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## Luke 15: The Heart of God

Terry N. Barnes

*Liberty University*, [tnbarnes2@liberty.edu](mailto:tnbarnes2@liberty.edu)

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# LUKE 15: THE HEART OF GOD

Presented to  
Calvary Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the class  
Advanced Hermeneutics

by

*Terry Barnes*

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<http://terrybarnes.us>

[tb@terrybarnes.us](mailto:tb@terrybarnes.us)

## Luke 15: The Heart of God

Nearly two thousand years ago, Luke wrote a letter to Theophilus for the sole purpose of assembling an “orderly account” (Luke 1:3) concerning the truth of Jesus Christ. In chapter 15, in the midst of this Gospel, Luke recounts a contentious exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees, a confrontation where the Pharisees criticized Christ concerning the crowds who sought after Him. The Pharisees were highly offended that awful, visible sinners were coming and listening to Christ. In essence, the Pharisees’ murmurings were intended to be an affront to the character of Jesus; His moral character was diminished because of His association with these sinners.

In response to their grumbling, Jesus told them “this parable” (Luke 15:3). Yet what followed was not one but rather three stories: the story of the lost lamb, the lost coin, and what is commonly but incorrectly known as the prodigal son.<sup>1</sup>

Yet in a very real sense, these three are indeed just one story; they are merely a three time recounting of a unified message. They were told to the same audience, they have common themes, and they share the common purpose of revealing the heart of God. At the conclusion of these parables and beginning in chapter 16, Jesus tells different stories directed to a different group. These stories were told for different purposes and are clearly diverse from the stories of the preceding chapter. Truly chapter 15 is a separate and unique literary unit that ultimately builds to the hanging conclusion of the father pleading with his older son.

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, The Daily Study Bible Series (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), 205

This paper is an exposition of this fifteenth chapter of Luke. As these three stories are unpacked, it will become clear that they reveal the incredible passion Almighty God has for lost people. These are not stories about herding, housekeeping, or parenting. Instead, these are stories that paint a picture of the heavenly Father. Clearly Luke recorded these stories so that Theophilus, plus all others who would read his “orderly account,” would be able to discern for themselves the heart of God.

### *Luke 15 Chapter Outline*

- I. Conflict arises between Jesus and the Pharisees (15:1–3)
  - A. Sinners come to Jesus
  - B. Pharisees oppose the response of Christ
    1. Pharisees criticize Jesus for His associations
    2. Pharisees indirectly attack the character of Jesus
- II. Jesus responds to opposition by showing the heart of the heavenly Father through the medium of story (15:4–32).
  - A. The story of the lost lamb (15:4–7)
    1. Concern for what is lost
    2. Diligence in searching
    3. Rejoicing in finding
  - B. The story of the lost coin (15:8–10)
    1. Concern for what is lost
    2. Diligence in searching
    3. Rejoicing in finding
  - C. The story of the two lost sons (15:11–32)
    1. Lost younger son, *the subplot* (15:11–24)
      - a. Son’s contempt for his father
      - b. Son’s self-focus takes him to a far country
      - c. Son’s repentance
      - d. What was lost is found, what was dead is alive
      - e. Great rejoicing
    2. Lost older son, *the plot* (15:25–32)
      - a. Son’s contempt for his father
      - b. Son’s self-focus
      - c. Final discourse with the father that *shows* the heart of God

### *The Power of Story*

The most common and popular definition for a parable is simply an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.<sup>2</sup> Parables make use of the commonplace settings and events of everyday life to reveal abstract truth. In effect, parables place two items or ideas beside each other. The first is a well-known, practical, everyday picture of life. The other is a spiritual truth that is being taught. The comparison of these two items or ideas comprise the spiritual lesson that the teacher, and in this case Jesus, teaches.<sup>3</sup>

Parables would have been very familiar to the crowds that surrounded Jesus. Their very Scriptures were replete with such stories. One parable, found in Isa 5:1–7, equates Israel with a vineyard and through the power of story, pronounces judgment upon the people of God. Another parable is found in 2 Sam 12:1–7. This is a simple story about a wealthy man with great herds who took his neighbor's pet lamb, just to satisfy a present need for hospitality. The significance of this story lies in the fact that the prophet Nathan, through the power of story, showed to King David his sinful and wicked actions that in turn facilitated his repentance.

