

The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother

*An Exegetical Paper on Luke 15:11-32*

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“*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23 NRSV). As human beings, particularly as sinners, we do things that make us undeserving of God’s love. However, perhaps that is the point – we do not deserve his love, yet by his mercy and grace, God goes to extreme measures to show us our worth and that we are indeed loved. Such is the message expressed in the *Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother*. Upon squandering his father’s property, the prodigal son realizes his sin and returns to his father, who demonstrates love to him by forgiving him and celebrating his return, though he is clearly undeserving of his forgiveness. And in response to the elder brother’s anger, the father again demonstrates love and expresses the need to celebrate when the lost has been found. The historical-geographical and literary context, along with a verse-by-verse analysis, will be explored below to further dive into the extent that God goes to love his people, all people, followed by an application to a modern situation.

## **Contextual Analysis**

### **Historical-Geographical Context**

Luke, the third Gospel in the Bible, is a twenty-four-chapter book written by a man who many refer to as “Luke.” Many acknowledge the author of Luke to be the author of Acts as well and consider Luke-Acts to be a two-part letter. It is said that we cannot know his personal identity, but the common belief is that he was a “physician and sometime companion of Paul”.<sup>1</sup> He was also “an educated author who [...] was at home in Hellenistic culture and aimed to address persons of education and status in that world,” and his writings indicate that he was either a Jew or a Gentile drawn to Jewish religion.<sup>2</sup> The book itself is approximated to have been

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<sup>1</sup> Sakenfeld, Katharine D., et al. “Luke, Gospel of.” *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Abingdon Press, 2008) 720-721.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 721.

composed sometime between the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE and the last years of the first century.<sup>3</sup> The book's place of origin, however, is uncertain. Suggestions include Antioch, Achaia, Rome, Caesarea, the Decapolis, and Asia Minor.<sup>4</sup>

As for the audience, the beginning of Luke indicates that the author was writing to Theophilus, who appears to be a man of rank that has associated himself with the church but doubts his sense of belonging in this community.<sup>5</sup> However, Luke did not write just for this one person – he wrote for anyone who felt the same tension Theophilus did. Therefore, one could say the extended audience of Luke includes Gentiles, and some Jewish Christians, who honored God; particularly those who were living in the urbanized parts of the Roman Empire and would understand his use of sophisticated Greek.<sup>6</sup>

In relation to mentioning who Luke was written for, it is also worth noting the reasons Luke was written. Robert H. Stein outlines the four main reasons as follows: “To help convince his readers of the truthfulness of what they had been taught, to clarify the Christian self-understanding of his readers, to clarify Jesus’ teachings concerning the end times, and to assure his readers that Rome was not a threat to them”.<sup>7</sup> Other scholars indicate that Luke was written to defend Christianity against Roman culture, the Gnostics, and Judaizers, and as an instruction for Christian converts.<sup>8</sup> With Luke’s audience in mind, in addition to providing instruction, one could also say that Luke was written to provide assurance for these converts by showing the inclusive nature of God’s salvation. It is clear that the book provides help for these God-honoring Gentiles in their faith walk and reassurance for those feeling out of place in an “originally Jewish

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<sup>3</sup> Sakenfeld, 721.

<sup>4</sup> Stein, Robert H. *Luke*. The New American Commentary. (Broadman, 1992) 27.

<sup>5</sup> Bock, Darrel L. *Luke*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. (Baker Books, 1994) 15.

<sup>6</sup> Sakenfeld, 721.

<sup>7</sup> Stein, 36-44.

<sup>8</sup> Bromiley, Geoffrey W., et al. "Luke, Gospel According To." *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (William B. Eerdmans, 1986) 183.

movement.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, according to Darrel L. Bock, Luke also wanted to defend God’s faithfulness and promises to Israel despite the rejection of the gospel and these promises by many in the nation.<sup>10</sup> Any Jew or Jewish Christian troubled by the Jewish response to the gospel or by the Gentile openness to the gospel can see that “God directed the affair and that he gave the nation multiple invitations to join in God’s renewed work.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Literary Context**

