



Crisis - Conflict - Stress Management: Leadership Les- sons from the Parable of Father and Two Sons in Lk 15: 11-31 - Yesu Karunanidhi

Abstract

The parable of the father and the two sons in Luke 15:11-32 when studied from the characterization point of view reveals how the characters present there instead of 'resolving' the crisis, conflict, and stress, 'manage' them pro-actively by anchoring themselves not on the persons or the processes but on principles. The interplay of the crisis-conflict-stress is studied and managerial lessons are drawn for the Christian leaders today.

Keywords

Parable, prodigal son, Luke 15, management, crisis, conflict, stress.

The Backdrop

The parable of the lost son¹- as often called - in Luke 15:11-32 has been interpreted in the Biblical scholarship through various tools and the meanings that have emerged through such interpretations are varied. Scholars by and large agree that more than a religious truth this parable

1 "Thus, the popular title 'The Prodigal Son' distorts the point of the story as his prodigality is only a detail and as the opening line makes it clear, it is about two sons and their loving father." J. P. KEALY, *Luke's Gospel Today* (New Jersey: Dimension Books, 1979) 331.

expresses universal truths of human experience and offers an existential interpretation in terms of freedom and estrangement, the personalness of life, longing and return, anguish and reconciliation.² Our present study aims at looking at the parable from the point of view of characterization, an element of the narrative analysis tool, and attempts to draw leadership lessons for us today. The three major characters of the parable - the Father, the Younger Son, and the Elder Son - represent three negative situations - Crisis, Conflict, and Stress - and present three ways of managing them.

The paper consists of two parts. In the first part the text of our study is analyzed with the tools of narrative analysis and the text is divided into three episodes based on the theme of parting, staying, and returning. In the second part the characters are studied from the point of view of crisis-conflict-stress management with the implications for Christian leaders today.

The Analysis of the Text

Let us begin with the study of the plot. Any story in text or screen has a plot. Plot is the ordered arrangement of the incidents and it can be defined as the dynamic, sequential element in narrative literature.³ The way in which the narrator shapes the plot is essential for making interpretive decisions because the narrator has complete control over how the plot is presented.⁴ The plot organizes events in a purposeful way to provoke curiosity and emotion in the reader. The way the plot is crafted also seeks to add

² Cf. I. H. MARSHALL, *The Gospel of Luke. A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1978) 605.

³ J. L. SKA, *Our Fathers Have Told Us* (Rome: PIB Press 1990) 17.

⁴ S. D. MATHEWSON, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming Old Testament Narratives," *BS 154* (October - December) 413.

significance and meaning to each event narrated.⁵ A plot may be a single plot type or a combination of more than one. Single type plot is unified and combination of plots is episodic.⁶

The parable in Luke 15:11-32 occurs in three episodes:

Episode One: Parting (vv. 11-14)

Marker: Change of locale (from Father's House to a Distant Country)

Episode Two: Starting (vv. 15-19)

Marker: Change of locale (In the Distant Country)

Episode Three: Returning (vv. 20-32)

- of the Younger Son (vv. 20-24)

- of the Elder Son (vv. 25-32)

Marker: Change of locale (from the Distant Country to Father's House)

In Episode One the characters in the play are the Father and the Younger Son. The story begins when the Younger Son asks for the share of the property - literally, 'the share (*meros*) of the property (*ousia*) that falls (*epiballon*) to me.' He is asking for an early distribution of the inheritance.⁷ The reasons for his asking are not given in the text. As soon as the Son gets the property he goes out and travels to a distant country. In no time he spends his property by living without control. "The participle is here translated in a causal sense: the way he lived led to his impoverishment. The term *asôtōs* has the sense of carelessness but does not by itself suggest sexual excess, in contrast to the

⁵ S. BAR-EFRAT, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (London: A&C Black, 2004) 93.

⁶ SKA, *Our Fathers*, 17-18.

⁷ L. T. JOHNSON, *The Gospel of Luke. Sacra Pagina Series 3* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991) 236.

interpretation of the elder brother (15:30).”⁸ That forces him to live in hunger and want.

At the beginning of the episode the younger son has everything. And at the end the younger son has nothing. His hands are full at the beginning and empty at the end. There is now a physical distance from his home and an emotional distance from his father.

