

The Prodigal's New Clothes



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 4:1–8; 25:25–34; Luke 15:4–32; John 11:9, 10; Rom. 5:12–20.*

Memory Text: “ ‘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’ ” (Luke 15:32, NIV).

W. Somerset Maugham wrote a short story called “Rain” about a missionary in the South Seas who “converted” a prostitute to the gospel. He poured himself, heart and soul, into seeking to win her, although at times his methods seemed harsh and unforgiving. In fact, he insisted that she return to the United States (from which she was fleeing) in order to finish out a jail sentence, all despite her desperate pleas to spare her from the torture, degradation, and ignominy that awaited her in prison. Doing her jail time, the missionary insisted, was just part of the process of repentance that she needed to go through, and thus she had to return.

The story ended, however, unexpectedly. The missionary killed himself, and his mangled corpse was found washed up on the beach. What happened? Apparently, spending all this time with the prostitute, he fell into sin with her and, unable to forgive himself, he killed himself instead.

What those characters needed was what we all, as sinners, need—a personal experience of the grace and assurance that Jesus revealed in the parable of the prodigal son.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 4.*

Same Parents, Same Food

“ ‘There was a man who had two sons’ ” (*Luke 15:11, NIV*). In this parable, the two sons born to the same father represent two character traits. The older son apparently demonstrated loyalty, perseverance, and industry. The younger was unwilling to work, unwilling to be accountable, and unwilling to take his share of responsibility. Both were from the same heritage. Both probably received identical love and commitment from the same father. One son was, it seemed, faithful; one was disrespectful. What caused the difference?

Of what other stories does this remind you? *Gen. 4:1–8, 25:25–34.*

It’s a strange phenomenon, is it not, one that is seen all the time. Two (or more) siblings from the same parents, living in the same home, receiving the same teachings, the same love, the same *food* even, and one becomes spiritual, faithful, and determined to serve the Lord, while the other, for whatever reason, goes in the opposite direction. However hard to understand, it does show us the powerful reality of free will. Some might see something significant in the fact that it was the *younger* of the two brothers who rebelled, but who knows why he did what he did?

Read **Luke 15:12.** What lesson can we learn from how the father reacted to the son’s request? What does that tell us about how God relates to us?

The text does not say what kind of dialogue ensued between the father and the son or whether the father remonstrated with him, asking him to reconsider, asking him not to be so rash, asking him to think through his actions. Most likely he did, but, in the end, the son was given the “portion of the goods” that were his, and off he went. All through the Bible, we can see this same principle: God allows human beings the freedom to make their own choices, to go their own way, and to live as they want. Of course, as we all know so well, our choices come with consequences, consequences that we don’t always imagine or foresee.

What have been the results of some of your own free choices lately? Not so easy to turn back the clock, is it?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Luke 15:11–31*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Discuss (1) the father’s response to the willful, prodigal son’s request to leave home, and (2) his response to the boy’s return in comparison to the response of his eldest son.

Feel: Absorb a sense of the compassion the Father shows the returning sinner, allowing it to open the wellsprings of your own heart.

Do: Love yourself and others with the forgiveness and compassion given to us by God.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Forgiving Father

A How does the father respond to his son’s request to take half the father’s wealth and leave home?

B What is the father’s attitude toward his son while he is gone?

C How does the father react to his son’s return? How does the elder brother react?

II. Feel: Open Heart

A How does an appreciation of God’s openhearted response to repentant sinner (of whom we are prime examples) affect our attitudes toward ourselves and others who have fallen?

III. Do: Loving With God’s Love

A What should we do in order to offer love and compassion to others, rather than the cold judgment of the older brother?

B Whom do we know in our church or family who needs a warm, welcoming friend, and how can we be this friend?

► **Summary:** The father gave his son the freedom of choice to leave home, but he kept a constant watch for his return. The father covered his son’s filth with his own rich robes and rejoiced over him as a son who had been dead but was now alive.

Spreading His Wings

Picture the father as he watched his emboldened son put things together in his backpack, ready to leave home. Maybe he asked his son where he was going, what his plan was for employment, or what his dreams were for his future. Who knows what answers the son gave? They probably weren't encouraging, at least to the father. The son, meanwhile, was more than likely ready for the good times ahead.

After all, why not? He was young and adventurous, had some cash to spend and a world to see. Life on the family farm probably seemed dull and boring in contrast to all the possibilities presented by the world.

Read Luke 15:13–19. What kind of repentance do we see here? Does it seem like a true repentance, that he's sorry for what he did, or that he is sorry only for the *consequences* of what he did? What hints exist in the verses that could give us the answer?

