

# **A Moral and Relational Interpretation of the Parable of the Prodigal Son: Luke 15:11-32**

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## **Introduction**

The story of the Prodigal Son is only found in Luke 15. Luke recorded the parable of the Prodigal Son both to instruct and to challenge. Jesus told this story to teach the listeners the character of God and the character of humanity. And to make the point that no matter how far sinners run, how well they hide, how lost they are they cannot escape God's love. He does this by using a trilogy of parabolic analogical arguments in response to the legalistic didactic accusations of the Pharisees.<sup>3</sup> The Pharisees were accusing him of associating with sinners and Jesus was essentially using the parables to argue that God sent him to find the lost.

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## Context and Structure

A parable is “a short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle.”<sup>4</sup> It comes from the Greek word παραβολε which can mean proverbs, similes, figurative sayings and stories.<sup>5</sup> The Parable of the Prodigal Son is the third of three parables Jesus told in Luke 15 to answer the grumblings of the religious leaders (Luke 15:2), because He associated with sinners and tax collectors. The first of this triad of parables, the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7) employs a pastoral metaphor, while the second, the parable of the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10) features a domestic illustration. These two parables, each quite short and similar to one another, serve as an introduction to the parable of the prodigal son, which follows the same general structure as the first two, but expands on it. The structure of each of these parables revolves around three common elements: something is lost, it is sought and found, and the result is that the seeker and his or her friends rejoice. The first two parables end with a direct comparison of the rejoicing of the characters in the parable to rejoicing in heaven at the repentance of a sinner (Luke 15:7, 10). The third parable also exhibits rejoicing at the return of the prodigal son, but does not end with it; the rejoicing is resented by the remaining son, represented by the Pharisees, who resent Jesus’ rejoicing over the lost who come to Him.

“The voice of Jesus dominates the narrative, shifting and evaluating all other speech.”<sup>6</sup> He taught these three parables to show the joy of God in the repentance of lost sinners (Luke 15:1-2). Luke 15 begins with the grumblings of the religious leaders and ends with the grumbling of the older brother in the story of the prodigal son. Jesus’s intention was to rebuke the religious leaders by

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<sup>4</sup> Robert L. Plummer, “Parables in the Gospels: History of Interpretation and Hermeneutical Guidelines,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 13, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 5.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> James L. Resseguie, “The Point of View in the Central Section of Luke (9:51-19:44),” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25, no. 1 (March 1982): 43.

showing them that because there is natural joy in recovering a lost coin, sheep, or son, therefore God must have much more joy in recovering a lost sinner. In this time-period in Jewish society, tax collectors and sinners were outcasts along with Samaritans, Gentiles, and prostitutes because they did not obey the Jewish religious laws, traditions and customs.<sup>7</sup> Jesus saw these sinners “as lost sheep that needed a shepherd, lost coins that had value and needed to be put into circulation and lost sons who needed to be put into fellowship with the father.”<sup>8</sup>

In this parable Jesus used the illustration of a father’s love for his child to represent God’s love for His children. This metaphor would likely have resonated with Jesus’ dual audience of disciples on the one hand, and Pharisees and scribes on the other. Additionally, it is consistent with the Lukan Jesus’ depiction of God as Father of Israel, and of Himself (6:36; 9:26; 10:21-22; 11:2, 13; 12:30-32; 22:29, 42; 23:46-49).

## **Content**

This is a classic Biblical account of sin, repentance, and restoration (many such parallels exist in the Old Testament, both in the experiences of individuals, and of Israel as a whole); a parable of God’s forgiving love, mercy and grace to which the reader or listener can identify. The voice of Jesus dominates the parable, controlling the flow and value of the speech.<sup>9</sup> Jesus leaves the conclusion of the parable open ended to draw His listeners to reflection and a decision concerning their lives.<sup>10</sup> Unlike the two parables which immediately precede this parable, and which share the common themes of losing, seeking and finding, and rejoicing, this parable does

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<sup>7</sup> William W. Klein et al. *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Rev. and Updated (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 403.