In Luke chapter 15, self-righteous Pharisees confronted Jesus. In answer to their confrontation, Jesus laid before them practical pictures of everyday life to reveal a profound spiritual truth. The three stories are similar in that there is something lost, that something is either found or returns, and then there is great rejoicing. The three stories

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<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *And Jesus Said, A Handbook on the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Oliver B. Green, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, vol. 3 (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, 1972), 196.

also build to a single, literary climax that directly points to the immediate context of Jesus' audience.

It would appear self-evident that Luke has grouped these three stories as a literary unit<sup>4</sup> to reveal a singular spiritual truth. Stein even notes that the three form, “a tightly knit unit with a single, strongly Lukan theme.”<sup>5</sup> However, there is some disagreement among commentators. For example, Blomberg sees similarities with the three parables, though he fails to see them as a unit with one major theme.<sup>6</sup> Yet despite obvious differences between the three stories, this paper will demonstrate that the common themes of lost, found, and rejoicing all clearly reveal a singular spiritual truth of revealing the heart of God.

### *The Background of the Conflict*

Luke 15 consists essentially of only three characters or groups that define the context and boundaries of the three parables. Jesus is the main character who tells the stories and reveals the spiritual truth.

The other two characters comprise of groups. The first group contains the publicans (tax collectors) and sinners. Luke uses this combined grouping three times in his Gospel (5:30, 7:34, 15:1). In every instance of this grouping, Jesus was being criticized for his association with them. Essentially, these people were the traitorous (tax

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 15:3, “this parable.”

<sup>5</sup> Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 400.

<sup>6</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1990), 172–184.

collectors) and the sinful riff-raff, or unclean,<sup>7</sup> who circulated on the street. This group can be generalized as comprising of lost people, though willing to listen to Jesus (whereby some were saved). In fact Luke records several publicans obtaining salvation such as Levi (5:27) and Zacchaeus (19:9).

The second character group Luke refers to consists of the scribes and Pharisees. This group claims to know God.<sup>8</sup> Essentially, they were a group of religious people who knew the Scriptures and superficially focused on God. However, Luke portrays them in a negative light.

Luke notes that the scribes and Pharisees: murmured because Jesus ate with publicans and sinners (Luke 5:30), always appear in opposition to Jesus (6:7, 11:53), and reject the counsel of God (7:29–30). Pharisees believe they are religious and in favor with God; they appear fine on the outside, yet within their hearts there are serious problems (11:39–44) and Christ proclaims woe to them. Jesus warns to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees (12:1), and portrays them as covetous (16:14). Luke also contrasts both groups, the publicans and the Pharisees, in a parable (18:10–14), where ironically the publican becomes justified whereas the self-righteous Pharisee did not.

Luke clearly portrays both of these groups in Jesus' audience as lost. The publicans and sinners know that they are lost, but the Pharisees are self-righteous and refuse to acknowledge the fact that they are lost or even might be. The Pharisees are hostile to Jesus while the publicans and sinners are more open to him.

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<sup>7</sup> Gary Inrig, *The Parables, Understanding What Jesus Meant* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1991), 12.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Throughout his Gospel, Luke contrasts those who respond to Jesus with those who do not. Jesus came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance (5:32). Jesus came to seek and to save that which is lost (19:10).

Chapter 15 then opens with a contrast between these two lost groups; the publicans and sinners were coming to Jesus while the Pharisees merely murmured. The murmuring was not so much that sinners were coming to Christ. Rather the murmuring was directed more at Jesus' response, His acceptance of these sinners.<sup>9</sup>

In fairness to the Pharisees, a superficial reading of their Scriptures would suggest separation from sinners.<sup>10</sup> However, their actions went way beyond this context. Their grumbling revealed a clear and pointed contempt for Christ. In fact, they thought themselves better, indeed were exalting themselves, not only over the publicans and sinners but also over the Son of God. Such self-exaltation over Christ was a clear sign of their spiritual "lostness." In response to this murmuring from the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus tells them "this parable" that then comprises chapter 15.

### *The Lost Lamb*

The parable begins with a rhetorical question formula, "What man of you?" (15:4). Here Jesus is speaking of the universality of all who owned a flock, say of a hundred sheep, where one turned up missing. Would not the owner leave the 99 in the open country and go after that which is lost until it is found?

