

# LUKE—WEEK 20

## THE DIFFICULT PARABLES



F. Michael Slay  
*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

*The Cover Picture is The Return of the Prodigal Son by Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606–1669) on display at Hermitage, St. Petersburg*

The prodigal son parable gets into some deep concepts. Following this, Jesus tells the parable of the dishonest manager who gets praised for his shrewdness. Lastly, Jesus applies this parable by explaining that worldly wealth will go away.

The lessons aren't easy, but they're as valuable as they are difficult.

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Thank you.

Luke 15:21–16:13 — The Difficult Parables  
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1 Luke 15:21–32 (ESV) (part two of a four-part series)

*And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.*

*"Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 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.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"*

The older son says he's upset because his brother gets a party and he doesn't. That sounds like an excuse. What's one feast in the grand scheme of things? The father makes this point when he says, "*all that is mine is yours.*" The real lesson is in the psychology behind the older son's pique.

The celebration (actually the forgiveness behind the celebration) offends the older son's sense of justice. The prodigal son is catching a break, not because he deserves it, but because he needs it. To the older son, that's wrong. The prodigal trashed his own life; that should count for something.

The idea that the prodigal son should suffer the consequences of his actions is logical, but that's not how the father thinks. That's not how God thinks either. You see things differently when you're in charge. The difference is this thing called grace, which is a complex concept. It's easy to memorize that God forgives people who have messed up totally. **Wanting** them to be forgiven is something else again.

That's the genius of the command, "Love thy neighbor as thyself."

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Imagine someone who's suffering. Let's just say it's a teenaged boy, and he's all bruised up, with lots of stitches and one arm in a cast. He doesn't look like he fell off a bicycle; he looks like he fell off a train. Do you feel for him? How would you pray for him?

Now suppose further that he got all busted up because he taunted Farmer Brown's prized bull. Did your sympathy just go down a notch? How would you pray for him now? Remember, just like the prodigal son, he's not in denial. He knows he messed up; he doesn't need more pain. This is the father's perspective.

Pain is very educational. When someone is covered in bruises, the lesson is clear.

2 Luke 15:21–32 (ESV) (part three of a four-part series)

*And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.*

*“Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 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.’ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”*

We repeat the idea from yesterday’s reading (part two), where we imagined an analogous situation in which a teenaged boy got thrashed by Farmer Brown’s bull. The boy had teased the bull, so, in a sense, he got what he deserved. But grace is about compassion, even for people who cause their own problems.

Let’s take this up a notch. Imagine that you’re that boy. You did something stupid and wrong, and every bone in your body hurts. What would you pray for now? Does sympathy seem appropriate now?

It does for me. I don’t have a problem with sympathy for my own pain, even when it’s all my fault.

But why? Why do I want better treatment for myself than for some unknown boy? In a way, that’s obvious, but what exactly is the difference?

The difference is love. I love myself, and I’m used to “rooting for” myself to catch a break. When you love thy neighbor as thyself, you root for the teenaged boy just as much as you would root for yourself.

Grace is born of this.

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This gets back to a point from part two of this series — “You see things differently when you’re in charge.” The father in the parable is focused on the lesson his son has learned. The father sees this as a great thing—much more significant than the money his son squandered learning this lesson.

Remember, this parable is part of Jesus’s response to the Pharisees saying, “*This man receives sinners and eats with them.*” The Pharisees have no heart for the “sinners,” just as we might not have much sympathy for the boy (or the prodigal son who blew his inheritance). They’re focused on justice.

But our Father in heaven is like the father in the parable. The lesson is what matters to Him.

3 Luke 15:21–32 (ESV) (part four of a four-part series)

*And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.*

*“Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 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.’ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”*

Sympathizing with others who are suffering from the consequences of their own actions is good, but grace is much more.

For starters, grace includes forgiveness. Forgiveness goes way beyond mere sympathy. Of course, in order to offer forgiveness, you have to have something to forgive. Let’s get back to the boy who teased the bull. There may be nothing to forgive there, assuming the bull’s okay, so it’s not so hard for Farmer Brown to feel sorry for the teenager. But suppose the bull’s not okay. Suddenly, forgiveness isn’t so easy.

But that’s not all; grace includes sacrifice. Sacrifice is a lot like forgiveness in that you lose something. But forgiveness is about something already lost. You can’t get it back anyway, so why keep the emotional baggage? Thus, forgiveness can be just as much a gift to yourself as it is to the person you’re forgiving.

