



WEEKLY STUDY

WEEK 2: Prodigal - Love with no strings attached

In our new 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 read the entire parable, we begin to learn the depth of the Father’s love for his sons. This unconditional “Prodigal Love” is so foreign to the way that we as humans tend to love. We tend to love those who love us back. We tend to pour into a relationship equal to what we can receive back from it. In many instances, we would say this is the marker of a healthy relationship. Depending on your personality type, you may even feel uncomfortable when someone gives or pours into you, because you will “owe” them back something equal or better. There tends to be this unspoken relational score keeping in our minds. How many of us have gift limits for Christmas gifts for this very reason? How many of us say yes to doing things with our friends, not because we want to or have the time to, but because they said yes to us last time so we “owe them”? You might even be one of those people that sends a thank you note, for a thank you note you received. We naturally feel this transactional obligation as we desire this human form of equality and fairness.

With this in mind, as we read this parable, we may feel angry on the Father’s behalf. We may also feel the same way about the older son. After all, he stayed and did what he was supposed to do, so why does the younger son get rewarded? Rest assured the Pharisees and religious leaders in the crowd felt the same way. Not much has changed in the thousands of years since this story was written. We might not want to admit it, but if we search deep, there **are** strings attached in many of our relationships.

It’s important to recognize that neither son “deserved” or even desired a relationship with the Father. Instead of relationship, they desired the Father’s blessings, authority and position for themselves. Neither son had what we could call a “healthy” or balanced relationship with their Father. The younger son was open about his ill intentions, and the older son was more covert by attempting to earn blessings through good deeds in a self-righteous way. The Father knew this, but He loved them anyways. He gave generously, He forgave immediately, and He literally went out to meet each of them in order to invite them into relationship with Him. This is so hard for us to fully wrap our human brains around. **Can you think of the ways God has done this in your own life? Does it make you uncomfortable? Pray today and thank God for the ways that He has loved you through your broken messy self, your self-righteous angry self, and your “strings attached” transactional self. Ask Him for forgiveness over the areas that you can see yourself acting as the sons in this story.**

TUESDAY: Mark 10:46-52

46 Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means “son of Timaeus”), was sitting by the roadside begging. 47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” 48 Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” 49 Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” So they called to the blind man, “Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.” 50 Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. 51 “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him. The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see.” 52 “Go,” said Jesus, “your faith has healed you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.

As we read this scripture in Mark chapter 10, we see Jesus healing a blind man named Bartimaeus. His name is significant because he was a known blind man in the community, and many commentators suggest that his father was also blind according to other historical documents. During Jesus’ time, many of the religious leaders believed that if you were blind, or handicapped then it was because of a punishment for some sort of sin in your life. This would have meant that the community may have believed there was a deeper generational sin or curse on his family. However, Bartimaeus had faith! We see over and over in the scriptures how God loves and cares very specifically, even by name, for those that were the outcasts and the overlooked in the community. The way that Bartimaeus calls to Jesus as the “Son of David” shows that he knew Jesus was the Messiah, and was proclaiming this royal lineage. He also begs Jesus for mercy first, not to see. Bartimaeus knew what he truly needed more than anything was to be healed from his sin. Again, this shows his faith & understanding in knowing who Jesus really was. Jesus stops and asks Bartimaeus what he wants, even though Jesus is all-knowing and already knew what he needed. God in His love for us allows us to ask, to come to Him and to call out for help. God knows this is part of our faith journey in naming what we need from Him. Ultimately Bartimaeus asks for his sight and Jesus immediately heals him proclaiming that his faith is what has healed him. As soon as Bartimaeus could see he began to follow Jesus on the road. He wasn’t just interested in a transactional blessing from Jesus. He knew who Jesus was, He knew what he needed from Jesus, and he was ready to follow Jesus. This is the faith that Jesus is speaking of. If we compare this story to the parable of the lost son, we can see that those trying to keep him silent were like the older son sitting in judgement of him. They didn’t feel that this outcast was worth Jesus’ time, or energy. The outcast, Bartimaeus, was similar to the younger son and was deemed a sinner not worthy of Jesus’ time or love. However, instead of letting this silence him, Bartimaeus called out. Just like the younger son, Bartimaeus was ready to be healed. **How many times have you allowed a disability, a perceived past failure or a sin to keep you from calling out to God? Are you doing that now? What would it look like for you to call out to God because of how great God’s love for you is, instead of how you feel like you have earned it? Have you ever tried to silence someone else reaching out to God, or doubted God would help them because they needed to “clean up” their life first? Pray and ask God to reveal those spaces in your life today.**

