
The Prodigal Son

DAVE BAST

Everywhere we see him in the Gospels, it seems Jesus is teaching people by using parables; that is to say, by telling stories. Picture him sitting in a boat on the Sea of Galilee, or resting on a nearby hillside with a listening crowd gathered all around; or watch him walk down a dusty country road trailing disciples like a kite with a tail; and then Jesus turns to his listeners and he says: A sower went out to sow; or the kingdom of heaven is like a pearl of great price; or a certain man had two sons. Even today, people who have little knowledge of the Bible probably know something about Jesus' parables, especially the one we are going to look at today, the most famous story of them all. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. We are in the middle of a series, Scott, on the parables, and we had a couple of parables about the kingdom...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And then last week a parable about grace.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Now we have another, and we will close the series with two parables of judgment before sort of wrapping the whole thing up with sort of a catch-all parable, the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan. That will be the seventh program in this series; but here is program number four; and as you hinted at there, Dave, we are going to be going to Luke 15, the parable of the prodigal son.

We have been talking a little bit too in this series, though, about what is a parable...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think in our first program we referred to kind of a Sunday school definition we all probably heard at one time, that parables are earthly stories with heavenly meanings, but we said that that is not quite right.

DAVE BAST

In a sense, yes, fine; spiritual meanings or meanings for faith or meanings for our obedience or kingdom living; but they are not just about heaven by and by. They are really earthly stories with earthly meanings, in a sense...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes.

DAVE BAST

Because they are very much about the life that we live here and now, the way we respond to grace—God’s grace—what that grace is. That is kind of the topic that we are dealing with in this program again. Yes; earthy stories with heavenly meanings as long as we understand that correctly; but also, they do help us to understand and remember things a little bit. Sometimes they are unsettling, as we pointed out.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and sometimes the...what we referred to earlier as the cognitive dissonance, the unsettling nature of the parable; that period of time when you first hear a parable and you are not quite sure what it means. Well, that drives you deeper, right? That makes you think more about it; and certainly, that is true, and that is Jesus’ purpose in Luke 15. We will be making reference eventually in this program to the fact that there are...there is a triplet of parables in Luke 15, and there is actually another parable or two that follow immediately, apparently in the same story, in Luke 16. It just goes right on. We kind of think it ends with the parable of the prodigal son, but it doesn’t; but this is a parable that is only in Luke’s Gospel, like the Good Samaritan. It is interesting that two of the most famous parables of them all are only in one Gospel—only in Luke—who is the great storyteller of the New Testament, but he has this one in Luke Chapter 15.

DAVE BAST

Right; just as a kind of an introduction to it; you know, we talk about grace; grace is a bit of an abstraction. It is a Bible word, but it is a theological term as well; and maybe it is a little bit slippery in our minds, but you cannot help but remember a story about two boys...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And one of them ran away from home and then came back again, and that really helps us to get at the heart of what grace involves. So, let’s listen to the story. Here it is from Luke 15:11.

¹¹Jesus continued, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³Not 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.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

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

DAVE BAST

So, first of all we might just consider the actions of this younger son—the prodigal son, as we say. Prodigal actually is an older word, but it means kind of throwing stuff away. If you are very prodigal with your possessions you don’t take very good care of them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or it can also mean lavish, but yes, you are really spreading it around, which he did in the sense of wasting his money. I have sometimes also heard this called the prodigal father because he ends up being very lavish. This boy obviously grew up privileged. It looks like he lives on an estate with his father, who must be a man of some means; and yet, this boy does this absolutely terrible thing that a lot of scholars like Kenneth Bailey, scholars of the ancient Near East would say no son actually would ever have done this because when you come to your father, who is still alive and say: Give me my share of the estate, you are essentially saying:

Drop dead, old man. Put your will into effect as though you are dead to me. So give me my share of the inheritance. That is horrible!

DAVE BAST

It is rude, obviously. It is offensive and unbelievably selfish. So, this is a greedy, spoiled little guy, and the father astonishingly says: Okay, you want it, here. What did he have to do? Liquidate; sell off some of his land; I don't know. Get rid of flocks and herds...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, they didn't have a lot of cash in those days, so yes, you would think he would have to have liquidated part of the estate and turned it into cash. So, he gives it to the boy. He wastes no time. He goes as far away from home as he can...goes to the big city. It takes no time at all...throwing his money around; gaining some very temporary friends who enjoyed his company as long as he was buying the steak and the wine; and soon enough, sure enough, as you might have guessed. All the money is gone, and so are his friends.