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<sup>9</sup> Gary Inrig. *The Parables, Understanding What Jesus Meant*, 12

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 1.



Who cared for the 99 in the man's absence? Were they neglected and left abandoned?

Certainly each individual lamb that comprises the 99 is equally important to the man. The implication is that they were left in a secured environment, though the story does not directly say. However, Stein has correctly noted that the question is irrelevant and does not matter.<sup>11</sup> The focus is on the lost lamb, what is relevant is the searching shepherd, and the point of the story is the man's rejoicing.

In effect, this comprises the simple plot of the parable. A sheep is lost. The shepherd leaves the 99 and searches after it. He finds the lost lamb and tenderly carries it back on his shoulders, rejoicing. Then he calls his friends with the good news, so that they might rejoice with him.

In this story, Jesus takes the everyday, commonplace occurrence of shepherding and lays it beside the spiritual truth He desires to teach. Jesus then delivers the punch line. "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (15:7, ESV).

Here, in Luke's application of the parable, is where the reader will reach a snag. There is no such thing as people who need no repentance. All need to repent.<sup>12</sup> This statement was clearly intended for the benefit of the Pharisees, and in the context of Luke's Gospel, they truly needed to repent. Jesus' words concerning persons who do not need to repent were clearly intended to be ironic.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Stein, *Luke*, 403.

<sup>12</sup> Luke 13:1-5.

<sup>13</sup> Stein, *Luke*, 404.

Therefore, the point of the parable is clear. Just as the man rejoices in finding his lost lamb, so too will God rejoice over one (even though apparently insignificant) sinner who repents.

### *The Lost Coin*

The lost lamb is a story of a man searching for an animal that is of great importance to him. In the story of the lost coin, the character changes to a woman who searches for an object that is of great value to her.

As with the lost lamb, this second story begins with a similar rhetorical question. Any woman who had lost a coin would diligently search until she finds it. The same pattern that appeared in the preceding parable also appears here. Something is lost, there is a diligent search, what is lost is found, and then there is the public call to join in the rejoicing.

In the story of the lost lamb, the ratio of lost to total was 1 out of 100. Here, in the story of the lost coin, the ratio is 1 out of 10. However, the comparison of ratios is unimportant.<sup>14</sup> What is important is Luke's identical plot pattern and application of the two stories.

The punch lines, even though the words are different, are identical for the two stories. The scene is in heaven with the focus on rejoicing. This clearly ties these stories together to essentially make them one story with just two different *tellings* or different settings. The conclusion is clear; there is great joy before the angels of God (heaven) over one sinner who repents (than over ninety-nine who need no repentance).

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<sup>14</sup> Stein, *Luke*, 404.

*Two Lost Sons, the Younger*

Clearly these first two stories are essentially identical and show God's love for the lost.<sup>15</sup> Yet their greater literary function seems to be simply building to this third story, which brings Jesus' point to a climax. This parable has been known as the greatest short story of all time.<sup>16</sup> Though commonly known as the prodigal son, this title is inaccurate and misleading. The story begins with, "A certain man had two sons" (15:11). The younger son is not even the focus of the story; rather it is the older son. This is the story of two sons, and the title *The Two Lost Sons* would be more accurate.

The story begins with the younger son. This son asks his father for his inheritance early. In essence, the boy is saying, "Gee, Dad, I wish you were dead." Then, as now, to ask for an inheritance early in such a manner is clearly an insult.<sup>17</sup> The words of this younger son reveal both contempt and dishonor, truly a clear rejection of his father. Obviously, this younger son is self-focused.

The father then divided unto his sons his property. Noting the time and setting of the story, property would probably have included land, animals and livestock, various personal items, and cash.

Not many days later, the younger son gathered all that he had and took a journey into a far country. The fact that this son gathered all that he had indicates that he had

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 402.

<sup>16</sup> Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, 204.

<sup>17</sup> Inrig, *The Parables*, 16.

converted all the inheritance into cash that could be easily transported.<sup>18</sup> The fact that it was not many days later indicates that this conversion was accomplished quickly. This would mean, because time was obviously of the essence, that he dumped the non-cash assets into a “buyers” market. For example, if a parcel of land was worth 100 shekels of silver, he might have sold it for 60 (if that much). He might have sold the livestock for half of their value, as well as the other items he had. This would be simply because the buyers would not have the immediate need for the assets (though they would be always willing to take them at a discount), or they did not have the time needed to raise the necessary capital to pay for them at full market value. Capital was not nearly as available in that culture as it is today. The implication of the story is that this younger son dissipated much of his father’s wealth before he even left home, simply because he was in such a hurry to leave.

