



Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Laborers

GRACE FOR RELIGIOUS SINNERS • The Older Brother

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

Luke 15:25-32

This study covers the last act in the three stories that Jesus taught in Luke 15. Though it rarely makes the cut when the Children's Story Bible publishers are paraphrasing 'The Prodigal Son' for six-year olds, it's really the ultimate point of the whole collection of stories.

Jesus told these stories in response to the grumbling of the Pharisees and teachers of the law who weren't happy that he was hanging out with sinners. He's been telling stories about lost people and how much joy He and the Father get when they repent and come home. The stories are meant to correct a faulty view of God and show that He is much more generous with grace than anyone really knew.

Go back to vv. 1 and 2 and note the cast of characters. There are the tax collectors and sinners, the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, and Jesus. So far we've seen the tax collectors and sinner represented by a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son. Jesus has shown up as the farmer who lost his sheep, the woman who lost her coins, and (if we squint a little at the Trinity) as the father who lost his son.

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees haven't had a role in these vignettes, but that's about to change. The older, angry, self righteous son is here to represent the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

Knowing that, when I last prepared to teach this story something struck me as incongruent. The Pharisees are always the villains in the gospels and as such I was waiting for them to get chewed out. I was thinking it would be great if the father would yell at the older son and put him in his place. But there's none of that here, not at all. The father is really gracious with him. I didn't know what to make of it.

Here's what I realized. During the first half the story, religious types are listening and waiting for the father to chew out the younger brother for squandering everything, but they're disappointed. So I'm looking down my nose at them, thinking, "You think prostitutes are losers, but you're the losers. You don't understand grace."

Then in the second half *I'm* waiting for *them* to get chewed out. It doesn't happen. Finally a few days later I realized – oh no. *I* don't understand grace. I'm as bad as they are. I want to punish a different group of people but I'm as stingy with grace as they are. You've gotta be careful with parables. They are time bombs.

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What's the Big Idea?

As Jesus concludes this set of stories He turns His attention to the Pharisees and shows that even for them, His chief adversaries, there is grace in abundance if they would only take it.

What's the Problem?

Self righteousness in our hearts causes us to despise grace when it's extended to others and blinds us to see that we need it too.



So in contrast to what I was expecting and what my theological grid predicted, let's see what really happens.

Verses 25-27

In this scene the older son is working in the field. He's a good boy, ever dutiful, working hard. Meanwhile a party is going on to celebrate what he doesn't think is very good news at all.

Verses 28-32

Notice some things about the older son in this scene.

1. He refused to go in. He could have enjoyed the party as much as anyone but he didn't want to.
2. He claims to have slaved for his dad all these years, never disobeying an order. That's really significant. Remember in last week's study one of the key applications was to correct our faulty view of the Father? The older son sees his father as a slave master and himself as a slave. He has a distorted view.
3. He is distancing himself from the family. Notice he refers to his brother as, "This son of yours" not as his own brother. His relational lines are all screwed up.

Now look at the father, what he does and what he says:

1. He goes out to his older son, just like he did with the younger.
2. He pleaded with him. He doesn't command, he pleads.
3. "My son." Sonship is always the issue. Restoration is the father's priority.
4. "You are always with me." He had lost sight of this. The relationship is the prize, not work, not money. There is nothing anywhere in this story that indicates that the father wants his work, or would withhold anything from him. He's constantly gracious, ever affectionate with his sons. The older son's focus on work and "slavery" is self induced and not a fair reflection of his father's heart.
5. "Everything I have is yours." If he would just take it he could enjoy the inheritance of a son, instead of demanding the wages of a slave.

As I understood this, I was glad it didn't turn out the way I had expected. I wanted the hammer to fall on the older brother because he's a Pharisee and they are punks. Finally I realized that the older brother is also me. I've been slaving away on staff. Sometimes I do it as a son for the love of the Father, but sometimes not. And I don't get paid as well as I'd like to, and blah blah blah.

John Piper, who has helped me to see this, says this:

Jesus is entreating the Pharisee. He is entreating all of us. Sinners of the worldly kind and sinners of the religious kind. Come in from the foreign country of misery, and come in from the porch of hard-earned merit. Both are deadly. But inside is the banquet of grace, and forgiveness and fellowship with an all satisfying father, and inheritance unfading, undefiled, incorruptible, kept in heaven for all who live by faith in grace, and not by earning merit.

Help the people in your group see themselves in these stories, whoever they are, and invite them to a deeper belief in the gospel of grace.

What's Our Response?

Help the people in your group examine their own hearts for self righteousness so they can repent of it and "come in from the porch of hard-earned merit" to the banquet of grace.

What Are the Questions?

Luke 15:25-32

LAUNCH

Has there ever been a time when you were angry at someone else's good fortune? Tell us about it?

EXPLORE

1. What is the question that sets up Ch 15? What's the answer?

Read 15:25-32.

2. Anything missing or incongruent here to you?

3. Look back to vv.1, 2. Who's the cast of characters?

4. Where do they each show up in the stories?

5. What do you know about the Pharisees?

6. What do you expect to happen to their corresponding character in this story?

Scene 1, read 25-27.

7. What's the older brother doing?

8. What's happening while he works?

9. Why is there a party? How does he feel about it?

Scene 2, read 28-32.

10. Let's do some analysis. First the son. What do you observe about him?

11. What does the son's language portray about his view of his father?

12. Now let's look at the father. What does he do?

13. What does he say?

14. Why is Jesus so gracious to the Pharisees in this story?

Piper says this: "Jesus is entreating the Pharisee. He is entreating all of us. Sinners of the worldly kind and sinners of the religious kind. Come in from the foreign country of misery, and come in from the porch of hard-earned merit. Both are deadly. But inside is the banquet of grace, and forgiveness and fellowship with an all satisfying father, and inheritance unfading, undefiled, incorruptible, kept in heaven for all who live by faith in grace, and not by earning merit.

APPLY

15. We easily become like the "older brother" in this story. What takes place in the heart of an "older brother"? Where do you see the "older brother" attitude in your own life?

16. Describe a time recently when you were living more like a "slave" than a son or daughter.

17. Has your life become more about what you can accomplish than enjoying the love of your father?

What Are the Answers?

1. Why do you hang out with losers?
For joy.
9. They are celebrating the return of his no good brother and he's not happy about it.

Read 15:25-32.

2. Leave this unanswered till question six if no one gets it.
3. The tax collectors and sinners, the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, and Jesus
4. See "What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?"
5. They were Jesus' main nemesis and they really didn't like Him at all.
6. You might expect criticism or judgment for the Pharisees' parallel character, the older son.
7. He's dutifully working in the field.
8. A party is going on.
10. See "What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?"
11. He views him as a slave master and himself as a slave.
12. See "What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?"
13. See "What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?"
14. Because He is extending to them the same grace they are complaining about being extended to tax collectors and sinners. See Piper quote.

Scene 1. Read 15:25-27.

- 15.-17. Allow the group to discuss.

Memorize

"My son," the father said, "you are always with me, and everything I have is yours."

Luke 15:31