



**Session 13**  
**Winter 2015–16**  
**Primary**

# The loving father

**LUKE 15:11–32**

## prepare



### PRAYER

*No matter where we go or what we do, you welcome us back with open arms. Loving God, inspire me to offer that same unconditional love today. Amen.*

### PURPOSE STATEMENT

To understand God as a loving parent

### STORY SUMMARY

Jesus told a parable about a man with two sons. The younger son asked for his inheritance early. He went to another country and spent all the money. He worked for a farmer feeding the pigs, wishing he could eat the pigs' food. Starving, the son returned to his father and apologized. The father was so happy to have him back that he held a feast in his honor. The older son was angry.

### teaching tips for primary

Young children are frequently told what they should do and how they should behave. Sometimes this can lead to stress when they make a mistake. Today's story helps them to know that God will always love them, no matter what. Help the children know that whether they are a rule-follower like the older brother, or make mistakes like the younger, they are forgiven and loved.

Decide which Explore activities you will do, and check Supplies and To do throughout the session to see what needs to be prepared.

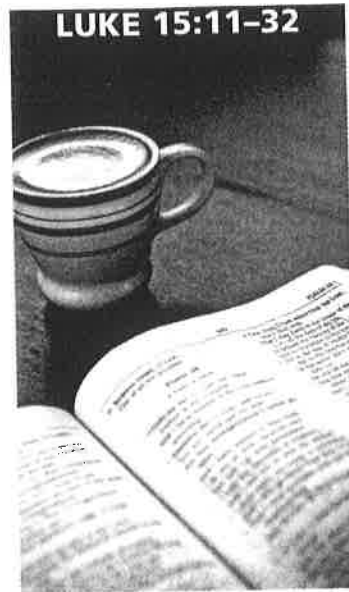
## A surprising father

The third parable of Luke 15 follows the same pattern as the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, studied in last week's session. This final parable, however, extends and elaborates themes in surprising and provocative ways. The father in the third parable is quite surprising. Unlike the shepherd and the woman in the first two parables, who exert themselves immediately, the father is initially quite passive. He also endures shame as a result of the actions of both his sons. For the younger son to request his inheritance while the father is yet alive was shameful and outrageous, because in those days it would have been seen as a desire for his father to actually be dead already. The elder son, however, also treats his father dishonorably. The father compounds his humiliation in the way he interacts with both sons—dividing his property between them, running through the village, and leaving his own feast. He is incredibly passive in the face of the insults he has received.

## Disgraceful sons

After the younger son leaves home, his desperate and isolated situation is ironically expressed in keeping with Luke's exploration of meal symbolism: even the pigs would not share a meal with him. Destitute and hungry, he plans to return to his father's household, now in the role of a servant. However, the father's actions eclipse those of the son; his father refuses to treat him as "one of your hired servants." Indeed, the robe, ring, and shoes are all symbolic of full restoration to sonship and family. They suggest that the father is saying, "I will not receive you back as a servant but as a son!" In fact, the killing of the fatted calf implies that the entire village is invited to join the celebration, in keeping with the pattern of the previous parables.

However, this parable presents the additional element of the episode with the elder son. Though the elder son has never left home, he also relates to his father in a servant-like manner and refuses to acknowledge his own brother. Everything he says conveys the fact that he is as estranged from the father as the younger son is.



In reality, both sons are estranged and hold a servant-like attitude toward their disgracefully gracious father. Though the father persists in recognizing the elder as his son and inviting him to embrace the younger son as his brother, we do not hear the older son's answer. Unlike the first two parables, which conclude with the entire community joining in celebration at the finding of the lost, this final parable is open-ended in a manner that forcefully turns the question back to the Pharisees in Jesus' audience.

## The lavish grace of the father

Who is the central character in this parable? Initially, it appears that unlike the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, the main figure may be the one that is lost—the son. However, after his initial passivity, the father eclipses everyone else by the extravagant compassion he exercises toward both his sons. As in the first two parables, it is the one searching for the lost item that is the real focus. Some have referred to this as the parable of the prodigal father, given the shame that he endures and the lavish grace he extends to both his sons.

