

## **The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11-32)**

### **Scene 1: Father divides properties between two sons (15:11- 13)**

15 <sup>11</sup> Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup> A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

### **Scene 2: Younger son squanders, suffers and decides to return home (15:14-19)**

<sup>14</sup> When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. <sup>16</sup> He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup> But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'"

### **Scene 3: Father welcomes him with an extravagant feast (15:20-24)**

<sup>20</sup> So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

<sup>21</sup> Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

<sup>22</sup> But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe-- the best one-- and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> And get the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup> for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

### **Scene 4: Elder son angers and complains (15:25-28)**

<sup>25</sup> "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup> He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' <sup>28</sup> Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

### **Scene 5: Father answers, an open ending (15:29-32)**

<sup>29</sup> But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

<sup>31</sup> Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

### Parable as a Story

- Many themes: Family relationship, self-indulgence and suffering, love and patience, joy over the return, anger and fairness.
  - Many surprises: The father agrees to divide his properties, welcomes back the prodigal son with love and joy, and patiently pleads with the elder son.
  - Many symbolic meanings: God's love and patience override human betrayal and fairness. Division, jealousy and reconciliation between siblings.
- \* What would be the best title for this story? The parable of the prodigal son? The parable of two sons? The parable of a father?

### 1. Meaning in Jesus' Ministry

- 1.1) Social context in ministry shows this parable defends Jesus' association with sinners. The third parable to explain to the Pharisees and scribes why he welcomed sinners and ate with them (15.1-2).
- 1.2) The father character represents God with incredible love. Against the human tendency to judge others, God is a compassionate Father whose steadfast love ( *τὸνhesed*) and patience are boundless.
- 1.3) The plot of surprises shows Jesus encourages repentance to receive God's grace. The prodigal son refers to tax collectors and sinners who will be forgiven, if they return home [In Hebrew, return is *שובshub*, "repent" in the Prophets] ; the elder son refers to the law-abiding Pharisees and scribes.
- 1.4) The repeated saying shows Jesus defines his mission as evangelizing the KG. For "this son of mine (and "brother of yours") was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" is reiterated (15.24, 32). The kingdom of God has come. "The Son of God came to seek out and save the lost" (19:10).

### 2. Meaning in Luke's Gospel

- 2.1) Narrative context shows Luke underscores God's joy in finding the lost.
  - All three parables (lost sheep, lost coin, and lost son) emphasize the joy over the lost found (15.7,10,24,32)
  - The father runs to welcome his son with kiss (15.20), interrupts his apology (15.21), give gifts and order celebration (15.22-24). These actions underscore God's extravagant love for the son.
- 2.2) The father's unexpected acceptance of the prodigal son shows Luke encourages sinners to repent.
  - The prodigal son's suffering (15.15,16), realization (15.17), remorse (15.18), and return (15.20) indicate how to repent.
  - If a distant country (15.13,15) suggests the Gentiles, Luke may be advocating the church's

mission to the Gentiles.

2.3) The father's answer to the elder son's complaint shows Luke wants to urge acceptance of Gentiles.

- Many readers are sympathetic with the elder brother.
- The father reassures him of his inheritance but urges him to join the celebration.
- The elder brother might refer to the Jews or Jewish Christians who rejected Gentiles entering the church (cf. Acts 15).

2.4) The open ending of the story (Did the elder son enter the house?) demands reader's personal response.

- Does the elder son join the celebration?
- The open ending challenges the readers to think how they should relate to one another in the church.

### 3. Meaning in Church History

- All interpreters read the parable allegorically as a story of grace, forgiveness, restoration and reconciliation.
- The Father represents the loving God, but each referred the prodigal son and the elder brother to different types of people.
- Prodigal Son was often interpreted as sinners, Gentiles or the apostates.
- Elder son, in relation, was interpreted as the righteous, Jews or the faithful.
- Robe, ring, sandals and calf represent different gifts or symbols such as: dignity, status, mission and celebration, etc.

#### 3.1 Early Church: Who is the prodigal son?

- 1-2 Centuries when Christianity and Judaism were parting ways: the prodigal son was interpreted as Gentiles who were converted and joined the church, while the Jews were the elder son refusing to accept his brother (Cyril of Alexandria).
- 3-4 Centuries when the Church was persecuted, the prodigal son was referred to the apostates who repented and rejoined the church, while the elder son the Donatists who despised on them (Tertullian).
- 5-6 Centuries when the Church began cross-cultural missions to the world, the prodigal son was cited as pagans who returned home to God, while the elder son Christians who did not support missions.