*The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother* in Luke 15:11-32 is the last of a series of parables about the lost and found in Luke 15:1-32, and is told by Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem. Among the many other teachings and parables Jesus told on this journey, this particular parable, along with the other two in the section, serves as a response to the indictment of the Pharisees and scribes,<sup>12</sup> who were complaining about Jesus’ association with publicans and sinners<sup>13</sup> (Luke 15:1-2). This criticism has been encountered in Luke 5:27-32, 7:39, and will be encountered in 19:7 as well.<sup>14</sup> The purpose of Jesus’ response was to defend his ministry to these outcasts and “appeal to his opponents to join in celebrating their entrance into the kingdom” (15:7, 10, 28, 31-32).<sup>15</sup> With this goal in mind, the main theme that Jesus portrays with these parables is the joy of the lost being found, with key words “*lost*,” “*found*” (Luke 15:6, 9, 24, 32), “*rejoice*,” and “*celebrate*” (Luke 15:6, 9, 24, 32).<sup>16</sup> The main difference between the first two short parables, in which Jesus talks about a lost sheep and a lost coin, and the longer parable about the prodigal son is the portrayal of this theme evident in a man-to-man relationship and the

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<sup>9</sup> Bock, 15.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Green, Joel B. *The Gospel of Luke*. New International Commentary New Testament. (Eerdmans, 1997) 578.

<sup>13</sup> Stein, 400.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

fact that the stakes are raised with what is lost being the son of a father in comparison to an animal or object.

Additionally, these three parables together portray an important Lukan theme – God’s love for outcasts and sinners.<sup>17</sup> This material further demonstrates and responds to the opposition of the Pharisees and scribes towards Jesus (Luke 15:2 with 14:1-6, 15-24 and 16:14-15, 19-31) and speaks of welcoming outcasts into God’s kingdom while excluding the religious elite, like in the parable of the great banquet (Luke 14:15-24).<sup>18</sup> As one can see, the material of the parables in Luke 15 fits well with the material of Luke 14 and 16. Furthermore, it is worth noting that “a primary image of God in the Lukan travel narrative has been God as Father” (Luke 11:1-13, 12:22-34), an image of him that is continued in this parable about the prodigal son.<sup>19</sup> And this image of a father is of one who acts in ways out of character according to “normal canons of familial behavior,” especially with historical context in consideration.<sup>20</sup>

Beyond the immediate surrounding context, *the Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother*, along with the other lost and found parables, also fits well into the flow of Luke as a whole with the same theme of God’s love that was mentioned above. Luke begins with a dedication to Theophilus (Luke 1:1-4), then goes into the infancy narratives about John the Baptist and Jesus (1:5-2:52), which is followed by the details of the preparation for Jesus’ ministry and the calling of the disciples (3:1-6:16). Then follows Jesus’s teachings in Galilee, during his journey to Jerusalem, and in Jerusalem (6:17-21:38). After that, the book closes with the last supper, the betrayal and death of Jesus, and his resurrection and ascension (22:1-24:53). As one can see, Luke describes Jesus’ life on earth from beginning to end, and in his description of Christ’s life

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<sup>17</sup> Stein, 400.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 401.

<sup>19</sup> Green, 579.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

throughout the book, there is a string that ties everything together: the theme of God's love that is all-inclusive in nature. This love was expressed through these three parables – in fact, they essentially set forth “the love of God for sinners,” which is “the mainspring of the of the gospel”<sup>21</sup> – just as it was expressed through Jesus' teachings and actions in Galilee, during his journey to Jerusalem, which is where these parables were told, and in Jerusalem. Moreover, this same love was ultimately demonstrated most clearly through his sacrifice on the cross.

### Detailed Analysis

**15:11-12** This passage begins right away with Jesus starting to tell the parable. He sets the stage by introducing the three main characters, which are a father and his two sons. It is the two sons, mainly the younger son, that controls the literary action, but the focus of the parable is on the father, as it is his response to his sons that provides the lessons that Jesus is trying to share.<sup>22</sup> Another indicator that the father is the focus of the parable is the phrase “*There was a man*” (Luke 15:11 NRSV). This is a typical Lukan introduction to a parable,<sup>23</sup> like in 15:4 and 15:8, where Jesus introduces the focal character at the very beginning of the parable.<sup>24</sup>

After the introduction of the characters, the older son is immediately taken offstage, only to reappear towards the end of the parable in 15:25, while a transaction is being made between the younger son and the father.<sup>25</sup> “*Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me,*” says the younger son (15:12). The reference to this share of property, or estate, in Greek literally translates to “the life,” and so the son is essentially requesting his portion of what will be left from his father's life.<sup>26</sup> With the request's historical and legal background in consideration,

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<sup>21</sup> Morris, Leon. *Luke*. The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. (Eerdmans, 1988) 262.