It's hard to know how this story might have turned out had things gone well for the prodigal. Suppose he found ways to keep the money flowing in and to keep the good times coming? It's not likely, at least from what we see here, that he would have been coming back "on his knees," is it? Who among us, at times, hasn't been really sorry, not so much for our sins but for the consequences of them, especially when we get caught? Even the hardest pagan is going to be sorry he committed adultery if, in the process, he picked up herpes, gonorrhea, or some other sexually transmitted disease. There's nothing Christian about sorrow for the pain that comes from our wrong choices, is there?

What, then, about this young man? Although there's no question that the terrible circumstances in which he found himself brought about a changed attitude that might not have otherwise occurred, the thoughts of his heart, as revealed in the texts, do reveal a sense of true humility and a realization of the fact that he sinned both against his father and against God. The speech he prepared in his heart did seem to show the sincerity of his repentance.

Sometimes we need the bad consequences of our actions to awaken us to the reality of our sins, don't we? That is, only after the suffering comes from our actions do we truly repent of those actions and not just regret the results. What about yourself and whatever situations you're facing now? Why not choose to avoid the sin and spare yourself all the sorrow and the repentance that (one hopes) will follow?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The parable of the prodigal son illustrates an understanding of God’s merciful attitude toward His lost children. God not only eagerly accepts repentant sinners back to Him, but He also watches for them and will come meet them when they are yet far from “home,” clothing them in His forgiveness and love.

Just for Teachers: The parable of the prodigal son is the third parable in Luke 15. Jesus used these three parables to illustrate the three different types of the “lost.”

In the parable of the lost sheep, the one who is lost is unable to get back to the sheep pen without help. In the parable of the lost coin, the one who is lost is oblivious to the frantic searching—it is lost and is unaware of its state. In the parable of the prodigal son, however, the one who is lost not only knows that he is lost but also knows how to get back home.

Opening Activity: Use a small cardboard box to create a pigpen, or make one out of popsicle sticks. Cut several pig shapes out of pink paper or use sheets from a pink sticky pad to symbolize pigs.

Ask class members for suggestions as to the various sins that led the prodigal son to the pigpen. Write each sin on a pig and place it in the pigpen. Some of the sins might include greed, selfishness, rebellion, wastefulness, thoughtlessness, and foolishness. It won’t matter how many “sins” you put in the pigpen, but the more the better.

Discuss: Ask the class members to consider what is in their pigpen. Just as the father in this parable forgave all the sins that led his son to the pigpen, so our Father forgives us when we return to Him.

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. The Loss of the Prodigal (*Review Luke 15:11–32 with your class.*)

This loss is actually a mutual loss.

God has lost a child. John 3:16 tells us that the Father loves His children

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You *Can* Go Home Again

In the early part of the twentieth century, novelist Thomas Wolfe wrote a literary classic, *You Can't Go Home Again*, about a man who leaves his humble family origins in the south, goes to New York, makes it big as a writer, and then seeks to return to his roots. It wasn't an easy transition; hence the title of the book.

In the story of the prodigal, who is the one who makes the long journey in order to be reunited with his father? Contrast that to, for instance, the parable of the lost sheep and lost coin (Luke 15:4–10). What might be the important difference here?

Perhaps, in the two other parables, the lost objects didn't even know that they were lost (certainly the case with the coin), and they couldn't make it back even if they tried; whereas, in the case of the prodigal, he walked away from the "truth," as it were, and it was only after he was in the darkness (*see John 11:9, 10*) that he realized just how lost he was. All through salvation history, God has had to deal with those who, having light, have purposely turned away from that light and gone their own way. The good news of this parable is that even in the cases of those who turned their backs on Him after knowing His goodness and love, God is still willing to restore them to the position that they once held in His covenant family. However, just as the young man chose of his own free will to leave, he had to choose of his own free will to come back. It works the same way with all of us.

What's interesting, too, about these parables is the context in which they are being told. Read Luke 15:1, 2. Look at the different people who are listening to what Jesus is saying. What a powerful message it should be to us all that, instead of giving warnings about end-time apocalyptic events, or about doom and judgment upon the unrepentant, Jesus gives parables showing the Father's earnest love and care for all of those who are lost, regardless of the situation that led to their being in that position.

Have you known people who have walked away from God? What hope can you take from this story that all is not lost? How important it is that we all pray for those who still haven't learned the lesson the prodigal learned so painfully.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

so much that the loss of His children is unbearable, and so Jesus was sent to die in our stead.

The child has lost his Father. Sin separates us from God. Isaiah says as much: “But your iniquities have separated you from your God” (*Isa. 59:2, NIV*). In the parable of the prodigal, the son was lost through self-will. Self-will causes us today to waste our lives on the things of this world, focusing on the material at the expense of the spiritual.

Consider This: How is the actual “lost item” in this parable different from the lost item in the parable of the lost sheep (*Luke 15:4–7*) and the lost coin (*Luke 15:8–10*)?

