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# THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL: Priorities (Luke 15:11-32)

*Tim Geddert*

How can first century parables have twentieth century meanings? Can age-old parables still speak and confront, shock and instruct, as they once did?

Many methods have been tried as exegetes throughout the ages have aimed to make old parables speak contemporary messages. Origin and Augustine and many followers throughout the centuries tried allegorizing them. Jülicher and Dodd and many followers throughout this century aimed to find "the one right meaning." And a host of contemporary scholars have given up on the idea of any right meanings. For them, parables are playthings. We can make them do lots of interesting things! *None* of these methods seems appropriate or adequate.

Ultimately the issue is what the parables are aiming to do to us, not what we choose to do to them. And if they are to have their effect on us, we need to do some careful listening and always be ready for surprises. Our main calling is to listen to the parables in such a way that we can enter into them and be challenged by them. We are not called to play with the parables and see what we can make them say. We do dialogue with the texts, but if our part of the dialogue includes more talking than listening, more opinions than questions, we are messing up the conversation. That is my starting point.

*To ask about  
rightness and  
wrongness  
shows we have  
not yet heard  
the parable.*

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## Interpreting Parables

My bias is also toward the canonical form of the text. We are sometimes fascinated by other possibilities, like reconstructing the original Aramaic form of the parable, or guessing what the traditions sounded like before they reached the Evangelists, or tuning in to the voice of the Holy Spirit as he speaks above and beyond the text. But the main focus should be the text itself. That is the form of the parables we have! Because the text is the central focus for me, it seems important to know as much as possible about the historical context reflected by the text. And that is also true for the cultural, sociological, economic, anthropological, and religious contexts.

Yet in all this there is always a danger, too. We might become so good at transporting ourselves out of our own situations into the first century, that we do not notice when the parables we are trying to exegete sneak up on us and kick us in our twentieth century behinds!

Gordon Fee tells the story of a Sunday School teacher who did not realize how the parable of the Pharisee and Tax-Collector sneaked up on him. This teacher wanted to present the historical situation of this parable in which a Pharisee conspicuously prayed, "I thank you, God, that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers — or even like this tax collector." For a whole hour this teacher waxed eloquent in his exhaustive description of all the things that the Pharisees of the first century were doing wrong. He ended the hour by praying, "Thank you Lord that we are not like the Pharisee in this story." Our response is of course to laugh at this unsuspecting Sunday School teacher who was caught by the parable he taught. Or perhaps we respond with our own prayer: "Thank God that we are not like this Sunday School teacher!"<sup>1</sup>

I am personally convinced that if we take seriously what the first century texts were really saying and if we read the parables in the light of that cultural and religious milieu, there will be no shortage of challenge to us in our time and place. I want to test this in an examination of the well-known parable of the "Prodigal Son" (or "Prodigal Sons" Luke 15:11-32). It is a parable, I will argue, about priorities.

The parable gives us a portrait of Jesus, though on the surface it is not about Jesus, but about a father and two sons. From the literary context (Luke 15:1,2) we know that the two sons represent two contrasting groups of people. The younger son represents the tax-collectors and sinners with whom Jesus gladly associates. The older son represents the Scribes and Pharisees who criticize Jesus for this association. The father in the story seems simultaneously to represent God, the Father, who seeks to win back into his family prodigal sons and daughters as well as proud self-righteous

ones, and also Jesus, who then (as well as now) invites all kinds of people into the family of God.

To whom does this parable speak? It is often used (inappropriately, I suggest) to confront wayward “sinners”. The parable is used to warn people about the possible consequences of “prodigal living”. We call the parable “The Prodigal Son” to symbolize this focus on the younger son. I think we come *closer* to the heart of what Jesus wanted to say if we shift the focus from “anti-sinning” to “anti-judgmentalism” or “anti-legalism”. In this approach, we focus on how wrong the older brother was to reject the returning prodigal. We come *still closer* if we recognize that the faults of *both* sons are to be taken seriously—if the parable is used to assure both down-and-outers and impossible legalists that God is willing to accept them back, if only they take the right steps. But even this, I am convinced, fails to reach the depths of this amazing parable.

