

The Prodigal A Word Study

by Forrest Gilmore

The third parable in Luke 15 is best known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Why do we use that term "Prodigal?" If you try to find this word in your Bible, you won't find it. Let's dig a little....

In Luke 15:13, we read that the younger son left home and engaged in "riotous" (KJV) or "loose" (NASB) living. Let's look at the origin of this word, translated as "riotous" in the KJV.

The AV (King James Authorized Version) translated the Greek word *asotos* as "riotous," and that it is found only once in the New testament, in Luke 15:13. We see that two synonyms are "dissolutely" and "profligately."

Let's go to the Merriam Webster Dictionary on the Internet and look up these words. First, "dissolute:"

Main Entry: **dis·so·lute**

Pronunciation: 'di-s&-lüt, -l&t

Function: *adjective*

Etymology: Latin *dissolutus*, from past participle of *dissolvere* to loosen, dissolve

Date: 14th century

: lacking restraint; *especially* : marked by indulgence in things (as drink or promiscuous sex) deemed vices <the *dissolute* and degrading aspects of human nature -- Wallace Fowlie>

That sounds pretty negative, and has sexual connotations. Note how this agrees with the older brother's description, in verse 30, of his younger brother's waywardness - "this son of yours has devoured your wealth with harlots."

Now, let's look up "profligate" in Webster's:

Main Entry: **1prof·li·gate**

Pronunciation: 'prä-fli-g&t, -"gAt

Function: *adjective*

Etymology: Latin *profligatus*, from past participle of *profligare* to strike down, from *pro-* forward, down + *-fligare* (akin to *fligere* to strike); akin to Greek *phlibein* to squeeze

Date: 1647

1 : completely given up to dissipation and licentiousness

2 : wildly extravagant : [PRODIGAL](#)

Hmm -- "wildly extravagant," and "prodigal" is suggested as a synonym, and there's a link to its definition. Let's go there:

Main Entry: **prod·i·gal**

Pronunciation: 'prä-di-g&l

Function: *adjective*

Etymology: Latin *prodigus*, from *prodigere* to drive away, squander, from *pro-*, *prod-* forth + *agere* to drive -- more at [PRO-](#), [AGENT](#)

Date: circa 1520

1 : recklessly extravagant

2 : characterized by wasteful expenditure : [LAVISH](#)

3 : yielding abundantly : [LUXURIANT](#) -- often used with *of* <nature has been so *prodigal* of her bounty -- H. T. Buckle>

synonym see [PROFUSE](#)

We see that the word "prodigal" dates from about 1520. "Recklessly extravagant," "lavish", "luxuriant" - does this sound like the younger son's life? Well, perhaps it was, while he still had lots of money! He was having a ball! But let's explore a little more. We look up the definition of "prodigal" as an adjective:

Entry Word: **prodigal**

Function: *adj*

Text: **Synonyms** [PROFUSE](#), exuberant, lavish, lush, luxuriant, opulent, profusive, riotous

There's "riotous" again, along with some more positive words. There's a link to a thesaurus on the dictionary page, let's see what synonyms we can find for "prodigal," both as a noun and as an adjective:

Main Entry: **prodigal**

Function: *noun*

Date: 1596

: one who spends or gives lavishly and foolishly

Entry Word: **prodigal**

Function: *n*

Text: **Synonyms** [SPENDTHRIFT](#), high roller, profligate, scattergood, spender, squanderer, unthrift, waster, wastethrift, wastrel

Well, what do we conclude from this little excursion into the English language? The Greek word *asotos* means "reckless, extravagant, wasteful," or something like that, and that this may have moral or sexual connotations, but may also be used in a positive manner, depending on the context. In the passage in Luke, it appears to be used in the negative sense with regard to the younger son.

It turns out that the word "prodigal" was first used as a heading for this section of the Bible in a translation from Geneva in 1551, and the KJV used this word as a heading for this parable.

