



WEEKLY STUDY

WEEK 3: Prodigal - Unfair Love

In this series, we are going to dive deep into the parable of the lost son in Luke 15. Parables are stories that Jesus told to simplify a spiritual truth in a way that we, as humans, can understand it. Since these stories were recorded thousands of years ago, we sometimes need help in fully understanding the cultural context of the story. In the next few weeks we will slowly walk through the verses in Luke 15 as we learn what Jesus was trying to teach us through this story of a loving father and his two sons that were both stuck in their sin, but in very different ways.

Background:

Luke 15:1-2

*Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. **2** But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

In the beginning of Luke chapter 15 we learn that Jesus is speaking to a crowd. In this crowd, there are tax collectors and those that would have been considered sinful or "unclean". Jesus had been teaching and eating with these openly sinful people. This had upset the religious leaders that were also in the crowd. They had come to pass judgement on Jesus for keeping such "unclean" company. Jesus knew this and spoke through parables to the religious leaders who couldn't see their sin, and to the "unclean" around him that already knew the weight of their sin.

Jesus shares 3 parables with the crowd. Each parable is about something that was lost, and then celebrated once it was found. The first parable (Luke 15:3-7) is about a shepherd that had 100 sheep. This shepherd chose to leave all 99 sheep to go chase after one sheep who wandered away. The next parable (Luke 15:8-10), Jesus tells us about a woman who had 10 coins and lost one. She searches everywhere for the one coin and then rejoices once she finds it. Jesus clearly states at the end of each parable that this is how our Father in Heaven celebrates when one person who is lost repents of their sin and comes back to Him.

Then, Jesus begins the third parable, the story of the lost son. Some call this the "Prodigal Son" parable, when it should probably more accurately be called the Prodigal God story. The definition of prodigal is to give recklessly and extravagantly, or lavishly giving everything. As we study this parable it will become clear that God, the father in the story, gives in this way to both of His sons. We will slowly work our way through the scriptures in Luke 15:11-32 together over the next few weeks as we learn what it means to be loved in this way.

MONDAY: Luke 15:11-32

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. **25** “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. **26** So he called one of the servants and asked him 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.’ **28** “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. **29** But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. **30** But when this son of yours who has 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. **32** But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

This week, as we look at the Lost Son parable, we are examining the seemingly unfair love of the Father. While he loves each son equally, he expresses that love in different ways. Many of us as kids probably remember saying “it’s not fair” at some point. We might have included a stomp of the foot and a “dirty look” at our parents, right? As adults it might look different. Maybe it looks like resentment, feelings of bitterness or insecurity, even jealousy or envy. We might not stomp our foot, or say it out loud, but God knows our hearts. He sees our “dirty look” even if it’s deep within our souls. It’s important to recognize that there will be seasons and times in our lives when we will need to receive God’s love and blessings in different ways. As a parent, when one kid falls down and scrapes their knee we may need to leave our other kids playing safely to run and scoop up the hurt one for a hug and a bandaid. This is just like the parable of the lost sheep. God is our good shepherd. This doesn’t mean that God loves the other 99 sheep less, or that we love our children playing safely less. We have to trust that God knows what we need, when we need it, and that He always knows best. Each day this week we are going to journey through the process of the older son’s heart, and our own hearts, as we have those “it’s not fair” moments with God’s love.

First of all, looking at the younger son for comparison, it says that the Father runs to the younger son while he’s a long way off. In Jesus’ culture, running was only for children or servants and would have been a shameful embarrassment for an older person to do. In this patriarchal society, it would have been even more unheard of for the patriarch of the family to run in this way. Not only does he run, but he immediately embraces him, kisses him, puts on a robe around his shoulders, a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Each of these items and actions are significant in this time period and culture. They indicate that the younger son was being re-instated into the family, with all authority by the Father. By their custom, this would mean that he once again had access to an inheritance. This was a full and complete reconciliation back into the family. This was not just simply giving him a new outfit and throwing a party. This was so much more! Jesus is showing us that God’s love is a completely unearned, undeserved, gift of love and grace.

