

St. Matthew's Lutheran Church • 2009 Day of Grace
The Timeless Tale of a Prodigal Son:
What it Means Both Near and Far
Presentation by Dr. Mark Allan Powell

1. Social Location

the complex of factors that determine our particular position in human society: our race, gender, age, nationality, economic class, political affiliation, sexual orientation, personality type, physical appearance, level of education, religion, vocation . . . etc.

2. How One College Professor Studies "Bible Stories" (other stories too)

1) Pair off and both read/study the episode silently; 2) Both close books, then the first person recounts to the other what he or she read, as faithfully as possible; 3) Both now look at the episode and see what details were accurately remembered and what was omitted, added, or changed in telling.

— from David Rhoads, *Mark As Story*, Fortress Press, 1999.

3. The Story of "The Prodigal Son "

4. Seminary Students: American and Russian

- Americans: 100% mention squandering 6% mention famine
- Russians: 34% mention squandering 84% mention famine

5. The American Version

A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country and he began to be in need.

6. The Russian Version

A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country,
and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country and he began to be in need.

7. *Wicked or Foolish?*

Western translations of Luke 15:13

"dissolute living" (NRSV)
"riotous living" (KJV)
"a life of dissipation" (NAB)
"loose living" (RSV, NASB)
"reckless living" (NEB)
"a life of debauchery" (JB, NJB)
"wild living" (NIV)

Western commentaries

"The prodigal wastes his inheritance on sexual misconduct."
"He went the whole route in sinful indulgence."
"He wasted his money on 'wine, women, and song'. "
"He goes abroad and lives a sinful life."

Eastern translations of Luke 15:13

"expensive things"
"a life of luxury"
"living luxuriously"
"spendthrift"
"costly purchases"
"what he could not afford"
"living beyond his means"

Eastern commentaries

"He was enamored of a love of luxury and splendor."
"The boy wasted his possessions living luxuriously."
"He pursued a life full of entertainment and amusement."
"He was trouble-free."

8. *Four Gaps*

the plight of the young man is attributed to his own squandering and to a famine -readers might emphasize either of these factors over the other

the story contains possible parallels to the story of Joseph in Genesis - readers may or may not notice these and interpret the story in light of the comparisons

a key line in the story (15:13) uses the word asotas, which has both literal and figurative meanings - the word might be read as "wasteful" or "unhealthy."

the story places an allegation regarding the boy's behavior on the lips of his older brother (15:30) - readers may take that comment as reliable or as slanderous.

9. *Reform or Recovery?*

Point: he came to himself (15:17)

Point: a sinner who repents (15:7, 10)

Counterpoint: he has been found (15:24)

Counterpoint: found what was lost (15:6, 9)

10. *A Postscript*

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

(from the Gospel of Luke - Luke 15:11-32)

Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' ¹ So he divided his property between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and *before* you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" ²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and *before* you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. ²⁵ "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' ³¹ Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"