In Episode Two though the Younger Son is the only character there is a shadow of a citizen of that distant country who hires the empty son as a servant and sends him to tend the pigs. “The herd of pigs represents something unclean for Jews (see Lev 11:7; 14:8). To tend the pigs of a Gentile is about as alienated as a Jew could imagine being. In the Mishnah, raising pigs is forbidden to Jews (m. Bab. Qam. 7:7).”⁹ The son fills his stomach from the husks. “The word translated ‘husks’ is *keratia*, literally ‘little horns,’ which is the name for the fruit of the carob tree.”¹⁰ There he comes to his senses. But his repentance is based on the lowest motive possible, his misery.

However, in a typical Lucan soliloquy, he rehearses a speech of true repentance.¹¹ In my opinion, more than repentance his coming to senses is a ‘homecoming.’ The son in his

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soliloquy says that he has sinned against heaven. “The son does not specify the nature of his sin, which the elder son is more than eager to do (15:30).”¹² The son wanted his father to treat

8 JOHNSON, *Gospel of Luke*, 236.

9 JOHNSON, *Gospel of Luke*, 237.

10 JOHNSON, *Gospel of Luke*, 237.

11 J. P. KEALY, *Luke's Gospel Today* (New Jersey: Dimension Books, 1979) 331.

12 JOHNSON, *Gospel of Luke*, 237.

him as one of his hired workers. “The contrast here is between a member of the family (and heir to property) and a *misthios*, a hired laborer with no claim of permanence. Torah required the payment of wages to such workers (Lev 19:13), but not a personal relationship. But even as he requests this lesser status, the son uses the greeting, ‘Father,’ which evokes quite a different sort of response.”¹³

As the Younger Son moves from the distant country - without informing the one who hired him and without giving the account of the pigs he was invested with - the Episode Three opens. Here we have two returns: (a) return of the younger son

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He sees, runs,
embraces, feels, and
kisses his son. ”

from the distant country; and (b) return of the elder son from the field. The father waits for the son at the entrance of the village. Here Luke uses the same very ‘moved with compassion’ (*splangnizomai*)

as was attributed to Jesus in 7:13 and the Good Samaritan in 10:33. The initiative is shifted to the father. He sees, feels, runs, embraces and kisses his son. The embrace literally is a ‘fall on his neck.’¹⁴ The extravagant gestures of acceptance (robe, ring, feast) are initiated by the father *before* the son has time to complete his speech and the son does not have the chance to say, ‘treat me as a worker.’¹⁵

Though the plot of the story is resolved here the narrator extends the story by reporting the return of the elder son from the field. “It is strange that nobody went to tell him what had happened, and that he must find out for himself: is there some suggestion that he was not on the best of terms with his father? Or is the point simply that he slaves away all day in the fields until the duty is complete? The son has to summon one of the

13 JOHNSON, *Gospel of Luke*, 237.

14 Cf. JOHNSON, *Gospel of Luke*, 237.

15 JOHNSON, *Gospel of Luke*, 237.

slaves to learn what is going on.”¹⁶ The elder son was angry and did not even want to go in. “Luke shows considerable psychological sensitivity here. The elder son’s anger is expressed by the refusal to go in; the father’s love is expressed by his coming out also to meet this elder son.”¹⁷ The father comes out to plead (*parakaleō*) his son to enter the house. “The verb has a wide range of possible meanings, from ‘exhort’ to ‘plead,’ to ‘comfort.’ The rendering ‘plead’ here makes good sense, especially the elder son ‘answers’ (15:29).”¹⁸ The elder son complains that he is slaving for his father. “The choice of *douleuō* reveals great bitterness. This son feels lower than the hired hands (*misthioi*); he sees himself as a slave.”¹⁹ He complains that he is not even given a goat to celebrate. “The language is again quite bitter; in contrast to the fatted calf is the *eriphos* (kid), a much more common and cheaper commodity. But notice as well that he wanted it to celebrate with ‘his friends’ - not with his father. He is alienated even though he never left home.”²⁰ He calls his own brother as ‘this son of yours,’ which reveals his angry tone and distancing attitude.²¹ The father is identifying the elder son as a ‘friend’ with whom everything is held in common.²² The story ends here. The narratee is not told whether the elder son entered home.

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He is alienated
even though he never
left home.”