There is surely more to the parable than a simple message about God accepting all sorts of people, no matter *how*, or *how badly*, they have sinned. And because we do not see more in the parable, we find virtually no applications for ourselves. After all, we would first have to be as sinfully promiscuous as the prodigal with his prostitutes, or else as down and out as the prodigal with the pigs, or else as legalistically judgmental as the older brother, before it could apply to us! And so we know exactly how the “Parable of the Prodigal Son” speaks to playboys, whose wild lives have not yet caught up with them, and to the people whose lives are on skid-row, and to judgmental Pharisees.

We know that these sorts of people are being called to change. But we see little challenge in this parable for ourselves. I mean, what are we doing wrong? In fact, it might even happen that we read this parable with comfortable satisfaction and say: “Thank God that we are not like the younger son, nor like the older son for that matter!” And as soon as these thoughts pass through our minds or lips, we would do well to watch out, lest this parable trap us!

“Well, what then are we doing wrong?” we ask. The paradox is that if we even formulate the question, we show that we have not yet heard the parable. Its whole point (I will argue) is that we stop making a priority of the issue of rightness and wrongness. Its point is that we focus our attention rather on relationships.

### **Where did the Younger Son go wrong?**

To test this way of interpreting the parable, let’s approach the parable with the question: “So what did the younger son in this story actually do wrong?”

*Was it so wrong for the younger son to ask for his share of the estate?* Is there a law against asking? The father can always say, “No!” if he wants to. Besides, he did not! He said, “Yes”. So how can we claim the son did the wrong thing by asking?

*“He packed everything up and left home.”* What is so wrong with packing a suitcase? Well, as the modern translations make clear, he did more than pack a suitcase. Where he was going he had more use for cash than fields, so he sold everything and stashed the proceeds in his carry-on luggage. But what is wrong with that? Is there a law that says one cannot sell land and invest one’s wealth in other things, like maybe friends and fun? I think the younger son might well have defended his actions like this!

*“He moved out to a distant country!”* So? Is there something wrong with that? Where is there a law saying a young man can’t move away from home?

*“He squandered his wealth in wild living!”* That is how the story continues. Well, of course we might think he should have done some better financial planning. A more mature and reasonable person would no doubt have done so. But the issue here is not wisdom and good judgment. We are talking about what he did **WRONG!** Where is there a law that says you always have to be reasonable and plan ahead? Is it against the law to enjoy life a bit?

Oh yes, there is that one line in the story about squandering his living on prostitutes. Ah, but that line comes from the older brother. Did he really know what his brother had done? Or was he just making that up? Can we really trust the judgmental, self-righteous, and maybe just a little bit jealous older brother, to describe accurately how the prodigal son had lived? Well, there probably was some truth in it. Even the younger son had to admit he had not quite lived right. But then, who is perfect? What would you expect from a rich adventure-seeking young man? Had the younger son been inclined to defend his actions, he could surely have found a way of defending even his use of the money.

*“A severe famine came over the whole country.”* And exactly at the time he ran out of money, too! Sure he should have prepared for the possibility, but how could he know that there would be an economic downturn? We can’t blame the younger son for the famine can we?

*And then the part about the pigs!* Of course that was a disgrace for a Jew, but he was not eating the meat! No chance! They would not even give him the pig food!

If we really look closely, it is pretty hard to prove that the younger son really broke any laws! Why does this young son not ask the question we tend to ask, “So what have I done that is so bad?” Why does he confess from

the bottom of his heart, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you?”

### **Relationships are Paramount**

The answer is surely that he understood what *really counts* in the family of God, and that is *relationships*! These (according to Jesus) count far more than how technically right or wrong a person lives — more for that matter, than slaving away for the father “all these years”. Carrying out commands is not the bottom line; relationships stand at the top of the priority list! That is what the older brother apparently never understood. He challenged his father with the claim, “Look! All these years I have been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders!” Maybe he was right, but unfortunately for him, that simply does not count for much! Relationships are the important thing.

Let us look at the parable again. But instead of asking, “Which laws were technically broken?” let us ask, “Which relationships were abused?” If that is the question, then the whole parable looks differently. Then neither of the sons can come up with much to defend themselves.

To ask for one’s share of the estate did not break any law. But it was still an unimaginable thing to do! It was as if the young man were complaining to his father, “You are living too long. I do not want to wait any more! I want to get something out of life *now*. I do not want to wait until you are dead!”