<sup>8</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Wiersbe’s Expository Outlines on the New Testament* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1992), 183.

<sup>9</sup> Resseguie, 43.

<sup>10</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, “Jesus as Story Teller: Literary Perspectives on the Parables,” *Masters Seminary Journal* 16, no. 1, (Spring 2005): 53.

not end with a direct comparison of the rejoicing father and rejoicing in Heaven over the repentant son. On the contrary, Jesus depicts the hard-heartedness of the brother who will not rejoice. It is not difficult to see the connection to the scribes and Pharisees, whose grumbling over Jesus' reception of sinners (15:2) occasioned the parable.

The main character of the parable is the wayward son and therefore the story is often called, "The Prodigal Son." Another prominent character is the prodigal's father who gives the son his inheritance only to have his son leave the family, waits for the son to return, and then throws a feast in the prodigal's honor. Another title of the story could be, "The Forgiving Father." The final character is the older brother of the prodigal. He is obedient to the father, but selfish and self-righteous. He resents the brother's return and refuses to rejoice with the family, therefore the story could also be called, "The Begrudging Brother."<sup>11</sup> Each one of these characters adds a point of reference for the lesson Jesus is teaching.

By way of a simplistic allegorical application of the parable to its immediate context, it is perhaps accurate to say that the prodigal son represents the sinners with whom Jesus was eating, the older brother represents the scribes and Pharisees who resented their reception by Jesus, and the father represents God receiving those sinners who return to Him. Such a superficial interpretation is useful only insofar as it helps to place the parable into its context. A serious interpretation, however, requires more detailed analysis.

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<sup>11</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *The NIV Application Commentary: From Biblical Text...Luke...to Contemporary Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 412.

## Argument and Thesis

Soon after the completion of the New Testament early Christians began to approach the parables with an allegorical method of interpretation, as this was a common way of interpreting religious text in the Greco-Roman world.<sup>12</sup> By the late Nineteenth Century Adolf Julicher proposed that interpreters should focus on a single main point of the parable. Some say the parables should be read as allegories that have multiple meanings<sup>13</sup>, and some say they are intended to have only one meaning.<sup>14</sup> This article will take a balanced approach similar to that of Blomberg who teaches that parables should not be allegorized in every detail, but neither should they be limited to one main point.<sup>15</sup> In this article it is argued that Jesus's parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32 is neither singular nor allegorical in its meaning, rather its meaning is moral and relational, with three distinct lessons.

## Interpreting the Parable

The most obvious meaning of Luke 15:11-32 is a moral one. If one were to pick only one primary meaning (as per Adolf Julicher), then a likely meaning would be God's plan for redeeming His people from sin, and the joy of God when a sinner repents. However, we assert that within this broader soteriological scheme, two distinct themes may be derived, related to the characters presented in the parable: a moral interpretation, and a relational one. The two parables which precede this one share the same broad themes of losing, seeking, finding, and rejoicing, but lack the level of character development present in this parable. It is asserted that

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<sup>12</sup> Plummer, 6.

<sup>13</sup> William W. Klein et al, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Rev. and Updated (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 77.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 412.

<sup>15</sup> J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 287.

the words and actions of the characters provide a key to understanding the parable as conveying a more detailed message than the two which precede it, but which is essentially parallel to them.

### **A Moral Interpretation**

The first interpretation offered is a moral one. Specifically, it is asserted that the parable presents certain ethical claims. These are examined below in turn.