<sup>22</sup> Bock, 1309.

<sup>23</sup> Stein, 404.

<sup>24</sup> Bock, 1309.

<sup>25</sup> Green, 580.

<sup>26</sup> Bock, 1309.

this is a clear indication that the son is severing his relationship with his father, as the actual distribution of estates typically does not occur until death.<sup>27</sup> In fact, the distribution of property prior to a father's death is frowned upon, and the fact that the son initiated this transaction is "strikingly presumptuous" and is "highly irregular," in the words of Joel B. Green.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the father divides his property between his two sons.

**15:13** Upon receiving his share of the estate, the younger son gathered all he had and took off only a few days later to a distant country. The phrase "*gathered all he had*" (15:13) implies that the son converted his inheritance into cash,<sup>29</sup> and so it is at this point that his "shocking breach of familial ties surfaces dramatically," as while the division of an estate during a father's lifetime is one thing, it is quite another to turn it into "transportable capital" during his lifetime.<sup>30</sup> And in this distant country, the son "*squandered his property in dissolute living*" (15:13). The fact that he squandered his property in a distant country implies that he was living as though he were a Gentile in a non-Jewish world, abhorrent to the Jewish way of life,<sup>31</sup> and the use of the word "*dissolute*" is another indication that he is dishonoring his father.<sup>32</sup> In other words, the son wasted what his father gave to him through an undisciplined, reckless lifestyle, and disrespected his father even more through this wasting of what was given to him, which was unthinkable for him to ask for in the first place.

**15:14** The younger son's situation continues to follow a downhill slope, as now a severe famine hits the land. While the hard time the son is facing is not completely his own doing, had he not wasted all his wealth, he might have had the means to provide for himself during this

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<sup>27</sup> Bock, 1309-1310.

<sup>28</sup> Green, 580.

<sup>29</sup> Stein, 405.

<sup>30</sup> Green, 580.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Nolland, John. *Luke 9:21-18:34*. World Biblical Commentary Volume 35b. (Thomas Nelson, 1993) 783.

time. However, the text indicates that he was in need. He had no money, no family, and is suffering in a distant land.<sup>33</sup> At this point in time, the younger son is left in a vulnerable state and is clearly in trouble.

**15:15** Having lost everything, the younger son had to get a job. However, in a time of famine employment is not easy to come by,<sup>34</sup> so he hired himself to a local citizen “*who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs*” (15:15). For Jews, this was the most dishonorable job one could have, as pigs were unclean, and under normal circumstances, one would have nothing to do with them at all.<sup>35</sup> This just shows how desperate the son was to even consider this job.

**15:16** It becomes clear that the job is unable to satisfy even the most basic of the younger son’s needs. He becomes so desperate that “*he would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating*” (15:16). These “pods” refer to carob pods which were used to feed animals, and sometimes the poor were forced to eat them as well.<sup>36</sup> This shows that the text indicates he was not even able to eat what was for unclean animals and the poor. Furthermore, the phrase “*no one gave him anything*” (15:16) is not to show that he literally was not given anything, though that very well may be the case, but rather to show how low his self-esteem had fallen and that his value had become less than that of a pig’s.<sup>37</sup>

**15:17** The younger son finally came to himself, or came to his senses,<sup>38</sup> and realized that even his “*father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare*” (15:17) while he is starving to death in a distant land. The phrase “*came to his senses*” (15:17 NIV) is a Hebrew/Aramaic expression for the word “repented,” and refers not only to a mental process that causes him to

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<sup>33</sup> Bock, 1311.

<sup>34</sup> Morris, 264.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Stein, 405.

<sup>37</sup> Morris, 264.

<sup>38</sup> Bock, 1312.



evaluate his situation more clearly, but also to a moral renewal involving repentance.<sup>39</sup> The two verses that follow 15:17 further highlight the son's repentance and moral renewal.

**15:18-19** The younger son's words "*I will get up and go*" (15:18 NRSV) marks "the onset of a new series of actions through which his lost status will be restored" and signals "his return to life from death," according to Green.<sup>40</sup> These verses reveal a key turning point in the parable, as it is at this point that the son develops a plan of action.<sup>41</sup> And in his plan of action, it is important to note that he was expressing sorrow not for what he had lost but for what he had done.<sup>42</sup> The son acknowledges his foolishness before God and his father, indicating that he had sinned against them both.