This liquidation of the father’s assets would have been an embarrassment to Dad in the community. As an illustration and to help the reader enter the story, suppose a neighbor had offered the father 50 coins for a team of oxen six months earlier. After this younger son hits the community with his “leaving town sale,” this neighbor buys the same team for 30 coins. This neighbor will be quite proud of his purchase, and will think of the father as “that old fool.” The father was a fool for either not accepting the greater offer earlier, or for giving the property to this imprudent, younger son. Certainly the younger son’s activity would have made Dad the topic of much conversation and probably ridicule in the community. Clearly, this younger son, without concern, was burning his bridges with home.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 17.

This son then journeys to a far country, outside Jewish territory,<sup>19</sup> where he squanders his property in reckless living. The implication here is that he lived a loose moral life along with worthless “good-time” friends. These friends would have delighted in helping him spend his money.

Then after this younger son had spent everything, a severe famine arose. It needs to be noted that famines do not happen overnight. It takes time for famines to occur. Their cause, if not war, is typically drought over a long period of time that spawns agricultural failure. Essentially, the younger son walked into a developing famine that was probably generated by drought. This would have meant that the prices for the commodities he purchased would have been higher priced than they normally should have been. Prices would have continued to rise as the famine, and the scarcity of items, especially food, would have become more acute. Essentially, this son dumped his property back home at discount prices, and then went to a far country where he would have paid more than normal for commodities. This escalated the rate of dissipation of his wealth.

The story paints a clear picture of the younger son. Not only were his actions morally reprehensible, but also stupid.

The younger son spends everything, the famine arises, and he then begins to be in need. At this point, all of his good-time friends would have left and he would be alone. Rather than starve to death, he moved to a hog farm where he hired on to feed pigs. This would have been demeaning to him at the least, but to have to feed ceremonially unclean animals that pigs were would have also been culturally and religiously insulting to him.

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<sup>19</sup> Walter L. Liefeld, *Luke*, The Expositors Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 983.

Also, pigs are filthy, stinking creatures. His association with them would have guaranteed his assimilation of their filth and smell. And if this was not bad enough, he was still hungry. As Jesus relates the story, no one gave the boy anything.

At this point in the story, this son has reached absolute bottom. He is filthy, he reeks, he is starving, and he has no hope or any prospects. The boy then comes to himself and realizes that his father's hired servants were far better off than he was.

The boy's coming to his senses demonstrates the first intelligent thought he has had in a long train of stupid behavior. However, his motivation is anything but pure. Hunger was his motivation,<sup>20</sup> and the hired servant position was his focus, not the father. The father was merely the geographical location for the position he wanted. He essentially had no other place to go.

Some commentators have attempted to make a case for this son's coming to his senses meaning repentance at this point.<sup>21</sup> However, the text neither calls this repentance, nor does the text necessarily imply this. As will be seen, the immediate actions of the boy indicate something other than repentance.

This son then concocts a plan. Instead of being a hired servant for a stranger and not earning enough to feed himself, why not become a hired servant for Dad where he would have plenty? But there are some problems with that plan. First of all, he has rejected his father and severed the relationship. Secondly, he has created quite an embarrassment for Dad in the community. Without question, he had burned his bridges with home. So how can he return?

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<sup>20</sup> Liefeld, *Luke*, 984.

<sup>21</sup> Stein, *Luke*, 406.

To accomplish his goals of changing employers and improving his position, he plans a speech to deliver to his father. “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” No truer statement could be made; he had demonstrated a clear, public contempt for Dad. But his plans go beyond the obvious. “Treat me as one of your hired servants” (15:18–19, ESV). Here the story reaches a serious point of tension.

A hired servant is one who would work on the property, receive his wage, then would have returned to his home. He was simply asking his father to hire him as a wage earner, similar to his position with the owner of the hog farm. This is not theological repentance; this is merely manipulation or negotiation.

