



THE FATHER'S *Love*

Three Bible Study Lessons on the Parable of the Lost Son

MARY & FRIENDS
Forever-Loved.org

The Father's Love

Mary and Friends

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Italics included in Scripture quotations have been added by the author for emphasis.

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Introduction



Jesus came to show us the Father and to reconcile us with Him. He told the parable of the lost son to help us see our Father as He really is. As a vivid illustration, Jesus tells of a father's love for his sons and how he wants to be in relationship with each one.

Our heavenly Father loves us just like the father in this story. In God's sight we are worthy and valuable no matter what condition we are in. God loves us with a great, unstoppable love. He loves us despite our sins and wanderings. He loves us even when we are self-righteous and think we are better than others because we follow rules.

This is how God sees us, but so often we don't know of or cannot accept His unconditional forgiveness and grace. We judge ourselves based on the good or evil we think we have done. If we have done bad things we listen to the voice of condemnation and beat ourselves up with guilt or shame. If we have obeyed the rules, we consider ourselves good and right and pride wells up within us. To further complicate the problem, we falsely assume that God, our Father, judges us in the same way we judge ourselves. We assume He condemns us because of our bad behaviors or values and loves us because of our good deeds and hard work.

However, this is not how our Father thinks of us. God does not see us through the rules of the law; He sees us in love. In this story, we hear of the contrast between the Old Covenant of law and the New Covenant of grace. Both the lost son and the hard-working son are measuring themselves according to what they have done—according to the law. They judge and value themselves—and assume that their father judges and values them—based on their obedience to the Old Covenant of law introduced through Moses.

Both sons are focused on what they think they deserve based on the law. They view acceptance, blessing and love as rewards to be achieved or withheld based on their behaviors. This is how things work in the Old Covenant—or in any law-based religion.

But the father is clearly not thinking like either of his sons. His actions come from his loving heart. He loves both his sons—not because of what they have done or failed to do—but simply because they are his sons. The father treats his sons with love, kindness, care and compassion. He loves his younger son and his older son and desires that both join him in joyful relationship.

God reaches down to us in love. Even our best attempts to obey the law, or any other set of religious rules, will not help us earn our way to God. Yes, God wants us to be good by His definition—to be right and holy like He is. But we can't achieve that by following *rules*; we only come

to be good in loving *relationship* with God. God doesn't love us because we are good; He makes us good because He loves us. He makes us good through our inner relationship with Him. That inner relationship can't help but work itself out so that we actually become good on the outside as well. In this way, obedience is a by-product of living in right relationship—of living in love.

The Christian life is not to be one of external conformity to the law—of *legalism*. Neither is it to be one of disregard for the law—of *license*. Rather, the Christian life is to be one of *liberty*. In liberty, we are set free from sin—not just from the consequences of sin, but from the actual thought and deed itself. In the Christian life, as God intended it to be, our loving relationship with God sets us free to be our true selves, fashioned after the image of God.

In the New Covenant, the Father sent His Son to die for our sins and reconcile us to Himself. Regardless of our wanderings or our self-righteous ways, our Father loves us unconditionally and always. A loving relationship with our heavenly Father is the foundation for all that we were created to be. Reconciled with God—dwelling in His love—we become right from the inside out.

Bible Passage



The Parable of the Lost Son—Luke 15:11–32

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.

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. ¹⁴After 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 citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He 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! 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.’ ²⁰So 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. ²³Bring the 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.

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 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. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰But 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. ³²But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

Lesson One



Loving the Rebellious **Luke 15:11–24**

Have you ever done something really bad—so bad that you felt God couldn't possibly love you?
I have.

As a 38-year-old, “mature” Christian, I did something so awful that I couldn't believe God could love a sinner like me. I couldn't forgive myself for what I had done. I didn't like myself, let alone love myself, and I felt that God couldn't possibly like me (or love me) either. In this way, I condemned myself; my own twisted thinking cut me off from God's love.

My heavenly Father still loved me; it was just that the lies I believed kept me from believing and accepting that He did.

Have you stopped to consider that how you think God feels about you may not be the way He actually feels at all? Is it possible that you have excluded yourself from God's forgiveness and compassion because you simply cannot believe He could really love you?

Jesus told this parable of the lost son so that we would understand: Our Father values us for who we are, not because of what we do or don't do. Our sins—those we have committed knowingly or unknowingly, those we have committed in the past and those we will commit in the future—do not exclude us from God's love. Our Father desires that each one of us live in continual, joy-filled, loving relationship with Him.

Read Luke 15:11–24 (see page 6).

Questions

1. What do verses 12–13 say that the lost son did? What choices did he make?
2. Based on verses 14–17, why do think the son decided to return home?
3. According to verses 18–19 and 21, what did the son plan, and then say, to his father?
What do these words tell you about the son's perception of himself?
4. What do these words tell you about the son's perception of his father?
5. As described in verses 20 and 22–24, how does the father greet his lost son?
6. What do these actions tell you about the father's heart for his son?
7. After being welcomed home with celebration, how do you think the son saw his father?

