

## **Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family**

### **Title: About Prodigal**

### **Lesson: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32**

<sup>1</sup> Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. <sup>2</sup> But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." <sup>3</sup> Then Jesus told them this parable: <sup>11b</sup> "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup> "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. <sup>14</sup> After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup> "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! <sup>18</sup> I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' <sup>22</sup> "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. <sup>23</sup> Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. <sup>25</sup> "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. <sup>27</sup> 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' <sup>28</sup> "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup> But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' <sup>31</sup> "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

**(Slide 1)** There's a word called "prodigal." This word traces its origins back to Latin and Old French, carrying meanings like "wasteful," "lavish," or "driving away wealth." It's a term that primarily focuses on a negative connotation. Today, the most important word in my message is this very word, "prodigal."

The story of the prodigal son in Luke 15 is likely one of the most familiar stories to all of you. When reading this story, it's easy to view the younger son, who squandered his father's wealth, with a negative lens. I, too, used to read and understand this story that way. Though I'm an only child, I'd think about people around me who had older or younger siblings while reflecting on it.

In my personal experience—not to generalize—but I've noticed that older siblings often tend to be more steadfast, reliable, responsible, and patient compared to younger ones. Younger siblings, on the other hand, often seem more playful and unpredictable. Based on this, when I read the prodigal son story, I used to think the older son stayed by his father's side out of responsibility and patience, while the younger son, being mischievous and rude, disrespected his father and wasted all the inheritance he received. I imagine some of you might have read this story in a similar way. Today, however, I'd like to approach and understand this story from a slightly different perspective.

As an only child, I've never experienced sibling rivalry myself. But observing those with siblings around me, I've seen that while many grow up to have good relationships, as children, it's not uncommon for there to be frequent fights or conflicts between them. Older siblings, for instance, are often told by their parents to look after the younger ones. They might pretend to care for or yield to their younger siblings in front of their parents, but when the parents aren't watching, they might secretly hit, push, or refuse to share, making the younger ones cry. As a result, younger siblings often have negative experiences with their older siblings or feel suppressed by them.

In the cultural context of that time, where the firstborn typically inherited most of the father's estate, I imagine the younger son might have felt injustice or oppression toward his older brother. Everyone already assumed the older brother would be the heir. While their father was alive, the older brother might have treated him with respect, but the younger son could have wondered, based on his experiences, whether that would continue after their father's death—and perhaps concluded it wouldn't.

The younger son had two choices: either accept his situation and watch his older brother inherit most of the estate, or, though it felt rude and wrong, ask his father for his share of the inheritance early, securing at least a third of it while his father was still alive.

Though he knew his request was disrespectful, the younger son likely had a strong desire to break free from his brother's shadow and live life on his own terms. So, he went to his father and asked for his share of the estate. In their small, tight-knit

society, word of his audacious request spread quickly throughout the community. Unable to stay in his hometown any longer, he decided to leave for a distant country.

Back then, most people were born, lived, and died in their hometowns. For the younger son, too, his hometown was his entire world until he took his inheritance and left. His father was a kind, wealthy man respected by all, and the townspeople treated the son well because of his father's influence. But what the younger son gravely overlooked was this: he assumed everyone in the world would be like his father or the people in his hometown.

There's a saying, "There's no place like home." When the son first left for a foreign land, he might not have felt the weight of this saying—because he had plenty of money. Not everyone is like this, but people tend to gather around those with wealth. Knowing he had money, the people there likely approached him with feigned kindness to get something from him. They might have spent time with him, all the while seeking what they truly wanted—investment opportunities, loans, or business proposals.

But what did this younger son, raised his whole life as the son of a rich father, really know? Did he have a keen sense for investments, business acumen, or the ability to spot a scam? Sadly, no. He trusted people too easily and shared what he had. Having lived only in the bright side of life, it didn't take long for him to lose everything, be abandoned by all, and realize he'd been deceived.

At that time, a famine struck the land where he was. Yet, no matter how bad the economy gets, the rich always seem to eat well and live comfortably. The younger son went to the one friend he trusted most from his time of wealth—a friend who still had financial means—and asked for help. But even that friend wouldn't give him anything for free; he demanded a price. That price was labor—tending pigs.

**(Slide 2)** As he cared for and fed the pigs in the fields, he himself had nothing to eat. With no money, no one offered him a warm place to stay or food without expecting something in return, as his father once did. He began to lament his pitiful state. Realizing his condition was worse than that of the servants working for his father back home, he wept in regret. He felt that, having severed his relationship with his father, asking to be accepted back as a son would be shameless. What he'd learned in the world was this: no one helps you without a reason or a price.

So, he decided to return to his father and ask to be hired as a servant. On his way back, he rehearsed his plea to be taken on as a hired worker over and over again.

**(Slide 3)** When the younger son entered his hometown, he was still far from his father's house, walking along. But despite his ragged, unrecognizable appearance, his father recognized him instantly, ran to him, embraced him, and kissed him.

The son tried to say what he'd rehearsed, but his father didn't even let him finish. He ordered his servants to clothe his son in the best robes and shoes and to feed him. The father restored him not as a servant but as a precious son.

The older son heard of his brother's return but wasn't pleased at all. In fact, he was furious to hear a feast was being held for him. We might think he was simply jealous, but considering the father's kindness and love for the younger son, it's possible his anger toward his father stemmed from anxiety—that he might have to share more of his remaining inheritance with his brother.

This father had two sons. But when the younger son left for a foreign land, the father lost him. Yet the younger son soon realized his mistake and returned. The older son, though always physically present, had his heart set not on his father but on his inheritance. In a different sense, the father had lost his older son too. What's tragic is that the older son still hasn't grasped his father's love and remains lost, wandering. In a way, he might be the true prodigal son—distant from his father in heart.

But there's another figure in this story who deserves the label "prodigal." I mentioned earlier that "prodigal" means "wasteful," "lavish," or "driving away wealth." In English, however, it can also take on a positive meaning, tied to "abundance" or "generosity." Being prodigal with money might mean wastefulness, but being prodigal with love means "giving without restraint."

So, the other person in this story who fits the word "prodigal" is the father, who gives boundless love to both his sons. There's a saying, "Like father, like son." In this sense, they are truly a prodigal family—the sons prodigal with money, the father prodigal with love. And perhaps this difference reflects the distinction between God and us.

We are in the season of Lent. Let's not treat this precious time as just another annual routine. Instead, may we cherish the grace and love of our prodigal God, humbly draw near to Him, and take this as a special opportunity to share love and care with our neighbors. Amen.