Next, as we look at the father’s interaction with the older son, we see the same unconditional love just in a different way. When the older son refused to enter the party, this would have dishonored both the Father and the family as a whole. This was a huge offense, and may have divided some families during this cultural time. When the Father comes out of the party to find

him, this would have been unheard of. Just like running, the host leaving the party was a shameful embarrassment. This action was a true humbling of the Father in order to seek out the son. Then to add to this embarrassment, the older son's tone with the Father would have been unacceptable as well. As one of the commandments, the Jewish culture was very serious about honoring your Father and Mother. Even after the older son shames and dishonors the Father with his refusal to join the party and disowns his younger brother by his statements, the father doesn't give up. He continues to plead with the older son. He graciously reminds him of all that he's given him and gives him another chance to join back into the party, and ultimately the family. This is exactly what Jesus does with us as well. Both son's were stuck in sin, both sons needed forgiveness, and both were shown equal amounts of love just in different ways. Sadly the older son couldn't see this, and the story ends before he is reconciled to the family.

Have you ever been jealous of someone else's love story? Have you thought "it's not fair" about something God has blessed someone else with? Did you think that maybe you deserved it more, or that they deserved it less? Confess this to God, He already knows it anyways. Ask for His forgiveness, and ask for healing in this relationship and area of your life.

TUESDAY: Step 1 - COMPARE

Matthew 20: 1-16

20 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. **2** He agreed to pay them a denarius[a] for the day and sent them into his vineyard. **3** "About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. **4** He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' **5** So they went. "He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. **6** About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' **7** "'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' **8** "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' **9** "The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. **10** So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. **11** When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. **12** 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' **13** "But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? **14** Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. **15** Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' **16** "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Much like the parable of the Lost Son, the parable of the vineyard workers in Matthew can make us question God. We can find ourselves among those first hired workers who had worked all day toiling in the sun, while others stood idly by and only worked an hour for the same wage. Like the older son in the Lost Son parable, they looked at God and said "it's not fair". Both the first hired workers and the older son felt that they deserved more, or at the very least, that the others deserved less. We can absolutely find ourselves asking the same questions as the original audience did in Jesus' time. How is this fair? Why would the landowner give the same to those that only worked an hour? Why would the Father treat the younger son to a huge party? As we ask these questions, let's take a look at the first step in the "it's not fair" process: **COMPARISON**.

Initially, the workers and the older son were willing and able to obey. The first hired workers were glad to take the job from the landowner and agreed to the daily wage. The older son was willing to stay and work on the Father's property even after his younger brother had left them

with taking care of everything. How do they suddenly begin to shift into an “it’s not fair” mindset with God? In both stories, we see a shift when they begin to **compare** themselves to others. The first hired workers were glad to receive work initially, but begin to grumble when they **compared** their wages to the newly hired workers. The older son stays and works in obedience until he sees the younger son has returned and is receiving a party. Once they begin to **compare** themselves to others, their view of God’s love for them begins to shift into a not enough, or not fair mindset. They begin to judge their work as more valuable by **comparison**, and they begin to self-righteously claim to deserve more love or blessings from God because of it. We are no different, and we can get stuck with **comparison** in our own lives. As the saying goes “**comparison** is the thief of joy”. Maybe you’re sitting in the car line on a beautiful Friday afternoon, thankful to be done with work and able to pick up your kids. Then you get a text from a friend sitting on a beach in some tropical paradise. Suddenly you’re not so grateful anymore. Why can’t you be sitting on a warm beach? Instead of being joyful for your friend, you begin down the road of **comparison**. Maybe a little monologue begins in your mind, “Must be nice to afford time off on a fancy vacation. I’ve been working all week, and they are floating down a lazy river. Why don’t I ever get anything like that?” Just like the workers and the older son, our once beautifully content Friday afternoon gets ruined by **comparison**. **Think about the last time you got stuck in an “it’s not fair” mindset of comparison. Was there an element of judgement towards another person? If you’re honest, did you pridefully feel that you deserved it more? Did you suddenly feel a little less grateful for all that God has given you? Confess that right now to the Lord, ask for His forgiveness and ask for His strength to be grateful for what He’s given you, while being joyful for what He gives to others around you.**

WEDNESDAY: Step 2 - COMPLAIN

Exodus 16:2-3

***2** In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. **3** The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.”*

Numbers 14:1-4

*That night all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. **2** All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, “If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness! **3** Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt?” **4** And they said to each other, “We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”*

After comparison, the next step we often fall into is **complaining**. We see this clearly in both parables. After comparing, the first hired workers begin to **complain** about their work. They state that it was burdensome and in the heat of the day. The older son does the same, as he states that he was “slaving” for the Father and never even received a goat for his friends. In the book of Exodus and Numbers we see this over and over with the Israelites in the wilderness. They quickly turn from rejoicing in God’s blessings, to **complaining**. They were literally just freed from over 400 years of harsh slavery in Egypt and had just experienced many amazing miracles like the parting of the Red Sea, and bread falling daily from heaven. However, they quickly turn to grumbling and **complaining**. They even suggest that they would be better off back in slavery. How often does comparison lead us to **complaining** about the very things that God has just blessed us with? How often do we find ourselves not only ungrateful, but desiring the very things that God rescued us from?