These three episodes of the parable develop in a ‘problem-

16 MARSHALL, *Gospel of Luke*, 611.

17 JOHNSON, *Gospel of Luke*, 238.

18 JOHNSON, *Gospel of Luke*, 238.

19 JOHNSON, *Gospel of Luke*, 238

20 JOHNSON, *Gospel of Luke*, 238

21 JOHNSON, *Gospel of Luke*, 238.

22 JOHNSON, *Gospel of Luke*, 239.

solution' pattern. A solution is arrived at a step and the solution acts as the problem for the next step.

Problem 1		Younger Son demands the share of the property (v. 12)
	Solution 1	The Father divides the property (v. 12)
Problem 2		The Younger Son squanders the property and is in need (vv. 13-14)
	Solution 2	Hires himself to one of the citizens (v. 15)
Problem 3		He fills himself with the pods (v. 16)
	Solution 3	He comes to himself (v. 17)
Problem 4		He sets off and goes to the Father (v. 20)
	Solution 4	The Father welcomes him and a feast is arranged (v. 20-24)
Problem 5		The Elder Son refuses to join the feast (vv. 29-30)
	Solution 5	The Father entreats the Elder Son to enter the house (vv. 31-32)

To sum up, in the first part we have analyzed the text by studying the episodic plot present there and have understood the key actions of the characters. From episodic plot we derive that the actions move in a 'problem-solution' pattern.

Characterization and Crisis-Conflict-Stress Management

Characters easily become the focus of the narratee because the interaction, speech, and fate of characters reveal aspects of the ideological point of view of the narrator.²³ Therefore it

23 Cf. BAR-EFRAT, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 47.

is important to understand how the narrator establishes and utilizes characters within the narrative. Let us understand the characters of the parable because of their involvement in 'crisis-conflict-stress management.' At the end of the section we will establish how the Father serves as a symbol of crisis management, the Younger Son of conflict management, and the Elder Son of stress management to Christian leadership today.

The Father and the Crisis Management

However, we are alert and pre-cautious that the crisis does occur. A few months before when I went to my village it was reported that my god-parent lost his three fingers to a machine he was operating at the spinning mills. On meeting him he said that it happened just like that. He has lost not only three fingers, but also his income, his job, and his livelihood. He would have never imagined that morning that the daybreak would bring him this crisis. Sometimes the crisis emerges because of our wrong choice, at other times from our life situations, from our givenness, from society, and due to natural calamities. We experience both individual crisis like loss of a loved one, job, and health, and collective crisis like petrol price hike, and water scarcity.

I understand crisis as a gap between choice and decision. How? Let us understand this from the parable. The younger son has a choice - to remain with the father or to part from him. He decides to part gathering the property. Now there is a crisis in the family because of his deciding so. Again, in the distant country the younger son has a choice - to remain there or to return to the father. He decides to return to the father. Again, there emerges a crisis in the family as to welcome him or not. And the elder son has a choice to enter the house or to walk away from the celebrations. His decision is not given in the text. But still it creates a crisis in the family. Thus, crisis is "a time of great disagreement, confusion, or suffering, or an extremely difficult or dangerous point."

The father manages the aforesaid three crisis situations in

three ways:

Each one is responsible for the decision he or she makes

As soon as the son asks for his share in the property the father divides the property and gives away. He realized that his son was responsible for his decision. He did not spend his time, energy, and other resources refraining him from leaving home, nor did he send servants after to watch over him. He just let his son go. The leader must understand that each one has a right to decide and each one is responsible for his or her decision. Everyone has a reason to justify his or her decision. Then there is no point in curtailing the freedom of the other individual in decision-

My goodness is not affected by your badness

The father did not allow his goodness to be affected by his son's badness. His fullness was not affected by seeing his son's empty hands. He met his son where he was and met him with what the son had - the empty hands. This attitude is result of love and compassion which the father hand in full. In the first instance he was not affected by his son's spendthriftness. Secondly, he started 'pro-acting.' He took time to hear his son speak. The Father did not demote his son. The son's mistake and wasting of his estate did not make him a lesser one in the eyes of the father. Though he was ready to be counted as one of the hired hands the Father did not let it happen. In fact, he celebrated the return.