DAVE BAST

Yes; he goes to Vegas and gets a suite, you know, and has a high old time for awhile. I love the older version—the King James translation of the story. He squandered his goods in *riotous* living...riotous living, it says. So, we can imagine parties and gambling and women and all the rest; and it is gone and then we read... You know, Jesus the master storyteller, a famine strikes that land and he began to be in want; and where are all of his friends now?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, gone.

DAVE BAST

Gone; and so, he ends up hiring himself out to a farmer and he is sent to feed the pigs.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which for a Jewish person, pigs were not kosher; they were totally unclean. Jews wanted nothing to do with pigs. They wouldn't eat ham and bacon and so forth; so, this is a terrible fate for a Jewish boy to actually have to feed pigs. He has sunk as low as he can go, Jesus is saying; and of course, the boy stands in for all of us...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From the beginning of our story in the Garden of Eden already, we moved to the far country. We moved east of Eden and gave up on God; separated ourselves willfully from the one who had given us everything...

DAVE BAST

Right, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then we find ourselves in a place where now nobody gives us anything.

DAVE BAST

It is the story first played out by our first parents. Yes, you are right. Or you think of Paul's words in Ephesians 2: Living without God and without hope in the world; and that is exactly the predicament this boy has gotten himself into; but that is not where the story ends. I think you probably know enough to know that there is going to be a real happy turn in just a moment, and that is where we will go next.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this, the fourth program in a seven-part series on some of Jesus' parables. Today we are in Luke 15...the end of Luke 15, and the parable of what is often called the prodigal son; and Dave, we just saw that he took his share of the inheritance, pockets full of money, moves to Vegas, goes to the big city, lives it up, buys all of the best wine and steak and shrimp that money will buy, and then the money is gone, and he hits rock bottom—feeding pigs, and he is so hungry he almost wants to eat the pig slop.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly. So, it is a picture of humankind in its lostness, really. Some of us might be able to tell a story of life that is fairly similar to this; others perhaps not, but it is all about where men and women, boys and girls find themselves living apart from God as a result ultimately of the sin of our first parents; but then we read this wonderful turn in the story, and it all revolves around a phrase: When he came to his senses; that is verse 17.

“He said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death. ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.”’ ^{20a}So he got up and went to his father.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as he does so, Dave, I have always pictured him as rehearsing...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That little line. It took him a while. “I am going to go back...”

DAVE BAST

He is in a far country, so he had plenty of time, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He had plenty of time, so you know, he is just walking back: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy...but Father...”

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

“Father!” He maybe tried it with different intonations, but he...

DAVE BAST

“Fatherrr...”

SCOTT HOEZEE

He has his speech and he is hoping it will work because he has no leg to stand on back home...

DAVE BAST

Right, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He told his father to drop dead: You are dead to me, Dad. His father would be within his rights to say: And you are dead to me, son...you know; get out of here! And there are fathers in this world who have done that and would do that.

DAVE BAST

And would do it again, absolutely.

SCOTT HOEZEE

"I told you, son, never go come home again and I meant it," and the door slams and that is that. So, he knows this is a bit of a high-stakes gamble here. He is gambling that his father has enough love, enough compassion to at least make him a servant. Even that would be better than hanging out with those pigs.

DAVE BAST

Yes; he is not aiming very high here. He is saying: If I can get into the bunkhouse, you know, where the hired hands live; but it is a wonderful picture, too, if he is a picture of our lostness, this is really a picture of conversion. When you come to your senses, Jesus says in the story: When his eyes were opened, we might say. When he realized that what seemed like so much fun wasn't really fun at all; that all that wildness, while it had a certain glamour and excitement, ultimately in the morning after it turns to dust and ashes in your mouth, you know; you've got that taste. So, he gets up and he goes home; and really, conversion...the word *conversion* means to turn around...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And that is what happens here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So he turns around and heads home...

DAVE BAST

Heads for home.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And meanwhile, it kind of looks like that; although again, you could imagine this father being angry and bitter at this son, who told him to drop dead. You know what? It kind of looks like he has been sitting on the front porch scanning the distant horizon ever since the day he left, hoping, hoping, hoping maybe...maybe I will see my boy again...maybe.

So, the son is coming home; and then we read this:

15;20b"But While he was still a long way off, his father saw him..." So, maybe he had been looking for him...

