But the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." So to them Jesus addressed this parable:

Listen to how the Gospel reading begins:

Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain saying "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." So to them Jesus addressed this parable.

Jesus did not address this parable to his disciples, nor to the tax collectors nor even to the sinners. He told it to the Pharisees and scribes. I think that's how we need to hear it: as though we too were scribes or Pharisees.

Jesus actually told them three parables, ending with this one, but for the sake of brevity, the first two have been omitted from today's reading.

The first two parables that Jesus told them were about finding something that was lost: The Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin. Both of them are about losing something precious and then joy at finding it again. Jesus says to Pharisees and scribes, "in just the same way, there will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

In first story a sheep has wandered away from home and is lost. In the second story, a coin is lost. It's still in the house but it is lost none-the-less.

So now we come to the parable which we just heard: "The Parable of the Prodigal Son," which is also known as "the Parable of the Lost Son," or even "The Parable of the Two Sons." That last title is the one I think fits the story best.

So Jesus has set up the Parable of the Prodigal Son using two short and simple ones, both of which have happy, unambiguous endings.
In the Prodigal Son, Jesus weaves together the first two: he tells us about two sons. Both sons are lost. Like the sheep, one son left home and was lost. Like the coin, one son remained home, but was lost none-the-less.

But this time only the first son is found, the second part of the story is never resolved. We never find out what happens to the second son. The ending is left up to the listeners: to the Pharisees and scribes … and to us.

The two greatest commandments are to love God and to love our neighbor. Sin, therefore, is the breaking of those loving relationships.

And that’s exactly how the two sons in this story became lost. They damaged their relationship with their father and they damaged their relationship with each other.

The younger son was self-centered. He thought he could find happiness in his autonomy. For him being happy meant doing what he wanted, unencumbered by the obligations of love that bound him to his family and especially to his father. His sin is a very modern one. We live in culture that worships independence, autonomy, and self-definition.

What of the older son? Did he love his father or his brother? It seems he felt bound by the obligations of family life, but he wasn't flourishing, he wasn't happy. It seems that he felt more like a servant or even a slave:

\[
\text{He said to his father, "Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends."}
\]

Without love, his obligations left him bitter and resentful and he seemed to expect a rather narrow sort of justice.

It seems that he was much farther away from his father than his little brother ever was. He really was a lost soul.

But his father, amazing man that he was, didn't give up on his eldest son. He came out to meet him, just as he had for his younger son.

But the younger had come to his senses and understood just how lost he was and what a catastrophe it had been for him to have rejected his father's love. His
contrition allowed his father to restore their relationship … to restore what had been lost.

So, what became of the older son? Did he remain bitter and refuse to enter the house or did he allow his father's compassion draw him back into the house and back into the love and the joy of family life?

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So to them, Jesus addressed this parable ... 

A parable that is really a question:

Since God is merciful and compassionate and is looking for you as a father looks for a lost son, are you willing to let go of whatever it is that keeps you from flourishing and to open your heart to accept his embrace?

If that last part of the story, the one about the older son, is in some way directed at you, then you should give it a happy ending.