The younger son also recognizes that he has forfeited all claim to be treated as a son, so he decides to ask to be made like one of his father's hired hands.<sup>43</sup> The fact that he wants to become a hired hand, or a day laborer, is another significant point. Day laborers are very different from other laborers, like slaves for instance. While slaves were like a part of the family, though still part of the lower class, day laborers were hired only on special occasions for a day at a time, and so they were less cared for.<sup>44</sup> This planned request indicates that the younger son wanted to be of minimal burden to his father, and is prepared to be the lowest of the low, since he would still be better off than he is now as a hired hand.<sup>45</sup> The son makes no excuses, just a sincere confession and a humble request. Ultimately, according to Bock, this picture "shows what repentance looks like: no claims, just reliance on God's mercy and provision."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Stein, 406.

<sup>40</sup> Green, 582.

<sup>41</sup> Bock, 1312.

<sup>42</sup> Morris, 265.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Bock, 1313.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

**15:20** The son sets off and goes to his father to carry out his plan. Here it becomes clear that the father is indeed the focal character of the story, as the text mentions the viewpoint of the father and the father's response to his son's return. The text says, "*But while he was still far off, his father saw him*" (15:20), indicating that the father was hoping and waiting for such a return. According to John Nolland, this also indicates that "it is the father who actively initiates the restoration," as it is clear that he was anticipating for this day to come.<sup>47</sup>

Jesus further emphasizes the welcome the father gave his unworthy son with the phrases "*filled with compassion*" and "*he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him*" (15:20). It is very likely that the father's response to his son's return was not expected; he was breaking the norms of his culture in various ways. Firstly, the fact that the father *ran* was "striking in an elderly Oriental."<sup>48</sup> Upon recognizing his son's figure in the distance, the father threw aside the norms of behavioral conventions and ran, making it clear without words the joy he had in regaining a son. Jesus includes this important detail in the story to show God's love, joy, and eagerness to receive outcasts.<sup>49</sup> Secondly, "*put his arms around him*" (15:20) literally means "fell on his neck," which is an action that shows the father's "loving acceptance of his son."<sup>50</sup> Thirdly, the manner in which the verb *kissed* is used in Greek refers to "a sincere greeting and not to perfunctory politeness;" it is a tender kiss of affection.<sup>51</sup> All of this happens before the son says a word, and such details are included to show the beginning stages of reconciliation in their relationship and to powerfully portray the love of God.

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<sup>47</sup> Nolland, 784.

<sup>48</sup> Morris, 265.

<sup>49</sup> Stein, 406.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Morris, 265.

**15:21** The son finally speaks, but because his father was so eager to receive him, he was unable complete the speech he had prepared.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, he is able to offer his confession, stated just as he had planned in 15:18-19, omitting only the request to be made a hired servant.<sup>53</sup> The important thing is that he was able to get out the words that expressed his sense of sin and unworthiness. Furthermore, there is no indication that the text portrays the younger son's return as negative or forced.<sup>54</sup> According to Bock, this is to show that those who come humbly to God can know that they will be received by him.<sup>55</sup> There is also a picture of genuine repentance that is in view, which is fitting to the picture of a sinner returning to the Father.<sup>56</sup>

**15:22-24** The father's display of affection portrayed in 15:20 is now expressed in words here. Regardless of what he had done, the son is received by his father with full privileges, if not with even more than what he had before.<sup>57</sup> The father tells his slaves to bring out the best robe, a ring, and sandals to put on his son. The *best robe* (15:22) signified a sign of position, as did the *ring* (15:22), which was most likely a signet ring that conveyed authority.<sup>58</sup> The mention of *sandals* (15:22) indicates that the son was barefoot like a slave, so the wearing of sandals marked him out as a freeman.<sup>59</sup>

Then the father tells his servants to bring out the "*fattened calf*" (15:23) so that they can eat and celebrate. Meat was not usually eaten at meals and were saved for special occasions,<sup>60</sup> such as religious holidays like the day of atonement,<sup>61</sup> so the fact that the father made such a

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<sup>52</sup> Stein, 406.

<sup>53</sup> Bock, 1314.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Morris, 266.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Stein, 407.

<sup>61</sup> Bock, 1315.

request is very significant. It further demonstrates the full acceptance and joy the father felt toward his son, who he expected to never see again. He is overflowing with joy and wants to celebrate, because his son was “*dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found*” (15:24). It is also worth noting that in saying this, the father is explaining the significance of what has happened. According to Bock, “new life and recovery of the lost are what results from repentance.”<sup>62</sup> And so the celebration begins.

