

The Prodigal Son: The Story of Justice and Mercy

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Introduction

God's boundless act of mercy is seen and expressed clearly in the Bible. This is evident in many passages both in the Old Testament and New Testament. The parable of the prodigal son is one of the parables of the "lost and found" as seen in Luke 15:1-32. "The necessary framework for understanding these three parables of the lost is provided in 15:1-2".¹ In these two verses, we see a contrast on how two groups of people, namely, the tax collectors and sinners, on the one hand, receive, and the Pharisees and the Scribes, on the other hand, reject the gospel of Jesus. Jesus tells these three parables as a response to the complaint by the leaders on how Jesus associates with the "lost ones". The story of the prodigal son is one of the most prominent stories given by Jesus on God's forgiveness and mercy in the gospels. It is a story of loss and restoration, a story of compassion, a story of forgiveness and mercy.

In history, the church has taken the Bible as its basis to express God's mercy. This is another opportunity for the church to bear witness to Christ in the world today. As we approach the end of the Jubilee year of Mercy and within the context of the general theme of this convention, namely, *Mercy and Justice in the Bible*, we have decided to choose the above topic to reflect and contribute on this important theme.

1. God's Act of Mercy: The Old Testament and the New Testament

1.1 The Old Testament

Amongst the many attributes of God, mercy, in a special way, portrays the nature of God, and it stands out clearly. Mercy is closely related to compassion in the bible. Three Hebrew root words are used in the OT for mercy or closely associated with it, namely:

(i) *Hesed*: This word has a range of meaning. It refers to the kind of love, which is mutual and dependable, for instance, in marriage relationships, bond of friendship etc., "It both initiates and characterizes the covenant bond between Yahweh and the people (cf. Exod 20:6; Deut 7:9), between Yahweh and David (cf. 2 Sam 7:15; Psalm 89). It is a way of defining the covenant between God and His people (cf. Exod 34:6-7; Mic 6:8). *Hesed* also implies action on the side of God and humans (cf. Gen 2:12.14; 2 Sam 2:5). It is mutual and enduring (Psalm 136; Hos 2:20-22; Isa 54:8).² By and large, "In the OT, mercy/loving-kindness is associated with the covenant obligation between God and humans".³ God, as a result of his mercy, is ever faithful to his covenant and humans are also called upon to be merciful. "Divine and human mercy are

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (A Michael Glazier Book; Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 239.

² Joseph Komonchak *et al.*, *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Bangalore, India: Theological Publications, 2011), 650.

³ Paul Achtemeier *et al.*, *Bible Dictionary* (Bangalore, India: Theological Publications, 2009), 674.

closely associated with Justice and righteousness because all refer to behaviour appropriate to a relationship”.⁴

(ii) *rahamim*: “It designates ‘womb-love’, the love of mother (and father) for a child (cf. 1 Kings 3:26; cf. Hos 2:6), love of brothers and sisters who have shared the same womb (cf. Amos 1:11)...It is a word frequently predicated to Yahweh who has mother-love (cf. Isa 49:15; Jer 31:20) or father love (Psalm 103:13; Isa 63:15-16) for Israel. The womb-love of Yahweh leads to forgiveness of the wayward children”.⁵

(iii) *hen/hanan*: Originally it means grace or favour. It is a free gift and no mutuality is expected or implied. This often occurs between unequal partners (cf. Gen 6:8; 39:4; Num 6:25; 1 Sam 16:22; Exod 33:12-17; 34:9; 2 Sam 12:22. Favour and blessing: Jon 4:2; Psalm 62:2).⁶

The graciousness and richness in God’s mercy is portrayed strongly in the OT, the most prominent amongst such passages is Exod 34:6 (cf. also Psalm 100:106; 103:8; 107; 118; 136; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jon 4:2). Israel is also called upon to reciprocate this gesture of God’s mercy as beneficiaries of divine mercy (cf. Mic 6:8. Hos 4:1; 6:4-6). God has been the initiator of mercy and reconciliation, He has interest in humans, this is the image of our loving father, and humans, in turn, are called upon to reciprocate this gesture.

1.2 The New Testament

The NT concept of Mercy is closely related to the OT notion. God is seen to show mercy through his son Jesus Christ and humans are called upon to emulate this. Those who show mercy receive mercy (cf. Matt 5:7; 9:13). The need for humans to show mercy to one another is widespread in the NT, and showing mercy, especially to the needy, can also not be overemphasised (cf. Luke 10:37; 17:13; 18:38).