What is this parable about? Despite the occurrence of the word in the first two parables, this may not be a parable about repentance. This is surprising, given the emphasis on the word *repentance* in the first two parables. However, neither son models true repentance as Luke explains it. Each of the parables in Luke 15 is really defined by the intense actions of the one who is searching for the lost items. This parable is not so much about repentance as it is about the seeker and about being found. Or perhaps repentance and salvation in the Gospel of Luke are about being found.

# gather

## supplies

- *Shine Songbook and CD*
- *Year Two Songbooks* (optional)
- CD player
- Rhythm instruments
- Dice or paper clips
- Prayer chart (from Additional resources)

## poster pack

- Bible memory poster (Luke 4)

## to do

- Make copies of the Prayer chart from page 103 in this guide. Each pair of children will need one.

## media connections

- *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Henri Nouwen (for teacher nurture)
- Vimeo search for "God's Story: Two Sons and a Father"
- YouTube search for "Parable of the two sons" by Luke TheBook
- *The Prodigal Son—Short Film* video by HHH Films on YouTube

## BUILD COMMUNITY

Invite children to talk about their families. Offer conversation prompts as needed: Who do you live with? What do you enjoy doing with your family? Is it ever hard to get along with people in your family? Have you ever made a mistake that hurt someone in your family?

Tell children that today they will hear a Bible story about a father and two sons. The sons made some big mistakes. How will the father respond? The children will get to find out soon.

## WORSHIP TOGETHER

Sing "Generous God" (track 6, page 11 in the *Year Two Songbook*). Play rhythm instruments while singing "God Is a Good God" (track 7, page 13).

Lead the children in prayer. Thank God for each child and for being present with your group today.

## SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Turn on "Óyenos, mi Dios" (track 15) as background music.

Have children pray in pairs or small groups, using the Prayer chart from page 103 in this guide to structure their prayer time. Give each child an opportunity to roll a die and pray for someone from the category shown on the chart. A short, simple prayer is fine. For example, "God, help my friend Sarah." If a die is not available, children can toss a paper clip onto the chart and then say a name.

## teaching tip

Some children may not feel comfortable sharing stories in the large group setting. If that's the case, have children talk with a partner. You can also look for ways to draw out the child in less formal settings, such as during Explore time.

## teaching tip

If the children don't feel comfortable praying aloud, simply have them say the names of people when they roll the die. Then say one prayer at the end, restating all the names.

## Bible memory

Say the Bible memory passage as a call and response. Say several words of the verse and then pause for children to repeat it, copying the tone and speed of your voice. Keep it fun and interesting by using silly voices or occasionally only saying one word for them to repeat. Give children an opportunity to be the leader if interested.

**The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.**

—Luke 4:18–19

# experience

## SHARE THE STORY

Open a Bible to Luke 15 and show the Bible story illustration on page 232 in *Shine On*.

Set two pieces of cloth a distance away from each other; one represents the home and one represents the faraway country. Place the father and two son figures from the poster pack on one cloth. When the younger son requests his inheritance, place several coins beside his figure. Move the son and pennies to the other cloth when he leaves home. Have the son give away all his pennies to other story figures, and then stand alone. When he returns home, add several more story figures for the feast.

## WONDER AND REFLECT

After a few moments of quiet, ask the children these questions. Leave time for them to respond verbally or to think quietly.

- I wonder how the father felt when his son asked for his money and left.
- Imagine being so hungry that you want to eat pig food.
- I wonder how the son felt when he realized he made a big mistake. I wonder if you have ever felt like that.
- Imagine how happy the father felt when he saw his son coming.
- Imagine getting a big hug after you did something wrong.

Look at the Parables poster from the poster pack. Invite children to find pictures that remind them of today's story. Show page 228 in *Shine On*. Remind children that in the banquet parable, all people were invited to the banquet. Turn to page 232. In today's parable, even the son who had done wrong things was invited to the feast.

