

Luke 15:11-24

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Jesus told three parables in response to the Pharisees and scribes grumbling at how He mingles with sinners. This third parable is often called “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” This is part one of the parable.

It is about a father with two sons, neither of whom understand their Father’s perspective toward them, or what is actually in their best interest. The younger brother represents the attitude of sinners the Pharisees complained about, and the older brother represents the Pharisees.

The first half of the parable tells how the younger son prematurely demanded his inheritance and left his father for a distant country where he squandered it all. After he became desperate, and believing himself to be unworthy as a son, he returned home hoping to be hired by his father. Instead, the father graciously reinstated him as a son and called for a major celebration because, in his words: “This son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.”

There is no apparent parallel for this parable in the other gospel accounts.

In response to the Pharisees’ slanders against Jesus due to His willingness to fraternize with tax collectors and sinners (Luke 15:1-2), Jesus *told them* three parables.

1. “The Parable of the *Lost Sheep*” (Luke 15:3-7)
2. “The Parable of the *Lost Coin*” (Luke 15:8-10)
3. “The Parable of the Prodigal Son” (Luke 15:11-32)

The first parable He told them was, “The *Parable of the Lost Sheep*.”

It was about a man who left his flock of ninety-nine sheep in search of the one that was *lost*. He rejoiced over it when he *found* it. Jesus concluded the parable with a declaration: “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7).

The second parable He told them was, “The *Parable of the Lost Coin*.”

It was similar in structure and meaning to the first. It was about a woman with ten coins who turned her house upside down in search of the one that was *lost*. She rejoiced over it when she *found* it. Jesus then concluded the parable with another declaration about the value of repentance: “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10). In each case it is inferred that this speaks of one who is a part of Israel, one who belongs to the flock, the group, or the family. One who is *God’s* chosen people (Deuteronomy 7:7-8).

The third and final parable Jesus tells the grumbling scribes and Pharisees is “The Parable of the Prodigal *Son*.” It will demonstrate that *God* desires repentance from both the sinners (of whom the Pharisees grumble) as well as the Pharisees themselves.

It is perhaps Jesus’s most famous parable. It is a story about three men who are members of the same family—a *father* and *his two sons* (an older and a *younger* brother). The story follows the actions and reactions of these men and the effects their choices have on their relationships with each other. *The father* represents *God*, *the older brother* represents the Pharisees and teachers of the law, and *the younger brother* represents the sinners.

To a certain degree, “The Parable of the Prodigal *Son*” is three parables in one. The first half of the story focuses on *the younger son* and *his* relationship to *his father*. This is where the parable gets its name, “The Parable of the Prodigal *Son*.” Prodigal means “excessive,” definitionally, as in “prodigious.” But due to this parable’s cultural influence, the term generally has a negative connotation, because *the younger son* was excessive in *his* irresponsible use of liberty and *loose* lifestyle.

The second half of the parable is sort of sequel to the first. It focuses on the older *son*’s relationship to his *father* and his cold reaction to the *compassion* his *father* has toward *his younger* brother when *he* returns home, paralleling the attitude the Pharisees have toward the sinners. The second *son* is excessively judgmental and self-oriented. Arguably, the story’s title could apply to him as well, but refer to his excessive self-righteousness. By observation, it would seem that most people are by nature either prone to fall into one of these two excesses. We are all sinners, but may express our sin differently (Romans 3:23). Therefore, this parable has something for everyone.

The third insight of this allegory is the story of the *father*. The *father* is excessively just, while also being excessively loving. If the story was named “The Prodigal *Father*” the word “prodigal” could have retained its definitional meaning but acquired a positive connotation. We get an extra bonus by being allowed to peer into the heart of *God*, and see His benevolence toward His people, while also understanding the reality that *God* has granted us the amazing gift of making choices. And of course, our choices have immense consequences.

The Prodigal Family

A man had two sons.

Even though the parable is named after *the younger son*, really all three members of this family are excessive prodigals in one way or another. *The younger son* is excessive in *his* liberty. *He* prodigiously uses his liberty to dive head-first into ruin (Galatians 5:13,15). The *father* is excessive in *his compassion for his son*. *He* prodigiously pardons *him* when the *son* repents. Also the *father* is completely just and loving. *He* pardons *his younger son* relationally, but does not restore the inheritance that *his younger son* lost, therefore allowing *him* to suffer the consequences of *his* actions. The older *son* is excessive in his judgmental legalism. He is prodigiously embittered at his *father*’s mercy toward *his younger* brother.

The first half of the parable follows the prodigious rise, fall, and restoration of *the younger son* and the extravagant mercy of *his father*. *The younger son* represents the tax collectors and sinners who were flocking to Jesus's Gospel and were repenting and being restored to the fulness of life (Luke 15:1).

The second half of the parable follows the older *son's* cold reaction to his *younger* brother's return and the bitterness he feels towards his *father* and brother when their relationship is restored. The older *son* represents the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling about the tax collectors' and sinners' restoration in Jesus's ministry (Luke 15:2). To learn about the second half of the parable, and the older brother's reaction to his *younger* brother's return and his *father's compassion* for him, [please see the commentary for Luke 15:25-32](#).