There are three Greek words, which portray the mercy of God, though they do not correspond exactly to the three Hebrew words discussed. They are: *eleos*, mercy which is close to *hesed* (cf. Hos 6:6; Matt 9:13, 27; 12:7; 15:22; 17:15; 20:30, 31). Secondly, *oiktirmos* sympathy, grief, close to *raham*, *rahamim* (*connection to parental love is maintained*), thus father of mercies (cf. 1 Cor 1:3). Thirdly, *splanchna* connotes inner organs, e.g., liver, kidney, heart. The ancients believed the emotions are seated in the lower organs. This third one is associated with *raham*, *rahamim*. Jesus feels compassion for the crowd, the sick etc. (cf. Matt 9:36; 18:27; 20:30; Mark 1:41; 9:22; Mark 1:41; 6:34; 8:2; 9:22; Luke 7:13; 10:33; 15:20; Phlm 12:20).⁷ Another close usage is found in Matt 9:36, where the word for compassion used is *splagchnizomai* meaning “to be moved in one’s bowels”, in the sense that Jesus’ heart went out to the people.⁸

In the NT, the mercy of God is salvific and it is seen in God sending his son (cf. Luke 1:58; Eph 2:4; Rom 11:30-32). God’s mercy will be manifested in the final Judgement (cf. Luke 16:24; Phil 2:1; Col 3:13; Jam 2:1; 2 Tim 1:18). Also, Luke’s interpretation of Lev 19:2: “Be holy because I the Lord your God am holy” is seen in the light of God being merciful, thus: “be merciful just as your father is merciful” (Luke 6:36).

⁴ Achtmeier *et al.*, *Bible Dictionary*, 674.

⁵ Komonchak *et al.*, *New Dictionary of Theology*, 650

⁶ Komonchak *et al.*, *New Dictionary of Theology*, 650.

⁷ Komonchak *et al.*, *New Dictionary of Theology*, 650.

⁸ Leland Ryken *et al.*, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 548.

In the Pauline letters, God is the father of mercies and He is abundantly rich in mercy (cf. Eph 2:4-5; 2 Cor 1:3). The letter to the Hebrews portrays Christ as the faithful and merciful high priest who became like his brothers (cf. Heb. 2:17). And we are further called upon to approach God's throne where we shall receive mercy (cf. Heb 4:16). Formerly the gentiles had not received mercy but now they have (cf. 1 Pet 2:10; cf. Hosea 1:6, 9; 2:1, 23).

Mercy is also rich in many extra biblical sources, for instance: 1 Clem 9.1; 23.1 "...beg for God's mercy". Also in Did 5.6, Mercy is demanded of Christians. Mercy should be shown to the poor and weak in the society. Did 5:2 warn that those who have no mercy on the poor are condemned.

2. Theological Analysis of the Story of the Prodigal Son

There are basically three main characters in the parable of the prodigal son, namely: The Father, the elder Son and the younger Son. We shall examine the three characters in the following sequence: the younger Son, the elder Son then conclude with the Father.

2.1 The Younger Son

By right the younger son should inherit some property but not as much as the elder brother. The basics of Jewish inheritance law are contained in the OT (cf. Num 27:8-11; 36:7-9; Deut 21:17). There is also evidence of the disposition to ask for property prior to one's Father's death (cf. Tob 8:21; Sir 33:20-24). The case of the prodigal son asking his share of the father's property is, however, negative and further implies his rejection of his family.

The younger son rejects his family and goes to a distant country. "'A distant country' already suggests the non-Jewish world, and this identification is helped along by the prominence of pigs, abhorrent to Jewish sensibilities, in the story".⁹ As it is stated in the story, he lived a careless and useless life. The Greek word *asotos*, as used in the sense of carelessness, does not necessarily mean sexual excess as the elder brother interpreted it.

After squandering all he possessed, he found himself in a reckless situation. "To tend the pigs of a Gentile is about as alienated as a Jew could imagine being".¹⁰ This tragic experience and predicament made him think of the past and compared that with the present. He came to himself in a sense. "The feeling of total loss brings the young man to himself (v. 17) and teaches him to accept the limitations and bounds of life".¹¹ He recognises his loss of status. Coming to one's senses implies coming back on the path of reasoning. He makes a fundamental decision by saying, "I will arise and go to my father". This is the beginning of ensuing actions in which his status will be restored, just as his father described his return as one from death to life. On his return he still addresses his father as father. He proposes to be considered not as a member of the family but a hired labourer with no claim of permanence.