8. In this story the son assumed he would be treated harshly upon his return home. Think of a time when someone treated you harshly and legalistically after you had done something wrong. Describe that time and the feelings you had.

9. Think of a time when someone offered you forgiveness and compassion after you had done something wrong. Describe that time and the feelings you had.

10. How does the lost son respond to his father's reception?

11. What sort of life do you think the lost son would have lived had he not accepted his father's full welcome and only allowed himself to be a hired servant?

12. In what ways might you be judging yourself and thinking of yourself as undeserving of love? Can you identify any wrong thoughts that are keeping you from fully receiving your heavenly Father's love?

Reflection

Music can help connect us to God in deep ways. If possible, listen to the song, "When God Ran," <https://jesusonline.com/forever-loved/when-god-ran/>. If you cannot access the video, read the lyrics (on the next page). Open your heart to the message.

*Almighty God, The Great I Am,
Immovable Rock, Omnipotent, Powerful,
Awesome Lord.
Victorious Warrior, Commanding King of Kings,
Mighty Conqueror and the only time,
The only time I ever saw him run,
Was when*

Refrain:

*He ran to me,
He took me in His arms,
Held my head to His chest,
Said "My son's come home again!"
Lifted my face,
Wiped the tears from my eyes,
With forgiveness in His voice He said
"Son, do you know I still love you?"*

*The day I left home,
I knew I'd broken His heart.
And I wondered then, if things could ever be the same.
Then one night,
I remembered His love for me.
And down that dusty road, ahead I could see,
It was the only time,
It was the only time I ever saw Him run.
And then*

(Refrain)

*He caught me by surprise.
And He brought me to my knees.
When God ran, I saw Him run to me.
I was so ashamed, all alone, and so far away.
But now I know, that He's been waiting for this day*

(Refrain)

He said "Son, do you know I still love you?"

Songwriters: Benny Ray Hester / John Parenti
"When God Ran" Lyrics © Warner/Chappell Music, Inc.

Lesson Two



Loving the Self-Righteous Luke 15:25–32

Have your good deeds as a Christian ever made you feel that you were better than someone else? Mine have.

Before I'd committed the sin referred to in the introduction to the first lesson, I'd been obedient to Christian rules and worked hard to be a good and productive person. Based on these behaviors, I considered myself valuable and right. I thought of myself as the hard working, older brother. Like the Pharisees—the religious leaders of Jesus' time—I considered myself better than others. I had worked hard to be “good” by obeying solid, Bible-based rules, and I assumed I was deserving of God's favor, blessing and love. I looked at others who did not measure up to “church” standards and considered myself to be better than they.

Self-righteousness led me to think I was doing what God wanted and was therefore deserving of His blessing. Pride told me I was worthy of God's love.

However, I couldn't seem to receive the love pride told me I deserved. No matter how hard I tried to be “good,” I never felt I had actually done enough to please God and earn His love.

This was because, as Jesus points out in this parable, the Father's love doesn't work like that. As I came to realize later in life, God's love is completely unconditional. It is not based on human ideas of merit nor can it be earned by self-effort. Our Father freely gives His love to all people. In the New Covenant, Jesus shows us that we are of infinite worth to God. He loves us, not because of what we have done or failed to do, but simply and purely because it is His nature to love.

Read Luke 15:25–32 (see page 6).

Questions

1. Verse 28 says that the older brother was “angry.” Based on verses 25–27, what do you think he was angry about?
2. In your own words, what did the older son say to His father in verse 29?
3. Based on these words, how do you think the older brother felt he deserved to be treated? Why might he have felt this way?
4. In what ways are you currently, or have you been in the past, like the hard-working, self-righteous older brother? Think deeply.
5. In verse 30, what did the older brother say to his father about his younger brother? Why do you think he felt the need to point this out?
6. In verse 28 and 31–32, how did the father respond to his older son?

Reflection

Earlier in Luke 15, Jesus had shared another parable. Read Luke 15:4–7 (below).

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

⁴“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ ⁷I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

Read these verses again slowly.

Imagine that you are a little lost lamb. You have wandered away from the flock and night is coming. Unable to find your way home, you are lonely and afraid. Jesus notices that you are missing and sets out to find you. When He sees you, He runs to meet you. His face lights up in a smile. His eyes sparkle with joy. He has found you. He kneels on the ground in front of you. He lifts you to his strong shoulders ... and carries you back to the flock.

Close your eyes for a moment and reflect on Jesus’ love and care for you.

Lesson Three



Loving with Perfection Luke 15:11–32

Years ago, I copied a quote I'd read somewhere into the front of my Bible: *The greatest of saints is simply the greatest of receivers.*

Think about that.

Can it be true? Is it really possible that our Father simply desires us to receive from Him?

