

The Prodigal Son

(Luke 15:11-32)

Pre-Session Warm Up

Ask: Have you ever felt like running away from home?

Perhaps you've lain in your bed at night thinking of what it would be like living somewhere else.

[Teacher, perform the following skit with a puppet or in a role-play:]

"I'm going to run away from home! I hate living here. I'm always getting bossed around. My mom is always making me clean my room, do my homework, and wash the dishes. Every day it's the same old routine. I have to get up at 7 a.m., go to bed at a 9 p.m. even when I'm not even tired — I wish I could do the things I want to, when I want to do them!"

Ask: What would make a kid want to run away from home?

[Teacher, lead a discussion. Maybe the kid is bored at home or doesn't want follow his parents' rules and just wants to do things his own way.]

It's very easy to become dissatisfied with what you have when you constantly think about the things you don't have rather than remembering all the good things you do have.

Perhaps that's what happened to the guy in a story Jesus told. Things looked a lot better anywhere else.

Opening Prayer

Father, this morning we will again learn one of Jesus' parables. I pray that You will give us the spiritual understanding that we need to see beneath the surface of this story so that we might understand the deeper spiritual truths that You want us to learn about Your kingdom. Open the eyes and ears of our heart, I pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Memory Verse

O Lord, You are so good, so ready to forgive, so full of unfailing love for all who ask for Your help. (Psalms 86:5)

Lesson

The Pharisees and scribes were the arrogant and self-righteous religious leaders of Jesus' day. They thought it was terrible that Jesus showed kindness toward sinners. They thought they were better than most people because they strictly kept the *Ten Commandments* and all the rest of the rules. They thought that God shouldn't forgive people that they considered horrible sinners. It made them angry and resentful to hear Jesus teach that God wanted sinners to come to Heaven. So, Jesus confronted them with a parable to show them God's love for the lost sinner.

Luke 15:11-12

To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: "A man had two sons. (12) The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

Although this son had everything he needed. His father provided for all his needs. He had food, clothes, and he even had servants. For some reason he was not happy at home with his family.

Maybe he was jealous of his big brother because he was always doing things better than him and he thought he could never be good enough to please his parents. Maybe he thought his father made him work too hard. So, one day he went to his father and asked for his share of his inheritance.

In Bible times, the oldest son always inherited two portions of the father's estate while the other brothers got only a single portion. Usually, the sons would not have received their father's inheritance until after their father died.

How good this father was to his younger son! He was willing to give his hard-earned savings to his son even though the son didn't deserve to have it until after his death.

The love of the father in our story is a picture of God's mercy and grace. None of us deserve anything good from God. But because of His great love for us, He went to the cross so that we might have eternal life with Him.

Jesus wanted to teach the Pharisees and scribes about God's goodness. When the younger son asked for his portion early, it showed that he was self-centered and had no respect for his father, which was just like these Jewish religious leaders.

Luke 15:13

A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living.

Some versions of the Bible say that this son *wasted his possessions with prodigal living* (NKJ), that's why we call this the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The word *prodigal* means wasteful. Someone who lives a prodigal life is one who recklessly and foolishly wastes his life.

The son had disregarded his father's love and care and decided to go his own way. How foolish! God's Word says that you and I can be just like that. God is so very good to us: He has provided for our needs and given us many things to enjoy. Yet we, too, go our own way (Isaiah 53:6) and waste what the Father has given us. We often do things that displease God.

Ask: Can you think of ways we displease God?

When you speak rudely to your brothers and sisters, talk back to your mothers, or get cocky at school with your teachers, you displease God. You do those things because you were born with a sinful heart that is constantly persuading you to do wrong despite God's goodness to you. So often we foolishly go our own way and disregard God's goodness and love.

Soon the son would have to suffer the consequences of following his own sinful heart.

Luke 15:14-15

About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. (15) He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs.

His money ran out and there was a great famine in the land. The only place he could find a job was with a local farmer who hired him to feed the pigs.

According to the law God gave to Moses, pigs were unclean animals and the people were forbidden to eat pork (Leviticus 11:7,8). Jews would not even touch pigs. For a Jew to stoop to feeding pigs was a great humiliation.

Luke 15:16

The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

This son was so hungry that the pig food began to look good to him.

Ask: Do you know what pigs eat?

They call it "*pig slop*" for a good reason! It's stuff that you and I would consider garbage! And it stinks really bad.

He was starving and would have eaten the pig food if it had been offered to him. But, for this young man to eat food that the pigs had touched was disgusting to the listeners of this story. The prodigal son had truly sunk to the depths of society.

This young man, like many who are rebellious and immature, wanted to be free to live as he pleased, but he had to hit bottom before he came to his senses. It often takes great sorrow and tragedy to cause people to look to the only One who can help them.

Luke 15:17

When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger!'

This son finally came to his senses! He realized he had made a big mistake. This was not at all what he wanted to do with his life.

He knew that his father was kind and always made sure that the people who worked for him had plenty to eat. So he thought to himself, *"I will go back home and ask him to hire me as one of his servants so that at least I won't starve to death."*

Luke 15:18-19

I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, (19) and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant."

The son realized he had sinned against God and his father. Recognizing that you have sinned is the first step towards making peace with God. Jesus was telling this story to the Pharisees and was hoping they would see that there was hope for them if they would only recognize their sins like the guy in this story.

Luke 15:20

So, he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him.

The son headed back to his father's house. When he was still a long way off his father saw him coming.

Ask: What does that tell you about the father?

In this story, the father was watching and waiting for his son to return to home. He had never stopped loving his rebellious son. He was ready to greet his son if he returned. And when he saw his son, he ran to him and hugged and kissed him and held him in his arms.