DAVE BAST

Yes, he was on the lookout.

SCOTT HOEZEE

"His father saw him and was filled with compassion for him. He ran to his son, threw his arms around him, kissed him; ²¹and the son said to the father, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²²But the father said to the servants, 'Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him and put a ring on his finger, sandals on his feet, ²³and bring that fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they

began to celebrate.”

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The son never gets through his whole speech; he gets cut off.

DAVE BAST

Yes, he doesn't get to say it, right. The father comes... You mentioned Kenneth Bailey, Scott, a little bit ago, and he wrote a series of wonderful books. He grew up in the Middle East himself, and so he had a real understanding of that culture; and just as he said, you know, what the son said to the father would have been terribly offensive when he asked for his inheritance, he also pointed out that what the father does here is completely inappropriate for an elder in the Middle East to *run*? They don't run; they don't run anywhere. That is undignified; and here is this father standing on the porch, and he catches sight of a figure *waaay* in the distance, and he thinks: Could it be? Is it? He looks familiar. That looks like...and he runs out... It is just this fabulous picture of the grace of God. So, this really isn't so much about the prodigal son, it is about the waiting father, as Helmut Thielicke, the German preacher said.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and the bottom line here...and this is true of the previous two parables of lost and found here: The lost sheep and the lost coin...the bottom line is great joy. When the lost is found, these parables in Luke 15 bubble over with the joy of salvation ultimately, because in Luke whenever you read the word *rejoice* or *joy*, it stands for salvation. And so, here we have this joy. This boy is saved; and indeed, now all of a sudden it is a little bit more about the father than the son.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; so, the father immediately says throw a party. He doesn't even let the boy get through his speech. Far from telling him to go to the bunkhouse, you know, and work his way back...well now, let's see...we will put you on probation, son. You failed me terribly. You broke my heart. You have done all these bad things. And by the way, where is all that money that I had to cash in to give to you? We will see whether you... No, no; none of that occurs here. None of that. Nothing about works. Nothing about earning your way back. It is just: My son who was lost has been found. My son who was dead is now alive. Kill the fatted calf. Bring out the robe. Put a ring on his finger. It is just this joy in heaven, as Jesus says in this chapter. Joy in heaven when one person, one sinner, repents and comes back to the embrace of the Father. So, it is about grace, isn't it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

It really is about grace.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you know, in the Reformed tradition, we sometimes talk about irresistible grace, and there is a sense in which you would say: Well, who could resist a father like this? Who could resist that kind of love; and who would fail to rejoice in such great mercy and compassion? Well, some people can; and one character in this particular story, who we will see actually stands in for some real-life characters in Luke 15, they do manage to resist such a portrait; and we are going to consider that in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we are coming to the climax of Jesus' great parable at the end of Luke 15, the parable of the prodigal son or the parable of the waiting father—different ways to frame it...

DAVE BAST

You know, it would be nice if it stopped right there, wouldn't it, with the son coming back and the father throwing the party and everything is happy and it is all grace.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, Jesus began this parable by saying: There once was a man who had *two* sons; and we need to wonder, well, where is that other one? Where is the elder son? We know that the spoiled brat younger kid, what he did; but where is he? Well, he...that elder brother, as we are going to see, actually is the one whose attitude kicks off this series of three parables, because if we go way back to the beginning of Luke 15 we read now: ¹The tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus, ²but the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³And then Jesus told them...ultimately three parables of lost and found, basically to say to the Pharisees: You ought to be looking for these lost sheep, lost coins, lost sons, but you are not. I am with the lost because God wants them to be found. You think you are the already found, and you don't care about anybody else. The Pharisees are why Jesus told this story, and they haven't really been in any of the parables. There were no outside observers on the lost sheep or on the lost coin, but there is an outside observer to the events in the prodigal son, and it is the elder brother.

DAVE BAST

Right; and so Jesus is kind of building a climax throughout the chapter, so as you said, Scott, they are all about lost and found; so there is the shepherd who has a hundred sheep and he has ninety-nine of them and he finishes counting and he goes: Ninety-nine...and he goes: Ninety-nine...and he goes: Ninety-nine...and...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Oh-oh! And so, he leaves the ninety-nine to go look for the one; and then the next parable is about a woman with ten silver coins and she has lost one of them so she sweeps the whole house, and when she finds it she calls her neighbors in to celebrate with her; so now the joy begins...