WEDNESDAY: Luke 7:37-50

36 When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table. 37 A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. 38 As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. 39 When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.” 40 Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to tell you.” “Tell me, teacher,” he said. 41 “Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii,^[a] and the other fifty. 42 Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now

which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said. 44 Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. 47 Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little." 48 Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49 The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" 50 Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Once again we see this prodigal, lavish, unconditional, no strings attached love that Jesus has for someone stuck in a broken, messy, sinful state. The woman in this story was a known sinner in the community, and would have been considered unclean by Jewish law. She would not have been a welcome dinner guest, especially for Pharisees and the religious leaders in the room. For her to pour out this expensive offering of the oil, most likely much more than a year's wages on Jesus' feet, would have been an unimaginable sacrifice for such a woman. Her tears, hair and emotional display must have caused quite a dinner stir. She was worshiping with everything that she had, quite literally pouring out all of herself at Jesus' feet. Instead of being awed by her faith and gratitude, they were offended by her very presence. They passed judgment on Jesus for allowing her to touch him and anoint Him in this way. Of course Jesus' forgiveness of her, was more than they could bare. How could he? We can see the same dynamic playing out in this story as in the parable of the lost sons. The woman is like the younger son as an outcast asking for forgiveness from the Father. She had made mistakes and she knew it. She also knew exactly who Jesus was and had faith in His love for her. This is why he says that her faith saved her. The religious leaders are like the older son, judging her for her sin and ultimately Jesus himself for His forgiveness of her. This is exactly how the older son reacts when the Father forgives and blesses the younger son at the end of the parable. Over and over in scripture we see this unconditional lavish love, mercy and forgiveness that God pours out for those that... 1. Know who He is, 2. Know who they are, 3. Know they need Him. The older son and the Pharisees don't recognize who He is, they don't see their own sin of judgement and self-righteousness, and therefore they don't recognize their need for Him. The Father still loves them and seeks to teach them over and over through parables and by example, however, they have a choice of whether to join the party. **Pray and ask yourself if you are missing out on the party? Do you recognize who God is? Do you recognize your need for Him? Would you pour out all that you have on His feet asking for His forgiveness, or do you think that you have done well, gone to church and been a good enough person to earn it? Are you judging others that are right now weeping at Jesus' feet?**

THURSDAY: Matthew 22:37-40

37 Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." [a] 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." [b] 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

In these verses in Matthew 22, the religious leaders were trying to trap Jesus by asking him which commandment is the most important. Jesus' response is in the verses above. Jesus tells them that loving the Lord with your heart, soul and mind is the most important. A close second was to love others. We know in the parable of the lost son that the father, or God, loves both sons unconditionally the same. However, the sons don't love the father in this same way. The younger son only wants the blessings from his father. He is worshiping what the father can give him verses the father himself. He doesn't even want to be in the father's family or under his father's authority. He basically wants his blessings "To Go". The older son states that he

has “slaved” for the Father, and complains about what the Father hasn’t given him with the mention of a goat for his friends. He forgets about all the goodness the Father has bestowed on him, and doesn’t see the work he has been doing as bringing glory or honor to the Father. In the end, he disowns his brother by calling him “your son”, and he refuses to enter the party. Both sons are stuck in their sin. Both sons want to be in control, and they desire the Father’s blessings & authority more than the Father himself. As these verses in Matthew indicate, we are called to love God with everything that we have. We are never called to love or worship his blessings. This is a truly “no strings attached” non-transactional love for God and for others, just as He has for us. **How often do we have a “strings attached” relationship with God? When things are good, is it easier to be thankful and to worship Him? When things are bad, do you find yourself blaming God? When we are honest, how often are we loving God’s blessings more than loving God himself? How can we begin to love God unconditionally with our hearts, souls and minds? How can we begin to love our neighbors with the same love that God loves us?**

FRIDAY: Psalm 124:6 (MSG)

Oh, blessed be GOD! He didn’t go off and leave us.

He didn’t abandon us defenseless, helpless as a rabbit in a pack of snarling dogs.

In his commentary on the Prodigal Son, preacher and professor Fred Craddock suggests here that we have to wrestle with the fact that God’s grace and forgiveness will almost always offend our sense of fairness. God’s grace and forgiveness are abundant, lavish, and always much more than we deserve. To understand God’s love is to understand that we will never be able to fully comprehend the depth and breadth of a love that goes beyond what we think ourselves or others deserve. Just as these verses in Psalm suggest, “he didn’t go off and leave us”, even when our human senses would have told us to long ago. God doesn’t “cancel” us, God loves with reckless abandon. As we’ve read this week, Jesus didn’t heal the most deserving or honoring from our human perspective. Jesus’ love, mercy and forgiveness often offend for this very reason. He doesn’t bless someone because they were the best Sunday School teachers, the volunteer of the year, or because they had memorized the most scripture verses. No matter how many mission trips we go on, or how many good deeds we have done, we can never ever do enough to earn God’s love or His blessings. The religious leaders of that time were offended, outraged and confused by this unfair, unconditional way of loving others. Those that they judged and saw as outcasts, were the very people that Jesus celebrated and welcomed in. They felt that they had “earned” the right to be at the table, and these others had squandered their right. They missed the incredible blessing of Jesus’ unconditional love for them. They missed the freedom that comes from knowing that God loved them with a no matter what, crazy, unfair, radical “no strings attached” love.

This week take some time to pray about these 3 things:

- 1. What it would look like for you to accept a “no strings attached” love from God?**
- 2. What would it look like for you to love God with your heart, soul, and mind in a “no strings attached” way, that doesn’t depend on your current position or circumstances?**
- 3. What would it look like for you to love others, even those that you judge and struggle with, with the same “no strings attached” kind of love that God gives to you?**

Remember with all these things, we cannot do any of this on our own strength. Pray and ask God to help you with this today!