#### The Prodigal Son

The character for whom the parable is commonly titled is the prodigal son. The moral message the prodigal teaches is that a lost sinner who lives a very sinful life can and will be accepted by God (represented by the father) through repentance. Jesus begins the story by setting an example of just how depraved the prodigal is. The stage is set with the prodigal asking his father for his inheritance early, essentially implying that he wishes his father was dead (Lk. 15:12). Such a request would dishonor the father, and would sever the son from family, as well as from the community at large- hence we find him taking the money to a far country. The father was risking a lot by granting this request. According to Jewish law he was risking his security, with the possibility of the shame of relying on others from outside his family unit for provision in his later years.<sup>16</sup> The son then proceeds to waste this gift from his father through self-indulgent living. His lifestyle of debauchery humbles the son as he realizes the foolishness of his decisions and the gravity of the sin against his father and Heaven (v. 17). Finally, he returns to his father to confess his sin and repent, humbled enough to be his father's servant (v. 19). The moral message, simply stated, is that forgiveness is available to repentant sinners. In this respect, this parable goes further than the two which preceded it. The parables of the lost sheep and the lost

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<sup>16</sup> Bock, 412.

coin did not contain overt references to sin or repentance, only to losing and finding. This third parable expands the message of the first two: people are lost to God through sin, and are found by Him in repentance.

### The Father

The moral message of the father lies in his representation as the Heavenly Father and His eagerness to forgive sin and welcome sinners back into His kingdom through His grace. It is here Jesus answers the accusations of the Pharisees (15:2). The father waits for his son to return and then when he sees him, runs to him, embraces and kisses his son (v. 20) as an example of extravagant love and forgiveness. The father could have put the son on probation for a period of time to allow the son to earn his way back to his position in the household, but that is not how Divine grace works.<sup>17</sup> Through the role of the father, Jesus is teaching the willingness of God to forgive wayward sinners, longing to see them repent and rejoicing when they do. The moral message is that which Paul echoed in Romans 5:20- “where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.”

### Self-Righteous Brother

The self-righteous brother may represent certain members of Jesus’ audience. Indeed, parallels between the brother’s behavior and that of the Pharisees, Scribes, and Sadducees are not difficult to see. He prides himself on his obedience and his perceived close proximity to the father, but has no awareness of his own sin, sees no need of repentance, and no concern for lost sinners.<sup>18</sup> Because of this he does not have joy when the prodigal son returns home (v. 28). The self-righteous son’s heart is revealed in verse 29 as we see that the true motivation behind his

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<sup>17</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Paternoster Press, 1977), 102.

<sup>18</sup> MacArthur, 1513.

obedience was selfish and not out of love. His sins are not as externally visible as those of the younger brother, but are more inward sins of the heart, such as having a critical and unloving spirit, pride and unwillingness to forgive.<sup>19</sup> He claims obedience and commonality with the father, but does not share the father's love for the lost son, his seeking, or his rejoicing when the son is found. The moral message is clear: by casting the son in an unfavorable light, his attitudes are condemned. If the self-righteous son represents members of Jesus' audience, then their moral attitudes are condemned as well.

### **Relational Message**

While most commentaries and scholars point out the moral messages of the parable of the prodigal son; it is asserted that the meaning of the prodigal son is two-fold, both moral and relational. Jesus uses the three main characters of the prodigal son to teach a relational message as well as a moral one. Below, we will examine relational aspects of Jesus' representation of each character.

#### The Prodigal Son

If one shifts one's thinking from the sins committed, the wrong choices the prodigal made, and instead examine the relationships he abused, we find another lesson Jesus taught through this parable. When the prodigal son asked his Father for the inheritance early (v. 12), he was taking control of his own life, making his own decisions for his own benefit, and dishonoring his father. In modern terms, one might say that he was essentially kicking his father out of the driver's seat and taking control of the wheel. He was acting on his own will, in

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<sup>19</sup> Wiersbe, 184.

rebellion against the moral and spiritual leadership of his father. One can extrapolate the attitude of the son toward the father to that a person rebelling against God.