And the older brother did not do much better, when he later complained, “all these years I have been slaving for you!” “Look how long I have been waiting to become the boss! How much longer do you intend to live, Dad?”

The issue is not obeying commands. The issue is relationships, and the relationship to their father was disdained by both of the sons.

And the relationship *between* the two sons was no better. The older son accuses his father, “This son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, and you kill the fattened calf for him!” “Your son”—as if he wanted to make things clear. He’s not my brother, not any more. If you have not rejected him by now, I sure have.

Of course the younger son may be said to have deserved this rejection. Both sons knew what would happen if the inheritance was divided after the death of the father. The older brother would get two portions and the younger son only one. That was all regulated by the inheritance laws. Both knew as well that when a father decided to divide up the property while he was still alive, it was so that he could divide things fifty-fifty. The younger son had dared to beg for that! And so he ended up with a considerably larger

portion of the inheritance than he would otherwise have been able to get! Of course he had not actually broken a law, but he had sure put a strain on family relationships.

And what about the other things he did—selling the land, moving away, wasting the property? That was unheard of in that culture. Impossible. If a father chose to divide up the property while he was still alive, it was taken for granted that the son would support the parents in their old age—so taken for granted, they did not even need laws to regulate it! The younger son had acted disgracefully. Actually both of them had! The difference between them was that the younger son recognized what he had done and came back to repent.

This parable is not finally about how terrible things can become for those who fall into sin. It is rather about how important it is to preserve loving relationships and when necessary rebuild the ones that break down.

We have always known that this parable portrays a young man who sinned immeasurably, reached the bottom, and finally came home totally dependent on the forgiveness of the Father. But exactly how he sinned, what it meant to hit the bottom—here is where the parable challenges us to revise our thinking. In terms of breaking laws, the younger son is far less guilty than we might suppose. Where he fell short of the mark was in relationships. That is surely why his confession acknowledges his sin “against heaven and against you, father!” The issue is not objective guilt, but broken relationships.

If this parable is going to speak to us, we too need to move beyond questions of objective guilt. If the parable provokes us to ask only, “What have I done wrong? Which law did I break?” then we will probably be able to escape the force of this parable. Then it turns out to be about other people, prodigals, down-and-outers, ultra-legalists. But if we ask the far more important questions: “How are things between me and my Father?” “How are things between me and my brothers and sisters?” then this parable can still confront and challenge and, depending on our response, condemn or console.

Of course for most Christians it is more comfortable to divert the whole topic to moral correctness. It is so much easier to maintain a blamelessness before the law, or measure how hard we have slaved in the fields, as the older brother did! And when we do, we run the risk of siding with the Pharisee in that other parable, who thanked God he was not like the tax-collector he despised.

Even to seriously pose the question, “How does this parable speak to me?” might be taken as a clue that our focus is on self-justification and technical correctness, rather than on intimacy with the Father and with our siblings in his family.

## A Focus on the “Running” Father

All this time, we have looked at the two brothers and their struggle with priorities. As soon as we identify the real issue, the issue of relationships, then it becomes imperative that we also cast a glance at the often forgotten father in this parable. Some have tried to centralize the father in the parable by re-naming it, “The Parable of the Waiting Father”. I will suggest another title: “The Parable of the Running Father.” The reason will become clear if we pose one more question to this parable: How far was this father willing to go, how much did it cost him, to restore the broken relationships in his family?

Here we get some help Professor Kenneth Bailey, though perhaps it would be more appropriate to call him Missionary Kenneth Bailey.<sup>2</sup> As a professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, one of the things he did was to interpret the parables so that they might speak to his students and to his Moslem teaching colleagues. And as a missionary to Arab peasants, he sought to preach the Gospel in the small farming villages around Jerusalem.

The “Parable of the Prodigal Son” was one that Kenneth Bailey often used to share the good news of Jesus. And since these Arabs have a culture even today that is remarkably similar to the culture of the Jews in Jesus’ day, Kenneth Bailey sometimes gained insights into the significance of this parable from the Arab farmers with whom he shared the Gospel—insights he could never have gained in the university library.

Bailey would slowly share the parable and then watch closely how the hearers would respond. To them it was self-evident that this parable was about relationships.