Here is the problem. Because the son had rejected his father, squandered his money, and publicly embarrassed him, the son had no standing to ask his father for anything, let alone employment or wages. He did not even have the right to ask his father for a breadcrumb. Jesus’ audience would likely have thought the son’s plan as an act of incredible presumption, certainly not humility.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly the son’s desire for employment and a wage was also an attempt to save face. He, being a hired servant, would still maintain a certain amount of freedom. He would work, then leave his father’s property and still live the lifestyle he desired. It is true that the position of hired servant was a more humbling position than that of a son. But it is also true that the position of hired servant with Dad was a better position than a hired servant that slopped hogs for some Gentile in a far country. The son was merely trying to improve the awful position he found himself.

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<sup>22</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Luke*, The IVP Bible Background Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press), 1993.

To better understand this manipulation, it must be understood that there was nothing in this scheme for Dad, unless of course, this younger son arrogantly figured that it would be a thrill for Dad to have him back. The truth is, Dad would not have a need for a hired servant, for he would have been able to obtain all of the hired servants he needed, when he needed them. To return home and ask Dad for a wage would be offensive.

In today's perspective, this would be similar if a son of a wealthy man would wreck and destroy the father's \$100,000 automobile, and the son would come make the following speech to his father. "Dad, I know I messed up real bad. Make me like the boy next door who mows your lawn. Just supply the lawn mower, the gasoline, and pay me the same money you pay him." This is neither theological repentance nor humility.

This younger son, in serious trouble, found himself in the position of having nowhere else to go. So gathering his pride and his speech, he heads back home to face Dad. But here the story pivots.

When he was a long way off, his father sees and recognizes him. Dad has compassion and runs to his filthy, stinking, son. Dad then embraces him and kisses him.

But something different comes out of this younger son's mouth than what was rehearsed. He merely says, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (15:21, ESV). And then this younger son shuts up. There is no negotiation. There is no asking for a wage. The son merely throws himself on his father's character and mercy. This is true repentance.

After the son finished his speech, the text reads, "But the father said to his servants..." (ESV). There is no indication, as some have attempted to impose on the text,



that Dad interrupted the boy.<sup>23</sup> The text simply does not support that notion. If Dad had interrupted the boy, he would have been speaking to the boy. But he didn't speak to the boy; he spoke to his servants. If Dad spoke to someone else while the son was speaking, Dad would have been ignoring the boy. Yet the text clearly reveals that Dad had not been ignoring his son. What the story recounts is that Dad was hugging and kissing the boy, the son gave his speech, and Dad then turned and spoke to the servants who appeared on the scene (though the story does not recount how).

According to the story, what changed the boy from his plans in the pigpen to the reality when he reached home? The only fact stated was the sight of Dad running toward him, and then his affectionate greeting. Dad's running was not only awkward because of his clothing, but also highly undignified.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the sight of the distinguished old gentleman running would have been another source of embarrassment in the sight of any onlooker.

Dad had already been embarrassed and humiliated by his son's actions. Dad had suffered the loss of his family's name and reputation. But the instant Dad saw his son, Dad had compassion and, clearly in a very undignified fashion, ran to the son, embraced him and kissed him. It was Dad's actions that broke this younger, manipulating son to repentance as evidenced by his changed speech.

Now the son speaks words of true repentance. The father, in turn, accepts him as his son. Dad's motivation was not only clear from the text but also simple to understand.

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<sup>23</sup> John A. Martin, *Luke*, The Bible Knowledge Commentary (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications, 1983), 245.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

Dad loved the boy. And it was the love of Dad that brought the boy to the final step of repentance.

Dad then commands that the best robe be brought and placed on his reeking son, a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. Unlike some commentators who attempt to make allegorical applications to these accouterments, the story merely supports the notion that the son has been officially received as a son, they simply demonstrate his acceptance.<sup>25</sup> Dad commands that the fattened calf be killed and prepared for celebration, for “this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (v. 24, ESV). And they began to make merry.

This celebration ties this story to the lost lamb and the lost coin. The father’s joy becomes the central thread of the chapter, and the ultimate invitation to the older son.

The celebration also finishes the episode of the younger son. Many preachers stop here as if this was the story, yet this recounting of the younger son was not the plot that Jesus told. Indeed, the prodigal was merely the subplot for the story, a long subplot but a subplot all the same. The father’s statement of, “was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found” forms a literary bracket around the older son, which indeed is the main focus of the story of two sons.