In the case of the first workers, instead of being grateful they were hired right away and that they didn't have to worry about their wage, they **complain**. God in His goodness promises a specific wage to the first hired, where He doesn't with the others. Regardless of this blessing, they compare & **complain**. They quickly desire to be like those that had to search all day for work. In the case of the older son, instead of begin grateful that he didn't have to go through the pain and heartache that his younger brother did, he **complains**. He even compares the work he has done for the Father to "slavery". He doesn't see all the bad things that he was rescued from by staying to work on the Father's property. **Think about all the things you have complained about in your life recently. Are you complaining because of your comparison to others? Pray and ask God to show you the places that you are ungrateful. Ask God to give you the strength to rejoice in the things that He's rescued you from. Make a list today of all the ways God has rescued you over this past year. Spend some time worshipping and thanking God today.**

THURSDAY: Step 3 - CONCEIT

Matthew 23: 2-7; 23-28

"The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. 3 So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. 4 They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. 5 "Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries[a] wide and the tassels on their garments long; 6 they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; 7 they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called 'Rabbi' by others.

23 *"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. 24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. 25 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26 Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. 27 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. 28 In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.*

Both in the parable of the lost son and the vineyard workers, we can see how comparison and complaining eventually lead to pride and **conceit**. Instead of rejoicing in God's grace and goodness for others, they are full of pride and self-righteousness for themselves. They have judged that they should have received more or better than the others based on their own perceived & **conceited** goodness. The original audience of these two parables would have included the Pharisees and religious leaders of Jesus' time. As we can see in these harsh words recorded in Matthew, this **conceit** and pride had lead to hypocrisy and sin in the lives of these religious leaders. The older son and the first hired vineyard workers are given as examples of what Jesus is speaking about in Matthew 23. Similarly, the parable of someone trying to get a splinter out of someone else's eye, while having a plank in your own (Matthew 7:3-5). The older son, the first hired workers, the pharisees, and often we ourselves are the ones Jesus is speaking to here. God doesn't love us or give us His goodness because of how good we are. God gives us His love, grace and goodness because of how good HE is. When we focus on how good God is and how much He loves us, then we can stop the "it's not fair" comparing and complaining process. When we have a self-righteous, **conceited** view of ourselves, God's love & goodness will result in comparing and complaining. This will lead us down the path to hypocrisy and eventually bitterness and envy. We will struggle to understand

and fully accept the lavish, prodigal, radical, unconditional, unfair and crazy love of God. When we have a self-righteous conceited faith, we place ourselves in the seat meant for God. This is a burden that we were never meant to bear, and it's a burden that is completely unattainable. You will never "get there", and you will never be good enough. We all need a savior, we all need the gift of grace, we all need the unfair unconditional love, grace and goodness of God. **Where in your life are you trying to be good enough? Where have to tried to make yourself beautiful on the outside, while ignoring the inside? What do you need to let go of today? Where has complaining and comparing lead you to bitterness and envy towards others? Where has conceit lead you to feel better than others? Confess these areas to the Lord, and ask for His strength to help you overcome this "it's not fair" cycle.**

FRIDAY: Step 4 - CONSEAL

James 3:16

For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

As it harshly says in James, envy is the root of every evil practice. The final step to getting fully stuck in this "it's not fair" mindset with God is when the comparing, complaining, conceited self-righteous pride lead us to full blown envy. Envy then **conceals** God's love and goodness in our lives. We become numb to God's love and blessings when our hearts are focused on what we don't have verses what God has freely given us. Just like the older son, we can't rejoice for others, and we can't receive the Father's love for ourselves. We give up our seat at the party and our place in God's family.

Take time today to make a chart of your own like the one below. Write down the lies you are believing about certain situations and areas in various stages of this "it's not fair" mindset. Then, prayerfully write down the truths that you have learned from this study this week. Keep this and pray over it in the weeks to come as you seek to be free from the older son mindset. Remember that it's never ever too late. The Father selflessly ran to the younger son, and he humbly came out of the party to beg the older son to come back in. The father is waiting and watching for you too!

(These are just examples...make this your own)

Stage	Area in my life	What does God say?
Compare	Everyone around me has a better job than me, how am I going to keep up with the income levels of my friends & family	<i>Phil 4:19 "And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus."</i>
Complain		
Conceit		
Conseal		