

STUDY GUIDE
GROUPS / INDIVIDUALS

FIVE SESSIONS



THE PRODIGAL SON

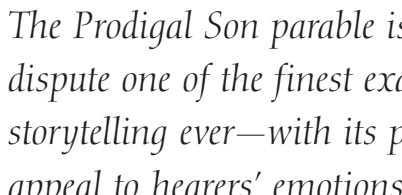
An Astonishing Study of the Parable
Jesus Told to Unveil God's Grace for You

JOHN MACARTHUR

SESSION 1

PARABLES

Unveiling God's Truth through Stories



The Prodigal Son parable is without dispute one of the finest examples of storytelling ever—with its penetrating appeal to hearers' emotions and imaginations; its succinct, tightly crafted form; and its powerful and personally engaging message.

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Imagine that you are being criticized for doing something that you know is right—something not just okay but deeply good. How do you respond to this criticism? You might feel hurt, angry, or defensive. You might be tempted to lash out at your critics or to retreat and avoid the conflict. Or, if you're Jesus, you might calmly tell several brief stories that express why you're doing what you're doing.

Jesus didn't tell these stories because He was incapable of carrying on a direct debate. In fact, He had previously tried talking to His critics using plain language. But that had only served to inflame them so much that they plotted His death long before the time for His self-sacrifice was ripe. So Jesus resorted to speaking to His opponents in stories, where the point was clear to anyone who took the trouble to think them through.

This is the setting in which Jesus told one of His most famous stories: the parable of the prodigal son.

Opening the Study

Go around the group and invite everyone to introduce himself or herself, and then answer the following questions:

- When you were in high school, how did you see yourself—as one of the “good” kids, the “bad” kids, or somewhere in between? Why?
- What is one thing you did that illustrates who you were at that time?

Reading the Word

Read Luke 15 aloud in the group. (You might have a different person read each paragraph.) If you've read these parables before, try to open yourself to them and their context with fresh eyes and a receptive heart. Let the wonder of God's grace fill you through these simple but powerful words.

¹ *Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. ² And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, "This Man receives sinners and eats with them."*

³ *So He spoke this parable to them, saying:*

⁴ *"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' ⁷ I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.*

⁸ *"Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she has found it, she calls her friends and neighbors together, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I lost!' ¹⁰ Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

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¹¹ Then He said: "A certain man had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.' So he divided to them his livelihood. ¹³ And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living. ¹⁴ But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. ¹⁵ Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. ¹⁶ And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, ¹⁹ and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants."'

²⁰ "And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

²² "But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. ²³ And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; ²⁴ for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry.

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²⁵ “Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.’

²⁸ “But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ So he answered and said to his father, ‘Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. ³⁰ But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.’

³¹ “And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. ³² It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.’”

Turn to the person next to you and take turns sharing your answers to the following questions:

- What was one thing that stood out to you from the reading? In what ways did that represent a new insight?
- What do verses 1 and 2 tell you about the context in which Jesus told the three stories? Who was His audience? Why did He tell the stories?
- In the story of the lost sheep (verses 4–7), do you identify more with the one lost sheep or the ninety-nine that didn’t go astray? Why?

Watching the Video

Play the video teaching segment for session 1. As you watch, use the following outline to record any thoughts or concepts that stand out to you.

NOTES

The word *parable* comes from a Greek term that means to lay something alongside. In a parable, Jesus put a story alongside a spiritual truth to make that spiritual truth clear.

All parables have one main idea. The main idea in this parable is that the Pharisees and scribes—the religious leaders of Israel who thought they knew and represented God—had no knowledge of the mind or heart of God. Jesus, who is God, was preaching the gospel to the lowlifes of his day, and they repented of their sin. The leaders of Israel were irate about this.

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God rejoices in the repentance of sinners, not in the self-righteousness of hypocrites.

Jesus told the three stories in Luke 15 out of mercy. He told them to the wrongdoing scribes and Pharisees as a warning that they were out of touch with God.

The prodigal son was the worst sinner that Jesus could have invented. He was outrageous, but in the end he finds reconciliation with the father.

The reconciling father is Jesus Christ, who receives the most extreme sinner.

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The older brother is the Pharisees and the scribes, who were angry at the father's forgiveness. These religious hypocrites thought they were earning their way into heaven and had no concept of grace.

There are only two possibilities: either we seek to receive salvation by our own righteous deeds or we go to God repentant, recognizing our sin, and receive the grace of a reconciling Father.

If we are depending on our works to earn our way into God's favor, it won't happen. Salvation is a gift of grace that comes when we repent, because Christ has paid the penalty for our sin.

Group Discussion

Take a few minutes with your group members to discuss what you just watched and explore these concepts in Scripture.

1. After watching the video, what is one question you have that you would like to share with the group?
2. The main “enemies” of Jesus’ ministry were the scribes and Pharisees. What did the scribes and Pharisees not understand about Jesus’ mission?
3. What are some adjectives that would describe the Pharisees and scribes?
4. What does it say about God that there’s a party in heaven each time someone repents?