The common theme running through both halves of the parable is the *father's* prodigious *compassion* for both *sons*. This parable is really about the *father* of these *two sons* and *his* great love for both of them. While the *father's* love encompasses both *sons*, they are allowed to make their own choices, and bear the consequences of those choices. Thus, this parable is also a stark reminder that humans are made in the image of *God*, a major part of which is the gift of exercising the volition to make moral choices (Genesis 1:27).

The *father* in this story represents *God*. The *father* is representative of *God* the Father's "forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of His grace which He [prodigiously] lavished on us" (Ephesians 1:7b-8a). In a literal sense, "The Parable of the Prodigal *Son*" is an iconic picture of *God* the Father, masterfully told by the One who is the icon (image) of the Father (Colossians 1:15). Perhaps more than any other parable, this parable reveals the character of *God*.

God is shown as being totally loving, having complete benevolence toward His people. But He allows them to make their own choices. *God* invites His people to see things with a true perspective, but leaves them to make their own choice of perspective. *God* is also completely just. While we can always mend our relationship with Him, our choices have real consequences.

The Central Figure of the Parable

Jesus began this parable with a brief description of the central figure: *A man had two sons*.

The central figure is the *man* who is the *father* of *two sons*. Before the story ends, both *sons* will have played an important part in this parable. But as significant and dramatic as each of the *sons'* roles are, the main function they play in this parable is to reveal the astonishing depth of *compassion* their *father* has for them. It is therefore appropriate that Jesus begins this parable with the *man* who was their *father*.

The Younger's Son's Ultimatum

The younger of the two sons said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.'

There are four points to make about the son's claim.

First, *the younger son* did not request this of *his father*. *He* demanded it. Had *he* asked *his father* to do this for *him*, it would have been a ludicrous thing to request. But as an ultimatum it is even more outrageous.

Second, the *younger son's* demand ran counter to the Jewish social structure of the family, where *sons* were expected to join the family business and become a partner with the fathers. *This son* was not only wanting to leave *his father* and quit the family business, but *he* was also insisting that *he* be able to withdraw his future stake in the business immediately. Doing this would likely have had a detrimental, if not potentially catastrophic effect on the family business. *The son's* demand was extremely selfish.

Third, it is difficult to imagine a more contemptible claim for a *son* to demand of *his father*. *The younger son* was demanding that *his father* give *him* his inheritance in advance. *He* demanded money that was not yet *his*. *He* wrongfully insisted that a portion of *the estate* which belonged to *his father* rightfully belonged to *him*.

The son's harsh mandate revealed that *his father* meant nothing to *him* beyond *his estate*—that *his father* was a paycheck and nothing more. From *the son's* perspective *his* relationship with *his father* was purely transactional. *The younger son* was so devoid of love or respect that *he* was essentially telling *his father* that *he* wished *he* was already dead so that *he* could possess what *he* believed was *his* entitled *share of the estate*.

What could be more hurtful for a *son* to demand of *his father*? In making this demand, *this younger son* was violating core Jewish customs, and Jesus's audience (the Pharisees and teachers of the law) would have readily despised *this son* as a result.

The younger son's mandate was an egregious transgression of the fifth commandment: "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you" (Exodus 20:12).

And fourth, what *the younger son* really seems to be insisting upon having was a massive amount of freedom apart from any responsibility. This is a common expectation embraced by many young people in America. *The younger son* desired that *his share of the estate* not only be divided out, but also made liquid/spendable, eliminating any responsibility for managing it. *He* desired to consume that which *his father* had labored to produce.

The younger son wanted no connections and no responsibilities. *He* only desired to spend on *himself*. In this *he* displays an immense attitude of entitlement. This reflects a view that *his* greatest self-interest lay in consumption, rather than in investment.

Additionally, the language *the younger son* employs as *he* issues *his* ultimatum reveal two deeply flawed presuppositions.

The first deeply flawed presupposition of *the younger son* was a misunderstanding of love and grace.

The younger son demanded: *Give me my share of the estate.*

A gift as opposed to a wage is an act of unmerited grace or favor. Moreover, it is impossible to gift something to someone that already belongs to them. *The share of the estate that was to fall to the younger son* already belonged to the younger son. This is seen by the fact that when *he* returned home *his father* told *his older brother*, “all that is mine (that I have left) is yours.” (Luke 15:31). When *the younger son* demanded: “*Give me my share of the estate*” *he* was insisting that *he* be given what already belonged to *him*. It already belonged to *him*, but *his* possession was one of trust (in *his father*) and responsibility (to the rest of the family).

The younger son’s perspective was that *he* did not want to possess *his* inheritance as a stewardship for others. Rather, *he* desired that *he* be free to indulge these resources upon *his* own pleasures. Accordingly, *the younger son’s* demand of entitlement drastically minimizes his capacity to receive his inheritance in love. Agape love is making a choice to seek the best for others. *The younger son* only desires to spend *his* inheritance on *his* own appetites.