**15:25-26** The third character, the elder son, finally makes a reappearance in 15:25. From here, the parable’s focus shifts onto him with the father. He was in the field and as he approached the house, he heard the celebration; people were dancing and there was music. Something is happening, but the elder brother clearly does not know the cause of the celebration,<sup>63</sup> and so he called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.

Now, there is no doubt that in the father’s acceptance of the younger son, Jesus is teaching the heavenly Father’s acceptance and welcoming of returning sinners, and that in and of itself certainly makes for a great lesson. However, the perspective of the elder son is also one of great importance and is even necessary for the full lesson that Jesus is sharing. According to Leon Morris, “when Jesus turns to the elder brother we should see his concern for the Pharisees and people like them.”<sup>64</sup> The elder son is pictured as “*in the field*” (15:25) indicating that he was at work and that he was one to fulfill his duties,<sup>65</sup> just like the Pharisees and other people of the like were always at work, trying to fulfill their religious duties.

**15:27** The slave responds to the elder son and explains the reason for the celebration.

*“Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back*

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<sup>62</sup> Bock, 1315.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 1316.

<sup>64</sup> Morris, 266.

<sup>65</sup> Bock, 1316.

*safe and sound*,” he says (15:27). “*Safe and sound*” literally means healthy, but more is implied than his physical health; the younger son has gained moral and spiritual health, as well as salvation.<sup>66</sup> The father’s reason for joy is highlighted here again.

**15:28** The reason for the celebration made the elder son angry, and he refused to go in. As Morris suggests, “the likeness to the Pharisees is unmistakable.”<sup>67</sup> Just as the Pharisees and people of the like have failed to show compassion to repenting sinners, the elder son’s anger stems from his lack of compassion towards his younger brother.<sup>68</sup>

The father then comes out to plead with the elder son. He again takes initiative and demonstrates that reconciliation should extend across the entire family.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, in “*coming out*” and “*pleading with him*” (15:28), the father again breaks social protocol, as he leaves the house and the festivities, of which he was host, in full view of the other members of the household.<sup>70</sup> In the words of Trevor J. Burke, “he is now outside the house where his actions would also be readily seen and evident to all in the entire village and community.”<sup>71</sup> Essentially, the father is putting himself in a vulnerable position where he cannot protect himself from shame, but clearly that is of no concern for the loving father.

**15:29-30** In response to his father’s pleading, the elder son explains the reason for his anger. He compares his relationship to his father as years of servitude (“*I have been working like a slave for you*,” 15:29) without any joyous recognition (“*you have never given me even a young goat ... But when this son of yours came back ... you killed the fatted calf for him*, 15:29-30).<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Stein, 407.

<sup>67</sup> Morris, 267.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>69</sup> Bock, 1317.

<sup>70</sup> Burke, Trevor J. *The Parable of the Prodigal Father: An Interpretative Key to the Third Gospel (Luke 15:11-32)*. (Tyndale Bulletin, 64(2), 2013)226.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Stein, 407.

Also note that “*this*” in “*this son of yours*” (15:30) is used derogatorily, as in 14:30, 15:2, and 18:11,<sup>73</sup> and indicates that the elder son does not even refer to the younger son as his brother. Another parallel between the elder son and the Pharisees is presented here, as the elder son’s refusal of accepting his brother corresponds well with the Pharisees’ refusal to acknowledge the outcasts as brothers.<sup>74</sup>

The elder son also demonstrates his self-righteousness in this response. His words indicate that he saw himself as “the model son”, but his use of the phrase “*like a slave*” (15:29) gives him away; he did not understand what being a son meant, nor did he understand what being a father meant.<sup>75</sup> And as Morris points out, “the proud and self-righteous always feel that they are not treated as well as they deserve.”<sup>76</sup> Additionally, in his self-righteousness, the elder son accuses his brother of devouring his father’s property with prostitutes. Though it is not clear how he came to this conclusion, in his own interpretation of what “*dissolute living*” (15:13) means, the elder son creates more distance between himself and his brother, declaring himself to be honorable and responsible while his brother was disgraceful, reckless, and not worthy of honor.<sup>77</sup>

It is also important to recognize what this all means for the father. In 15:28, there is the cultural implication that the father was putting himself in a position that could cause others to look at him in shame. This implication becomes true through the way he is treated by his elder son. The elder son berated “his father in a public space which would have not only been dishonoring and humiliating to the latter but also to the entire household of which the father was the leading figure.”<sup>78</sup> Essentially, he is accusing the father of “poor household management,”

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<sup>73</sup> Stein, 407.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 408.