This subplot with the younger son provided two functions. First of all, it provides the setting where the plot actually takes place. Secondly, the subplot tells us who Dad is. After all, the story of the two sons is a story about Dad. Dad is the hero.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

*Two Lost Sons, the Older*

The actual plot of the story now begins with the older son returning from the field. As he approaches the house, he finds music and dancing. Therefore, he called one of the servants and discovered his father's celebration for his returned brother. The older brother became angry and would not go in to the merriment. Therefore, his father came out and entreated him.

The older son then begins to accuse his father. First of all, the son points to his many years of service to his father, likening it to servitude or joyless slaving.<sup>26</sup> The son then claims absolute obedience to his father, having never disobeyed his father's command. These statements need to be considered.

Were the older son's years of working on his father's property serving his father or was it merely labor for improving his own position? Clearly at this point in his life, since he had an inheritance divided to him, he was working for himself. But did he not also personally benefit somewhat from his earlier labors even though he was technically still working for Dad? How can this labor be "slaving?" Also, slaving for a parent is more of an act of duty, not love.

Next, did this son really always obey his father? What son has never disobeyed a parent or would have the gall to claim such? And ironically, for never having disobeyed his father, the son thought nothing of opposing his father on this issue concerning his younger brother. He is hardly the obedient and dutiful son that he was attempting to paint for himself. The older son's actions indicate that his words were horribly exaggerated at best.

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<sup>26</sup> Stein, *Luke*, 407.

Next, this son directly attacks his father's lack of generosity for having never given him so much as a kid goat to celebrate with his friends. Again this charge appears questionable in light of the subplot with the younger son. The father divided the inheritance at the mere asking. Not only does the father appear generous, but almost indulgent to a fault. If this son never received a kid goat, it is because he either cannot remember or because he never asked his father for one.

The older son now chides on the younger son. First, he calls him, "this son of yours." Indeed this is true, but this son of his father's is also his brother. Clearly the older son is distancing any identity he has with his brother and pinning his brother's faults on the father, or at least the father's acceptance of the younger son. Furthermore, this younger son has squandered the father's property with harlots, in contrast to the older son's alleged loyal service. Yet the father killed the fatted calf in stark contrast with the father's alleged selfishness with the older son.

What this older son is doing is exalting himself, by use of contrast, with his younger brother. By degrading his father through linking him to the younger son, the older son was also exalting himself even over his father. The older son is demonstrating that his standards are higher and more righteous than Dad's. Furthermore, he is accusing his father of unfair treatment, thereby attacking his father's character in the process. Inrig correctly notes that the older son would much rather not have fellowship with his father than, "accept his father's treatment of his brother."<sup>27</sup> The older son's contempt for his father is now made public for any and all to see. Moreover, this son is demonstrating that

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<sup>27</sup> Inrig, *The Parables*, 23.

the only relationship he has with his father is merely visible and superficial, lacking in truth and depth.

But the father's reply to his older son reveals his passion for both his sons. The father reminds this son that he has always been with him, and that all that the father has also belongs to the son. He then reminds this son that it is indeed fitting that they celebrate the return of the younger son. He was lost and is now found, a repeat back to verse 24 at the conclusion of the subplot and now completing the bracket. And with the father's pleading, the story, and the chapter, conclude.

### *The Interpretation*

The older son demonstrated the same contempt for his father as did his younger brother. While the younger was very direct and open in his rebellion, the older was subtler. The younger, in effect, made the statement to his father that he wished he were dead. The older openly opposed his father's will, blasphemed his father's character, impinged his generosity, and he attempted to link his brother's immoral behavior to his father, as if it proved some character flaw in the father when Dad accepted the prodigal back. In effect, the older son claimed to be more righteous than Dad.

The younger son's open contempt was morally reprehensible. On top of that, the younger son also behaved in a stupid manner. The older son did not behave in a stupid fashion, but had the same morally reprehensible contempt for his father. As the younger brother was self-focused, the older was self-exalting.

