

## The Prodigal Son

**15** Now all the tax collectors and the **[a]**sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. **2** Both the Pharisees and the scribes *began* to grumble, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

**11** And He said, “A man had two sons. **12** The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.’ So he divided his **[d]**wealth between them. **13** And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. **14** Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. **15** So he went and **[e]**hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. **16** And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the **[f]**pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving *anything* to him. **17** But when he came to **[g]**his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! **18** I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and **[h]**in your sight; **19** I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.”’ **20** So he got up and came to **[i]**his father. But

while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion *for him*, and ran and **l**embraced him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup> But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; <sup>23</sup> and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup> for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’ And they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup> “Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> And he summoned one of the servants and *began* inquiring what these things could be. <sup>27</sup> And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.’ <sup>28</sup> But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and *began* pleading with him. <sup>29</sup> But he answered and said to his father, ‘Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never **k**neglected a command of yours; and *yet* you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; <sup>30</sup> but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your **l**wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.’ <sup>31</sup> And he said to him, ‘Son, you **m**have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had

**to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and *has begun* to live, and *was* lost and has been found.’”**

# **Sermon**

## **about the parable of „The Prodigal Son“**

### **Luke 15, 1-3 and 11-32**

Jesus tells a story to give a message to the Pharisees and the teacher of the law. Just like the authors of the Old Testament did as well. The story begins with a younger son, who wants to change his life. No, the life he has lived before he does not want any more. The monotonous routine, the drudgery, the joyless existence and especially the subordination to the elder brother he does not want any longer. He is sick and tired of this life. He wants to enjoy his life and freedom to the full.

I had this idea too, when I was young: To get out of the narrow-minded petty bourgeois society with their restricted conventions. I wanted to be free and enjoy the freedom. But I was realistic: This was a utopian idea.

On the contrary the younger son drew the conclusion of his analysis. He demanded his share of the estate from the father and went off to a distant country. So far that he has nothing to do with his life and the men he was living with before. He burned his bridges. A new life began. He squandered his wealth in wild living.

But of course the inevitable happened. One day everything was spent and he had no money. But the situation was even worse: A famine occurred. His being was desperate. He had to hire himself out to a citizen of this country. He sent him out to feed the pigs. The Jews regarded them as impure animals and so did the son as well, I suppose. He was not even allowed to eat the food of the pigs.

He belonged to the scum of the earth he must have felt. Existential fear ruled him. Nobody cared about him, when he died. The level of pain became oversized.

This reminds me of alcoholics or junkies: The level of suffering must be so unbearable that they realize that they have to change their life completely. Their self-esteem breaks.

Exactly this happens to the younger son: He came to his senses and analyzed his situation rather realistic: He went his own way, which promised freedom, joy, independence and a better life. But this way failed completely so that his life was threatened.

Now his father came into his mind, to whom he had burned the bridges. Even the hired servants of his father did not suffer like him and they had always enough food.

And now he realizes that behavior must have caused enormous suffer for his father when he left him. But though he let him go. So he made the confession: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son: Make me one of your hired men."

In my opinion he is very honest and pleasant: He does not blame the father, nor his elder brother, nor the society for his situation, who did not prevent him to go. No, he took the whole responsibility of the way he went. And he drew the conclusion of his analysis and set off, this time in the opposite direction.

The story goes on with something you and especially to people of the time of Jesus must be bothered: The father saw him when he was still far off as if he was on the watch every day since he left him. When he saw him he was filled with compassion: He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. He forgot everything he was: His status as the master of his servants, as a successful and rich merchant and farm-owner, he forgot the distance of father and son at the time of Jesus.

That this was not a carrying away of his own feelings, but a reinstallation as the son, shows that the father gives the order to bring the best robe and put it on him, to put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. The son has the status he had, before he left the farm, as everybody of the farm can see.

The father does just the contrary the son said to him: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." The father acted as if he had not heard it. For him the relationship was cut, the son was dead and surprisingly the son came back. This is what only counts. The hurt, when the son left the farm is forgotten, that is old. Let's celebrate, let's be happy for the coming back of the son.

It is wonderful happy end up to here. Many people have experienced such change of life perhaps when they became Christians. But to be quite frank, I have difficulties to identify with them, because I have not experienced the fate of the younger son and I have not experienced the feelings of the father, to whom his son was given back. I can much more identify with the elder son and with him the story goes on.

Meanwhile the older son was in the field. I think that is typical for him: The daily work, the ordinary tribulation. And suddenly he hears something strange: music and dancing. For him it is from another world. Music and dancing does not fit with this farm. So he asked the servant, what strange things happen here. "Your brother has come" he replied "and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound."

The son became angry and refused to go in. So the father came out. Now the feelings of the older son came out like an eruption of a volcano: "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. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you killed the fattened calf for him."

