

March 17

Lesson 3 (NIV)

CALLED TO RETURN

DEVOTIONAL READING: Ezekiel 34:11–16

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Luke 15

LUKE 15:11–24

¹¹ Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

¹³ “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. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “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! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against

heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ ²⁰ 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.

²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²² “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. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.”



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KEY VERSES

*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.... For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate.—***Luke 15:22, 24**

DISCIPLESHIP AND MISSION

Unit 1: Call to Discipleship

LESSONS 1–4

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Recall the details of the parable of the prodigal son.

2. Interpret the parable as illustrating God’s response to the repentant sinner.

3. Reflect on ways to have the outlook of Jesus toward those who seek redemption.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

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II. Consequences (LUKE 15:13–16)

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The Lure of Wealth

III. Reflection (LUKE 15:17–19)

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A Famous Prodigal?

Conclusion

A. The Essence of Repentance

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

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Gentiles	<i>Jen-tiles.</i>
Pharisees	<i>Fair-ih-seez.</i>
prodigal	<i>praw-dih-gul.</i>

Introduction

A. The Scandal of Forgiveness

“That is just unforgiveable.”

Have you ever said something like that, or heard someone say it? We all believe in the importance and necessity of forgiveness. We all rely on forgiveness, from other people and from Almighty God.

But some wrongs seem impossible to forgive. They are too heinous, too painful. We can hardly imagine forgiving those who committed history’s great crimes against humanity. But more practically, we struggle to forgive those whose deeds have deeply hurt us personally.

Likewise, we may struggle to believe we can be forgiven. Our wrongs go with us every moment. We cannot escape the deep regret we have for the harm we have done to others. Forgiveness is as hard to receive as it is to give.

Forgiveness is a scandal. We question those who offer it, question whether we can receive it, doubt whether it can really happen, doubt whether it should happen. The opponents of Jesus questioned both his ability to forgive sin ([Luke 5:20, 21](#))

and his association with those most in need of it ([15:2](#)). How Jesus responded is highly instructive yet today.

B. Lesson Context

Today’s text, one of the most beloved (and misapplied) of Jesus’ parables, is one of a series that he spoke in response to his opponents. Jesus was surrounded by publicans (tax collectors), hated in his time as collaborators with the oppressive Roman Empire. Sinners of various stripes flocked to him. None of this sat well with religious leaders opposed to Jesus. They grumbled about his associating with such people, and especially about his eating with them.

With [Luke 15:1, 2](#) noting the above, [Luke 15:3](#) marks the beginning of Jesus’ response. That response consists of three parables, each about the recovery of something: a lost sheep ([15:4-7](#)), a lost coin ([15:8-10](#)), and an errant son ([15:11-32](#)).

When Jesus used parables to address Jewish leaders, the stories were often meant to be “in your face” tweaks aimed at their hypocrisy. In the parable told at his house, Simon the Pharisee was to understand that he was the debtor who “loves little” ([Luke 7:47](#)). “The chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders” were to know that the parable of the tenants was directed at them ([Mark 11:27; 12:1-12](#)). The three parables in [Luke](#)

15 are similar: they were meant to be rebukes of pious leaders who disdained Jesus because he “welcomes sinners” (Luke 15:2).

What Do You Think?

What guardrails can you adopt to avoid misapplying parables to today's situations?

Digging Deeper

Consider Jesus' original intent for using parables (Matthew 13:10-17), the original audience of a given parable, and the general difficulty in interpreting figurative language (Matthew 15:15, 16; 16:5-12).

sibilities that other sons do not (Genesis 25:31). One privilege is to receive a double share of the estate (Deuteronomy 21:15-17). This is computed by adding up the number of sons, adding one, then dividing the estate equally by the result. Each son except the oldest then receives a single share; the oldest son receives two shares as his birthright.