I became a Christian when I was 16. Now, as I write this, I am almost 60. But it has only been in the last 15 years or so that I have finally begun to realize that God really does love me unconditionally. He loves me when I sin, like the lost son, and He loves me when I am prideful and self-righteous, like the hardworking, older brother. My behaviors and thoughts have nothing to do with His care and compassion for me. Love, not law, defines and fills God's heart. My heavenly Father wants to have a loving relationship with me—a relationship in which I receive all He has planned for me.

God is love. He is always full of compassion for us. He always has our best interests at heart. Nothing can stop God from loving you. He values you. You are of infinite worth to him.

Jesus told this parable about the lost son and his older brother to help us understand our Father's heart. He told the story to help us see our Father as He really is. Each and every moment of each and every day, He gives His gift of love to us.

However, the giving of a gift is only half of the transaction. A transaction is not complete until the gift is received. The question is: Will we accept the invitation to a joyful, love-relationship with our Father that He freely offers?

Read Luke 15:11–32 (see page 6).

Questions

1. What do the father's actions tell you about his heart toward his younger son?

2. If you had been away for a long time and someone you knew came running joyfully to welcome you, how would you feel? What would their joyful welcome tell you about how he/she felt about you?

3. What do the father's words in verses 31–32 tell you about his heart toward his oldest son?

4. In verse 24 and again in verse 32, the father repeats, "For this son of mine [Because this brother of yours] was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." How are these words central to the father's joy and his desire for both his sons?

5. What words would you use to describe the father in this story?

6. God doesn't want us to live life as the lost son or as the older brother. How do we come to live life as God planned for us to live it?

7. What do we experience when we choose to be in relationship with our heavenly Father?

8. What have you learned from this parable about how your heavenly Father sees you?

9. Putting aside what you may have learned from Jesus' parable, how do you actually believe, deep down in your heart, that your heavenly Father sees you?

10. Our Father's love for us is not the issue. Always it is strong and unwavering. the issue is whether or not we will accept the compassion He is freely offering. What wrong thoughts might be keeping you from embracing the vast, unconditional love the Father freely offers you?

11. How do you know when someone really loves you?

12. How do you personally know that God really loves you?

Reflection

If possible, listen to the song "Reckless Love" as recorded by Cory Asbury, <https://jesusonline.com/forever-loved/reckless-love/>.

If you cannot access the video, slowly and thoughtfully read the lyrics below. Let God speak to you through the words.

*Before I spoke a word, You were singing over me
You have been so, so good to me
Before I took a breath, You breathed Your life in me
You have been so, so kind to me*

Refrain:

*Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God
Oh, it chases me down, fights 'til I'm found, leaves the ninety-nine
I couldn't earn it, and I don't deserve it, still, You give Yourself away
Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God, yeah*

*When I was Your foe, still Your love fought for me
You have been so, so good to me
When I felt no worth, You paid it all for me
You have been so, so kind to me*

(Refrain)

*There's no shadow You won't light up
Mountain You won't climb up
Coming after me
There's no wall You won't kick down
Lie You won't tear down
Coming after me*

(Refrain)

Songwriters: Caleb Culver / Cory Asbury / Ran Jackson
"Reckless Love" (Single) lyrics © Bethel Music Dba Bethel Music Publishing

Suggestions for Study

About this Bible Study

- The Bible passage included in this study guide is from the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible. Feel free to use a different translation if you like.
- The study questions are designed to encourage you to think deeply about God's Word and to help you open yourself to more of His love.
- If you cannot print this study guide, you can write your answers on a separate sheet.
- This study can be used individually or with groups.

Suggestions for Individual or Group Study

- Begin and end your reading and study time with prayer. Ask God to help you understand the Bible passages and reveal more of Himself to you. Thank Him for your time together.
- Read and reread the Luke passage as you work through each of the lessons. Reflect on what you have read and see if anything stands out to you.
- Do not feel you must answer the questions all at once or in any particular order. Even choosing a few questions will allow you to benefit from the study.

Suggestions for Group Study

- Each time you gather with your group, come prepared—ready to share, ready to listen and ready to learn.
- As the group leader guides the discussion and encourages members to share their thoughts and ideas, be willing to participate, but try not to dominate. Listen to others in the group without judging them. What the Holy Spirit shows you will not necessarily be the same as what He shows someone else.
- Remember that what is shared in the group stays in the group. Being able to share without fear of being talked about helps create a safe place for honest discussion and healing.

Suggestions for Group Leaders

- Begin and end each group time with prayer.
- Unless the Holy Spirit specifically leads you otherwise, help the group stay focused on the passage being studied.
- Encourage group members to listen and learn from each other without judging.
- Give everyone opportunities to share. Imagine that Jesus is in your group; see how He interacts with other members. Love those around you, being sensitive to their needs and backgrounds. Encourage all to come to a deeper understanding of God and His love.
- As the leader, try not to dominate the discussion with “right” answers. God will teach each member through the verses being discussed and through the insights of others in the group.
- Be assured that the Holy Spirit will guide you and give you the strength and wisdom you need to be a thoughtful, caring leader.