Kindness and compassion have not always been considered necessary components of business leadership. Until about a generation ago, the paradigm for American business was 'command and control,' otherwise known as Theory X, whose assumptions included: (a) People are naturally lazy and need the threat of punishment to make them work; (b) Kindness to employees will too often be interpreted as an individuation to slack off from the achievement of key business results. Theory Y posits that people naturally want to achieve and that leaders who exhibit kindness and compassion will not necessarily be

ridiculed or ignored the moment their backs are turned.²⁴

The father teaches us that a leader in no way be affected by the behaviors of the other. He or she must be able to stand a level above and see the situation with the eyes of kindness and compassion. For, “compassion is the quintessence of generativity. It is more than a mindset, it is love in action. Compassion is the spontaneous, consistent, helpful response to the needs, the pains, and the sufferings of others. Compassion flows from a profound sense of the interconnectedness of all people as children of God. It is central to Christian belief, it is what the second great commandment is about, that we love our neighbor as ourselves.”²⁵

Everything that is mine is yours

The father does not fall on the neck of the elder son to receive him home. Because he thought his elder son was equal to him. He was his father's second self. But he failed to realize that. The elder son felt that it was unfair from the part of his father to welcome the son who had squandered his estate. He was right in doing so because he operated on the principle of 'having more is equal to being more.' There emerges a crisis of injustice. Now, a leader who operates on principles of fairness inspires better employee performance, loyalty, and retention.²⁶ It is not enough to pursue justice. A leader also needs to reverse injustices and issue deserved rewards quickly.²⁷ But the father makes an inclusive approach. He raises his elder son to a friend's status - 'everything this is mine is yours' - all, all I have, all I choose, all I decide, all I celebrate. Thus, a Christian leader when met with a crisis accelerated by his or her subordinates may imitate the father model in managing it.

24 Cf. L. WOOLFE, *The Bible on Leadership. From Moses to Matthew - Management Lessons for Contemporary Leaders* (New York: Amacom Press, 2002) 50-51.

25 L. SOFIELD - D. H. KUHN, *The Collaborative Leader. Listening to the Wisdom of God's People* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1995) 182.

26 WOOLFE, *Bible on Leadership*, 194.

27 WOOLFE, *Bible on Leadership*, 194.

The Younger Son and Conflict Management

The Cambridge dictionary defines conflict as “a situation in which there are opposing demands or ideas and a choice has to be made between them.” To me, conflict is a gap between decision and result. The younger son decided to walk away from home with his share of inheritance. The result was a wasteful life and hunger. He was a person propelled by a kind of instant gratification- ‘I-want-it-now.’ Kenneth Kaye once said, “Conflict is neither good nor bad. Properly managed, it is absolutely vital.” Highly effective leaders identify, understand and develop swift and smart resolutions to workplace conflicts, most of which demand some level of confrontation.

Conflict is a part of life. There is simply no getting away from this fact. As a leader, as a human being, you can be sure that you’ll face relational conflicts. No leadership model exists that will eliminate disagreements or clashes of personality. In fact, the tension that comes from conflict can be healthy and beneficial to growth if dealt with correctly. Jean Varnier, founder of L’Arche communities across the world, that gives disabled people the chance to discover their true worth and beauty, wrote, “Communities need tensions if they are to grow and deepen. Tensions come from conflicts.... A tension or difficulty can signal the approach of a new grace of God. But it has to be looked at wisely and humanly.”²⁸ Effective leaders don’t ignore conflict. They manage it by creating an environment in which people are enabled to work through relational friction on a one-on-one basis. The question isn’t “Will I face conflicts?” but “How can I best manage conflicts when they arise?”

Relying upon the confidence

But the younger son managed the conflict through the confidence in his father that he could always return home. What has formed this confidence is the knowledge of his own father.

²⁸ J. VARNIER, *Community and Growth* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989) 120-121.

How often does our leadership give others the knowledge of we are?

Surrendering (to) the brokenness

What if the Father did not go to the field to welcome his younger Son? The younger son would have to wear a sorry face among the villagers. The Son of a great estate would feel humiliated, shameful, and an utter failure. But before the villagers could judge him he embraced the Son and clothed him. The younger son surrendered his brokenness to the father who welcomed him and clothed him. “A glass falls to the floor and breaks into a thousand pieces. Instantly it becomes worthless and is discarded. In the natural world a broken item decreases in value. But in our spiritual lives, the opposite is true. The more broken we are the more useful we are in the kingdom.”²⁹ “Brokenness demands death. When you live in brokenness at home, you will admit your mistakes. You will confess honestly, “I was wrong. Will you forgive me? When you are broken you will give up your rights. A broken leader will not fear affirming and promoting others.”³⁰ Since the father himself was broken he is able to understand and accept the brokenness of the son.