Since the father in the story has only two sons, this means that *the younger one* is requesting one-third of the father's estate right now—this son wants to “cash out.” Of course, such distribution is always made at the father's death. To ask for one's inheritance before that is to say to one's father, “I want you to treat me as if you were dead.”

I. Desire

(LUKE 15:11, 12)

A. Description (v. 11)

11. Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons.

Parables begin with images from common experience. This family depicted is no different in that regard—so far.

B. Request (v. 12a)

12a. “The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’

Jesus' audience knows that the oldest son in a family has privileges and respon-

C. Response (v. 12b)

12b. “So he divided his property between them.

An angry response would be understandable. But the father in the story accedes to the request! Is he being simply naïve in doing so? (See Proverbs 20:21.)

Our sanctified imaginations can see this as not only generous but also devastating. We may wonder how the family can thrive as a third of the assets suddenly vanish. This grant is bound to bring consequences on the father that may never be undone. But financial ruin of the father and the rest of the family is not

part of the illustration, so we should not get sidetracked by it.

What Do You Think?

Without giving advice, how would you counsel someone who is about to use this verse as a basis for granting a similar request to a restless offspring?

Digging Deeper

Consider what the story as originally told was designed to illustrate.

II. Consequences (LUKE 15:13-16)

A. Abandoning Covenant (v. 13)

13. “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.

The younger son seems to take as little time as possible to turn his share of the estate into cash. As he does, he puts his plan into action. For the audience of Jesus’ day, this is much more than a long-distance move in a modern sense. The son is abandoning not only his family, but also the promised land and God’s covenant. Having been born into an Israelite family, he now abandons that identity in favor of—something else.

As he lives wildly in a *distant country*, the man has no concern for moral bound-

aries or prudence. As a result, he wastes the father’s legacy. The accumulated wealth that could have given the son a start on an independent life later is now dissipated even while his father lives.

What Do You Think?

What guardrails can a church put in place to help members who are in danger of becoming spiritual prodigals and rejecting Christianity? What will be your part in this?

Digging Deeper

What are some warning signs that a rejection of Christianity is about to happen?

This verse also gives the story its familiar name: the parable of the prodigal son. While the word *prodigal* is often associated with the son’s decision to rebel against parental oversight and leave home prematurely, the word actually means “recklessly wasteful of one’s property or means.” This definition therefore points to the son’s poor stewardship more than his desire to cut ties with his family, although the two concepts are related here.

B. Experiencing Hunger (vv. 14-16)

14. “After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.

Food shortages brought on by drought, pests, or social upheaval are common in the ancient world. Because a majority of people make a subsistence living in the best of times, death by starvation always looms. The younger brother has grown up in a prosperous household. Now he is estranged from family and far from his homeland by his own foolhardy actions. He is hungry and without anyone to call on for help.

THE LURE OF WEALTH

It's a common fantasy: *If only I could win the lottery. Then my life would be perfect!* The evidence demonstrates otherwise, however.

After winning \$16.2 million in the Pennsylvania lottery in 1988, the winner had the worst year of his life. His own brother hired a hit man to kill him, hoping to inherit a share of the winnings. The winner invested his gain in business ventures that failed and put him \$1 million in debt.

Another man thought it the best Christmas gift ever when he won a \$315 million Powerball jackpot in December 2002. But his marriage disintegrated as he spent money on alcohol and adultery.

A woman who won a \$5 million lottery in 1991 gave \$2 million of it to an illegitimate child her husband knew nothing about. When he discovered his wife's

deception, he poisoned her.

Those fascinated with wealth do well to heed Solomon's warning: "For the rich, their abundance permits them no sleep" ([Ecclesiastes 5:12](#)).

—J. E.

15. "So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs."

To underscore the prodigal's plight, Jesus introduces an element that is particularly troubling to Jewish people: the destitute man is hired to *feed pigs*—unclean animals ([Leviticus 11:7](#); [Deuteronomy 14:8](#)). This indicates that the *citizen of that country* who hires the prodigal is Gentile. It is virtually impossible to honor the Law of Moses in such a context. Though the prodigal has forsaken family and country, the pigs remind the readers how far he has fallen (or jumped).

16. "He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything."

Pigs are valued as livestock because of their ability to eat nearly anything and produce meat. But there is no indication that the prodigal is allowed to eat any such meat; the fact that *no one gave him anything* would seem to indicate the opposite. Instead, he must rely on *the pods that the pigs were eating*—probably seed pods from carob plants.

We sometimes speak of those who experience consequences of bad decisions as “hitting rock bottom.” That’s where the prodigal is.

III. Reflection (LUKE 15:17-19)

A. Reckoning with Reality (v. 17)

17. “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!’

At the bottom, the prodigal is forced to reevaluate his situation and the solution. His previous abundance had clouded his judgment. His destitute situation makes things crystal clear. Gone is the self-deception that created chaos for him and others.

B. Planning to Repent (vv. 18, 19)

18. “‘I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

Reality prompts the man to a new course of action. Having acted with high-handed selfishness, he now recognizes that sin for what it was. So he plans to take responsibility for his actions by openly affirming that he has done wrong.

To sin *against heaven* is to sin against God, to violate God’s law and will. God is

Father to his people, a generous, loving, forgiving Father who commands his people to show honor to their parents on earth (Exodus 20:12). The young man’s actions were terribly dishonoring.

Likewise, abandonment of the covenant people to live as a pagan among idolaters is an affront. Jesus’ Jewish audience is undoubtedly recognizing that the prodigal’s spiritual poverty is more serious than his physical one. Does that audience think the man’s sins to be beyond forgiveness?

19. “‘I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’

The man continues to rehearse his repentance speech as he assesses his responsibility for his situation. A legal reality is in view: because he has already spent his share of the inheritance, his father’s obligation to recognize him as his son no longer exists.

This fact is underlined by the son’s callous disrespect for his father. The son has treated the father as if dead. Further, the son cannot return the inheritance because it is gone. The only hope is that repentance can result in being hired as a servant.

We may pause to ask ourselves what life would be like for an estranged but repentant son to be brought back into the household as a servant. Would the father

make extra demands of him? Would the son sense a constant obligation to seek his father's approval? Some Christians today may sense they have the relationship of a hired servant with God more than that of a beloved son or daughter. If we see ourselves as such, we have much to consider in this story.

IV. Restoration (LUKE 15:20-24)

A. Father's Welcome (v. 20)

20. "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.

Having reached the point of repentance, the son returns to face *his father*. The son's repentance and return are necessary to be restored to his family, but will not be sufficient. It will be the father's action that accomplishes the restoration. In the preceding parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, everything else is put on hold until what is missing is recovered through active searching. But that is not the case in the parable at hand. No searching for the errant son is said to be done. There is no indication that the family business is put

on hold until the son is recovered.

When he sees the son, the father does not wait for him to arrive at the front door. The father did not run after the son when he left, but he runs toward him now! The driving force to do so is the father's *compassion*, deep feelings of love and mercy, for his estranged son, and so he runs despite the indignity.

When the two draw near each other, the father does not halt abruptly to wait to hear what the son has to say. Rather, the father's reaction indicates that the son's repentant presence is more than acceptable. Without having spoken, the prodigal son has already received more than he hoped for, and certainly more than he deserved.

What Do You Think?

How can the parallels between this account and that of Esau meeting Jacob ([Genesis 33](#)) inform how we deal with those who repent after having wronged us?

Digging Deeper

What false parallels do you see between the two accounts? How does their identification caution us in answering the question above.

B. Son's Confession (v. 21)

21. "The son said to him, 'Father, I

have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

The son begins his prepared speech of repentance. But the son seems to be interrupted (next verse) before he can get to the part where he plans to say “make me like one of your hired servants” (Luke 15:19).

C. Relationship's Renewal (vv. 22-24)

22. “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.

The father interrupts with the instructions we see here. *The best robe*, likely very costly, is a sign of sonship. Such clothing is very costly in the ancient world. The *ring* is not just ornamental jewelry, but likely bears a seal for identifying legal documents in the family's affairs. *Servants* commonly do not wear shoes, but family members do.

23. “‘Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.

In each of the two preceding parables, the finding of the lost object prompted owners to gather friends and relatives for a celebration (Luke 15:6, 9). The same happens in this story.

In biblical times, the slaughter of an animal is always a special occasion. Ordinary, everyday family meals often do not

feature meat. The reason is that the lack of refrigeration means that all meat of a slaughtered animal must be cooked and eaten immediately. That won't happen unless a lot of people are present.

A calf is an especially extravagant animal for slaughter, as the owner is foregoing the growth that the animal might attain and the offspring it might bear. This is provision for the most festive of celebrations. The father is holding back nothing to welcome his lost son back to the family.

We might have expected the father to make some provision for the son to repay what he had taken. But he offers not a word in that direction. Instead, the father gives generously. His forgiveness for the repentant son is graciously full and complete.

24a. “‘For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'

The father's final statement to the younger son summarizes the story. The son's original desire effectively treated his father as dead to the son. But in fact it was the son who ended up effectively dead to the father! The father had had no realistic expectation of ever seeing his son again, let alone of enjoying a loving relationship with him. But the son's restoration is as if he has been raised from the dead. Like the sheep and the

coin in the preceding stories, what was lost no longer is.

24b. “So they began to celebrate.”

And so the celebration begins. Friends and family gather to share the joy. Their presence honors and affirms the grace the father is showing to his son. How unlike the religious leaders who criticize Jesus for his eating with sinners!

A FAMOUS PRODIGAL?

He was given a job as an apprentice in the family print shop. All he needed to do was learn the trade, and he would be guaranteed a rewarding career. But things did not work out that way.

Soon conflicts arose with his boss, who happened to be his stepbrother James. Not content with merely setting type, the apprentice wanted to write and have his words read by everyone in Boston. James was not impressed with his writing and refused to publish it.

But the apprentice began to submit essays under a pen name. These were accepted by James for publication, and soon readers in Boston eagerly awaited the next letter from “Mrs. Silence Dogood.” The deception angered James when it was discovered. So the rebellious 17-year-old apprentice left.

He went to Philadelphia for a new start. Work in several printer shops there was unsatisfying, so he headed to Lon-

don. Lured by an empty promise of help in starting a newspaper, he ended up working again as a typesetter.

Returning to Philadelphia, he found work as a store clerk and bookkeeper. That return was fateful because that young man was Benjamin Franklin, who went on to become one of America’s founding fathers!

A popular but loose, extended definition would describe him as an American prodigal. We can let that stand as long as we don’t lose sight of Jesus’ original intent in our text. See below.

—J. E.

Conclusion

A. The Essence of Repentance

We must stress what should be obvious: Jesus was not using a heartwarming story to illustrate how a family reconciliation should occur. Rather, Jesus was telling the story of every person who has ever turned away from God and squandered the blessings of his love and grace. This observation explains the father’s startling behavior at the outset: God might not stop a person from turning to a sinful lifestyle.

Even so, he is ready to take back the repentant. He may watch in silence as we depart, but he leaves the door open for our return. The older brother’s complaint

([Luke 15:25-32](#)) is not considered in this lesson so this point is not overshadowed.

What Do You Think?

What should churches do, if anything, regarding unrepentant backsliders whose sins are separating them from the heavenly Father?

Digging Deeper

How should those actions differ, if at all, regarding the nature of the sin?

Jesus celebrated repentant sinners whom he had restored to fellowship with God. For the publicans and sinners, that meant admitting that what others said about them was true: they had ostracized themselves from God's people. That meant they needed God's mercy. They found that mercy in Jesus. The religious leaders of the day saw no relevance for Jesus in obtaining that mercy. But in fact, he was (and is) the only relevance in that regard. The fact that Jesus spoke this parable to stress the available mercy of the Father has another teaching point: we dare not think of anyone as "too far gone" to be eligible for God's mercy.



Visual for Lesson 3. Use this visual as a backdrop to the discussion question that is associated with the lesson's conclusion, below.

While the parable can be viewed on a personal level in illustrating God's acceptance of repentant individuals, many students see a larger theme here: the prodigal son as representing the Gentiles. Surely the religious experts of Jesus' day had read [Isaiah 49:6](#), where God promised that his servant would not only "restore the tribes of Jacob" and "bring back those of Israel," but also was to be "a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth" (quoted in [Acts 13:47](#)). This speaks to how we are to view people-groups today ([Matthew 28:19, 20](#)).

B. Prayer

Father, we thank you for your mercy! May we join in your joyous celebration as others become reconciled to you. Teach us to express that joy as we treat others

with the grace and mercy you granted to us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

G. Thought to Remember

God's banquet celebrates the forgiveness of self-aware failures.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student

Into the Lesson

Write the following words on the board: *keys, purse or wallet, cell phone, credit card, pet*. Ask what these items have in common. After a few guesses, propose (if no one else does) that these are things that cause panic when lost. As a whole-class or in small groups, have students discuss the emotions of having lost something important and having that item turn up later, with or without a search.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "Helpful Directions?" activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students pair off to discuss how they like to give and receive directions. Ask students to share experiences of, and reactions to, following someone's directions only to end up hopelessly lost.

Follow either activity by saying, "In today's lesson Jesus tells a parable about someone who was lost, yet found his way home. This parable has often been misapplied, but today we'll consider it as Jesus originally intended."

Into the Word

Ask two of your best readers to take

turns reading aloud the verses of [Luke 15:11–24](#). (This will work best if both are reading from the same version of the Bible.)

Have students close their Bibles or student books so that they cannot see the text. Divide the class in half and ask each group to select a spokesperson. Tell the groups that they are going to take turns telling the story of the prodigal son. The first group will begin telling the story until you say “Switch.” Then the other group will continue the parable. Others in the group are encouraged to make suggestions to the spokesperson.

Start them off by saying, “A certain man had two sons,” and then point to one of the groups. Every 10 to 15 seconds as appropriate, say “Switch.” Commend groups for the retelling.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Mixed-up Parable” from the reproducible page. Have learners work in pairs or threes.

After either activity, discuss the parable by posing the following questions. Pause for discussion after each before asking the next.

1–In what way did the son reject his family? 2–In what way did the son reject his homeland? 3–In what way did the son reject his religion? 4–What caused him to have a change of heart? 5–How did the father’s actions at the son’s return

demonstrate acceptance and forgiveness? 6–What point was Jesus trying to get across?

Anticipated responses: (1) *in asking for his inheritance, he treated the father as if dead*; (2) *moving a long distance meant leaving the promised land*; (3) *to live among idolatrous people, engage in wild living, and work among unclean animals (pigs) implied rejecting God’s covenant*; (4) *being hungry and destitute*; (5) *runs to meet and kiss him, has the servants bring a robe, a ring, and shoes for the son, then declares a great feast*; (6) *we should not despise those who seem beyond redemption because they are the very ones Jesus came to save and welcome back.*

Into Life

Say, “When the religious leaders grumbled because Jesus was being gracious to sinners and eating with them, he told parables about a lost sheep, coin, and son. In each case, rejoicing resulted when that which was lost was found.”

Pose these questions: 1–How does the fact that “there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” ([Luke 15:10](#)) contrast with the Pharisees’ outlook ([15:2](#))? [Pause to discuss.] 2–How well are we doing in having Jesus’ attitude? [Pause to discuss.] 3–In what ways can we do better? [Pause to discuss.] 4–How can we improve our celebrations when a sinner comes to

Christ? Allow a time of prayer for learners to reflect on how he or she can improve in these areas.