

## Parables Session 7

### Introductory Comments

1. The term “prodigal son” does not appear in the parable most often known by that name. The earliest reference is from the church father Jerome (347-420), who speaks of having written “on the prudent and the prodigal sons.” In Coptic Christian and German Christian sources, the parable is called “The Lost Son,” which opens the question: “Which son is lost?” Lebanese Christians refer to it as “The Clever Son,” which plays on the word meaning to “divide” and “separate.” The main reason the name “The Prodigal Son” caught on was because of Christian focus on the younger son’s character. Some early church fathers even interpreted the Prodigal as being an allegory for Jesus himself, but it is a clumsy read and not something that Jesus’ audience would have heard.
2. Common interpretation of this parable is that it reveals an extravagant, earth-shattering image of a God the Father who forgives (presented as if it were a novel idea within Judaism at the time). It is also commonly taught that the older son is an allegorical representation of the Jews (or at least the Pharisees and scribes), who slavishly serve God the Father in order to earn a reward, while Jesus proclaims salvation by grace. Common understanding is that the prodigal, given his connection to pig farming, represents Gentile Christians, whereas the older brother, the stereotypical Jew, resents God the Father’s outreach beyond the so-called chosen people, with their elitist, nationalistic attitudes.
3. Such interpretations not only yank the parable out of its historical context; they lessen the message of Jesus and often bear false witness against Jews and Judaism. In its original context, the parable of the Prodigal Son would not have been heard as a story of repentance or forgiveness, a story of works-righteousness and grace, or a story of Jewish xenophobia and Christian universalism. Instead, the parables messages of finding the lost, of reclaiming children, and of reassessing the meaning of family offer not only good news, but better news.

### Questions

Read Luke 15:11-32, The Prodigal Son

1. **Right off, when you read the first line of this parable, what biblical connections are being made?** The literary convention of introducing a man with two sons brings to mind many famous stories about two sons, and also the idea that we would do well to identify with the younger one. Adam had two sons, Cain and Abel (and yes, while the younger son, Abel, was killed, it was his offering that was accepted). Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. The younger, Isaac, inherits Abraham’s covenant and is revered as Israel’s second patriarch. Isaac has twin sons, Esau and Jacob. The younger, Jacob, barter a bowl of soup for the elder’s birthright and then tricks his father into giving him the blessing that was rightfully Esau’s. Jacob becomes the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob’s favorite son, Joseph, has two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. When it comes time for Jacob to bless his grandchildren, Joseph positions the elder, Manasseh, on Jacob’s right, and Ephraim, the younger, on Jacob’s left. But then, in giving the blessing, Jacob crosses his arms, so that the younger receives the primary blessing. The pattern continues throughout Israel’s history. David is the youngest of seven; Solomon is the second child born to David and Bathsheba, etc. The point is, Jesus’ audience would have been primed to identify with the younger son – who then turns out to be an irresponsible, self-indulgent, and probably indulged child.