II. Reaping the Consequences of Sin

Bankrolled by his father’s money, the prodigal son gave in to his lust for pleasure and jumped headlong into a life of full-blown sin, squandering his entire inheritance on (we can assume) fast living, booze, and prostitutes. Now he was reaping the consequences. The consequences of the son’s sins were many. His sins cost him not only his financial stability and comfortable home but his dignity, self-respect, reputation, purity, and good conscience. “A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life” (*Gal. 6:7, 8, NIV*).

Notice that when the son ran into trouble in that far-off country, he sought help from “a citizen of that country” instead of seeking help from his father. The “citizen” didn’t love him. The citizen exploited him as cheap labor during an economic downturn, offering him demeaning manual labor in a pigsty. Maybe the citizen was one of the son’s “friends” who had benefited from the son’s profligate spending. And when the money ran out, perhaps the son hoped this “friend” would remember his generosity and all the good times for which he fronted the money. It is more than possible that the citizen even knew whose son this was. Perhaps the son even hoped to trade in the commodity of his father’s name for a handout. But there was famine in the land, and suddenly it didn’t matter who he was—or who his father was. The son was left with a hard choice: sling slop to a herd of swine or starve. And so the rich man’s son, born to a life of ease and privilege, with servants to cater to his every need from his childhood, finds himself eking out a hand-to-mouth existence in a pigsty and bedding down with the swine at night. How quickly

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The Best Robe

As we saw, the son himself had to make the decision to return. There was no compulsion on his father's part. God forces no one to be obedient; if He didn't force Satan to be obedient in heaven or Adam and Eve to be obedient in Eden, why do it now, long after the consequences of disobedience have wreaked havoc on humanity? (*Rom. 5:12–20, 21*).

Read Luke 15:20–24. How does the father react to his son's confession? How much penance, how many works, how many acts of restitution was the son required to do before the father accepted him? What message is in there for us? See also *Jer. 31:17–20*.

The son did confess to his father, but you can get the impression from reading the text that the father almost didn't hear it. Look at the order: the father ran to meet his son, fell on him, and kissed him. Sure, the confession was fine, and it probably did the son more good than the father, but at that point the son's actions spoke louder than his words.

The father, too, told the servants to bring "the best robe" and place it on the son. The Greek word translated "best" (from *protos*) often means "first" or "foremost." The father was giving him the best he had to offer.

Think of the context, too: the son had been living in poverty for who knows how long. He probably didn't come home dressed in the finest of apparel, to say the least. After all, he had been feeding pigs up until then. The contrast, no doubt, between what he was wearing when he was embraced by his father and the robe that was placed on him couldn't have been starker (notice, too, the father didn't wait until he was cleaned up before throwing himself on him).

This shows, among other things, that the restoration, at least between the father and the son, was at that moment complete. If we see "the best robe" as the robe of Christ's righteousness, then all that was needed was provided for right then and there. The prodigal had repented, confessed, and turned from his ways. The father supplied the rest. If that's not a symbol of salvation, what is?

What's fascinating here, too, is that there is no "I told you so" from the father. There wasn't any need for it, was there? Sin reaps its own wages. When dealing with people who come back to the Lord after falling away, how can we learn not to throw their sins up before them?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

things in life can turn around, especially when we are doing what we know is wrong.

Consider This: In what ways do we look to the wrong sources for help? What can we do to shift our gaze to the right Source?

III. The Journey Back Home


The journey home was made up of several preliminary steps. However, before the prodigal son could take even those steps, a catalyst was needed. Something had to combust internally in the son before he decided to return home. The Bible says that he came to his senses—another way of saying that he hit rock bottom. Or in his case, the filthy bottom of a pigsty.

At this emotional ground zero, he looked honestly at himself, taking stock of the differences between his current living situation and his life in his father's house. How can we ever truly hope to go anywhere better unless we are able to look at ourselves honestly and see ourselves for who we truly are?

He admitted to himself that he had made a big mistake—a sin against heaven and his father. All too often, we do not realize a mistake unless the consequences are at the forefront of our lives.

Initially one could argue that his motives for going home were purely materialistic. He was thinking about what he could get. After all, he states that even the servants in his father's house ate better than he was eating now. But something gradual but dramatic happened on the road home. The reasons that started him on the road home changed. By the time he got home, he saw himself not as an heir but as a servant. Indeed, he didn't even feel worthy to be called his father's son. As for the prodigal, so for us. Our reasons and motivations for coming to God alter, becoming selfless as we draw closer to Him in our journey home.

