

7th Grade New Testament (Gospels)

Lesson Plan: Parables (Parable of the Prodigal)

Learning Goals: Students will learn to see the different aspects of a familiar story by getting a clearer understanding of vocabulary used within it (prodigal).

Question: When have you ever been lost? What was that experience like?

Prayer

Discuss Question on Board

Read (Act Out) Luke 15:11-32

Context:

3 Parables about losing something (Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, Lost Son)

Name often given to parable: Prodigal Son (What does “prodigal mean”?)

Prodigal (adj.)

1. Rashly or wastefully extravagant
2. Giving or given in abundance; lavish or profuse

There is more than one “Prodigal” in the story:

1. **The Younger Prodigal.** This seems to be the most obvious choice to wear the label. You can’t really get around the fact that this guy is a real jerk. When he comes to his father to ask for his share of the inheritance, he is essentially saying to his dad, “I wish you were already dead.” Surprisingly, the father gives it to him and he takes his inheritance and wastes it in “reckless living.” Things get so bad that the young man ends up tending the pigs of a Gentile - a double insult and prohibition (working for a Gentile and touching a forbidden, unclean animal). He is at rock bottom when he comes to himself. He has squandered everything that his family has worked hard to earn and has essentially flushed it down the toilet. He is at rock bottom when he comes to himself. He goes home fully expecting to be a servant in his father’s house.
2. **The Prodigal Father.** Let me say that if one of my sons came to me and said essentially, “Dad, I wish you were dead. Give me my money now,” I don’t think I would have had the same reaction as this father. I think it would have been something more along the lines of, “You ungrateful little @\$% . . . How dare you come to me and ask for your inheritance now!” But he does give it to him.

There is a **traditional rabbinic saying** found in the Talmud reads: “three cry out and are not answered: he who has money and lends it without witnesses; he who acquires a master; he who transfers his property to his children in his lifetime.” (Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, p. 164)

The father is willingly allowing his reputation to be trashed, to be looked down on as an incompetent father; to put his livelihood at stake; to put his whole family at stake.

When the son returns, the father responds by running to meet him. (Something that a well respected Jewish man would never do.)

It's important to realize that "a noble with flowing robes never run anywhere. To do so is humiliating...a man's manner of walking tells you what he is...[as] Aristotle says, 'Great men never run in public.'" (Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, p. 181)

And if it were my son that hit the bottom and dragged himself home, I'm not so sure that I would be pulling out a new robe, a new ring, and throwing a party for him.

The best robe - probably the father's robe, signifying that he and boy are in the same place

The ring - probably a signet ring, giving the boy power and status

Hultgren suggests that this ring would probably have been reserved for the elder son

Sandals - servants did not have shoes, to place them on the boy is to say that he is no servant; it is in a sense granting him his freedom.

Fatted calf - suggests that the entire village will be invited, a huge party; the father is restoring this son in the site of everyone.

These gifts come at the expense of the older brother (the father is taking away from his inheritance to receive the younger brother back).

How would that teach him the consequences of his actions? Yes, this father is prodigal in his love for his son, going way over the top time and time again.

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3. **The Older Prodigal.** In reality, this is the one I identify with the most. This is the responsible child who does what he is supposed to do. He works hard, keeps the family business going, works the fields, and doesn't cause his father any trouble. I wonder about this brother's reaction to his younger brother's request. Did he object? Did he try to talk his father out of it? And when his brother comes home, having wasted all that he had worked so hard to earn, is it any surprise that the older brother is furious? "You're throwing him a party? A robe, a ring, and a calf? I've never even gotten a goat to have a party with my friends!" This elder brother has been just as prodigal with his father's love as his brother has, but in a different way. Instead of wasting it on reckless living, he has wasted it on resentful living. He has wasted his father's love thinking that he had to earn it, to slave away at doing the right thing, the expected thing. He has become a slave instead of a son.
4. **The Prodigal God.** The deeper reality of this story is that it is a story of God and God's chosen people. In this simple story, Jesus is essentially retelling the story of the Israelites, a people who have continually wandered away from God and wasted the rich blessings God has given them. The history of the Israelite people is a history of exile and return - of running away from God, hitting rock bottom, and returning once again. It is a story of a God who has been prodigal with his love towards this chosen people - a God who will be true to the covenant God has made. New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, put it this way:

Exile, as some of the greatest prophets had seen, was itself part of the strange covenant purposes of Israel's father-god. Israel could be allowed to sin, to follow pagan idolatry, even to end up feeding the pigs for a pagan master, but Israel could not fall out of the covenant purposes of her god. She could say to her god, 'I wish

you were dead', but this god would not respond in kind. When, therefore, Israel comes to her senses, and returns with all her heart, there is an astonishing, prodigal, lavish welcome waiting for her.

(N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 129)

You see, this is a story about God, who is lavish in love towards us. So, regardless of where we find ourselves in the story - the younger prodigal who has run away from home and wasted the father's love in wild living, the older prodigal who has stayed home and wasted the father's love in resentful living, or the father who has given over and over again (only to be taken advantage of), there is good news: God is faithful. Healing is available. A new start is possible. Come home now, the banquet is just getting started.

Lesson Summary / Review:

Students should review and highlight the following vocabulary terms and concepts from this lesson in their notes:

- Prodigal
- Who were the four “prodigals” we talked about in this parable?