When *he* issued his loveless mandate to *his father*, *the younger son* failed to recognize *he* was already a steward of all that *his father* had already given to *him*—life, belonging, and an opportunity to inherit a *share* in a wealthy *estate*. *His* perspective seems to be that *he* considered this station as having no value, since *he* could not spend it upon *his* own entertainment. *His father* invested in *him*, but *he* was not interested in investing in others.

The son’s attitude of entitlement blinded *him* to *his father’s* love. *The younger son* had no place for seeking the best for others, so he did not yet recognize *his own father’s* love for *him*. While *he* lived within *his father’s* household *the younger son* received the material benefits of *his father’s* grace and love. But *his* selfish perspective rendered *him* unable to receive *his father’s* love as it was given to *him*. In other words, *the younger son* indirectly received some of the effects of *his father’s* grace and love, but *he* did not appreciate or enjoy love and grace for what it was. This shows us that our capacity to receive love and grace is likely determined by our willingness to show love and grace to others.

The *father’s* love and grace and *his younger son’s* entitlement are similar to how God causes “His sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45b). Grace often comes to those who do not deserve it, even when they do not recognize it as grace. Those who give grace to others will likely be the greatest recipients of God’s grace, as all rewards God gives are a manifestation of His grace and mercy.

By only recognizing the effects and not the substance of love, seeking the best for others, *the younger son* missed the greater good—which was intimacy with *his father*. *His older brother* (as we will see in the second half of the parable) had a similar misconception. Because *he* failed to understand the nature of grace and love, he harshly threw these gifts away and disregarded *his father’s* great love, in pursuit of *his* short-sighted demands.

The *younger son*'s misconception of love and grace led to a greedy sense of entitlement. And *his* entitled attitude seared *his* heart from the possibility of giving or receiving love. A greedy sense of entitlement can do the same to our hearts also. May we never cease to marvel at and to be thankful for the generosity of God's grace and love for us.

The second deeply flawed presupposition *the younger son* exhibited in *his* demand was that materialism and consumption was the path to *his* greatest self-interest.

The word translated as *estate* in this passage is a form of the Greek word, "ousia." This parable is the only time "ousia" is used in the Bible. It was used extensively by the Greek philosopher Plato who pondered the metaphysical properties of reality. And it was a much-debated term in later Church Councils who argued over the true "ousia" (essence) of Christ's two natures. But in this context, "ousia" appears to be free of the metaphysical or theological freight. In this context, "ousia" appears to refer to the material property of the *estate*. And in *the younger son*'s poor estimation the material "ousia" that he expects to receive from *his father* is essentially all *his father* means to *him*.

The *son*'s materialistic perspective preconditioned *him* to miss the true essence and real value of *his father*. Materialism is a worldview that believes that reality consists entirely of matter. It has no place for immaterial realities such as God, the spiritual world, the afterlife, angels, souls, etc. It also renders existence as meaningless and without morals. The material of the universe—whether it is money or particles—does not care how you live. It does not give approval of or take offense at your choices. A natural consequence of this worldview is a consumptive lifestyle that pursues insatiable appetites.

Materialism eliminates the possibility of absolute moral standards and values. This means there is no possibility for genuine love—only empty delights. This is because true ("agape") love is making a voluntary choice to seek the best interest of another.

Materialism's vision for the good life is "what I don't have will make me happy." *The son*'s materialistic worldview had led *him* to consider the "ousia" (true substance) of *his father* as nothing more than a material *estate*. *He* therefore considered *his father* and *his* "ousia" (*estate*), as a means to happiness and not a person to love and share enjoyment with. *He* will soon engage with a society who shares *his* views, and *he* will end up being just as despised by it as *he* now despises *his father*.

By trampling over *his father* and demanding *his share* in the *estate*, *the younger son* was living out *his* materialistic worldview—"let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Corinthians 15:32). *He* cares nothing for anyone but *himself*. *He* sees nothing but pleasures that can be gained.

If we adopt *the younger son*'s false presuppositions of entitlement and materialism, we will make similarly outrageous ultimatums of our *Father* in heaven and sacrifice everything upon the altars of selfish pleasures. If we pursue the idols of entitlement and materialism like this impudent *son* who did not even recognize the personhood of *his father* and only saw an *estate*, we, too, will increasingly:

- View responsibility as an unwanted burden;
- Use our liberty to pursue pleasures;
- Be unable to recognize people for the gifts they are;
- Lose our ability to truly love and receive love;
- Expect the universe/circumstances to *give* us what we demand, eliminating all but transactional relationships;
- Become slaves of our own appetites, then ultimately perhaps;
- Doubt and then disbelieve God’s goodness and then His existence.

The Father’s Response

So he divided his wealth between them.