## PEACE NOTES

Tell children that we all do things that are wrong. Sometimes we say mean words, or hurt other people. We might be like the younger son in the story, and do things even if it hurts other people. We might be jealous of other people, like the older son was.

Give each child a small rock to hold, representing wrong things we do. Squeeze the rock tightly for several moments. Then invite children to place their rocks in a pile in the middle of the group. Say:

**Just like the father in today's story, God loves us so much. God is always ready to forgive us. We can let go of the wrong things we do, and follow God's ways again.**

Close with a prayer, expressing gratitude for God's love and forgiveness.

### teaching tip

Media connections come from a variety of sources and perspectives. Preview items to be sure they work for your setting.



## The loving father

Luke 15:11–32

### supplies

- Bible
- *Shine On: A Story Bible*
- Small rocks

### poster pack

- Parables poster
- Story figures

### storytelling props

- Coins
- Two cloths

### to do

- Practice telling the story with the story figures from the poster pack, along with the other props.

# explore

## CREATE

Make fancy sandals and rings to experience how the father welcomed his son back home. Using the cutouts from “Welcome home gifts” on page 3 in the leaflet, children can decorate, cut out, and wear sandals and rings.

### supplies

- Primary leaflets
- Crayons, markers, or colored pencils
- Scissors
- Tape
- Glitter or glitter pens (optional)

## MOVE

Play a game to think about times when we need God’s forgiveness and love. Walk in a circle around the room while you mention different actions. When you say something that is a mistake, everybody will stop and kneel down. Then you can walk around the circle, touching each child’s shoulder, and say, “You are forgiven. You are loved.” Then everyone can stand up and start walking again. The children may want to take turns being the leader. Some ideas include: helping a neighbor, being jealous, sharing, or lying.

## RETELL

Choose three areas of the room to be the home, the foreign country, and the pig farm. Have the children start at the home, where each receives an “inheritance” of two or three coins. Next, they will travel to the foreign country, where there are a variety of quick games to play, but each costs one coin. When their coins are spent, they will move to the pig farm, where they use small cups to put birdseed into a tub for imaginary pigs. When they go back home, they are welcomed and a feast (a snack) is waiting for them.

### supplies

- Coins
- Supplies for a few short games, such as card games, marbles, hopscotch, or ring toss
- Birdseed in a large bag
- Small cups
- Large plastic or metal tub
- Snack to share

## LEAFLET

Read “The loving father” on page 1 in the leaflet. This could be done in groups of three, with each person reading the lines that relate to a specific character (father, younger son, older son).

On page 2, have children substitute a rhyming word for each *P* word in the pig puzzle. If children are having a hard time with this, read the original sentence (with the *P* words) several times aloud. The cadence may help. *Solution:* My son was lost but now is found.

### supplies

- Primary leaflets
- Pencils



### other ideas

- Create family photo frames using craft sticks, paint, and glue-on items.
- Play “Hug tag.” This is played like “Freeze tag,” but anyone who gets frozen can be unfrozen by a hug or high five from a teammate.

# bless

## PRAY

Gather together in a circle. Pray:

**God, you love us no matter what we do. Help us turn to you when we make mistakes. Amen.**

## SEND

Sing "Sizohamba Naye" (We Will Walk with God) (track 18, page 27 in the *Year Two Songbook*).

Send children with this blessing:

**God is like a father who holds open his arms. God is like a mother hen who gathers in her chicks. Remember God's love every day.**

Make sure to send leaflets home with the children.

## supplies

- Primary leaflets
- *Shine Songbook and CD*
- *Year Two Songbooks* (optional)
- CD player

*I think the most important thing for young children is to experience feeling loved and affirmed as part of God's family, and I like to be able to offer that to them.*

—Rachel Yoder  
Fort Wayne, Indiana



## leader's closing prayer

Sometimes we don't feel like we deserve God's love. We make the same mistakes over and over. What a relief to know God's forgiveness is complete and God's love is unconditional.

*God, help me to follow your ways and to remember that you love me always. Amen.*