2.2 The elder Son

The Elder son clearly shows or expresses self-righteousness and dissociates himself from his father. "His refusal to enter his own home is also a refusal to share in the meal, a symbolic act

⁹ Joel B Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Sixth Impression Edition; Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997), 580.

¹⁰ Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 237.

¹¹ William Farmer *et al.*, *The International Bible Commentary* (An Ecumenical Commentary for the 21st Century; New Delhi, India, 1998), 1486.

of gargantuan proportions in a culture where kinship boundaries are secured through the sharing of food”.¹² He maintains that he has never ignored his father’s rules or transgressed his commandments. The elder son’s attitude is comparable to the attitude of the arrogant Jewish authorities. The “Scribes and Pharisees are invited to find themselves represented in the parable as the elder son – responsible and obedient; it would seem, but failing in their solidarity with the redemptive purpose of God”.¹³

2.3 The Father

The father’s response and attitude clearly contrasts that of the elder son. Luke’s Gospel sees God as Father (cf. 11:1-13; 12:22-34). “Against the interpretive horizons of the Roman world, wherein the characteristic attributes of the father as the *paterfamilias* are remembered especially in terms of authoritarianism and legal control, the picture Luke paints is remarkable for its counteremphasis on care and compassion”.¹⁴ The father’s welcome to the son is expressed in the father kissing the son (compare this with Gen 45:14-15; 46:29; Acts 20:37). “The embrace, the kiss, and the gifts of robe, ring, and sandals –these are all emblematic of the son’s honourable restoration to the family he had snubbed and abandoned”.¹⁵ The father’s response restores the son’s status as against the son’s expectations. The father’s statement “this brother of yours” while speaking to the elder son is an invitation to restoration.

God’s mercy is boundless. The role played by the father in the story is akin to God’s mercy towards humanity. God respects human freedom. He gives us freedom to choose between good and evil. In a similar way, when the younger son requested a share of the property from the father, the father did not refuse. The readiness of the father to bequeath the property to the son shows the freedom God has given us.

The father on sighting his son from a distance, ran to him, threw his arms round him and kissed him. He ordered that the best robe be given him, a ring, pair of shoes, ordered that a calf be slaughtered and declared a celebration. God does not want anyone be lost. We, on our part, are to make efforts. God shows us the interest he has in us and gives us his grace. And there is always a point of encounter between God and us.

3. Justice and Mercy: An interaction

The Greek *dikaioσύνη* is “the quality, state, or practice of judicial responsibility with focus on fairness, justice, equitableness, fairness”.¹⁶ Can we say that the father in the story is just, *dikaios*, in this sense? God can decide to be generous in his mercy and goodness and lavish it as he wishes on whosoever he wishes (cf. Matt 20:15). Therefore, the generosity of the father in the story should not be faulted. Humans too are called upon to act in like manner. “For a Christian, love of neighbour and justice cannot be separated. For love implies the absolute demand for justice, recognition of dignity and the right of one’s neighbour”.¹⁷

¹² Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 584-585.

¹³ Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 586.

¹⁴ Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 579.

¹⁵ Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 583.

¹⁶ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Third Edition, rev. and edited by Danker, Frederick William; Chicago: University Press, 2000), 247.

¹⁷ Komonchak *et al.*, *New Dictionary of Theology*, 549.

As a result, love should be the guiding principle. “Love informs all other virtues, lives in them, is their soul force. Love transforms justice from within”.¹⁸ The love of God is expressed in his mercy. Love and mercy cannot be divorced from each other. “God’s love and his mercy interact. They are themselves definitively and irrevocably present in the world in the mercy of God’s incarnate Word (cf. Heb 2:17)”¹⁹ In the story of the prodigal son, love and mercy overshadow, illumine and transform Justice. As such, what we see in the story is more of love and mercy in action, rather than simply an understanding of the single term or concept of Justice. In one of the weekday prefaces used at mass, common preface II, we proclaim: In Love, You created us; in justice, You condemned us; but in mercy, You redeemed us (actual text reads: “In goodness you created man, when he was justly condemned, in mercy you redeemed him”).