Remarkably, the *father* granted *his younger son*’s outrageous and offensive demand. Even though the *father* had the wisdom to know that this would be self-destructive, the *father* granted *the son*’s choice. We are told in Romans 1 that *God* does this generally, and that this behavior of granting evil desires is called the “wrath of God” (Romans 1:18). In Romans 1, *God*’s wrath is poured out upon unrighteousness for any who see *God* but do not acknowledge Him or His goodness, just as *the younger son* did not acknowledge *his father*’s goodness. Accordingly, *God* grants us the desire to “live my own way”:

- “Therefore [due to their ‘*younger son*’ attitude of demanding their ‘freedom’] God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity” (Romans 1:24a).
- “For this reason [due to their ‘*younger son*’ attitude] God gave them over to degrading passions” (Romans 1:26a).
- “And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind” (Romans 1:28a).

For His people, the biblical pattern is that *God* gives those who stray over to their own desires that they might suffer the adverse consequences of their actions in order to be led to repentance. It is *God*’s desire that all come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

So the father divided his wealth between them. This likely means that *his father* determined how much of *his estate* would go to *his younger son*, and how much of *his estate* would be kept for *his older son*. At the end of the parable the *father* says to the older son “all that is mine is yours” so this division stands (Luke 15:31).

The Greek word that is translated as *wealth* in this verse is a form of “Bios.” “Bios” literally means “life.” The English word “Biology” means “study of living things.” In the Bible, “Bios” typically refers to the sum of one’s earthly interests and treasures. In the Bible, “Bios” describes externalities of life—health, social rank, *wealth*, career, etc. (Mark 11:1; Luke 8:14; 2 Timothy 2:4; 1 John 2:16). The New Testament contrasts this external “Bios”-life with the more wholistic term of “Zoe” (complete/spiritual life), or the inner life of “Psuché” (soul/life).

Here, the *father* sorted through all the “ousia” (material things) *he* had accumulated over *his bios* (lifetime) before dividing it, and then prematurely transferred a *share* of *his bios* (life/wealth) to

his younger son. It is likely that *the younger son's share* was less than half of *his father's estate*. This is likely for a number of reasons. The elder son would have had a “double portion” which included a station as the family “CEO.” Much of the recorded biblical familial strife centers around this question of the “birthright,” which is a question of “who gets to rule?”

This question of birthright (right to rule) was the source of strife between Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25:31-32). It was likely the source of strife between Joseph and his brothers. Joseph's many-colored coat seems to be a sign that Jacob granted the birthright to Joseph, as the firstborn of Rachel (the wife he chose), rather than to Reuben, who was born first (to Leah, the wife Jacob was tricked into marrying). This natural rivalry may be inferred in this story as a part of the animosity among the two brothers. The biblical answer to this natural jealousy is that any leader who desires to be great should become the servant of all (Mark 9:35).

The *father* did exactly as *his son* demanded of *him*. God too grants us what we ask for. If we ask for good things, He gives them to us (Matthew 7:9-11). If we ask for things that are bad for us, God often restrains from granting our requests—but only for a time. Much of what we know as mercy, is God not allowing us to have the evil things we demand. But eventually, God gives us over to our depraved desires and allows us to experience the consequences (Romans 1:18-32). This “giving over” is the main way we experience God's wrath.

The Choran Makran (Distant Country)

And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living.

The *son* left home. Jesus says *he went into a distant country*. The Greek phrase that is translated as *distant country* is “choran makran.”

This expression has a double meaning. The first and most obvious meaning of “choran makran” is a foreign *country*, located a far distance away from home. But the second meaning comes from looking at how these terms work together. “Choran,” the Greek word translated here as *country*, literally means “a space lying between places.” It could be translated as the “empty space” or “void”. Makran comes from “makros” which means “big,” “far,” or “wide.” “Choran Makran” is an idiom for “the big void.” Both senses of “Choran Makran”'s double meanings are in full effect throughout this parable.

The *son* traveled far to a *distant* foreign country, but this *distant country* was also a place devoid of truth and love. It was a place of moral degeneracy. It was without moral boundaries. It was a mirage of seemingly limitless freedom; in that it allowed unfettered pursuit of pleasure. As is always the case, this means it will actually be a place of exploitation and slavery (Romans 6:16).

But it was detached from justice, virtue, or moral principles. Above all it was devoid of love and grace. The “Choran Makran” is a *country* where anything goes, a place where lusts are celebrated and indulged, and its devastating consequences are ignored. It is a *country* that is both geographically and morally *distant* from the loving home the *son* grew up in. And when *the*

younger son left home for the “Choran Makran,” *he* cut himself off from the generosity and benevolence of *his father*, who had given *him* over to the abuse *he* desired.

In the New Testament era, the “Choran Makran” can be seen to represent a life of willful sin, separated from fellowship, community with Christ, and the blessings that flow from being near to Him.