These people were not asking, “Was it legal or illegal for the younger son to ask for his share of the inheritance?” Their question was, “How could a son bring such shame on himself and his family? How could he take advantage of family relationships like that?”

These people did not ask, “Was it legal or illegal to sell the land and move to another country with the money?” Their question was more like, “How could anyone treat his family so shamefully?”

And so it went through the entire story. But the biggest surprise of all was the reaction that Kenneth Bailey observed as he told the part of the story where the Father ran to meet the returning prodigal. His hearers responded in amazement: “The father, too? Would he also bring shame on himself?”

“How’s that?” asked Bailey.

“Because an old man would not run!”

“Why not?” asked Bailey.

“Because he would have to lift up his robe!”

Kenneth Bailey had often been troubled when his colleagues at the university challenged his claim that God's forgiveness was a costly thing, paid for by God's own grace. They had often replied, "But just look at the 'Parable of the Prodigal Son'. There the father simply pronounced a word of forgiveness. It did not cost anyone anything!"

Suddenly Kenneth Bailey understood. The prodigal son is on his way back home! What can he expect from the people of the village? They will mock him, laugh at him, scorn him. The children will throw stones at him or spit at him. Some will turn their backs. This young man who brought so much shame on his family will never again find his place in the village.

But suddenly the people of the village see something totally unexpected. The father who was so scorned by his younger son, does something himself that will make *him* a laughingstock. He picks up his garment and runs! He is making a fool of himself. That is unheard of for a man his age in that culture. Now the children will mock him, too! And so these two, father and son, come together, both objects of scorn, back into the village. The father was willing to sacrifice his own honor, so that his son would not have to come home alone in disgrace. Suddenly Kenneth Bailey gained new insight, not only into this parable, but into the whole New Testament message of grace. Grace is a loving Father taking on our shame and exchanging it for his glory!

Yes, it did cost God something, *his honor*. And that, ultimately, is what the parable of the Prodigal Son is about. It is about a prodigal son recognizing the priority of relationships. But even more it is about a Father for whom relationships are so important, he is willing to risk his honor, willing to submit to scorn, willing to break all the rules of propriety, if only relationships with the sinner can be rebuilt.

And that is why the parable is perfect in the context of Jesus eating with tax-collectors and sinners. And that is why the parable continues to challenge and confront in all cultures and all centuries, as long as there are people who scorn a relationship with God, and as long as there are people still learning that such a relationship is infinitely more important to God than both being technically morally correct and than slaving away in our Father's vineyards.

A loving relationship with us was more important to our heavenly Father than defending his own honor was! And he waits patiently until a loving relationship with him is more important to us than defending our honor! The sooner we stop defending ourselves with questions like, "So what have I actually done wrong?" and start asking the really important questions, "How is it between me and God? How is it between me and my brothers and sisters?", the sooner we hear God saying to us, "All that I have

is yours!”

To be sure this parable speaks to the down-and-outers, to playboys and to those who proudly claim, “I have never disobeyed a single one of your commands.” But it also has a powerful message for all of us who find ourselves somewhere between the extremes. God wants all of us to receive his boundless grace and join him at his banquet table, enjoying and celebrating relationships and knowing that these please him infinitely more than being good and slaving away in his fields.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Fee, Gordon D. and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth*. Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1982, p.134.

<sup>2</sup>Bailey, Kenneth E. *The Cross and the Prodigal*. St. Louis: Concordia, 1973, pp 54, 55.

## PARABLES AND MEANING: A Response

*John Vooy's*

A young man left the tiny island of Barbados in order to seek his fortune in New York city. He apparently did rather well, but refused to send money back to his destitute parents. Every time he got a promotion, his letters would boast, “Mom, I just got another feather in my cap!” After a while, however, his fortunes changed and he became poverty stricken.

In his misery he longed to return home, so he wrote his parents asking them to send him money for plane fare. He received this reply: “You know all those feathers you talked about having in your cap? Well, just stick them in your posterior and fly on home!” (Adapted from Wickham 1994: A16).

Here is a “prodigal son” story from the West Indies with an unexpected “punch-line”, yet it shows that parables are still being used to hammer home a point, and it also shows that they are just as fascinating to people today as they were in Christ’s day.

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