Consider This: Why is taking these preliminary steps necessary and crucial to coming back to our Father? What does the prodigal's change in attitude about himself and his reasons for returning signal to us about the importance of humility in coming to the Father? Why is it that our attitudes and self-concepts change as we journey toward the Father? What is it about journeying in His direction that has the power to transform us?

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The Father's Own Garment

Ellen G. White, in *Christ's Object Lessons*, pages 203, 204, adds an interesting detail to the story that's not found in the texts themselves. Describing the scene of the father approaching the son as he humbly comes home, she writes, "The father will permit no contemptuous eye to mock at his son's misery and tatters. He takes from his own shoulders the broad, rich mantle, and wraps it around the son's wasted form, and the youth sobs out his repentance, saying, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.' The father holds him close to his side, and brings him home. No opportunity is given him to ask a servant's place. He is a son, who shall be honored with the best the house affords, and whom the waiting men and women shall respect and serve.

"The father said to his servants, 'Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.' "

What insights does this reference give us into the story as a whole, and what does it tell us about God's character?

The father wants, right away, to cover up the shame of the son's mistakes. What a message for us about learning to let the past go, to not dwell on others' past mistakes or our own. Some of the worst sins are not known now, but one day will be (*1 Cor. 4:5*); like Paul, we need to forget what's past and press toward the future (*Phil. 3:13, 14*).

Read Luke 15:24. What does the father mean when he says that his son was dead but is alive again? How are we to understand those very strong words?

In the end, there's no middle ground in the ultimate issues of salvation. When all things finally and totally wrap up (*Rev. 21:5*), and the great controversy is ended, each human being either will be eternally alive or eternally dead. There's nothing in between.

Certainly something to think about as we make our daily choices, both good and bad, as did the prodigal son.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**IV. Reunion With the Father**

When the son was still far off in the distance, his father saw him. The father didn't wait for the son to come all the way home. The father took off running toward his son.

The father's actions in this story are a beautiful picture of how God welcomes us back into the fold. God doesn't wait for us to come all the way—He comes to meet us as we are, where we are. Our slate is wiped totally clean. God doesn't put us on probation when we come to Him with penitent hearts, sorrowing for our sins. The restitution is immediate. God instantly restores us to our place as His children. There are no questions, there is no guilt, there will be no "I told you so."

Consider This: When you lose something valuable and then find it again, how do you feel? How might this be a tiny sliver of what God feels when a lost child returns? How should this inspire us to return to Him when we fall away?

► STEP 3—Apply**Thought/Application Questions:**

1 The parable of the prodigal also illustrates for us that not everyone is happy to see the prodigal son repent and come home. What can we do to have the same attitude toward sinners that the father had toward his son?

2 At the end of the story, which son appears lost? Why?

3 How can we be more careful not to judge others as they come back to God?

► STEP 4—Create

Activity: Remind your class of the pigpen activity in the motivate activity in step 1 of this lesson. Challenge them to take stock of what would be written on their pigs if the pigpen were their own and not the prodigal son's.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Lost and Is Found,” pp. 198–211; “A Great Gulf Fixed,” p. 260, in *Christ’s Object Lessons*; “The Last Journey From Galilee,” pp. 495, 496, in *The Desire of Ages*; “Parables of the Lost,” pp. 100–104, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3.

“Mark how tender and pitiful the Lord is in His dealings with His creatures. He loves His erring child, and entreats him to return. The Father’s arm is placed about His repentant son; the Father’s garments cover his rags; the ring is placed upon his finger as a token of his royalty. And yet how many there are who look upon the prodigal not only with indifference, but with contempt. Like the Pharisee, they say, ‘God, I thank Thee, that I am not as other men’ (*Luke 18:11*). But how, think you, does God look upon those who, while claiming to be coworkers with Christ, while the soul is making its struggle against the flood of temptation, stand by like the elder brother in the parable, stubborn, self-willed, selfish?”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 140.

“Strength and grace have been provided through Christ to be brought by ministering angels to every believing soul. None are so sinful that they cannot find strength, purity, and righteousness in Jesus, who died for them. He is waiting to strip them of their garments stained and polluted with sin, and to put upon them the white robes of righteousness; He bids them live and not die.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 53.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Discuss further the question of how siblings from the same parents, the same home, and the same environment can go in such different spiritual directions. How are we to understand that?
- ❷ How do you help those who—having turned away from the Lord, gone into the world, and damaged themselves and others in the process—want to put their past behind them but can’t because, no matter which way they turn, the results of their past choices stare them right in the face? What hope, what promises, or what help can you give them?
- ❸ It’s one thing to know that you are messed up, as did the prodigal. What about those who have “left their father’s home,” so to speak, and things are going quite well for them? Let’s be honest: not everyone who leaves the Lord winds up feeding pigs. Some end up owning the pig farm! What can be done to help them realize that, despite their circumstances, they have made a fatal choice?