In the big void of that *distant country* (“Choran Makran”) the *younger son* was free to live however *he* pleased. He rejected his old identity and familial responsibilities of being *his father’s son*. *He* behaved as if *he* were *no longer his father’s son*, and *he* claimed a new identity for himself—one of *his* choosing. In the “Choran Makran” *he* could live by his own rules. And while *he* was there, *he* perceived there were *no* reasons to deny *his* appetites or impulses. It seemed as if there was nothing to restrain *him* from the life *he* desired. In the moral void of the *distant country* and without any virtuous principles to guide *him*, *the younger son squandered his estate* (“ousia”) *with loose living*. In this, *he* incorrectly perceived that this was in *his* true self-interest, which would lead to *his* greatest happiness. It would not.

The young man’s lifestyle of *loose living* reflected the experiment expressed by King Solomon in Ecclesiastes.

“All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from pleasure...”
(Ecclesiastes 1:10a)

It appears *the younger son* denied *himself* no pleasures.

The Younger Son’s Calamity

Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.

Sooner or later, *the younger son spent everything he had in the distant country* (“Choran Makran”). First, *he* had cast aside *his* identity as being a shareholder in *his* family. *Now* there was nothing left of *his* inheritance. *He* had fully *squandered his entire estate* and by *his* own choices *he* was cut off from the generosity and blessings of *his father*. *He* had exhausted all that *he* had and was in the moral void of that *distant country*. There was no longer any money *he* could spend.

Jesus says at this point, *a severe famine occurred in that country*.

A *famine* is a scarcity of food. In the ancient world, famines were often the byproducts of natural causes such as droughts, locusts, or blights. Or, they could result from human activity such as war or labor shortages. Famines lead to skyrocketing food prices and consequently malnutrition and starvation for those who could not afford to pay those prices.

Jesus did not say what caused the *famine* in this *distant country*, but He did say that it was *severe*—which meant that food was scarce and consequently expensive. Perhaps the reason no cause for the *famine* was suggested is to indicate that it was not a random blow of bad luck, but that spiritual *famine* is an inevitable consequence of living a morally bankrupt life. When the *son* cut himself off from the grace and gift-love of *his father* it was inevitable that *he* would experience *famine*. We too experience spiritual *famine* when we sever our relationship with our *Father* and go our own way *into* the moral abyss of the “Choran Makran,”

“For the wages (consequences) of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life (including abundant life) in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
(Romans 6:23)

Because the *younger son* had *squandered his* entire *estate* and had no money, *he began to be impoverished*. Without money to buy food, *he began to starve*. But rather than starve, *he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine*.

The younger son, who came to that *distant country* (“Choran Makran”) with a liquidated portion of an *estate* with which to buy *everything, now had nothing*. The young man who was the *son* of a rich *man* and who once had everything *his* heart desired was now a defenseless, starving foreigner desperate to do anything for anyone in exchange for food. It was a humiliating fall from *his* previous life back home.

At home he was part of a family and community that cared for one another. In this *distant country* he was treated just as *he* treated *his father*—*he* was viewed merely as a means to an end. So long as *he* had money, people were glad to transact. Once *his* money was gone, *no one was giving anything to him*. It appears that *his* employer was so restrictive that *he* was not even allowed to *eat* the pig slop. *He* would have *gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating*, but even that was not allowed. The *distant country* (“Choran Makran”) was completely without mercy, and only interested in what could be extracted and exploited.

For a Jew, what this young man had to do in order to survive would have been doubly insulting. *The younger son* was working for *one of the citizens of that country*. In other words, *he*, a Jew, was working for a Gentile. And on top of that humiliation, *he* was feeding *swine*. Swine were unclean animals and forbidden by God’s Law for a Jew to *eat* (Leviticus 11:7). Swine were revolting to Jewish sensitivities. By saying that this young man resorted to *hire himself to a Gentile to feed his swine* was a way to powerfully express that *the younger son* had reached rock bottom.

Jesus drove this point home further when He said, *And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating*. The moral abyss of the “Choran Makran” had totally dehumanized *him*. *The younger son* was reduced to lusting over *swine* food. At this point in the story, we might imagine Jesus’s audience of Pharisees and teachers of the law feeling good about themselves. *This younger son* has gotten *his* just dessert.

Before *the younger son came to his senses*, Jesus added one final, but key detail. *And no one was giving anything to him*. The transactional *son* chose to live a transactional life in a transactional *distant land* (“Choran Makran”). Now *he* was abandoned by all around him because *he* no longer had anything left with which to transact. *He* was experiencing what we might think of as the world’s “exploitation principle”: exploit others before they exploit you. This is the opposite of the biblical mercy principle, that *God* gives us the same measure of mercy that we give others (Matthew 7:1-2). In the moral chasm of the “Choran Makran,” transactional exploitation eventually leads to being relationally alone (no loving connection) and spiritually destitute.

The dehumanizing mutual exploitation and soulless lack of love and grace defines the “Choran Makran.” As the moral void, it literally sucks the life out of people, and reduces everything and everyone into a commodity. All of life becomes transactional. People are reduced to objects whose entire value is determined by what can be extracted from them. They have no intrinsic value. Authentic relationships die.