Let's have a look to the complaints and the accusations of the elder son: Obviously the older son has never felt gratitude from his father for the daily slaving and for his obedience to the orders of the father. Obviously the father never came and said to the elder son: "Here is a goat or a calf. Make a feast and celebrate and invite your friends. You have deserved it." No, nothing happened like this. Or generosity of the father? No, always the ordinary routine. This is the reason, why the younger son left the farm. The elder son suppressed his feelings.

But when the younger son came back, the father showed so much love for him, he had never seen. Isn't it a topsy-turvy world? Hadn't the elder son deserved much more love from the father, because he stayed at home or at least equal treatment? But now this!



To show the father the absurdity of his behavior he said: Just for your son, who has squandered your property, even squandered with whores, you celebrate this feast and slaughter the fattened calf. Do you want to be in common with this guy, with this loser? How much better would the financial situation of farm be, if we still had the wasted money?

And by the way: Is this the reward for my slaving for your farm and for my obedience to your orders? Is this just towards me? In his wrath and his disappointment he called his brother not "brother" anymore, but the son of yours. Did he now draw a clear dividing line between him and the father? Did he now burn the bridge just as the younger son did before?

Do we understand the elder son? I think we do. Perhaps we are sometime in the same situation as he. I or we deserved more than others.

Jesus wants to invite the Pharisees and the teachers of the law to the love of God. That is the main point. A hierarchy or the question who deserve more and who deserves less these standards is set by men. In the kingdom of heaven the standards are different. They are set by God according to his rules. The first will be the last and the last will be the first.



Three points I want to mention:

At first: Just imagine: God decides to convert prostitutes and junkies to Jesus and gives them a home just in our congregation. Would we be happy that the lost are now found? Would we welcome them as brothers and sisters? Would we celebrate a feast, because they are saved? Would we accept their lifestyle? For me it is a difficult question. Think about it.

Secondly: The father loves both sons. The answer he expects is not duties and the discharge of duties but a living relationship to both sons. As we have seen the father acts according to this: He ran to the younger son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. It was unbelievable for the people 2000 years ago. To persuade the elder son he left the feast as the host. It was a strange behavior at this time. He tries to convince the elder son, that restored relationship is the most important. That has priority! Who deserves what is not the main point.

I think this parable gives a message to the well-behaved people, who think that they have not the attention by God, they deserve. I do many things in the congregation and there are lots of things to do and I do my very best, just as the elder son in the fields of the father's farm. But where is my reward? Other people, who don't care about God, have more money, have more fun, a better health and so on and so forth.

The answer: "Son – and daughters are meant as well – you have always been with me, and all that's mine is yours." I give you that, what you need and what is good for you. Everything is there for you. All that is mine are yours. What troubles you?

Thirdly: Jesus wants to present God as someone, who is completely different in his way of thinking, acting and loving as we and the Pharisees are. The standards we set are much below of Gods. The two sons in this parable show: They were very different in their character, but one thing they had in common: They didn't expect the father's behavior. They had their standards, what is right and what is wrong. But the father acted completely different. In this situation the father appeared to them as someone they didn't know, as a foreigner, though he is their father and they spend their lifetime with him.

Perhaps the two sons thought the father demands that the sons do their duty only. But if that is all to characterize the father, the two sons have a wrong opinion of him. According to their false opinion, the younger son left the farm. The elder son suppressed his feelings until the anger came out, when the younger son returned.

More over it seems to me that the elder son thought that the renouncement of having a feast is a pleasing sacrifice to the father, which he expected to be rewarded. According to this opinion the elder son didn't ask for a goat or a calf to celebrate with his friends. Surly he would have got it. Didn't the father say to him: "... all that is mine is yours."

How is it with us? Do we think at first of a father, who demands many things from us and we have a bad conscience because we so often fail, instead of believing in a loving, giving and forgiving father, who gives much more as he demands?

“God can do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think” the Apostle wrote in the letter to the Ephesians (Ephesians 3, 20).

Friedrich Nietzsche once said: “Christians would have to look more redeemed.” Isn’t there a grain of truth in it?

At the end the father says to his elder son: “But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live and was lost and has been found.”

The father says expressly “the brother of yours”.

Did the elder son understand and accept the point of view of the father, his love to both sons, the importance of the restored relationship, the importance of life, his priorities? Did the elder son understand and accept that the purpose of the orders the father has given is not obedience but love as Jesus said once: “You shall love your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” and “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

On this two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22, 37-40)?

We don’t know. The parable ends here.

I wish for us, that we can see our brother and sisters and everybody a little bit more from the point of the father, from the point of view of God to be God’s prodigal sons and daughters. Not in the way the younger son did. It does not work as we have seen. But to be prodigal in the way to give love to our neighbors as we have received abundantly love from God.

Perhaps we check our point of view and our priorities? May God help us for this! Amen