In the same way, God will not force us to come to Him when we sin. God waits patiently for us to turn from our sins, come to Him, and ask Him for forgiveness.

Luke 15:21-24

His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.' (22) "But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. (23) And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, (24) for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So, the party began.

The father didn't yell at his son or punish him. He didn't tell him he'd made a stupid choice in life. Instead, he had his servants bring his son new clothes, then put a ring on his finger which showed that his father had forgiven him and accepted him back into the family. And then the father threw a great feast to celebrate his return.

The son had left out of selfishness, just like we do when we willfully disobey God. Our Father in heaven is ready and waiting for us to confess our sins so that He can forgive us and restore us to right standing with Him. (1 John 1:9) God's great love reaches out and finds us sinners no matter why or how we got lost.

The Older Son

Ask: How many of you have siblings? Are you ever **jealous** of your brother or sister? Have you ever been **resentful** when your sibling got something you felt you deserved?

That's the situation in this story. It was hard for the older brother to accept his younger brother when he returned.

Luke 15:25

Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house,

The older son was out dutifully working in the field. He had no idea what was going on. When he got back to the house the party was well underway. There was laughter and noise and rejoicing. The musicians were playing and everyone was singing and dancing. The barbeque was filling the air with delicious aromas.

Luke 15:26-28

and he asked one of the servants what was going on. (27) 'Your brother is back,' he was told, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.' (28) "The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him,

The older brother was angry. He thought, "*This isn't fair!*" And he absolutely refused to go into the celebration. The father tried to reason with his older son and get him to join the party. But he would have nothing to do with it!

The older brother's attitude was just as self-righteous as the attitudes of the Pharisees to whom Jesus was telling this story.

Luke 15:29-30

but he replied, 'All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. (30) Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!'

In the story of the prodigal son, the father's response is compared with the older brother's response. The father forgave because he was filled with love. The older brother refused to forgive because he was bitter about the injustice of it all. His resentment just showed that he was just as lost to the father's love as the younger brother had been.

Luke 15:31

His father said to him, 'Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours.

The father encouraged him to rejoice on behalf of his younger brother. He said, "*everything I have is yours.*" The father wasn't going to take the older son's inheritance away from him. He still had the double portion that was his by birth right, even though the younger son had already spent his single portion. The father was just glad the son had come home where he belonged and he wanted the older son to rejoice, too.

Luke 15:32

We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!"

In Jesus' story, the older brother represents the Pharisees who were listening to Jesus tell this story. They were so busy finding fault with Jesus, they missed the whole the point of His story. Jesus wanted them to understand that God is good and gracious and kind and forgiving, and that He's just waiting for them to turn to Him.

Their self-righteous attitude prevented them from entering into the joy of experiencing God's gracious forgiveness for themselves, just like the older brother's resentment kept him from entering into the celebration.

Don't you miss out on the celebration we'll have when we all get to heaven. God is longing to forgive your sins and give you everlasting life. Just turn to Him and give Him your heart. Ask Him to be your Lord and Savior. And you, too, can join the party we'll have in heaven one day.

Closing Prayer

Father, I know that You are longing to forgive us our sins and to give us everlasting life. I pray that we would be like the younger son, and come to You with repentant hearts. Help us not to be resentful of others that receive Your love and forgiveness. We want to rejoice with You and the angels when the lost come into Your kingdom. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Learning Activities

Craft Corner

Game Center

Have the children work on *The Lost Son* worksheet or send it home as a “take home” paper.

Or, use the following questions in another game of your choice:

Review questions:

1. Who were the Pharisees and the scribes? (The arrogant and self-righteous religious leaders of Jesus’ day)
2. Why did the Pharisees and the scribes think it was terrible that Jesus showed kindness towards sinners? (They thought they were better than most people.)
3. This is the Parable of the Prodigal Son. What does the word *prodigal* mean? (The word *prodigal* means wasteful or reckless.)
4. Tell me in your own words the Parable of the Prodigal Son?
5. Who does the father represent? (God, the Father)
6. The son disregarded his father’s love and care, decided to go his own way. What is that a picture of? (We, too, go our own way and waste what the Father has given us.)
7. What is the love of the father in the parable a picture of? (God’s love for us. He willing lets us enjoy all that belongs to Him.)
8. What are some ways we displease God? (Speak rudely to our brothers and sisters, talk back to our mothers, get cocky at school with our teachers, etc.)
9. Why do you do things that displease God? (We were born with a sinful heart that is constantly persuading us to do wrong despite God’s goodness to us.)
10. Why is feeding pigs the lowest possible thing for the listeners of this story to imagine? (According to the law God gave to Moses, pigs were unclean animals and people were forbidden to eat pork or even touch a pig.)
11. What did the prodigal son finally realize once he came to his senses? (The son realized he had sinned against God and his father.)
12. Why did Jesus tell this story to the Pharisees and scribes? (He wanted them to realize that they were sinners and needed to ask the Father for forgiveness.)
13. Where was the father when the son finally came home? (He was watching and waiting for him and ready to greet him.)
14. Tell me about the older brother? Who did he represent in this story? (The arrogant and self-righteous Pharisees and scribes who were listening to Jesus tell this story.)
15. Why was the older brother so full of hate and bitterness and resentment? (His father was throwing a “welcome home” party for his little brother and he didn’t think it was fair. He had stayed home and done all the right things—worked hard for his father, never did any prodigal living like his younger brother had.)
16. Why did the father throw that party for the younger son? (Because he had been lost, but now he was back home safe and sound.)

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