This system is the polar opposite of *his father’s* home. The humiliating reduction of *the younger son* by *the* “Choran Makran” was the same kind of attitude that *he* had applied to *his father* when *he* demanded *his share of his father’s estate*. This is yet another example of the Measure for Measure Principle (Matthew 7:2).

At the beginning of the parable *the younger son* lived in the flow of *his father’s* grace and love, but *he* failed to understand the nature of grace and love. *He* desired freedom without responsibility. *He* was obsessed with what *he* felt he was entitled to possess, and spent *his estate* pursuing *his* appetites for pleasure. *He* told *his father*, *give me my share of the estate*. Now, in the *distant country* (“Choran Makran”) *his* illusions about life were shattered *and no one* is giving *him a thing*. *He* must earn every scrap of food. *He* foolishly took for granted the grace *he* received from *his father*, and now has learned through painful experience the immense value of that grace.

All the hopeful fantasies were gone. The horror of *his* reality came crashing down upon *him*. *The younger son* would either give in to bitter despair over the emptiness and exploitation of *the* “Choran Makran,” or *he* could come *to his senses* and repent/change to a new path.

The Younger Son Comes to His Senses

But when he came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.”’ So he got up and came to his father.

After the *younger son* hit rock bottom, living in a lonely state of perpetual hunger in the emptiness of the *distant country* (“Choran Makran”) while working to feed a Gentile’s pigs, *he came to his senses*. *He* realized some of what *he* formerly had (but now squandered) in the home of *his father*. To come *to his senses* means *he* began to see reality truly. Previously *he* had fallen for the false worldview perpetrated by the world, and its lusts.

He compared his current predicament with the livelihoods of those whom his father hired to work for him. And he realized how much better off they were than him. He considered how the men who work for his father always seem to have more than enough bread to eat, and that here he is dying with hunger. Back home in his father's house the hired men were not ground into the dust, as he was experiencing. The wages of the hired men were just, if not generous, for the men he hired had more than they needed. Whether or not the younger son fully grasped the concept of grace at this point, he seemed to at least intuit that back home, even those who were not part of his father's family experienced a measure of love and grace. In this the younger son seemed to recognize that his father cared for people rather than exploit them.

The younger son then made a humble plan.

I will get up and leave the sucking void of this distant country ("Choran Makran") to return home. I will go to my father. And when I see him, I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."

The younger son's plan entailed repenting to his father for the disrespect and wrong he had done him. It began by confessing how he had sinned against God's Law first. Then his confession proceeded to how he sinned against his father—in your sight.

His confessions were true. *The younger son had sinned against God's law, which required him to honor his father (Deuteronomy 5:16). By breaking that commandment he had sinned against God, and he also sinned against his father. Honestly accepting and confessing this reality would be a critical step to take if the younger son hoped to return to his home in any capacity. The younger son had now moved from entitled to humble.*

The son also would tell his father that because of what he had disrespectfully demanded and how he squandered his inheritance, he was no longer worthy to be called his father's son. This was also a sober assessment. For no father deserved to be treated as this son had treated his father. Instead of returning as a son, he hoped that his father would at least make him as one of his hired men. This way, he would no longer be hungry or risk dying from starvation. Here the younger son was recognizing that his father had a character that might forgive him and put him in a place he did not deserve, which is to say that his father might have grace toward him.

But even as he came to his senses, the son was still operating with some of his flawed presuppositions and the wicked worldview of the "Choran Makran." Namely, he was still perceiving the worth of people in materialistic terms. At the beginning of the parable, he saw his father's worth exclusively in the portion of the estate that was to fall to him. Now he saw his personal lack of worth according to the same scale. His primary concern still appears to be his stomach, and he fails to recognize his intrinsic value, believing that his sole worth consists in what he can produce for his father. Even so, the younger son does recognize his sin, which is a huge turnabout.

Because the son had sinned against God and his father, and then squandered so much, he had very little to offer according to a transactional view. Perhaps this was also part of his turnaround.

Perhaps *he* believed *he* was worthless *as a son*, and that *he* could only cast *himself* upon the mercy of his father. *He* did not yet seem to fully understand grace, mercy, and love. *He* still did not seem to understand that people have intrinsic value and worth.

Incidentally, neither *his* older brother (Luke 15:25-32) nor the Pharisees and scribes (Luke 15:2) seemed to understand the intrinsic value of people either—which is one of Jesus’s main points in this parable.

So, the prodigal *son* followed through on *his* humble plan. And *he* got up and came to *his* father.

The Father’s Compassion

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

Jesus says that *the younger son’s father saw his son while he was still a long way off*. This suggests that the long-departed *son* had remained and was still on *his father’s* mind. *He* was so much on *his* mind, that the *father* recognized *his son*, despite any change of clothing or appearance he had undergone, at a far-off distance.