But sacrifice isn’t just about the past. You deliberately create a cost. We’ve all done this for people we love, but Christ calls us to do this for our neighbor—even our enemy. Imagine Farmer Brown paying the kid’s medical bills (and not because of some legal obligation). His love for his neighbor is such that he wants the kid restored to health and is willing to pay a price to see that happen.

That’s grace.

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But there’s one last point. God’s love for us is greater than even our love for ourselves. This is where the parable of the prodigal son really gets its wings. Notice that the father loves the son more than he loves himself. This gets back to the way people in charge see things differently. The prodigal son is no more ready to accept forgiveness than his brother is to give it. They both have a son’s perspective. The prodigal son expects (even wants) to be a servant in his father’s household. He says as much with the words, *“I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”* He’s just as surprised as his brother by the father’s forgiveness.

But the man in charge sees this without all that baggage. He cares about more important things.

4 Luke 16:1–9 (ESV)

*He also said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. And he called him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.’ And the manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’ The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.”*

This passage gives many folks fits. The troubling verse is, “*The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness.*” Shouldn’t the master be furious and in no mood for commending anyone?

Sure. The parable doesn’t say that he wasn’t furious; it just makes the specific point that the master recognized the shrewdness of the manager’s scheme. In modern terms, he might have said, “You clever son of a gun.” Don’t be distracted by things that aren’t in the parable. It makes one point and that’s it.

But what’s so shrewd about the manager’s scheme? If that’s the point of the parable, what is the point?

The manager converted something of no value (to him) to something of value. It’s as if you figured out how to do something in a Monopoly game so that your Monopoly money became real money. Imagine you’re playing Monopoly and you own Boardwalk and Park Place. Another player offers to trade you all four railroads plus \$100 (not \$100 Monopoly money, but real dollars) for Boardwalk and Park Place. If you accept the offer, you have converted play assets into real assets. Sure, the properties are worth a lot more than \$100 in Monopoly money, but everything in the whole game isn’t worth \$100 real money.

That’s the idea here. The master’s money was useless to the manager. With his write-downs, he has converted something of no value (to him) into tangible assets. Compared to heaven, worldly wealth is as useless as Monopoly money. Jesus calls worldly wealth *unrighteous wealth*.

He’s saying that we should focus on trying to convert it into something useful.

*“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal.” — Matthew 6:19–20 (ESV)*

People who do good things with the resources God has entrusted them with will be given more resources to manage (maybe even more important ones). That’s the point of the parable of the talents.

5 Luke 16:9–13 (ESV)

*“And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings. One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”*

The ending is kind of creepy. *You cannot serve God and money.* Do people really *serve* money?

Absolutely—to an amazing extent. What people seem to forget is that money is almost useless unless you convert it into something else. It's not pretty. You can't eat it. You could burn it for heat but most people would cringe at that. A roll of coins makes a nice paperweight though.

It's funny to watch someone accumulate money with no plans to use it. I knew a brilliant mathematician who had plenty of money, yet was too cheap to go to a top tier sports orthopedic surgeon to fix his knee. I said to him, “You love sports, and you won't spend the money to get back in the game?!? What better thing are you going to do with your money?” That changed his mind.

People get so immersed in the details of what they're doing that they lose track of why they're doing it. This is true of everything, even studying the Bible or having a quiet time. When Jesus refers to, “*one who is faithful in a very little,*” He's not thinking of someone who frantically and blindly pursues big numbers. Even serving Christ faithfully can be sinful if you're just trying to score points.

Specifically, I worry about people misusing those schedules to read through the Bible in one year. They can be a prescription for burnout. They also can be edifying, but anyone who tries to read the Bible in a year so that they can check off a box is missing the point.

Everyone misses a day occasionally. If you feel pressured to catch up, you need to ask yourself where that pressure is coming from.

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Is your quiet time fun? Do you look forward to connecting with the Lord? If not, if it's a burdensome obligation, then you need to reassess. Yes, daily QT is a goal you should strive for, but the path to that goal isn't just increased effort.

Everyone has their own style for QTs. Mornings are best for some. I like evenings.

QTs don't even have to be at a consistent time, or even at a time at all. You can read a passage and let it “simmer” for a while and come back to it later. That simmer time can even be overnight. There's no need to distinguish days.

And, for heaven's sakes, don't keep score.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. What kind of suffering (or cause for suffering) makes you the most sympathetic?
2. What kind of suffering (or cause for suffering) makes you the least sympathetic? If you were in that situation, would you be more sympathetic?
3. Who or what are you willing to sacrifice for?
4. In what way will worldly wealth “fail”?
5. What is your image of someone who “serves money”? Is it someone with a lot of money or a lot of debt?