The Parable of the Prodigal Son
Luke 15:11-32
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Background & Context

♦ The immediate co-text of this parable is all of chapter 15 and is a reply to the indictment of the Scribes and Pharisees in verses 1-2 “Now the tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”

♦ Some would argue that this chapter is intentionally connected with the previous section by the author Luke and could be titled, ‘The narrow door’ (13:22-14:35) which describes how a person may come to God (by stripping off every pretension). 15:1 wraps up the previous section and 15:2 introduces the subject of the following section.

♦ The parable of the lost sheep (15:1-7), the parable of the lost coin (15:8-10) and the parable of the lost/prodigal son (15:11-32) though different in detail, all underline or develop the different shades of the same picture.

♦ It is interesting to note that the primary image employed by Luke has been God as Father (11:1-13; 12:22-34).

A father and his two sons (15:11-12)

♦ Introduction of the three primary characters of the parable.

♦ Concern with inheritance had arisen early in Luke (12:13) and memory of this account casts the younger son immediately in disparaging light. This is not that uncommon with the ‘general’ view of younger sons being seen as lazy, irresponsible, covetous and greedy.

♦ Though a smaller ‘cut’ (Num 27:8-11; 36:7-9; Deut 21:17)), a younger son would be due part of his father’s estate upon his death. To divide or request the division of the estate prior to a fathers death would be frowned upon.

♦ Interestingly Jesus observes that the estate is divided between both sons.

A son desperately lost (15:13-16)

♦ The younger son’s request for his inheritance (15:12) gives way to his departure from the family and the squandering of that wealth through “wild living” – literally “dissolutely.”

♦ “Distant country” suggests the non-Jewish world (Gentile), helped by the prominence of pigs, abhorrent to Jews (Lev 11:7; Deut 14:8; Luke 8:32).

♦ The son has not only disgraced his father (Prov 28:7) but he has gone from being the son of a wealthy landowner to that of the unclean and degraded expendable member of society (according to the social classes typical in these agrarian societies). For these people (including especially beggars and thieves) mortality rates were extremely high (16:19-22), death was always lurking just around the corner.

A lost son comes to his senses (15:17-20a)

♦ The phrase “came to his senses” on its own does not necessarily mean repentance. However, in context repentance of sinners is highlighted in the passage (15:1-2, 7, 10). The younger son’s monologue also leads him to return home and acknowledge his sin (15:18, 21). Perhaps this is what we call brokenness (spiritual humility).

♦ “I will set out” or “I will arise” (as if to come back from death - Psalm 103:4) is the central verbal form and marks the beginning of a new series of events in the movement from death to life.

♦ “Father” once again in the Gospel of Luke has been equated with compassion (6:36; 8:51; 9:42; 11:2, 11, 13; 12:30, 32).

A son desperately found (15:20b-24)

♦ Before the son can finish his earlier rehearsed confession and proposition for a new relationship with his father as a hireling, the father launches into a declaration of restoration to status of the younger son in the family.
Though the son’s sin and shame is important enough to be included here, it is his return and not his confession that makes reconciliation possible.

Again the father’s compassion, as in the parable in the Samaritan (10:25-37) and the story of the Widow (7:11-17), is central to movement in this parable.

As in the parables of the lost sheep (15:3-7 and lost coin (15:8-10), recovery gives way to celebration.

Though close to physical death, “dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” stresses the depths to which the son had fallen in terms of his family relationships and identity.

An invitation to celebrate (15:25-32)

♦ That the older son returns from the field and the mention of servants and day laborers identifies this family as a household of relative wealth.

♦ The slave communicates the requested information from the father’s point-of-view.

♦ Jesus draws attention to the response of the older son just as he had drawn attention to the response of the father. The father responds in compassion whereas the older son responds with anger. From these two responses come two different behaviors.

♦ Refusal to share in a meal is a clear statement and symbolic act of huge proportions in a society and culture where the boundaries of family and kinship are secured through the sharing (table fellowship) of a meal.

♦ “Look” or “Behold” denotes the intensity of the statement about to be made (picture a child digging their heals in).

♦ When addressing his father, he does not name him as “Father”. Similarly when referring to his brother he is only “this son of yours” reinforcing his attitude toward the familial relations.

♦ The perspective we receive of the older son is that despite appearances, he has lived in alienation from his father. His refusal to come in, failure to address his father as father, stressing his slave-hood and complaining in the midst of a party all point toward this.

♦ Just as the father ran out to meet his younger son, the father shames himself by leaving the banquet to plead with his older son, calling him “son” and conferring on him the rights of an equal – his love for both sons is the same.

♦ This “brother of yours” is an invitation to restoration. The condition is that he must receive his brother into table fellowship and celebrate his return (Luke emphasizes this as a divine necessity).

♦ Scribes and Pharisees are invited to see themselves as the older brother. The question they must ask is are they (and we) willing to lay aside their (our) own concerns for status and recognition (14:7-14) and welcome into table fellowship (the family of God) those whom the father does?

Thinking it through

What is the story you believe about yourself?

What is the story you believe about God your Father?

How does your story of how you see yourself need to change in light of Father’s story?

What do you need to let go of, what wrong beliefs need to change for you to live in and embrace the status father has graciously (unfairly) given you?

How do you feel about Jesus’ redefining of kingdom values? Is grace fair?

Where are you experiencing or in need of experiencing brokenness (spiritual humility)?

Who are the ones you are struggling to have ‘table fellowship with’? How do you need to wrestle with Jesus on this?

“It is not about getting away from it all, but getting away to it all” – Subaru Outback

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