

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

When we hear the story of the prodigal son, first we have to ask the question: What does "prodigal" mean? The word "prodigal" is mysterious to us. Almost the only time we ever hear it is in the title of this parable. It's basic meaning is "wasteful" – particularly with regard to money.

The second thing that is important to ask ourselves: Why does Jesus tell this parable? This question is answered at the beginning of Luke chapter 15: Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable ...

Actually, Jesus tells *three* parables: the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin and the parable of the lost son (or, as we know it, the parable of the prodigal son). All three parables are on the subject of recovering the lost, which is the implicit explanation of why Jesus receives sinners and eats with them: They are lost, and he wants to recover them.

Jesus' parables are based on real-life situations, though they often veer off (turn away sharply but surely) from the expected course of events in surprising ways.

Here, Jesus relates his own situation of a father who has two sons, one of whom can't wait for his inheritance. In Jewish society, there were laws regarding how inheritances were typically divided. The oldest brother got a double share (cf. Deut. 21:17), while the other brothers got a single share. When there were two brothers (as here), the older brother would get 2/3rds of the estate, and the younger brother would get 1/3rd. It was also a normal course of life that the older brother's task was probably to stay home and support their parents, while the younger ones were allowed to leave the family house to start a new life somewhere. Of course no immovable estate were given to younger ones but usually only money or some animals of the flock. The younger son in this case got probably only money!

In this parable, the younger son demands the share of property that falls to him (v. 12). That means he is asking for the 1/3rd of the father's possessions that he would ordinarily get when the father dies. Think about that. Not many fathers would receive that suggestion well today. This is a truly astonishing request, but this father seems not to be shocked by it. He gives to his son what he asks for, supports him to start a new life outside the family.

After he gets 1/3rd of his father's estate, the younger son takes everything he has and goes "into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living" (v. 13). This means that he abandoned his tradition his homeland and voluntarily went to a gentile, pagan country where he could live loosely without being censured by fellow Jews living all around him. He got out of his ancestors' land so that he could live in the way he likes, and fund his sinful or new lifestyle by what he took from his father. But eventually the resources he had were exhausted and a hard time came. If he had not

spent what he had on loose living (as we will later learn, on prostitutes), he would have had the money he needed to weather the hard time, but he didn't.

Having been brought to such a low state by his own fault, having been humiliated in several ways like (being subjected to a pagan, feeding pigs, not having as good food as the pigs) he recalled how his righteous father treated even his hired servants better: "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger!" (v. 17).

He thus plans to return to his father and say three things: 1, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you" 2 "I am no longer worthy to be called your son" 3, "treat me as one of your hired servants". Even being treated as one of his father's hired servants would be better than the treatment he is receiving in the gentile world. And the prodigal son decided to go back to his father.

Some might be shocked by the fact, that his father *will not* treat his son as a hired servant. The younger son is *still* a son! His beloved son. He runs forward to embrace his son, gives him new clothes and takes him immediately into the house. These are the acts of his real paternal love. He did all these things before calling him to an account because of the wasted money. Actually no calling the prodigal son to an account (from the part of the father) even mentioned till the older brother arrives.

The older brother is so angry that he refuses to go inside and join the party. He didn't demand his inheritance. He stayed faithful to his father. And now he is angry. Why should his younger, *wasteful*, *sinful* brother receive such a reception by their father? This brother does not want to be reconciled with the younger one. While their father welcomes his younger son as a son, the older does not welcome him as a brother.

Naturally, his father hears about it and comes to talk to him. When that happens, we discover that he's not just angry with his brother, he's angry with his father, too. He points out that he has never disobeyed his father's commands but that his father has never given him a young goat so that he could slaughter it and have a party with his friends.

In contrast, the younger brother not only has wasted the third of the father's estate, but when he comes back "the fatted calf" (that is, the best, most tender and delicious animal, specially raised to be so) is killed! The older brother sees the difference in treatment as a manifest injustice toward him and is angry with his father because of it. He is not reconciled in any way.

When God in the Land of Egypt gave new food to his saved nation, no more manna were needed any more to fall from the sky, he gave a better and more nutrient food to his loved nation. Saint Paul also points to the fact that when God sent Christ to us he gave us a more nutrient promise through him: he reconciled the world and us to Himself. Don't we have a prodigal Father who gives his wasteful love to us?