#### Clement of Alexandria

- *"Who Is The Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?"* XXVIII • Symbolic Interpretation: New Life
- "The best robe is immortality, the ring a royal signet and divine seal. The new shoes are not the ordinary kind which wear out but are such that are imperishable and suited for the journey to heaven.

#### Tertullian, *On Repentance*, VIII

- Contextual Application: Apostates

- Arguing against Donatists, who refused to forgive repentant apostates after the persecution in North Africa, Tertullian cited the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin, and prodigal son as “examples from Scripture to prove the Lord’s willingness to forgive.”

### 3.2 Medieval Church

- 1) Literal and historical: Parents love all their children, especially the weak one that needs extra help.
- 2) Allegorical and mystical: God loves all humans, good and bad, especially sinners who suffer in sins.
- 3) Moral or topological: We should learn from God who embodies forgiveness, second chance, and reconciliation.
- 4) Anagogical or eschatological: God will take repentant sinners back and urges the faithful to accept them as brothers and sisters. God aches for union and harmony in God’s family.

### 3.3 Reformed Church: Grace vs. Virtue

- One major doctrinal debate about salvation was sola gratia (by grace alone) or work of law?
- Reformers argued:
  - (1) The fact that the father welcomes home the prodigal son and restores his status shows God’s forgiveness and love for a repentant believer is unconditional, by grace alone.
  - (2) Reformers accused the RC Church of teaching people to earn salvation with good work by obeying the law, just like the elder son who worked hard to serve but was joyless and resentful.

### Calvin, Commentary on Matt, Mark and Luke

- Theological Reading: Grace
- “Luke 15.20. *And while he was still afar off.* This is the main point of the parable. If men, who are by nature prone to revenge, and too tenacious of their own rights, are moved by fatherly love kindly to forgive their children, and freely to bring them back, when they are sunk in wretchedness, God, whose boundless goodness exceeds all the affection of parents, will not treat us more harshly. And certainly nothing is here attributed to an earthly father which God does not promise with respect to himself. *Before they call, says he, I will answer,* (Isaiah 65:24).” (Prevenient grace of God).

### Wesley, Notes on the Bible

- Theological Reading: Grace
- Luke 15:12. Give me the part of goods that falleth to me: See the root of all sin! A desire of disposing of ourselves; of independency on God!
- 13. He took a journey into a far country; Far from God: God was not in all his thoughts; And squandered away his substance: All the grace he had received.
- 14. He began to be in want: All his worldly pleasures failing, he grew conscious of his want of real good.
- 18. I will arise and go to my father - How accurately are the first steps of true repentance here pointed out!

## 4. Meaning for Today

### 4.1 German historical approach: God the loving Father

- Focus on the father character who represents the merciful God, who displays an incredible love that stretches human imagination by his willingness to forgive a disgraceful son and restores his status as member of the family.
- Such love points to the grace of God in Christ that justifies sinners who repent and restores his dignity.

### 4.2 American literary approach: self indulgence or jealousy

- Focus on the two sons as representative of human existences.
- The prodigal son represents a life of self-indulgence that results in the painful consequences of impoverishment, disgrace and shame.
- The elder son represents a life of jealousy that shuts oneself out of relationship, fretted by rage and losing joy.
- Which way of life do you choose?

### 4.3 Gospel narrative approach: Jesus' ministry and God's inclusive love

- Narrative context (15:1-2): 15<sup>1</sup> Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."
- In response, Jesus tells three parables: lost sheep (15:3-7), lost coin (15:8- 10), lost son (prodigal son, 15:11-32). All three emphasize the joy of finding the lost (15:7, 10, 32).
- For Jesus, this parable explains to his opponents why he associated himself with tax collectors and sinners. His ministry was to find the lost back home to God!
- For Luke, Gentiles are the prodigal son returning home. Jews reject the gospel behaving like the elder son. God loves both.