Jesus says *the father felt compassion for him*. This indicates that the *father* was not angry, or bitter, or vindictive, or smugly triumphant that *his* defeated *son* had returned home. *He* was loving. The *father’s* attitude was full of grace and mercy. *He* was glad *his son* was no longer *lost*. *He* was happy *his son* was home. This attitude is similar to the previous two parables where the shepherd rejoiced at recovering the *lost* sheep (Luke 15:6), and the woman rejoiced after recovering the *lost* coin (Luke 15:9). We can imagine at this point that the Pharisees’ prior agreement with the story, seeing the sinner get what he deserved, is now beginning to sour.

Jesus says the *father ran*. In Jewish culture, running was an undignified action—especially for a wealthy older *man*. But the *father*, overcome by *his compassion for his son* ran to *him* anyway. When *his father* got to *him*, the *son* did not embrace *his father*, because *he* felt *unworthy*. But the *father embraced and kissed his son*. The *father* was expressing *his* overwhelming *compassion for his lost but now found son*. *He* was rejoicing over *his son’s* repentance, which is the primary theme of all three parables in Luke 15.

At this point the returning *son* began to make *his* apologies, just as *he* had planned to do. *He* confessed, ‘*Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.*’ *The son* confessed *his* sin and *his* unworthiness as a *son*. But after saying the first two parts of *his* speech, *the son* was surprisingly interrupted by *his father* and *his compassion for him*. And *the son* was never able to state the third and final part of *his* speech—he never got to offer *his* request: *make me as one of your hired men*.

The Celebration

But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate.

The father appears to have interrupted his son's apology mid-speech. Before the son could even state his offer to work as a hired servant, the father said to his slaves, "Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him." The father's suddenness indicates that he had already forgiven his younger son for abusing him and squandering his share of the estate long before. His father didn't focus on any of that—he was thankful and glad that his formerly lost son was now home. This seems to show the eagerness with which God receives a repentant heart. He rejoiced that his son had repented. This parable now connects with the theme of the previous two, that heaven rejoices when sinners repent and return (Luke 15:7, 10).

It is worth noting that although the *father* appeared to long for *his son's* return, the *father* did not go out and seek him, as was the case with the prior two parables. In this parable, the *father* waited for *his son* to repent and return. It could be that the first two parables depict an Israelite that is lost due to ignorance. In that case, *God* seeks out that lost soul to return them. In this case, *the younger son* was lost due to willful disobedience. In this case, the *father* never *lost his* love, but waited for the natural adverse consequences of *his son's* decisions to chastise *him*, in hopes that *he* would come to *his senses*.

Now the *father* begins to *celebrate his lost son's* return. First, the *father* ordered his servants to *bring out the best robe and put it on his son*.

This was a way of covering *his son's* humiliation and shame. *The best robe* was expensive. *The son* was likely filthy from *his* poverty, travel, and feeding swine. *His father* had *the best robe put on his son* anyway. This was an instant act of grace and mercy. This *giving* of mercy not only covered *the son's* shame, but it was also a way to show everyone—perhaps *his son* most of all—that *he* belonged and was a part of the family. *He* had always belonged, but now *his* fellowship was restored.

The younger son may not have been *worthy* on *his* own account to be considered part of the family, but *he* was *worthy* to be in the family on account of the love and grace of *his father*. *His father* had just reaffirmed *the son's* intrinsic value. *He* reaffirmed that *his son's* acceptance as *his* child was unconditional.

Clothing, and robes in particular, were often used as a symbol of righteousness in the Bible (Job 29:14; Isaiah 61:10; Zechariah 3:4; Ephesians 4:24; Revelation 3:5). Just as God clothed Adam and Eve after their sin in the Garden, so too does the *father* clothe *his son* after *he* repented and returned home (Genesis 3:21). For New Testament believers, God has covered our sin with the righteousness of Christ (Psalm 85:2; Romans 4:7; Romans 8:1). And as believers we are exhorted to continually clothe ourselves and “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 13:14). In this way, our belonging is unconditional, as demonstrated in this parable, but we still have great responsibility for our choices, which have immense consequences.

The next two things the *father* did for *his son* was to have *his slaves put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet*.

Both actions underscored *the lost son's* belonging, worth, and intrinsic value, as well as *his* reinstatement into the fellowship of the family. The *ring* was possibly a signet ring, which would have given the *son* a measure of authority. The *sandals put on his feet* indicate that *the son* was barefoot upon *his* return. When *he* initially left home, it took *him* several *days* to gather *his* belongings, *now he* lacked even the minimum possessions that a slave might own.

Finally, the *father* called for *his* servants to *bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate*.

The *lost son's* return was cause for major celebration. It was so important, that the *father* called for killing *the fattened calf* to serve as the main dish for the celebration. The *father* would serve *the best he* had in celebration of *his lost son's* return. Because there were no grocery stores or refrigeration to keep meat fresh in those days, people kept their meat alive until it was time *to eat*. *The fattened calf* was the prime cut. And it was expensive. The *father* was willing to sacrifice this expense for the joyous occasion.

The image of eating *the fattened calf* reflected how Jesus was receiving and eating with repentant tax collectors and sinners (Luke 15:1-2).