The son was not lost (v. 24) because he did not know the way home. He was lost because he had wasted years of his life, the gifts of his father, his potential and his purpose on selfish living. For a while he was gratified with his selfish pursuits, but when these things ran out he was empty and the only place to go to be satisfied was home. He was found and fulfilled when his relationship with his father was reconciled. It is interesting to note here that while the father hoped for the son's return, he did not leave the home to search for him in the far country. The son was lost because of his own willfulness and the father had to wait until that will was broken and submissive for reconciliation.<sup>20</sup>

The relational lesson that Jesus is teaching here is that when we pursue our own selfish desires, when we make ourselves the authority of our lives, we strain and distance our relationship with God. The story begins with the son leaving home saying, "Father...give me...." (v. 12), when the son returns home he says, "Father...make me...." (v. 17).<sup>21</sup> The prodigal's perspective changed from what can I accomplish and possess, to what can I offer. Because his attitude had changed, the son was welcomed back into the family. The ring, robe, and sandals (v. 22) are symbolic of the son's full acceptance back into the family, not as a servant, but as a son.

### The Father

A key point to note concerning the relationship between the father and son is both that the father waits for the son to return and he runs to meet the son. The father feels compassion for the

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<sup>20</sup> Wiersbe, 1992, p. 183.

<sup>21</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Expository Commentary: An Exposition of the New Testament Comprising the Entire "Be" Series*, vol. 1 (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989), 236.

son, embraces and kisses him (v. 20). The father never chastises or punishes the son; instead he welcomes him and throws a party in his honor. These are signs of affection and love. The relational lesson Jesus is teaching here is that the father (God) desires a relationship with and loves sinners. The Father waits for lost sinners to come home, runs to meet them when they return, and rejoices in their repentance. Here the relational lesson coincides with the moral lesson (that God forgives sinners). God forgives sinners because He loves them and desires a relationship with them.

### The Self-Righteous Brother

In examining the relational lesson of the older, self-righteous brother it is important to closely look at the relationship between the two brothers. Notice the words, “this son of yours” (v. 30). The self-righteous brother did not claim his relationship with his younger brother.<sup>22</sup> The older brother did not see himself in relationship with the younger, but saw them both in the terms of his perception of their relationship to the father. This makes one ponder the question, “Which brother is really lost?” If the older brother represents the Pharisees, then this may speak to their alienation from the nation of Israel, and is consistent with other parables of the Lukan Jesus, such as the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14, in which the Pharisee explicitly states that he is “not like” sinners such as the tax collector. This alienation from “sinners” was frequently a point of contention between Jesus and the Pharisees. The relational message of the older brother in the parable may be that those who imagine themselves to be close to God because of their external conformity to the law are not only far from God, but are also far from others.

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<sup>22</sup> Timothy J. Geddert, 1995, "The Parable of the Prodigal : Priorities (Luke 15:11-32)." *Direction* 24, no. 1: 32, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 10, 2013).

## Conclusion

This article has attempted to demonstrate that Jesus's parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32 can be interpreted to convey both moral and relational messages, and that it conveys moral and relational dynamics which apply both vertically, to one's relationship with God, and horizontally, to one's relationship with one's fellow man. Each son in the parable represents a different type of person in relationship to God. The prodigal son represents, alternatively, a person lost in sin, and a person receiving grace through repentance. The older brother represents a person who perceives himself to be in close proximity to the father through his abstention overt, obvious sin, yet neither loves his fellow man, nor values the love of the father for his fellow man. The father represents God, giving his son the freedom to choose to sin, but seeking his return and welcoming him as a son when repentance is demonstrated.

Early and Wheeler apply this parable to a template for praying for one who is living in sin: "Lord please: Bring them to a place of famine and need (v. 14), create within them holy hunger and homesickness (v. 16-17), cause them to come to their senses (v. 17), draw them home (v. 18), give them the gift of repentance (18-21), and give us welcoming grace (v. 20)."<sup>23</sup>

The parable is not to be allegorized or limited to one point. The moral and relational lessons of Luke 15:11-32 are to be taught, heard, and taken to heart. They are to be taught by God's church and given as calls; calls to the lost to respond to God's grace, love, and forgiveness; calls to reconcile relationships to God, and calls to reconcile relationships to each other.

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<sup>23</sup> Dave Earley and David Wheeler, *Evangelism Is...How to Share Jesus with Passion and Confidence* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 169.

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