<sup>75</sup> Morris, 267.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Green, 584.

<sup>78</sup> Burke, 226.

which is a great offense to the paterfamilias<sup>79</sup> of the household, an important cultural notion, and “is viewed in the public eye as a serious familial disorder.”<sup>80</sup> With all of this in consideration, ultimately the fact that the father allowed all of this to happen was striking, as issues of honor and shame were of considerable importance in this particular culture.

**15:31-32** Jesus ends the parable with the father’s response to the angry son. While the father’s reminder to the elder son of what he has been given (“*you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours,*” 15:31) and of the needs for celebration (“*because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found,*” 15:32) can be interpreted as some form of rebuke, “significantly, and once again, he does not take any remedial action;” yet again the father chooses to not exercise his authority.<sup>81</sup> As a result of his gentleness, “he would have been perceived as weak and unstable.”<sup>82</sup> However, in his gentleness, the father demonstrates that was of no concern to him, shining light upon the more important things in life. To him, if reconciliation between family meant social shame, then so be it because the shame was worth it, just as the heavenly Father finds worth in sinners.

Also note that in the father’s reply, he addresses his son’s concerns first and then the issue of the younger brother. He demonstrates affection through using the word “*Son*” (15:31), affirms the faithfulness of the elder brother, and accepts that he has always been at his side.<sup>83</sup> In reminding him that all he owns belongs to him, the father also emphasizes the fact that his activity nor his younger son’s return diminishes the status of the elder brother.<sup>84</sup> “In a sense, he

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<sup>79</sup> The male head of a household. (Merriam-Webster)

<sup>80</sup> Park, Rohun. *Revisiting the Parable of the Prodigal Son for Decolonization: Luke's Reconfiguration of Oikos in 15:11-32*. (Biblical Interpretation, 17(5), 2009) 515.

<sup>81</sup> Burke, 226.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>83</sup> Bock, 1319.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

has always had access to the celebration,” Bock says, as “the animals are his.”<sup>85</sup> After addressing the elder son’s concerns as such, the father then addresses the issue of the younger brother by not allowing the elder son’s complaint to stand nor by allowing the elder son to separate himself from his brother (“*this brother of yours*,” 15:32).<sup>86</sup> He also affirms the necessity of celebration (“*but we had to celebrate and rejoice ... he was lost and has been found*,” 15:32) by implying that “such circumstances should result in joy, not questions about fairness.”<sup>87</sup>

And there the parable ends, with the mention of the wonderful event in which the dead has come to life and the lost has been found. Jesus intentionally left out whether the elder son responded or not and how the younger son lived in response to his father’s love, because in leaving these points unresolved, he wanted to challenge all his hearers – Jews, Pharisees, outcasts, all alike – to see themselves in place of the characters in the story.<sup>88</sup> Anybody could represent aspects of either brother. The point is that in leaving either reaction open, hearers of this parable can be encouraged to still do the right thing, as God’s love is a continuing challenge. Furthermore, the open-endedness of the parable serves as an invitation for all hearers to join the family of God, just as the father in the parable rejected neither son and demonstrated love to both.

## Summary

Jesus would often tell stories to drive home a divine truth. In the setting of Luke 15:11-32, in which Jesus is speaking to the outcasts and responding to the Pharisees and scribes who opposed his ministry to such outcasts, he is teaching the divine truth that is about God’s all-inclusive love. With the literary context in consideration, when grouped with the other two

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<sup>85</sup> Bock, 1319.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 1320.

<sup>88</sup> Morris, 268.



parables about the lost and found, the *Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother* is interpreted to be about God's love for outcasts and sinners. It is also clear that Jesus was responding to the Pharisees as well by calling them out for their rejection of these outcasts. Because of this, people at times fail to acknowledge the significance of the elder brother in the story; it has become a minor detail that is often looked over. However, the parable is titled the *Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother* for a reason. Even when the brother is left out of the title, which is the case with some versions of the Bible, the fact that the elder brother is included in the story is significant. If the parable was just about the prodigal son and his father, and had no mention of the other brother, this message of God's love for outcasts and sinners alone would suffice, and in and of itself it would still make a great message. However, it is important to know that God's love is all-inclusive in nature. By including the brother in the story, Jesus also expresses that God's love is for people like the Pharisees and scribes as well.