SCOTT HOEZEE

She spends more on the party than the coin was worth...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But that is the lavishness of grace that comes all through here. We just saw it with the father...totally undeserved for this boy, who told his father to drop dead...not only welcomes him back, restores him to the family as a full son, but throws a party. They killed the fatted calf, which you know was the Cadillac of dinners back in that day. That meant this was a very serious party.

DAVE BAST

So you have the background of these scribes and Pharisees who are muttering because of the kind of people who are being attracted to Jesus, and he is welcoming them, and he is even going out to eat with them, which was *horrors*, you know...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Unclean. Now listen to the conclusion:

²⁵“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house he heard music and dancing. ²⁶So he called one of the servants and asked them what was going on. ²⁷‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’”

SCOTT HOEZEE

²⁸“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him, ²⁹but he answered his father, ‘Look, all these years I have been slaving away for you and never disobeyed your orders. You never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends; ³⁰but when this son of yours, who squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him?!’ ³¹‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me and everything I have is yours; ³²but we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and he is alive again. He was lost and he is found.’”

DAVE BAST

Lost and found; that could stand as a title over the whole chapter; that could stand as a title over Jesus’ whole ministry; that could stand, hopefully, as the description of our lives: Lost and found. And the question is: How do you react to that? How do you respond? People, come on, listen, Jesus is saying to them. You are muttering, you are looking down your noses, you are kind of dismissing all these riff-raff as being unworthy and unclean; and then you are criticizing me for welcoming them—for receiving them. Don’t you get it? This is what God is about. This is what God is doing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I kind of picture that as Jesus sat there at table with the sinners and tax collectors, I think when he got to the line: Meanwhile, the older son... I think he lifted up his eyes and looked straight at the Pharisees as a way to say: This is who you are, guys; this is your role in the story because you are standing outside of my party with these people, who are lost and now found; and you are doing exactly what this elder brother...you refuse to go in, you refuse to have the joy; and look how the older brother characterizes his life. Does he say: Dad, I love you so much, I am just so... No: I have been slaving away for you. That is a terrible way to characterize... You know, the father maybe had hoped that at least this son loved him...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It turns out maybe not. He has been kind of spiteful and...this had to break the father’s heart in another way.

DAVE BAST

Well, he is just as greedy and mercenary as the younger son used to be...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Because...what are you home for? Are you home because of what you can get for yourself? You never even gave me a goat to have a party with my friends. And the father said: Look, everything I have is yours. God is so lavish with his goodness and grace. It is not about earning it. I think that is the key problem. Again, we all have this tendency to think we earn God's favor by being good...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And then when we see people who aren't good, and they still somehow get grace...yes, wow...what is going on here?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we cry out what we talked about in an earlier program with the parable of the laborers in the vineyard: That is not fair! We think grace is not fair; and grace isn't fair; that is the point of grace. It is not fair, but it is the way we get saved. Really, all of these stories are about sharing the joy. Jesus had said earlier at the end of the first two parables:

15:7 "I tell you, there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine who [have] no need of repentance." 10 "I tell you there is more joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

It is all about joy; but what is interesting is, this parable ends open-ended. That line we read earlier where the father says: Everything I have is yours. We had to throw this party because your brother was lost and found; he was dead and now he is alive. End of story. How does the older brother react? We are not told...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because that puts the camera on us. How do we react?

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Now it is up to us. Will the older brother go in? Will he join the party? Will he catch on to the joy? We don't know. Jesus doesn't say, but leaving it open-ended like that means: Do you?

DAVE BAST

In many respects, it makes me think of the ending of the book of Jonah...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

We did a series on Jonah—I think it was four parts for the four chapters—but Jonah has this very same kind of open-ended ending; and actually, the very same reaction, as Jonah gets angry because God has chosen to show mercy on the Ninevites...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And he is sulking and he wants to die, and God says: Shall I not care about Nineveh, that great city? So, that is really the question that comes to us. Who are we in this parable? When you read it, look in the mirror. Maybe you can identify with that prodigal son. You were lost and now you are found and you are just so happy and grateful; but for many of us, to be honest, we are the elder brother. We never did leave home, and maybe we are a little bit resentful about those we look down on.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Although we need to remember, the joy over the prodigal son is our joy. We are all saved by the same grace, thanks be to God.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we begin looking at Jesus' parables of judgment by studying the parable of the wedding banquet in Matthew 22. Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to let us know what scripture passages or topics you would like to hear discussed on *Groundwork*.

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Printed on July 22, 2025