Forgiveness comes as a freely offered act and gift from God. Despite human stubbornness, God wills that the relationship be sustained (cf. Psalm 89:33-35). God also expects humans to be just. For instance, this is evident in Mic 6:8: He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

4. The Need for Sincere Repentance: The Prodigal Son’s Example

There is need for sincere and true repentance. Although the attitude of the younger son can be interpreted as arrogance toward his father and family, but as contained in the story, “he came back to his senses”, he showed signs of remorse and regret to the extent that he prescribed a form of penance for himself by saying that he should be treated like one of the hired servants. He considered his unworthiness in accepting that he has lost any form of family rights that should accrue to him by virtue of him being a son. This he accepted willingly and wholeheartedly. He was humbled by his predicaments in a distant country. Imagine a Jew feeding swine. “I have sinned against God/heaven and against you, he said to his father. This is a sign of repentance portrayed by the son. The sinner must show the willingness for conversion and has to make the first move. As a result, to receive God’s forgiveness, one must ask for it (cf. 2 Chron 33:12-13; Psalm 86:5). The status of the prodigal son changed after forgiveness; from guilt he was declared innocent (cf. also Exod 34:7; Psalm 32:5; Jer 33:8).

5. Church Offenders, Punishments and the Process of Reconciliation

There are rules and regulations in the church. The code of Canon law states and stipulates various rules and regulations with their corresponding punishments if they are contravened. While this is good for orderliness and proper conduct, attention must be drawn to understanding and appreciation of the laws, so that if applied, those concerned may take and accept them as corrective measures, which are more productive rather than looking at them as a form of witch hunt. This is good both for the persons concerned and for the church and the society at large.

While tolerating all forms of misconduct in the church will lead to chaos and anarchy, those who receive church sanctions and punishments must be made to understand the implications of their actions which they decide to perform in freedom and must duly accept the

¹⁸ Komonchak *et al.*, *New Dictionary of Theology*, 552.

¹⁹ Karl Rahner, *Encyclopedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (ed. Karl Rahner; Freiburg-im-Breisgau: Herder KG, 1975), 954.

consequences whenever they go against them. Rehabilitation, care to church offenders should be done in charity and love.

A church leader e.g. a Bishop must be a father to all his children despite their weaknesses. A Bishop, for instance, should be ready to welcome back a strayed priest who returns seeking for mercy. He should be helped to reconcile with God even if the gravity of the offence does not permit him to return to full practice of his priestly office. He should be helped to feel loved and live meaningfully.

The Church should be at the forefront to initiate true reconciliation. Just as God initiates reconciliation, those who are offended should have the courage to initiate reconciliation as well, especially in situations where the offenders make no move in this direction. The clergy must show this example. It is possible for Bishops and the clergy in general to start the process of reconciliation in situations where reconciliation seems impossible.

Conclusion

The Biblical concept of mercy is applied to God and also to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the incarnation of God's mercy. Jesus' image of God is seen differently from those or from the way God is seen by the Pharisees. Above all, mercy supersedes. It comes first before any other thing; it comes first before the human or the world's perception of Justice. God wants us to imbibe this attitude and make his kingdom seen in the world.

Most of the instances or pictures on forgiveness in the bible picture divine forgiveness. But we also have instances on the human plane, e.g. Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers, Esau's forgiveness of Jacob, Jesus' command that we forgive seventy times seven times (Matt 18:22; 6:12, 14-15; Luke 17:4). "The parable of the prodigal son and the forgiving father is a picture of human forgiveness but also a metaphor of God's forgiveness (Luke 15:11-32)".²⁰ The Christian is also called upon to show mercy.

Most of the biblical images of forgiveness involve forgiveness of sins (cf. Psalm 103:12; Zech 3:9; Mic 7:19). Forgiveness is setting free from bondage (cf. Acts 13:38-39; Rom 6:7.18; Gal 1:4; Rev 1:5). Reconciliation is always accompanied by Joy (cf. 2 Cor 5:19; Col 1:22). God's mercy is boundless and we, humans, are called upon to exercise this mercy in a world, which is in dire need of mercy and compassion. As beneficiaries of God's mercy, Christians must in turn emulate the merciful father and practice the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.²¹

²⁰ Ryken, *et al.*, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 302.

²¹ Spiritual works of mercy (Counselling the doubtful, instructing the Ignorant, admonishing the sinner, comforting the sorrowful, forgiving injuries, bearing wrongs patiently, praying for the living and the dead) and the Corporal works of mercy (feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, visit the sick, visit the imprisoned, bury the dead).