### 4.4 History of Effects contextual approach

#### (1) Chrysostom

- Theme: "This parable was written to the end that sinners should not despair of returning (to God), knowing that they shall obtain great things."
- The father: This is the most touching and accessible picture of the love of God in all of Scripture outside the love demonstrated through the Cross.
- The prodigal son: The "far country" is the heart that has turned away from God! Coming to sense and returning home means his heart turns to God and finds God whose love has never left him.
- The elder son: He has obedience but without repentance. He lacks humility, and without humility there is no love.

#### (2) Augustine

- *Quaestionum Evangeliorum*, Bk 2, q. 33 (PL 35: 1344-48).
- Far country: Alienation from God amounts to a sort of self destruction and is certain to entail the disordered behavior that we call sin.

- Returning home: "That this 'return to my father' must now be taken for being established in the Church by faith, where there may still be a lawful and effective confession of sins."
- "New robe" points to Baptism, the calf Jesus' body, and the celebration Eucharist.
- This parable legitimates the liturgy of reconciliation.

### **(3) Calvin**

Calvin, *Commentary on Matt, Mark and Luke*

Still afar off: "Luke 15.20. *And while he was still afar off.* This is the main point of the parable. If men, who are by nature prone to revenge, and too tenacious of their own rights, are moved by fatherly love kindly to forgive their children, and freely to bring them back, when they are sunk in wretchedness, God, whose boundless goodness exceeds all the affection of parents, will not treat us more harshly. And certainly nothing is here attributed to an earthly father which God does not promise with respect to himself. *Before they call, says he, I will answer,* (Isaiah 65:24)."

### **(4) Artistic Expressions**

#### **(4.1) Rembrandt**

- H. Nouwen on Rembrandt
- "What gives Rembrandt's portrayal of the father such an irresistible power is that the most divine is captured in the most human. I see a half-blind old man with a moustache and a parted beard, dressed in a gold-embroidered garment and a deep red cloak, laying his large, stiffened hands on the shoulders of his returning son. This is very specific, concrete, and describable."

#### **Nouwen on Rembrandt**

"The true center of Rembrandt's painting is the hands of the father. On them all the light is concentrated; on them the eyes of the bystanders are focused; in them mercy becomes flesh; upon them forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing come together, and, through them, not only the tired son, but also the worn-out father finds their rest."

#### **Nouwen on Rembrandt**

"It seems that the hands that touch the back of the returning son are the instruments of the father's inner eye. The near-blind father sees far and wide. His seeing is an eternal seeing, a seeing that reaches out to all of humanity. It is a seeing that understands the lostness of women and men of all times and places, that knows with immense compassion the suffering of those who have chosen to leave home, that cried oceans of tears as they got caught in anguish and agony."

#### **Nouwen on Rembrandt**

"As Father, he wants his children to be free, free to love. That freedom includes the possibility of their leaving home, going to a "distant country," and losing everything. The Father's heart knows all the pain that will come from that choice, but his love makes him powerless to prevent it. As Father, he desires that those who stay at home enjoy his presence and experience his affection. But here again, he wants only to offer a love that can be freely received. He suffers

beyond telling when his children honour him only with lip service, while their hearts are far from him. He knows their "deceitful tongues" and "disloyal hearts," but he cannot make them love him without losing his true fatherhood."

#### **(4.2) He Qi: Disruption**

- The tone of the color?
- Triangular relationship among the three characters.
- Perspective of their eyes?
- Expression of their faces?
- Why a bull? Symbol?

#### **(4.3) Peggy Parker: Reconciliation**

- Duke University Divinity School
- Hands of the three characters?
- What is the father doing?
- Posture and attitude of the prodigal Son?
- Posture and attitude of the elder son?

### **Summary of Messages for Today**

- 1. Gospel. This story reminds us of God's incredible love that forgives sinners and accepts even self righteous people. We are family!
- 2. Spirituality. Between the two kinds of spiritual character and life style, which one is ours? Which one is to be blessed?
- 3. Reconciliation. This parable shows us how much God wants to restore relationship with us, and how much God wants us to reconcile with one another.