The father's plea to his older son was to come and embrace his brother and accept him back, as if one from the dead. Yet there was more involved in the father's plea

than this. The occasion of the younger brother's return was merely the incident that precipitated this confrontation between Dad and the older brother. In effect, what was actually happening was the father pleading with the older brother to accept him, Dad, as he truly was. He was generous, forgiving, passionate toward his sons, and even righteous. Dad never condoned the younger son's behavior; he merely accepted him back upon words of repentance.

The only way this older brother could enter the house and embrace his younger brother was that he first would have to embrace his father and his father's will. This son would have to embrace him for who he was and to deem that what is important to his father to be more important than any seemingly higher yet artificial standard. The only way the older could embrace the younger was for the older to first establish a true relationship with Dad.

The invitation was to join the joy of the father. The older son was refusing to do this, much like the wicked servant in Matthew's parable of the talents (25:14–30) refused to enter into the master's joy. More than this, the older son was now placed in the position of instead of just saying he was devoted to his father, he now needed to demonstrate his words; his walk must equal his talk.

The story then abruptly ends without resolution. Did the older brother embrace first his father's will and then his brother? This open-ended story was clearly pointed at the Pharisees, and the answer to the question concerning the older brother depended upon them.

The analogy is clear. As the older son is to the younger son, so too are the Pharisees to the publicans and sinners. Just as the older brother believed himself to be

more righteous than the father who embraces a repentant prodigal, so too do the Pharisees believe themselves to be more righteous than a God who accepts repentant sinners.

What was being shown the Pharisees was that they were just as lost as the publicans and sinners they were murmuring at. There was a real-time incident of the Pharisees' reaction against Jesus' association with the rift-raft. Jesus then told a story, a parable, and this was laid alongside the real life event. There was a spiritual truth revealed by the story. The invitation to change was now placed in front of the Pharisees.

*Application: The Heart of God*

Jesus, when confronted by the Pharisees, told them this story, the three parables. A strong grammatical case can be made that these three stories are really one; a lost lamb in a far country, a lost coin at home, and two sons, one lost away and one lost at home. These stories were told to the Pharisees so that they might see themselves as they truly are and see God as He truly is. The muttering by the Pharisees provoked the incident. Jesus then told these stories to bridge the gap between their attitude and the profound spiritual truth that He desired to impart.

This is not a story about inheritances, parenting, or life in the far country. This is a story about Dad. As already noted, Dad is the hero. Dad has the passion, and ultimately offers the invitation to join his celebration.

Some commentators believe that because of the speech of the younger son, "sinned against heaven and before you [father]," there is a difference between the father and God. Therefore, their conclusion is that the father does not represent God. This interpretation is nonsense and is actually attempting to allegorize every detail of the

parable. The parable of the two sons is simply a story. Within the story are story elements, including conversations. Upon completion of the story, it is then laid alongside the spiritual truth that is being taught. And Jesus is teaching the Pharisees about God.

What about application today? Certainly the manipulation of the younger son is to be avoided. Most people, if not all at some time, attempt similar manipulation on God. Often it is in the form of attempting to please God, earn His favor, or earn His blessings by good works or deeds. God is not one who can be bargained with; God's love or favor can never be earned.

Not only does the younger son show manipulation to avoid, but he also clearly shows true repentance to be copied. Repentance is throwing oneself entirely upon the character and mercy of God without negotiation. The words of the younger son to Dad as Dad embraced him are clearly such words.

Certainly God's invitation to all of us is to enter into His joy, His celebration. His joy is reserved for those who repent.

But the main point of the parable, indeed the main application, is to show all a picture of the heart of God. God's passion for those who are lost is clearly revealed. Just as the man is passionate about finding his lost lamb and a woman her lost coin, so too is God's passion about lost people. In fact, it is like a certain man who had two sons... We too are to join God in this passion for the lost.

Finally, there is one more truth that Jesus showed His audience. Simply put, He answered the question for those who wonder and ask, "What does God look like?"

To answer the question, Jesus vaulted the barriers posed by the spiritual attempting to communicate to the material, of the holy communicating to the sinful, and



the infinite communicating to the mere finite. The answer of what God looks like can indeed come from this parable. God looks like a father, running to his filthy, stinking, younger son, kissing him and hugging him. God looks like Dad, pleading with his older son, to embrace his heart and enter into his joy.

Therefore, Like 15 ultimately reveals the heart of God by showing us what God looks like. To accomplish this, Jesus used the power of story from which He painted for us a portrait of Almighty God.

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