. He takes his best robe and his best ring and sandals and puts them on the dirtiest,

scuzziest drifter who's ever stumbled into view, he orders the fatted calf slaughtered and cooked and throws the grandest party that that town has ever seen. He is extravagant. He is wasteful. He is intensely prodigal – the love that he has is showered without restraint on a son who is utterly undeserving. This isn't just a story about a prodigal son. It's a story about a prodigal father, a father who loves so extravagantly and passionately that nothing else is important to him, only the fact that his son has returned.

Of course, the story isn't over. At the very beginning, Jesus told us that this was a story about a man who had two sons, and now the elder son comes back in from the fields, and hears the music and laughter coming from the house, and is told by another servant that his brother has returned, and their father is throwing a party. This infuriates the elder son, and he refuses to come in. His father notices his absence, and comes outside to where his firstborn is pouting in the yard, and tries to get his son to join in the celebration, but he won't have any of it.

Pay attention, though, to what the elder son says to his father. He angrily declares that "For all these years, I've been working like a slave for you. I've been slaving away, trying to make you happy, to make up for losing a worker when this son of yours left. I never asked you for anything. I never caused you any trouble. I've kept my head down and worked and worked and never had any fun, and now you're throwing this son of yours a party." The elder son thinks he's proving what a good son he's been over the years since his brother left, but all he's proving is that he hasn't been acting like a

son at all. He's been acting like a slave. He's been slaving in his own father's house, he's thrown himself into trying to singlehandedly do all the work to make up for his brother's absence, he's grown bitter and angry, he's never once acted like a son and just enjoyed being loved by his father. We have just seen how loving and generous and prodigal his father is; his father would have given him anything, everything he wanted, but instead of living like a son, he has spent the years since his brother left living as a slave. The younger son acted like his father was dead, but the older son acted like his father was his taskmaster, his overlord. He took years of opportunity, years where he could have been growing closer to his father and enjoying the life of a blessed and cherished son, and he squandered them. He took the gift of being called a son, and he threw it away. He was so preoccupied with working and earning his way that he wasted years of his life. He was intensely prodigal – the time that he had was wasted on activities just as valueless and meaningless as the drinking and carousing of his younger brother. Both sons have wasted their lives on things that have no lasting value, one on work, one on play. The elder son is also a prodigal son.

The father hears the anger in his son's voice, and he speaks tenderly to him. "My Son," he calls him. Throughout this parable, everytime we have seen the word son, Luke has used the greek word *huios* (HWEE-ohs), but this word is different. Here the father calls his son "teknon," (TEK-non) which is a term of deep love and affection between father and son – it could be translated as "my beloved child." Once again, the father lavishes his love on

his son: "You are always with me, and everything I have is yours." The elder son never needed to work for his father's approval, he never needed to become a slave; everything that the father had belonged to the elder son, every privilege and gift and honour that came with his birthright were just waiting to be enjoyed, were still waiting to be enjoyed, and all the elder son had to do was just enjoy it, enjoy being the son of a loving father. Both sons had been as good as dead to their father, and now beyond all hope, his younger son was alive again, and the father now pleads with his elder son to let go of his anger and give up his need to prove himself, to earn his way, and just enjoy the extravagant love of his prodigal father; just come on in and join the party.

When we read this parable of the prodigal son, the first instinct is to ask the big interpretive question at the end; which son are we, the hardworking elder son or the hardliving younger son? The thing is, I don't think it really makes a difference. Like both sons in the parable, all of us have a tendency to live prodigally, to waste our wealth and our time and our lives chasing after things that do not and cannot satisfy. Anytime we place our jobs or our leisure or our bank accounts ahead of our relationship with God, we are living like prodigal children. Anytime we think our fear and worry about the future is stronger than the hope we have in Jesus Christ, we are living like prodigal children. Anytime we think the future is all up to us, that we need to save ourselves or fix what is broken in the world around us, we are living like prodigal children, we are squandering opportunities to

move into deeper communion with our creator. Even good things, even our friendships and our family and our service to the church can be wasteful and prodigal if they do not serve a greater purpose, if they don't bring us closer to God and make us more like him. God doesn't want us to live like slaves – he doesn't need us to work ourselves ragged trying to build up his kingdom, as if it depended solely on us to build a successful mission or a thriving congregation. God wants us to be his children, his sons and his daughters, he wants us to enjoy the gifts and privileges that come with being children of God, he wants us to experience the unbelievable love that he has for us, the depth of passion that can only be offered by our creator and redeemer. We are loved, deeply, deeply loved by a God who recognizes us when we are far away, who comes running to meet us, when we are still crusted with the filth and stench of our sin he throws his arms around us and kisses us and shouts out so that the universe can hear that we belong to him, that we are his beloved children, that in him we are no longer dead, but alive, no longer lost, but found. We are loved by a prodigal God, a god who squanders his love on feeble and sinful creatures like you and me, a God who gives away his very life so that we can be saved from our sin. Our God has already done everything for us; there is no work left undone, no task still to be performed, nothing to distract us from the love our heavenly father has for us. All we have to do is stop living like slaves, and start living like children. Get out of the pigsty, Come in from the fields, and enjoy the party. Amen.