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5. Who do you currently identify with most in the story of the prodigal son: the younger son, the older son, or the father? Why?

6. What are some modern-day settings where you might encounter people like the scribes and the Pharisees? What characteristics do those people display?

7. What is *self-righteousness*? How can you guard against it in your own life?

Opening Up to the Parable

For this activity, each participant will need a blank piece of paper and a pen. The group leader will also need an empty pot or bowl.

The scribes and Pharisees viewed certain types of people as unworthy of God's favor, and they were angry when those people showed signs of repentance. In their eyes, the tax collectors and other notorious sinners shouldn't and couldn't be forgiven. Is there any person

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or type of person (a religious group, political group, ethnic group, a criminal) that you see as unforgivable? Or a person you've given up praying about for repentance? Write the name of the group or individual on the piece of paper you've been given. No one will read it except you. Now pass the pot or bowl around to all participants. Let each person tear up their paper into small pieces and place them in the pot as a sign of releasing judgment over that person or group.

Closing Prayer

Close the session by praying together. First, invite any person who has a prayer request to share it. Ask that individual how the group could best pray for him or her. Next, let one or several people pray for the people they identified on their pieces of paper. Ask God to extend mercy even to those individuals for whom it is difficult for you to pray. Finally, pray for the person on your left, asking that he or she will experience an abundance of God's grace this week.

BETWEEN-SESSIONS PERSONAL STUDY

You are invited to further explore the material in this week's study by engaging in any or all of the following activities. Note that these activities are not about following rules or doing your homework. Rather, these activities—action, contemplation, and reflection—are designed to give you an opportunity to be open to God working in your life. Be sure to read the reflection questions after each activity and make a few notes in your study guide about the experience. There will be a time for you to share these reflections at the beginning of the next session.

Action: Paying Attention

During one day this week, pay attention to the way you relate to people who are or seem to be nonbelievers. How do you interact with people who don't know Christ? Are you especially warm to them and look for ways to offer them Christ's love? Or are you more suspicious of them because it's hard for you to trust them? Are you inclined to hurry through your day and not notice them? Do you debate with them or listen to them or ignore them? Make a few notes about your experience to share with the group next week.

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Jesus' intention in telling the story was not to impress His hearers with dramatic artistry. Rather, if we understand the parable correctly, its spiritual lessons leave a far more indelible impression on our hearts and minds than any literary analysis of the parable could accomplish. It is therefore of paramount importance to grasp the story's meaning accurately—in its original context and with all the nuances and implications Jesus' original audience would have heard.

JOHN MACARTHUR, *THE PRODIGAL SON*

Contemplation: Reviewing the Passage

For this week's contemplation, review Luke 15:1–10.

¹ *Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him.* ² *And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, "This Man receives sinners and eats with them."*

³ *So He spoke this parable to them, saying:*

⁴ *"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?"* ⁵ *And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.* ⁶ *And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!'* ⁷ *I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.*

⁸ *"Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search*

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carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she has found it, she calls her friends and neighbors together, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I lost!' ¹⁰ Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Spend some time reviewing the passage you just read, and then consider the following questions:

The words *rejoice* and *joy* are repeated in this passage. What is the significance of the repetition? What is the cause of joy?

When was the last time you participated in that joy?

How could you become a regular participant in that heavenly joy? What personal challenges would you have to overcome in order to do that?

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The central imagery is parallel in all three parables. Each parable illustrates the joy of God over the recovery of a lost sinner. Each parable also has a figure representing Christ, whose mission is to seek and to save the lost. In the first parable, the shepherd is symbolic of Christ; in the second, the woman takes that role; and in the Prodigal Son's story, it's the father. (Bear that fact in mind. It is common to assume that the Prodigal's father represents the heavenly Father, but the parallelism of these three stories suggests that he is actually a symbol of Christ.)

JOHN MACARTHUR, *THE PRODIGAL SON*

Reflection: Going Deeper with the Parable

Read the introduction and chapters 1 and 2 in *The Prodigal Son* and reflect on the following questions:

What were some of the faults of the Pharisees? How can you take their example to heart and avoid falling into the same errors?

Jesus never entered into negotiations with the scribes and Pharisees; rather, He stood His ground. Of course, this only heightened the tension, and as a result He was usually at the top of their Most Wanted List. There have been times when many of us have backed down rather than suffer the consequences of standing our ground on

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what we know to be right. Are there areas of your life where it is easy to negotiate, or compromise, on your convictions? If so, what are those areas, and what have been the results?

Think about your church family and the ways in which you live out your Christian faith. How welcoming are you toward those who are different from you in personality, wealth, ethnicity, social status, cultural background, or physical appearance? On the line below, place an X indicating how willing you believe you are to accept those who are different from you.

Very hesitant or exclusive

Very willing and welcoming

Use the space below to write any key points or questions you want to bring to the next group meeting.