The word "prodigal" certainly seems appropriate, given all the possible synonyms above, for this son's life after leaving home. He took his inheritance, lived the good life for a while, spending "lavishly and foolishly," perhaps engaging in reckless, possibly immoral behavior, until his funds ran out. He certainly was a "squanderer." Then he found himself destitute. In fact, for a Jew, he ended up about as low as one can get - working in Gentile territory for a pagan farmer, feeding pigs (regarded as unclean by Jews) and even eating the same food! Verse 16 calls the food "husks" (KJV) or "pods." (NASB)

"Husks" is from the Greek *keration* - the name of the fruit, *Ceratonia silqua* or carobtree (called also John's Bread [from the notion that its pods, which resemble those of the "locust", constituted the food of the Baptist]. This fruit was shaped like a horn and has a sweet taste; it was and is used not only for fattening swine, but as an article of food by the lower classes. These pods have a somewhat putrid smell - like the smell of dead flesh.

Now this son was described as "dead" by his father, since he was no long a member of the family, and, from a spiritual perspective, he was "dead in his sin." So not only was he socially and spiritually dead, he even smelled dead!

As he commiserates with his misery, he "comes to himself." In other words, he realized where he was and the end to which he had come. In a word - he knew he was **lost**. And he was not content to stay there. He couldn't go any lower, so he was willing to swallow his pride, admit to himself that he had failed, and take a chance that he could return home and be accepted by his family. He was even willing just to be a slave in his family,

if they would just let him come home! He even thought of a good speech he would give to his father when they met. So he heads for home.

And what happens? He never gets to make his little speech. Before he reaches the house, his father comes running up and takes him, dirty and smelly as he was, into his arms. His father must have been watching for him to return! And can you picture that? His father had to pick up his robe, exposing his bare legs, in order to run to his son. He must have looked rather silly! Almost instantly, this son finds himself bathed (cleansed - all the filth of his recent life washed away), clad in a long robe (like a king), wearing sandals (like the rest of the family), and wearing a ring on his finger - his sonship was restored!

The irony of this is that now we see that it is the father who is the Prodigal! At all times, he acted foolishly, even recklessly with regard to his son. He gave this son the portion of his estate, which he could have kept until his own death. He gave his son complete freedom to take it, leave home, and do with it as he pleased. While his son is away, he looks expectantly for his return every day. Everyone probably thought he was silly. Then one day, when he sees his son at a distance, he discards his dignity as a Jewish man, picks up his robe, and runs up the dusty road to meet him. Jewish men just don't do that! You see, his love for his son was recklessly extravagant.

To celebrate this joyous occasion, he throws a lavish party - maybe it was even riotous! In the midst of this celebration, the older son comes in and is insulted that this party is not in his honor, but for his wayward brother. "How could you do this?" he exclaims to his father.

And how does the father respond to this disappointed son? He patiently, yes, lovingly, reminds him that everything he has now belongs to him!

"Don't you understand, my son?" he says. "Your brother was dead, but now he is alive! He has returned to his family! This is a time for celebration!"

Of course, the intent of this parable about the Prodigal Father was to let the grumbling Pharisees and scribes see themselves, and to contrast their attitude - their lack of concern for their lost brethren - with that of their heavenly Father, who searches diligently for all who are lost and who showers His love recklessly on all of His children -- those who may still be in the far country, the unappreciative who remain at home, as well as those who have returned from their waywardness.

The question each of us should ask is, "Where am I in this story?"

- Am I at home, but not happy, wanting to be in the far country, where I imagine life is wonderful?
- Am I in that far country, living it up, enjoying what I think is my own time and money, with no concern for my anxious Father or for those around me?
- Have I reached the end of my rope and don't know where to turn -- wallowing in self-pity, and blaming someone else for my situation? Wondering why God allows such things to happen?
- Am I on the road home, wondering what type of reception I'll receive, unable to help anyone around me, realizing that none of the people near me really care about me, anxious just to be back with my family, in whatever way they accept me?

- Am I in my Father's loving arms, feeling the strength of His grasp, the warmth of His bosom, feeling His tears dripping on my neck, hearing His groans and shouts of joy, and knowing with all my being that I am deeply loved and cared for?
- Am I at home, relishing my new status, feeling the joy of those around me, feasting at the banquet, almost oblivious of the fact that I had been lost?
- Am I standing outside the banquet hall, grumbling because the celebration is not for me, jealous of the attention being given to someone whom I feel doesn't deserve it, wondering why I feel this way, and having no appreciation of my Father's love for me and no understanding of His feelings of joy for one who was lost but has been found?

Where are you in this story? Wherever you are, the Prodigal Father loves you extravagantly.