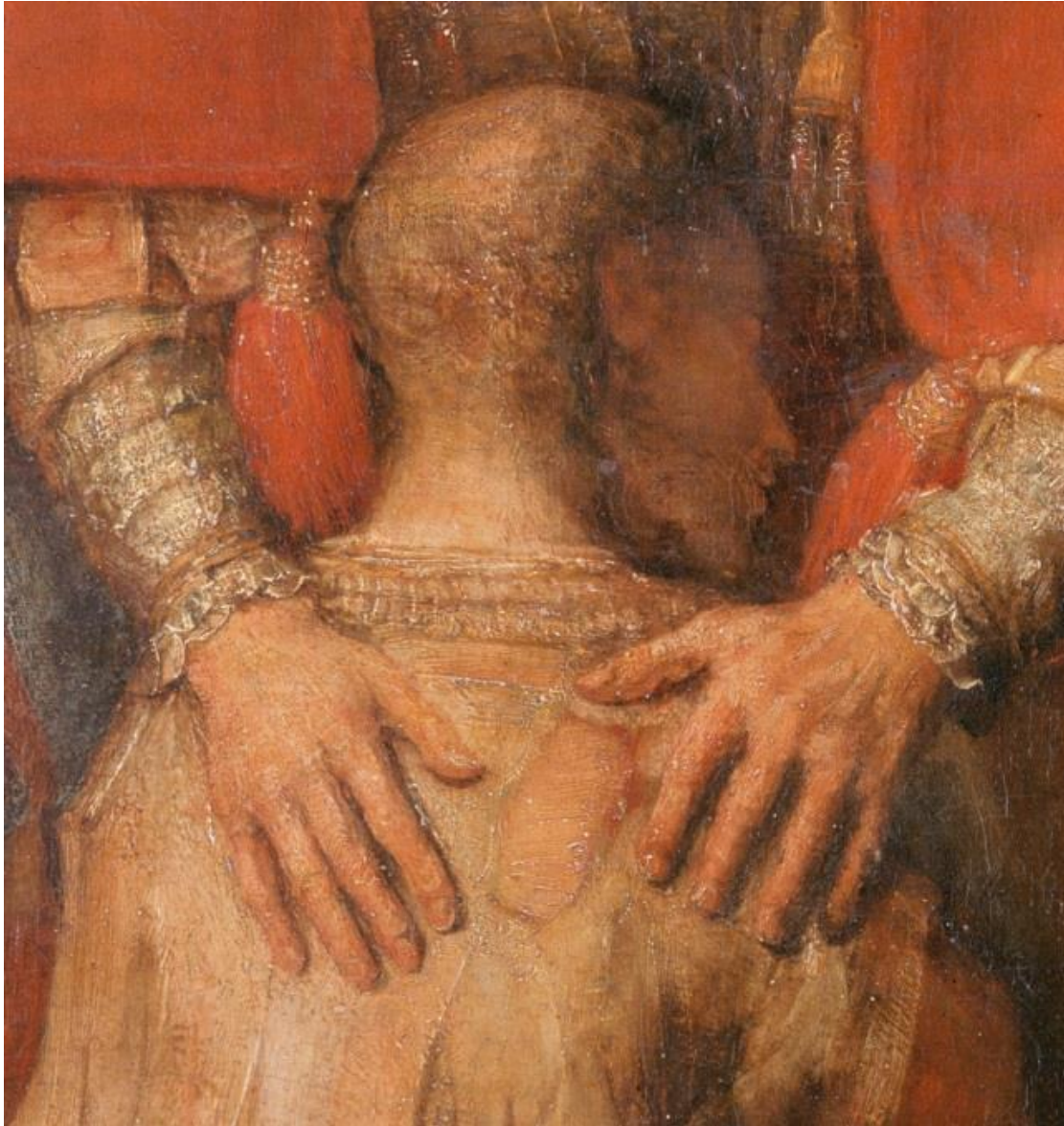
Rembrandt

The focus of the painting where it is lighted and the eyes of the bystanders gaze on is the father's two hands on the back of the prodigal.





The two hands of the father: the right hand looks like a female hand, and the left a male one.



“It seems that the hands that touch the back of the returning son are the instruments of the father’s inner eye. The near-blind father sees far and wide. His seeing is an eternal seeing, a seeing that reaches out to all of humanity. It is a seeing that understands the lostness of women and men of all times and places, that knows with immense compassion the suffering of those who have chosen to leave home, that cried oceans of tears as they got caught in anguish and agony.”





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