

The Prodigal Father

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Introduction

Dante described Luke as the evangelist of Christ's gentleness and compassion.¹ Luke's gospel does indeed contain a number of passages about compassion, and one of these, the "pearl of all parables," the "gospel within the gospel,"² is the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). But is it really *the parable of the Prodigal Son*? Many biblical scholars take issue with this title and suggest alternatives, such as the Lost Son, the Two Sons, or more often the Merciful Father or the Waiting Father.

At first the story appears quite straightforward and easy to understand. Its true meaning can be obscured, however, by at least four commonly held fallacies, which suggest that

1. it is a parable about a *prodigal son*, so the main character is the younger son;
2. the younger son is a prime example of a repentant sinner who "comes to his senses," regrets his past, and confesses his sin;
3. the father in the story represents "God the Father";
4. the parable's message is aimed primarily at the "tax collectors and sinners."

However, although each of these assumptions contains a grain of truth, we will gradually refute each one of them.

There is an amusing passage in Graham Greene's *Monsignor Quixote*,³ in which Father Quixote is discussing Luke's gospel with the Communist mayor, Sancho, who manages to turn the familiar story completely inside out:

"A very beautiful parable," Father Quixote said with a note of defiance. He felt uneasy about what was to come.

"Yes, it begins very beautifully," said the Mayor. "There is this very bourgeois household, a father and two sons. One might describe the father as a rich Russian kulak who regards his peasants as so many souls whom he owns."

"There is nothing about kulaks or souls in the parable."

"The story you have read has been probably a little corrected and slanted here and there by ecclesiastical censors."

"What do you mean?"

"It could have been told so differently and perhaps it was. Here is this young man who by some beneficent trick of heredity has grown up against all odds with a hatred of inherited wealth. . . . The son feels stifled by his bourgeois surroundings—perhaps even by the kind of furniture and the kind of pictures on the walls, of fat kulaks sitting down to their Sabbath meal, a sad contrast with the poverty he sees around him. He has to escape—anywhere. So he demands his share of the inheritance which will come to his brother and himself on their father's death and leaves home."

"And squanders his inheritance in wild living," Father Quixote interrupted.

"Ah, that's the official version. My version is that he was so disgusted by the bourgeois world in which he had been

brought up that he got rid of his wealth in the quickest way possible—perhaps he even gave it away and in a Tolstoyian gesture he became a peasant.”

“But he came home.”

“Yes, his courage failed him. He felt very alone on the pig farm. There was no branch of the Party to which he could look for help. *Das Kapital* had not yet been written, so he was unable to situate himself in the class struggle. Is it any wonder that he wavered for a time, poor boy? . . . Oh, he is welcomed home that’s true enough, a fatted calf is served, he is probably happy for a few days, but then he feels again the same oppressive atmosphere of bourgeois materialism that drove him from home. His father tries to express his love, but the furniture is still hideous, false Louis Quinze or whatever was the equivalent in those days, the same pictures of good living are on the walls, he is shocked more than ever by the servility of the servants and the luxury of the food, and he begins to remember the companionship he found in the poverty of the pig farm. . . .

“After a week of disillusion he leaves home at dawn (a red dawn) to find again the pig farm and the old bearded peasant, determined now to play his part in the proletarian struggle. The old bearded peasant sees him coming from a distance and, running up, he throws his arms around his neck and kisses him, and the Prodigal Son says, “Father, I have sinned, I am not worthy to be called your son.”

This amusing attempt at “interpretation” shows that when a text is approached with closed ears and the mind already made up, God’s word can quickly and easily be twisted to suit our own ideas. But we should not change God’s word to suit us—the word should, instead, transform us.

The Context of the Story

When interpreting any parable, knowing the context is paramount, and this includes knowledge of both the setting and the intended audience. The question the Pharisees had asked at the banquet at Matthew the tax collector's house—"Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" (Luke 5:30)—returns here with fresh significance. The Pharisees once more reproach Jesus for welcoming sinners and eating with them (see Luke 15:2), and Jesus responds by telling them three parables of "the lost"—the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Prodigal Son (see Luke 15). The common theme in all three parables in Luke chapter 15 is rejoicing at finding something or someone that had been "lost," and this rejoicing is then experienced to the full at a banquet for the "sinners."

But for whom is this parable primarily intended? Is Jesus perhaps telling it to sinners? The answer can be found in the text itself: "So he told *them* this parable," and in this case "them" refers to the "grumbling" Pharisees (15:2, 3). So in actual fact it is not so much an appeal to sinners as to the hard-hearted righteous. The "sinners" have already been rejoicing at being

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together with Jesus; they have already experienced the return home. They did not need to hear a figurative story because they were already experiencing the reality of being readmitted as “sons.” Instead, it was the hard-hearted and self-righteous, full of anger and bitterness and refusing to go in to celebrate, who needed to hear the call to return to the father’s house.¹

The final section of the parable also shows that the intended hearers are the “righteous” who believe that they—like the elder son—have never broken a single rule. It is the closing words of biblical passages that often betray the writer’s intention, and this parable does not conclude with the younger son’s welcome home, but with the father’s conversation with the elder son. Furthermore, the conversation is left open-ended: it is up to the hearers, the Pharisees, who grumble like the elder son, to make their own response to Jesus’ invitation. The banquet is for them also, but only on condition that they accept the “sinners” as their brothers.

Jesus responds to this grumbling by explaining, through the parable, his attitude toward the common sinner, symbolized by the younger son. The father in the parable does not, therefore, first and foremost symbolize God the Father, but Jesus Christ himself. Because the parable explains and defends Christ’s attitude toward sinners, it is Christ who is the “merciful father.”² Christ, through his concern for and kindness toward those who go astray, reveals God himself, who always rejoices in finding “the lost.” Furthermore, in light of the statement, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9), we see that Jesus himself embodies the actions of God the Father, and therefore that the parable applies only in the second place to the heavenly Father.

The Structure of the Parable

The parable is structured as a diptych, a double picture, through which the behavior of both sons is intentionally thrown into contrast.¹ The introduction is followed by two main sections:²

1. Verses 12-24 (part A)
2. Verses 25-32 (part B)

The parable does not, therefore, have only one climax, but two: the banquet for the younger son and the conversation between the father and the elder son. It is on this second climax that the emphasis is laid and where the real intention of the evangelist is revealed.³

Introduction: The father and his two sons
Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. 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.

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A. The younger son	A'. The elder son
1. Situation	
<p>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. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 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. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.</p>	<p>Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.</p>
2. Realization	
<p>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! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."'</p>	<p>He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.'</p>
3. Reaction	
<p>So he set off and went to his father.</p>	<p>Then he became angry and refused to go in.</p>

B. The father and the younger son	B'. The father and the elder son
1. The father's initiative	
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.	His father came out and began to plead with him.
2. The sons' attitudes	
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.'	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. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'
3. The father's reaction	
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. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate."	Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 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.'"