This scene of killing *the fattened calf* is also reminiscent of the Jewish sacrificial system offered during the atonement for sin and as meaningful expressions of repentance, symbolizing the restoration of fellowship with *God* broken by sin. This sacrificial system foreshadowed the final and ultimate sacrifice of Christ on our behalf so that we could have fellowship with *God* (Hebrews 9:8-12). The sacrifice was followed with a festive feast, where most of the sacrifice was consumed in fellowship with family and friends (Leviticus 19:5-8).

After calling for these things (*best robe, ring, sandals, kill the fattened calf*) the *father* declared why *he* and *his* household were going *to celebrate*. The way the *father* lavished these waves of mercy upon *his son* portrays how in the fullness of Christ we receive “grace upon grace” (John 1:16):

For this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’

What a beautiful statement. The *father* now affirms through words, what he has been affirming by *his* action—the *son* is not worthless, as *he* believed himself to be—he has great intrinsic value—he has belonging—he is accepted—he is *mine*—*he* is my *son*. And no amount of sin or squandering can ever alter these facts. All has been forgiven.

The Bible says that if we believe in Jesus, then we are *God's* sons and daughters,

“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of

the will of man, but of God.”
(John 1:12-13).

The Bible affirms again and again, that if we are Christ’s, no amount of sin or squandering can ever alter this fact. All has been forgiven:

“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.”
(John 10:27-29)

“where sin increased, grace abounded all the more...”
(Romans 5:20b)

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
(Romans 8:38-39)

After stating with words that the broken man that *he* was embracing was *his son*, the father aptly described the moment with two remarks: *The son was dead and has come to life again and he was lost and has been found.*

Jesus uses the image of resurrection to describe the return of the *father’s younger son*. Death means separation. *The younger son* had completely severed *his* relationship with *his father* when *he* left home for the “Choran Makran.” And *he* functionally told *his* father that *he* was dead to him, when *he* first demanded *his share of the estate*. Now *his son* was back from *his* self-exile and was reconnecting with *his father* after a prolonged period of *distant* separation in the big void of a *distant country*. It was very much as though *his son who was dead* had *come back to life again*.

The *father* repeated this sentiment: *he was lost and has been found.*

His son was indeed *lost*. *He* had *lost his* relationships, *his senses*, *his* property, *his* inheritance, *his* position, and was on the verge of losing *his* life through starvation. *Now he was found*. This line echoes the *lost-then-found* themes from the previous two parables: “The Parable of the *Lost Sheep*” (Luke 15:3-7); and “The Parable of the *Lost Coin*” (Luke 15:8-10).

It also described the situation that was taking place as the tax collectors and sinners were coming near Jesus and repenting (Luke 15:1).

And they began to celebrate. This means *they began to* participate in a festive celebration that mirrored the renewed fellowship that had just occurred.

It is worth noting that in the previous parables, Jesus makes a mention of heaven rejoicing over the repentance of a sinner. But in this parable of the Prodigal Son there is no such mention. This

would seem to further validate the interpretation of the *father* as a representative image of *God*. Since *God* is celebrating in this parable, and heaven is wherever *God* dwells, there is no need for such a comment.

Jesus's Points of the Parable's First Half

Some main points to consider from the first half of "The Parable of the Prodigal *Son*" pertain to *God* represented by the figure of the *father*; and "sinners," represented by the figure of the *younger son*.

1. The first point to note is that every person has an enormous amount of intrinsic value. This is true because every person is made in *God's* image (Genesis 1:27-28). *God* reaffirmed this value when He sent His Son to die to redeem the world (John 3:16). The fact that people are sinners who have squandered their inheritance does not mitigate their eternal worth.
2. A second point is that *God* is full of love and grace. His love for people is inexhaustible. He does not stop caring for people and seeking their best interest. Because *God* is love, He always respects people's choices and the consequences that attend those choices—including their decisions that are less than good.
3. A third point combines the first two, and it is that *God* rejoices when sinners repent. Because *God* celebrates repentance, so should we. We should never scoff when someone repents and comes back to *God*.
4. And the fourth point follows the third. It is: We should never give up on people. We are not responsible for the choices of others. We cannot stop someone from self-exile. But we can pray for them and eagerly await their repentance. This would seem to be the primary point Jesus was making to the Pharisees, that this was Jesus's attitude toward the sinners, and it ought also to be theirs.

This concludes the first half of Jesus's "Parable of the Prodigal *Son*." The first half concludes with a celebration of the prodigal's return, which is a similar note to the endings of the previous two parables with the shepherd celebrating the finding of the one *lost* sheep and the woman celebrating the finding of her single *lost* coin.

The second half of "The Parable of the Prodigal *Son*" focuses on the response of the older son to his brother's return and his *father's* celebration (Luke 15:25-32).

Biblical Text

And He said, "A man had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. ¹³ And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. ¹⁴ Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be

impoverished.¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.¹⁶ And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.¹⁷ But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger!¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight;¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."' ²⁰ So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'²² But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet;²³ and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate.