The Prodigal Son

Bible Stories Anthology — Luke 15

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> **Romans 15:4** *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

Why These Stories Were Written — Romans 15:4

Paul had just quoted a thousand-year-old psalm and applied it to Christ (Romans 15:3, quoting Psalm 69:9), and then he explained why he could: *whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning*. **Written aforetime** — the scriptures that already stood before this present age of grace opened at Pentecost: the record God gave through Moses, the prophets and the writings, along with the Gospel accounts of Christ's earthly ministry, which belong to that same time before Pentecost. (When Paul wrote these words, the scriptures he had in hand were the Hebrew scriptures; the Gospels had not yet been written down.) **Written for our learning** — "learning" is the Greek word for *teaching*, the very word rendered "doctrine" in 2 Timothy 3:16. These are not quaint tales; they are doctrine in narrative form. Adam, Ruth and David never knew us, but God did, and He had their lives recorded with us in mind — written *for* us, though not all of it written *to* us, which is why we read Israel's history as our instruction and not as our marching orders. **Through patience and comfort of the scriptures** — "patience" is literally *remaining under*, the staying power we gain from watching men and women stay under a load; "comfort" is a *calling alongside*, the strength God brings when He meets them there, which is why Paul calls Him "the God of patience and consolation" in the very next verse. **That we might have hope** — not a wish, but confident expectation: the return of Jesus Christ and everlasting life with Him. That is why these accounts exist, and it is how they should be read.

A Father Who Ran

It is called the parable of the Prodigal Son, but the word "prodigal" is not in the Bible, and the son is not really the main character. Jesus began it, "A certain man had two sons." It is a story about a father and the two very different ways his sons broke his heart.

One son took his share of the family fortune while his father was still alive, went far away and threw it all away. The other stayed home, did everything right, and was just as far from his father's heart. When the younger came home in rags, the father did something no respectable man in that world would do: he ran. When the elder refused to come in to the celebration, the father went out to him too.

Jesus told this story to answer a complaint. Religious men were grumbling because He welcomed sinners and ate with them. His answer was to show them what God is like. It is the clearest picture of grace in all of Jesus' teaching. And like the book of Jonah, it ends with a question nobody answers.

The Setting

When. During the last months of Jesus' ministry, as He was travelling toward Jerusalem, where He would die. Luke says that from chapter 9 on, "he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). Everything Jesus says in these chapters is said on the road to the cross.

Where. Somewhere on that journey, among crowds in the towns and villages of Israel.

Who. Jesus; "all the publicans and sinners," who came near to hear Him; and "the Pharisees and scribes," who murmured. Inside the parable: a father, his younger son, his elder son, the servants, and a citizen of a far country who kept pigs.

The situation. Publicans were tax collectors — Jews who worked for Rome and were free to charge more than Rome required and keep the difference. They were hated as traitors and thieves. **Sinners** was the religious leaders' word for people who openly broke God's Law, and for ordinary people who did not keep the Pharisees' strict rules. **Pharisees** were a party of devout, strict Jews devoted to keeping the Law and the traditions built around it. **Scribes** were the experts in the Law.

To eat with someone in that culture meant to accept him and to share fellowship with him. When Jesus ate with sinners, the Pharisees understood it as saying they were welcome. That is why they grumbled.

This is the **administration of Christ**, the period of Jesus' earthly ministry to Israel, which began at His baptism. Jesus was still speaking to Israel, under the Law. But in this parable He painted a picture of God's heart that would be fully revealed after the cross, the resurrection and the ascension, in the grace administration.

The Story, Told Faithfully

This Man Receiveth Sinners

> **Luke 15:1** *Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him.*
> **Luke 15:2** *And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.*
> **Luke 15:3** *And he spake this parable unto them, saying,*

You cannot understand the parable without these three verses. Two groups are listening. The outcasts came close to hear Him. The religious men stood back and complained. "This man receiveth sinners" — they meant it as an accusation. It is the best news in the world.

"Murmured" is the word used of Israel grumbling against Moses in the wilderness. The Pharisees were doing what their fathers had done.

"He spake this parable unto them" — unto the grumblers. The whole chapter is aimed at the Pharisees and scribes, and especially the last part.

A **parable** is a story drawn from ordinary life, set alongside a spiritual truth to make it clear. The Greek word means *something thrown alongside*. A parable is a figure of speech — an extended **simile**, a comparison of one thing to another. The people in it are not real individuals; they are pictures. A parable usually has one main point, and we should not force every detail to mean something.

Lost Sheep, Lost Coin

Jesus told three parables in a row, and each one builds on the one before.

> **Luke 15:4** *What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?*
> **Luke 15:5** *And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing.*

> **Luke 15:6** *And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost.*
>
> **Luke 15:7** *I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.*

One sheep out of a hundred. The shepherd goes looking "until he find it," carries it home on his shoulders, and throws a party.

"Ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance." Jesus was speaking with some irony. There are no such persons — "all have sinned" (Romans 3:23). But the Pharisees *thought* of themselves that way. The figure of speech is called **irony**: saying something in a way that means more than, or the opposite of, the plain words.

> **Luke 15:8** *Either what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it?*
>
> **Luke 15:9** *And when she hath found it, she calleth her friends and her neighbours together, saying, Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece which I had lost.*
>
> **Luke 15:10** *Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.*

One coin out of ten. The "piece of silver" was a Greek drachma, about a day's wage for a working man. Village houses were dark, with small windows and dirt or stone floors, so she lit a lamp and swept until she heard it ring.

Notice who the seekers are: a shepherd (a lowly trade the Pharisees despised) and a woman. Jesus used ordinary, humble people to picture God.

The pattern is the same each time: something lost, a search, the finding, and a celebration to which friends are invited. "Rejoice with me." The Pharisees should have been rejoicing with Jesus. Instead they were grumbling.

Now the third story. One sheep of a hundred, one coin of ten, and now one son of two. The numbers get smaller, and the loss gets more personal.

Give Me My Share

> **Luke 15:11** *And he said, A certain man had two sons:*
>
> **Luke 15:12** *And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.*

"A certain man had two sons." From the first line, there are two sons. Keep your eye on both.

"Give me the portion of goods that falleth to me." In Israel, a man's estate was divided at his death. Under the Law, the firstborn received a double portion (Deuteronomy 21:17), so with two sons, the elder would get two-thirds and the younger one-third. A father could choose to hand over his property during his lifetime, but it was considered unwise. The Jewish wisdom book of Sirach, written about two centuries before Christ, warned fathers not to give their property away while they lived, but to distribute it at the end of their days.

For a son to *demand* his inheritance while his father was alive and well was shocking. In effect he was saying, *I want what I would get when you're dead. I don't want you — I want your things.* Listeners in that culture would have expected the father to refuse, and perhaps to throw the boy out.

Instead, "he divided unto them his living." The word "living" is the Greek *bios*, meaning *life* — his livelihood, what he lived on. The father gave away part of his life. And notice "unto *them*": the elder son received his share at the same time. He took it, and said nothing in his father's defence.

The father did not argue, force or lock the door. He let his son go. This is how God deals with people. He does not make anyone love Him.

A Far Country

> **Luke 15:13** *And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.*

"Not many days after" — he did not wait. "Gathered all together" — as this series understands it, he turned his share of the family land and goods into money he could carry. That meant selling part of the family's inheritance, probably to outsiders, in a small village where everyone would know.

"A far country" — far from home and, as the pigs will show, a Gentile land, outside Israel. He wanted as much distance from his father as he could get.

"Wasted his substance with riotous living." "Wasted" means *scattered*, like seed thrown to the wind. "Riotous living" translates a word meaning *wastefully, recklessly* — a life with no restraint. That is where the English word **prodigal** comes from: it means *recklessly wasteful*. The Bible does not say exactly how he spent it. His elder brother later claims it went on prostitutes (15:30), but he had not been there.

Among the Pigs

> **Luke 15:14** *And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want.*
>
> **Luke 15:15** *And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.*
>
> **Luke 15:16** *And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.*

"When he had spent all." Then came the famine. He had nothing saved and no one to turn to. The friends who helped him spend it were gone.

The famine was not his father's doing. The father was at home, waiting. Hardship came because the son had put himself where there was no provision and no protection.

"Joined himself to a citizen of that country." The word means *glued himself to*, *attached himself* — he clung to a local man who, as this series understands it, gave him the worst job he had, perhaps hoping he would leave.

"To feed swine." For a Jew, this was the bottom. Pigs were unclean under the Law (Leviticus 11:7). The Mishnah, the early collection of Jewish legal tradition, forbade Jews to raise pigs at all. A Jewish boy feeding a Gentile's pigs had lost his money, his family, his people and his cleanness before God.

"He would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat." "Would fain" means *longed to*. The "husks" were carob pods, the fruit of a tree common in the Mediterranean world — food for animals, eaten by people only in desperate poverty. He was so hungry that he envied the pigs. "And no man gave unto him."

He Came to Himself

> **Luke 15:17** *And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!*
> **Luke 15:18** *I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee,*
> **Luke 15:19** *And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.*

"When he came to himself." Literally, *into himself coming*. It is as though he had been out of his mind and woke up. This is what repentance is: seeing clearly, at last, where you are and who you have been.

"How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!" That is a question that works as an exclamation — the figure of speech called **erotesis**, a question asked to make a point, not to get an answer. **Hired servants** were day labourers, the lowest workers on an estate — lower even than household servants, who at least belonged to the family. Even they ate well at his father's. His memory of his father's goodness was what turned him toward home. "The goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance" (Romans 2:4).

"I will arise and go to my father." He rehearsed a speech. "I have sinned against heaven" — "heaven" here means *God*. This is **metonymy**, a figure of speech in which one word is put in place of another it is closely connected with; heaven, God's dwelling, stands for God Himself. Jews often spoke this way out of reverence. "And before thee" — he had sinned against God and against his father.

"Make me as one of thy hired servants." It was a plan. He knew he had no claim to be a son. Perhaps, as a hired worker, he could earn his keep and pay back some of what he had lost. He was coming home to work his way back.

While He Was Yet a Great Way Off

> **Luke 15:20** *And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.*

This is the centre of the story.

"When he was yet a great way off, his father saw him." The father saw him first. How? He must have been watching the road. As this series understands it, he had been watching it every day since the boy left.

"And had compassion." The Greek word describes a feeling in the gut — a deep, aching pity felt in one's whole inward being. It is the same word used again and again of Jesus when He saw the crowds, the sick and the grieving.

"And ran." In the Middle East of that time, a dignified older man did not run. He wore long robes; to run he had to hitch them up and show his bare legs, which was considered shameful. Many who have

studied that culture point out that no respected head of a household would do it. This father did. He ran down the road in front of the whole village and took the shame on himself.

As this series understands it, there may have been another reason for the hurry. The son had sold family land to strangers and wasted it among Gentiles. When he came back through the village in rags, he could expect insults, and maybe worse. The Law itself said a stubborn and rebellious son, "a glutton, and a drunkard," was to be brought before the elders of the city and stoned (Deuteronomy 21:18-21). The Pharisees listening would have known that law well. By running to him, embracing him and kissing him in public, the father made it clear to everyone: *this is my son, and I have received him.* No one would lay a hand on him now.

"And fell on his neck, and kissed him." He threw his arms around him. The word "kissed" is a strengthened form meaning *kissed him warmly* or *again and again*. Esau greeted Jacob the same way after twenty years apart: "Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him: and they wept" (Genesis 33:4). So did Joseph with his brothers (Genesis 45:14-15).

Notice how the verse is built: "and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him." And… and… and… This is the figure of speech called **polysyndeton** — many "ands." It slows us down so we see each action one at a time. The father did it all before the son had said a word.

Notice, too, what the father did *not* do. He did not wait on the porch with arms folded. He did not demand an explanation. He did not set conditions. The son was still dirty, still smelling of pigs, still a great way off.

The Speech Cut Short

> **Luke 15:21** *And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.*

The son began his rehearsed speech, and it was true: he had sinned, and he was not worthy. But compare it with what he had planned. He never said the last line — "make me as one of thy hired servants." Either the father cut him off, or the son, wrapped in his father's arms, could not bring himself to say it. Either way, the plan to work his way back was never spoken. There was no need for it.

Confession was right. The bargain was unnecessary. The son was not received because his speech was good; he was received before he said it.

The Robe, the Ring and the Shoes

> **Luke 15:22** *But 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:*
>
> **Luke 15:23** *And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry:*
>
> **Luke 15:24** *For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.*

"But the father said to his servants" — he did not answer the son at all. He answered with orders.

The best robe. Literally *the first robe* — the finest robe in the house, very likely the father's own. It covered the rags and the dirt, and it told everyone the son was honoured. God says through Isaiah, "he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness" (Isaiah 61:10).

A ring on his hand. A ring was often a signet, used to seal documents with the family's mark — a sign of authority. When Pharaoh raised Joseph to power, he "took off his ring from his hand, and put it upon Joseph's hand" (Genesis 41:42). The son who had wasted the family's wealth was trusted again with the family's name.

Shoes on his feet. Servants and slaves often went barefoot; sons of the house wore shoes. The son had asked to be a hired servant. The father dressed him as a son.

The fatted calf. A calf kept and fed specially for a great occasion. One calf could feed a hundred people or more, so this was a feast for the whole village. Meat was rare in ordinary homes. The father was saying to everyone: *celebrate with me*.

"This my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." The son had not literally died. The father speaks of him as dead because, while he was in the far country, he was cut off, gone, as good as dead to the family. This is **metaphor** — a figure of speech that speaks of one thing as though it were another. And the two lines, "dead… alive" and "lost… found," are set side by side to say the same thing twice, a pattern called **parallelism**. "Lost… found" ties this parable to the sheep and the coin.

"And they began to be merry." In the first two parables, friends and neighbours were called to rejoice. Here, too, the whole household rejoiced. All but one.

The Elder Brother

> **Luke 15:25** *Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing.*
> **Luke 15:26** *And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant.*
> **Luke 15:27** *And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound.*
> **Luke 15:28** *And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him.*

Here the parable turns, and here it reaches the Pharisees.

The elder son was where a good son should be: in the field, working. He heard music and dancing and asked a servant what was going on. "Thy brother is come… because he hath received him safe and sound."

"And he was angry, and would not go in." He refused to join his father's celebration. In that culture, for the eldest son to stay outside while his father hosted a feast was a public insult. Now the father had been shamed by both sons.

"Therefore came his father out, and intreated him." Once again the father went out — first down the road to the younger son, now out of the feast to the elder. "Intreated" means *begged*, *pleaded with*, *urged*. It is the same word used for comforting and encouraging. The father humbled himself for this son too.

> **Luke 15:29** *And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:*

> **Luke 15:30** *But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.*

Listen to how the elder brother talks.

He does not call him "Father," as the younger son did.

"Lo, these many years do I *serve* thee." The Greek word means *to serve as a slave*. The younger son had wanted to become a servant; the elder son already thought of himself as one. He had lived in his father's house all his life, but he had never lived as a son. He saw himself as a worker owed a wage.

"Neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment." He was proud of his record. He had kept the rules. It is exactly how the Pharisees thought of themselves: "God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are" (Luke 18:11).

"Thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends." A young goat — much smaller than a calf. And notice: "with my friends," not with his father. He wanted a party, but not with his father.

"This thy son" — not *my brother*. He would not even call him his brother. "Which hath devoured thy living with harlots." He assumed the worst, and he said it about his brother's sins in front of the whole feast. He also said "*thy* living" — though he knew perfectly well that his own share had already been given to him.

The elder son was as lost as the younger. The younger was lost in a far country. The elder was lost at home. One broke the rules; the other kept them. But neither of them, at first, understood their father's love. The younger thought he could only come back as a servant. The elder thought he had been a servant all along.

All That I Have Is Thine

> **Luke 15:31** *And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.*
> **Luke 15:32** *It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.*

The father answered gently. "Son" — the word here is an affectionate one, *child, my boy*. He did not rebuke him for the insult.

"Thou art ever with me." You have had me all along — my company, my love, every day.

"All that I have is thine." It was true. The property had already been divided. Everything left was the elder son's inheritance. He could have had a kid, or a calf, any time he asked. He had lived as a servant in a house where he was the heir.

"It was meet" — it was *right*, it was *necessary* — "that we should make merry." "Thy brother" — the father gently corrected "this thy son." *He is your brother.*

And there the story stops.

Did the elder brother go in? Jesus did not say. The last word belongs to the father's appeal, left hanging in the air — like the question at the end of Jonah, "should not I spare Nineveh?" The Pharisees and scribes were standing right there. The story was about them. The ending was theirs to write. Would they

come in to the feast and rejoice with the Father over sinners coming home, or would they stand outside, angry, in the dark?

Where the Story Leads

To the Messiah

This man receiveth sinners. The Pharisees said it as an accusation. It was the truth about Jesus. "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). "I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Matthew 9:13). The shepherd who goes after the lost sheep is a picture of the Son; the father who runs is a picture of God, whom the Son revealed.

What the parable does not show. In the parable, the father simply forgives. No sacrifice is mentioned. A parable teaches one main point, and this one's point is the Father's heart toward sinners. But Jesus told it on the road to Jerusalem, "stedfastly" set on the cross (Luke 9:51). How could a holy God receive sinners and still be just? That question was answered a few weeks later. "God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). As the father in the parable bore the shame of running through the village, so God's Son bore our sin and shame on the cross. God raised Him from the dead, and exalted Him to His own right hand. The robe, the ring and the feast were bought at the price of the cross, and made sure by the resurrection and ascension.

Dead, and alive again. "This my son was dead, and is alive again." Those words would soon be true of Jesus Himself, literally: dead and buried, and raised to life on the third day. And because He lives, those who were "dead in sins" are made alive with Him.

To the Grace Administration

Reconciled. The whole parable is a picture of **reconciliation** — the restoring of a broken relationship. That is the heart of the gospel of grace: "God… hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them" (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). "Not imputing their trespasses" — not counting them. The father never brought up the son's sins at all.

Made alive and seated. The father said, "this my son was dead, and is alive again." Paul writes of what God has done for every believer:

> **Ephesians 2:4** *But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us,*
> **Ephesians 2:5** *Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;)*
> **Ephesians 2:6** *And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus:*

Dead, made alive, raised up, and seated — as Christ was raised and ascended, so believers are raised up and seated with Him in the heavenly places. That is more than a robe and a ring.

Sons, not servants. The younger son came home asking to be a hired servant. The elder son lived as a servant. The father wanted sons. So does God. "Ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father" (Romans 8:15). "Wherefore

thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ" (Galatians 4:7). The believer does not work his way back into God's favour. He is received as a son.

Grace, not wages. The younger son planned to earn his keep; the elder son thought he had earned a reward. Both thought in terms of wages. The father thought in terms of love. "Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness" (Romans 4:4-5). "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Don't be the elder brother. Believers can fall into the elder brother's attitude: keeping the rules, resenting sinners who are welcomed, living as servants instead of sons, and missing the joy of the Father's house. "All that I have is thine." In Christ, God "hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places" (Ephesians 1:3).

To the Topic of God's Heart Toward the Lost

- **God lets people go.** The father did not stop his son. God does not force anyone to love Him.
- **God does not cause the famine.** Hardship in the far country came from the son's own choices and the world he chose to live in, not from the father.
- **God is watching the road.** "When he was yet a great way off, his father saw him."
- **God runs.** He takes the first step, bears the shame, and does not wait for the sinner to earn his way back.
- **God does not count sins.** The father never mentioned them.
- **God rejoices.** "Joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth."
- **God goes out to the self-righteous too.** The father left the feast to plead with the elder son.
- "Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord GOD: and not that he should return from his ways, and live?" (Ezekiel 18:23).

The Main Takeaway

God is a Father who runs to meet sinners who come home, receives them as sons and not servants, and pleads with the self-righteous to come in and rejoice with Him.

- **You cannot earn your way back.** The Father receives you before your speech is finished.
- **Coming to yourself begins with remembering the Father's goodness.**
- **God does not count your sins against you.** He covers you with the best robe.
- **You are a son, not a servant.** Stop living like a hired hand in your Father's house.
- **You can be lost at home.** Keeping the rules is not the same as knowing the Father's heart.
- **Rejoice when others come home.** Don't stand outside the feast.
- **Answer the Father's appeal.** The story's ending is left for you.

For Our Learning — The People

- **Jesus.** The teacher who received sinners and ate with them, and told this parable to answer those who grumbled about it.
- **The publicans and sinners.** Tax collectors and open lawbreakers, despised by the religious, who drew near to hear Jesus.
- **The Pharisees and scribes.** Strict religious leaders and experts in the Law, who murmured that Jesus received sinners — the elder brother of the parable.
- **The father.** The central figure of the story — generous, patient, watchful, compassionate, willing to bear shame; he runs to one son and goes out to plead with the other. A picture of God.
- **The younger son.** He demanded his inheritance, wasted it in a far country, fell to feeding pigs, came to himself, and came home to be received as a son.
- **The elder son.** Obedient, hardworking, proud of his record, resentful of grace; lost at home, and left outside the feast with his father's appeal ringing in his ears.
- **The servants.** They carry out the father's orders and tell the elder son the news.
- **The citizen of the far country.** A Gentile who sent the young man to feed his pigs.

For Our Learning — Customs and Orientalisms

- **Eating together.** To share a meal was to accept someone into fellowship.
- **Publicans.** Jewish tax collectors for Rome, despised as traitors and extortioners.
- **The piece of silver.** A drachma, about a day's wage.
- **The inheritance.** Normally divided at death; the firstborn received a double portion (Deuteronomy 21:17). Asking for it early was a grievous insult.
- **Selling the family land.** Turning inherited land into cash and taking it abroad dishonoured the family.
- **The far country.** A Gentile land, outside Israel.
- **Pigs.** Unclean under the Law (Leviticus 11:7); Jewish tradition forbade raising them. Feeding them was the lowest a Jew could fall.
- **Carob pods ("husks").** Animal fodder, eaten by people only in desperate hunger.
- **Hired servants.** Day labourers, the lowest rank of workers on an estate.
- **An elder running.** Considered undignified and shameful for a respected older man in long robes.
- **The rebellious son.** Under the Law, a stubborn, rebellious son could be brought before the elders and stoned (Deuteronomy 21:18-21).
- **Falling on the neck and kissing.** The warm greeting of reconciliation (Genesis 33:4).
- **The best robe.** The finest garment in the house, likely the father's own; a mark of honour.
- **The ring.** Often a signet bearing the family seal; a sign of authority and trust.
- **Shoes.** Worn by sons; servants and slaves often went barefoot.
- **The fatted calf.** Kept for a great occasion; enough meat to feed a whole village.
- **The eldest son's duty.** To stand with his father as host at a feast; refusing to go in was a public insult.

For Our Learning — Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used by God to add emphasis and feeling. These are the ones in this story:

- **Parable** — an extended simile: a story set alongside a spiritual truth to make it clear. All three stories in Luke 15.
- **Irony** — words that carry more than, or the opposite of, their plain meaning. “Ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance” (15:7).
- **Erotesis** — a question asked to make a point. “What man of you… doth not leave the ninety and nine…?” (15:4); “How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare…!” (15:17).
- **Metonymy** — one word put for another closely connected with it. “I have sinned against heaven” — heaven for God (15:18).
- **Polysyndeton** — many “ands,” to make each action stand out. “And had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him” (15:20).
- **Metaphor** — speaking of one thing as another. “This my son was dead, and is alive again” (15:24).
- **Parallelism** — saying the same thing twice in different words. “Was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found” (15:24, 32).

What the Bible Actually Says

- **The word “prodigal” is not in the Bible.** It is a later title meaning *recklessly wasteful*.
- **The parable begins, “A certain man had two sons.”** It is about a father and both sons, not only the younger.
- **This is a parable, not a history.** The people are pictures, not real individuals.
- **The elder son received his share too** — “he divided unto them his living.”
- **The Bible does not say how the younger son spent his money.** The claim about harlots is the elder brother’s accusation.
- **The father saw him first and ran to him** before the son said a word.
- **The son never finished his speech.** He was not made a hired servant.
- **The father never mentioned the son’s sins.**
- **The father went out to both sons.**
- **The story does not tell us whether the elder brother went in.** It ends with the father’s appeal.
- **The elder brother stands for the Pharisees and scribes** who complained that Jesus received sinners (15:2).

God’s Will and Intent

- **God wants His lost children home.** He is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).
- **God gives freedom.** He does not force love.
- **God’s goodness draws people back** — “the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance.”

- **God takes the first step and bears the shame.** He ran; His Son went to the cross.
- **God restores fully.** Robe, ring, shoes, feast — son, not servant.
- **God wants sons, not slaves**, in His house.
- **God wants His people to share His joy** over every sinner who comes home.