The Elder Son and the Stress Management

Stress in my understanding is a gap between result and expectation. Dictionary defines stress is “worry caused by a difficult situation or something that causes this situation” or “a force that tends to change the shape or strength of an object.” The elder son expected that his ‘brother’ would not return home. Even if he ever returns the father would not accept him. But the contrary happens - the younger son has not only returned home but also is welcomed well. The gap between his own merit and his father’s grace to the younger son creates stress in elder son. The archaic societies were organized

29 J. BYLER, *The Heart of Christian Leadership. Learning to Lead with the Character of Jesus* (Hyderabad: Authentic Books, 2010) 43.

30 BYLER, *Heart of Christian Leadership*, 51.

according to two 'elemental principles: first, the dualism of in-group and out-group morality; second, for in-group morality, simple reciprocity: 'as you do unto me I shall do unto you.'³¹ The elder son that the father had to behave according to the second principle of reciprocity. Since the younger son had abandoned the father, the father had to abandon and judge the younger son. The father went contrary to this principle.

Setting the bigger picture

Stress management is done by setting the bigger picture or by expanding the horizon. The father sets his elder son in the picture of the entire family. He makes his elder son own whatever he has, he does, and he is.

Conclusion: Task Accomplished and Ahead

By studying Luke 15:11-32 through the spectacles of characterization we have arrived at the following:

1. We have studied the text as an episodic plot unfolding itself in a problem-solution pattern.
2. In the process of characterization the narrator beautifully portrays the interplay of crisis-conflict-stress and the characters' ability to manage them.
3. The text serves as a model of crisis-conflict-stress management for Christian leadership today.

The task ahead is the model that we need to adopt today for Christian leadership. A parish, an institute, or an organization is animated by (a) persons, and (b) processes. A leader who manages these two becomes effective and impactful. The overriding principle that manages both the P's (Persons and Processes) is the 'principle' - 'the principle-centered leadership'

31 Cf. M. WEBER, "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans., and ed. H. H. GERTH and C. W. MILLS (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946) 323-59.

or builders of new empires)” (p.408).¹ Jesus too exhibited charisma akin to what is exhibited by the stars of today.² The charisma of the stars of today, and Jesus’ charisma is that both are conferred by followers. The difference is that Jesus’ social recognition, was not a personal objective,³ rather he was doing his Father’s will (Lk 22:42, NIV).⁴ Also, Jesus exhibited charisma different from the leaders of that time and of today. He had control over non-physical reality evident in his work of healing, dreams and visions, supernatural knowledge, the distinguishing of angelic and demonic forces, prophecy, and interpretation.⁵ This was because he was truly human, and truly divine.

The charismatic leader is called to a mission that exudes self-confidence in his ability to carry it out. Such a leader is not necessarily attached to established social institutions or plays no part in their activities. “Her or she achieves and maintains authority by putting extraordinary talents to use in the performance of miraculous feats and/or the formulation of a new ideology” (p.405).⁶ In contemporary times, the complex interplay between the leaders and the sociopolitical contexts in which they are evolving, like bureaucracy and economic interests is important. Jesus’ mission often involved his clashing with the bureaucracy of

1 Piovaneli, Pierluigi. 2005. “Jesus’ Charismatic Authority: On the Historical Applicability of a Sociological Model.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 2: 395-427.

2 Cotter, A C. (1943). “The Divinity of Christ in Apologetics.” *Theological Studies*, 4(3), 369-384.

3 Piovaneli, Pierluigi. 2005. “Jesus’ Charismatic Authority: On the Historical Applicability of a Sociological Model.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 2: 395-427.

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6 Piovaneli, Pierluigi. 2005. “Jesus’ Charismatic Authority: On the Historical Applicability of a Sociological Model.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 2: 395-427.

as Stephen R. Covey puts it.³² This approach is an ‘inside-out’ approach where a leader moves from oneself to the other as the characters in the parable of our study. When the characters embrace an ‘outside-in’ approach they would end up in being judgmental, hasty, and self-destructive. Thus, the parable of the father and the two sons as we read in Luke 15:11-32 serves as a model for crisis-conflict-stress management in Christian leadership.

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³² Cf. S. R. COVEY, *Principle-Centered Leadership* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991).

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