2. **How do you react to the younger son when he asks for his inheritance early?** Even through a modern lens, he comes across as self-absorbed, only concerned with what he wants. Ancient audiences likely would have viewed this as an insult to the father. We have been taught that the son is treating his father as if he is as good as dead. Of course, were the son's request inappropriate, you might think that the father would have responded so. But the parable gives no indication – the father simply divides up his property (customarily, 1/3 to the younger son and 2/3 to the elder).
3. **According to Luke 15:14-16, what is the Prodigal's problem?** Many Christian commentators focus on the fact that he is in Gentile country, that he is "unclean" in the land of the "unclean." But the truth is, being in Gentile territory wasn't shocking to Jews. Millions of them lived in Gentile cities and lands in the time of Jesus. And besides, the story doesn't say he ate pigs, or raised them himself (both forbidden of Jews by Levitical code), but only that he went to work for someone who gave him the task of FEEDING pigs (a task that the Prodigal didn't seek out, mind you). And why did he do this? Well, that's his real problem. He was starving! There was a famine in the land, and as the parable states, "no one gave him anything." So, starvation, as well as alienation, are his main problems.
4. **Is the prodigal contrite when he talks about going back to his father?** For many modern readers of the parable, especially those influenced by Luke who says that the parable is about "repenting and forgiving," the sense is that the young son is, indeed, contrite. Yet, first century listeners may well have not heard it that way. The language suggests that the son may be more conniving than contrite, especially where he comes up with the line, "I have sinned against heaven and before you." Biblically literate listeners would hear an echo of Pharaoh's empty words to Moses and Aaron when he's trying to stop the plagues: "Pharaoh hurriedly summoned Moses and Aaron and said, 'I have sinned against the Lord your God, and against you'" (Exodus 10:16). The prodigal is no more repentant, he had no more change of heart, than Egypt's ruler. So essentially, his strategy may well be, "I'll go to Daddy and sound religious."
5. **What should we make of the father running out toward the prodigal?** Many commentators view this negatively, as if it is shameful or undignified. In one extreme interpretation, it is said that the father runs out to the son to protect him from the locals who would otherwise have wished to stone him! But in the biblical and rabbinic literature, running is not associated with dishonor or shame ("aimless running", perhaps, but this is not that). In fact, there are multiple examples from rabbinic stories of that time period where a father, desperate to reconcile with a wayward son, requests the son to return "as far as you can, and I will come the rest of the way to see you.' So, God says, 'Return to me, and I will return to you.'" (*Pesikta Rabbati* 184-85).
6. **If this is not a story about repentance and forgiveness, what is it primarily about?** The parable is about reconciliation, and the challenges to and possibilities for it. Without Luke's allegory of repentance and forgiveness and without the easy equating of the elder son with the grumbling Jews, the parable has no easy or comfortable interpretation. It leaves us with many open questions by the end:
  - a. What would we do if we were the older son? Do we attend the party? What will happen to this family when the father dies and the elder son obtains his inheritance? Will the younger son maintain an elevated role in the family, or will he be treated like one of the "hired laborers"?
  - b. What do we do if we identify with the father and find our own children are lost? Is repeated pleading sufficient? What would be? What does a parent do to show a love that

the child never felt? The parable shows us that indulgence does not buy love, but withholding can stifle it. And so we search, desperately, because our family is not whole.

- c. What are we to make of that younger son? It is neat and tidy to see him as shattered by grace and fully repentant, but it's doubtful that first-century readers would have seen him that way. All we have been given is someone who is self-indulgent, self-centered, conniving, and untrustworthy. Why would he do now anything other than what he has always done – take advantage of his father's love? And yet, his father loves him, and he is a cherished member of the family.

7. **What does this parable provoke in us? To what does it invite us to respond?** Here are some possibilities: Recognize that the one you have lost may be right in your own household. Do whatever it takes to find the lost and then celebrate with others, both so that you can share the joy and so that the others will help prevent the recovered from ever being lost again. Don't wait until you receive an apology; you may never get one. Don't wait until you can muster the ability to forgive; you may never find it. Don't stew in your sense of being ignored, for there is nothing that can be done to retrieve the past.

Instead, have a barbeque, and invite others to join you. If the repenting and the forgiving come later, great! And if not, then you will have still planted the seeds that may lead to reconciliation. You have opened the door to a second chance, the possibility for what was dead to return to life (i.e. resurrection).

And while this parable never resolves the reconciliation, the hope it hints at comes from its first line. "A father had two sons." Think of Isaac and Ishmael. Today some of their children are at odds or even war, as the Middle East demonstrates. But in the biblical account, these two sons reunite at Abraham's death, and together they bury him. Ishmael's hand was to be against his brother's, but Ishmael here proves the prediction wrong. If Ishmael and Isaac can reconcile, perhaps their children can do the same?

Think of Jacob and Esau – one who stole birthright and blessing and one who vowed murder in revenge. And yet, when Jacob, wounded from his wrestling at the Jabbok River, encounters Esau, the two reconcile.

The scriptures of Israel give us hope for the sons in Luke's parable. And they give us hope for our own reconciliations, from the personal to the international. And THAT is what the Kingdom of God will be like.

*\*\*\*For next session, read Luke 16:1-8, Shrewd Manager*