In this parable, upon squandering his father's property, the prodigal son realizes his sin and returns to his father, who demonstrates love to him by forgiving him and celebrating his return, though he is clearly undeserving of his forgiveness. And in response to his brother's anger, the father again demonstrates love and expresses the need to celebrate when the lost has been found. Through the demonstration of this father's love, Jesus teaches his listeners the extent God goes to love his people, all people, outcasts and Pharisees included. The father of this parable was rejected and shamed, just as God often is, but defied the norms of his time and accepted both sons, demonstrating a love so deep and powerful. God's love for his people is the same way; regardless of the sins committed, the anger thrown his way, or how many times he is rejected, God is always patiently waiting to gladly forgive, accept, and love regardless of who you are.

## Theological Applications

I was once given this piece of relationship advice: “Never get back with someone who has cheated on you.” Studying the *Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother* brought me back to this piece of advice, which I thought was so wise for a long time. Diving into the story of God’s all-inclusive love and forgiveness made me reconsider my thoughts about the advice I received. It made me really think, “If someone were to cheat on me, would I ever be willing to let that person back in my life? And would that be the right decision?” This parable also made me think of my father, who cheated on my step-mother three years ago and on my mom many years before then. His actions caused me to see him in a new way and I have since developed an image of him that I struggle with even to this day. How am I to demonstrate love to my father who chose to run off with someone else, knowing very well how this would affect the rest of his family? These were the questions that this parable encouraged me to explore as I studied and learned about the divine truth of God’s love as demonstrated in this story. For the discussion that will follow, it is the story of my father that I would like to discuss in relation to this parable.

My father left my mother when I was in the fourth grade. At the time, I was too young to understand what was going on – all I was told was that my father was moving out and that he would still be living close to us. Being young and a “daddy’s girl,” I was unable to fully grasp the situation and my parents’ separation did not affect me much emotionally, especially since I was still going to be able to see him. I do recall thinking it was odd that my dad had moved in with another woman right away, but again I was young and I adored my father, so I did not think much of it. It was more so my father’s separation with my step-mother, the woman just mentioned, that affected me heavily. Before I go on, I should also mention that before my mom,

my father was married to someone else, whom he had three children with. So, this is possibly the third time my father has cheated on his significant other.

Now my father is living in another country with the person he cheated on with my step-mother. He literally left his home, though not his original home, just as the prodigal son left his home and family. When my younger brother found out about my father's move, he was very upset. He also made it clear that he did not want to let this new woman into his life. My half-siblings expressed similar opinions, especially as they have seen this happen more times than we have. And such reactions were expected by my father. When he told me that he was going to move, he told me he was nervous about what the rest of the family would think and was worried that his new girlfriend would not be accepted into the family. To this day, he has never explained anything to any of my siblings with his own mouth, and as far as I know, to any other family member either. To make matters worse, my father does not do much to stay in touch with the rest of the family, only giving brief responses when we contact him. In such ways, he has distanced himself from the rest of the family.

I love my father, but I want to love him without having this image of him that he is a disloyal and untrustworthy man. Because if I truly do love him, like the father loved the prodigal son, would not I be able to let go of this image I have of him? Talking about my father with my siblings do not make accepting my father as he is easy either. However, having studied this parable, I now feel the need to extend love to them in the way the father did to the elder brother. Though my father has not "repented and returned" as the prodigal son so clearly did, as other family members are already expressing attitudes similar to that of the elder brother, perhaps it is my responsibility to demonstrate God's love to them in sharing the importance of loving our

father regardless of what he has done. As much as his decisions have hurt me in certain ways, it kills me to think of him as not a part of the family.

The relationship we have with our father is certainly still quite a mess. However, I believe that reconciliation is possible. It would require repentance on my father's part and it would also require forgiveness on my part and the rest of the family. In the meantime, I wait for him, just as the father waited for his son. Being a human with my own struggles in faith, I am not able to fully exhibit the love of God demonstrated in the parable, but I am learning how to love my father more and more. I am also learning what forgiveness really looks like. I am learning to be like the father of the prodigal and his brother, and I hope to reconcile my family, as the father worked to do the same with his family and as God did with all of us.

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