

Reading Luke 15:11-32 as the Parable of Mercy and Compassion

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Introduction

A parable is an extended metaphor or simile used frequently in brief narrative forms in the bible to illustrate or teach religious principles or moral truths. It is often designed with a double meaning; from this meaning is derived the intended message. It is a recurrent avenue used by Jesus in his teachings to deliver messages especially in response to questions or criticism from his audience. The parables of Jesus may be categorized as aphoristic, extended and narrative.¹ They represent the reality of life in every authentic way that challenges readers in their different contexts. The parables of mercy are thus stories told by Jesus in the Gospels for the purpose of offering moral and spiritual lessons on God's mercy towards humanity and human beings need to be merciful towards one another. They include in the Gospel of Luke, the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:4-7), parable of the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10); parable of the two sons (Luke 15:11-32). There are however evident ramifications of mercy in other expanded parables in the third Gospel which therefore qualify it to be identified as the Gospel of mercy and compassion. Proper however to these three parables are the elements of; belongingness, losing a prized possession and finding what is lost and celebrating as a result. Peculiar to the parable of the two sons however, is the dimension of active return of the son which contrasts with the lack of initiative on the part of the lost sheep and lost coin. Another peculiarity is the refusal of the older son to celebrate.

The parable of the two sons is a "two-peaked parable" or a parable with two stories, often traditionally interpreted to imply repentance and mercy. It is one of a series of parables in Luke 15 which in reaction to criticism from the Pharisees and the Scribes Jesus sets out to instruct his audience on mercy and the deeds of mercy by challenging, cautioning and encouraging both the self-styled righteous and the unrighteous. Viewed in the light of the motive in Luke 15:1-2, scholars have equally sustained that the parable addresses essentially the importance of participating in the compassion of God. This is evident especially in the parable's depiction of the elder son's refusal to return to the house. Inability to participate in God's compassion could constitute an obstacle for even the 'so called' righteous in their relationship with the God of mercy.

This work is basically a reading of the parable of the two sons in the light of the theme of mercy. It begins by explaining the concept of mercy and compassion in the light of the Hebrew/Greek terms *hesed/eleos* and *rahemim/splanchnon/splanchnizomai*. While *hesed* expresses the dynamism of covenant and juridical obligations, tempered by fidelity and responsibility, *rahemim* underscores an indissoluble bond which ties a mother to a child and generates a love that is gratuitous and unmerited towards the child. While the LXX translates *hesed* predominantly with *eleos*, it sometimes also translates *rahemim* with *eleos* (see Zech 7:9). Luke, on the other hand, uses *eleos* in Luke 10:37 to recapitulate the *splanchnizomai* of Luke 10:33. This implies that to have compassion expresses the sense of mercy towards the

¹ J. Dominic Crossan, "Parable", in David Noel Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol. 5 (New York, N.Y: Doubleday, 1992), 146-152 (148).

other and the two can be used synonymously. The terms are therefore used interchangeably in this work.

The interest on the parable of the two sons is primarily with the compassion of the father towards the returning younger son, and the indisposition of the elder son to share the home with the rediscovered brother. For the purpose of this work and in the light of the theme of mercy, the analysis is based on this section. This does not of course exclude the entire context of the pericope. The younger son's decision to depart is however reviewed to underscore the dispensation from obligation on the part of his father. This dispensation shows the act of mercy evident in the compassion of the father as gratuitous. Compassion is an expression of love from the father based on the existing bond of a father and a son.

The elder son's refusal to be part of the banquet of mercy celebrated in honour of the younger son denotes the need on the part of the righteous to be ready to share the home with the repentant. It implies that to be sons and daughters of the compassionate father Christians must be able to share in the father's banquet of mercy through deeds of mercy. In this lies the answer to the criticism in 15:1-2, and constitutes in this work the *crux interpretum* for the parable. The essence of the parable is to warn the Pharisees and the Scribes on the danger of not being merciful and forgiving towards sinners. They stand to lose the heavenly banquet themselves.

Biblical Notion of Mercy in terms of *ḥesed* and *Eleos*

Mercy is one of the English words used to translate the complex Hebrew concept *ḥesed*. *Ḥesed* is basic to the Hebrew religion and morality and is translated in the LXX by *eleos* and in the Vulgate by *miser cordia*. Because of the complex nature of the concept embodied by the term *ḥesed* scholars agree on the absence of a single English word that can translate it. It is translated as 'kindness', or 'loving kindness' in the King James Version of 1611. In the Revised Standard Version, the translation can be grouped under four categories: when the context implies a person's act towards another the word 'kindness' is used; when it is about one's continuing behaviour in relation to another the expression 'deal loyally' is used. Love or steadfast love is used when referring to God's consistent behaviour towards Israel or individuals. When the context implies a relationship to God, 'love', 'devotion', 'faithfulness', or 'loyalty' is used.²

In biblical contexts *ḥesed* is often paired with words that imply steadfastness and loyalty to denote dependability and being worthy of faith. It implies that which one person can do for another person; the two requests for benevolence in Gen 24:12 and Gen 40:14 underscore the advantageous position of the one from whom favour is expected, the second however has the undertone of an expectation of kindness in exchange for favour shown. The line of thought evident in these expectations of benevolence is the fact that the person from whom *ḥesed* is expected is not obliged to offer it.

The request for and acts of *ḥesed* can take place in secular contexts of intimate and non-intimate personal relationships. Examples of intimate personal relationships include Gen 20:13; Ruth 3:10; 2 Sam 3:8. Katharine Sakenfeld identifies in these instances a series of common features which help describe the character of an act of *ḥesed*. First, the help of another is indispensable. Second, the absence of the assistance may worsen the situation of the needy person. Third, the circumstance dictates that the needed help can come uniquely from that one person; failure to provide the help leaves room for no ready alternative. Fourth, the needy person has no authority over the decision of the person from whom help is sought. "The potential helper must make a

² F. Brown, S. Driver and C. Briggs, "*Ḥesed*" *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 339.

free moral decision, based essentially on commitment to the needy person within the relationship”.³

Secondary or non-intimate relationships within which *hesed* is requested and offered include Gen 40:14; 1 Kings 20:31; 2 Sam 10:1-2a and 1 Chron 19:1-2. The first expression of *hesed* in these cases becomes the basis for a relationship; this discovered relationship provides the background for the request for a return of acts of *hesed*. The suppliant for a return of *hesed* often appeals to this existing relationship as reason for compliance on the part of the other party. This emphasis is often taken for granted in the contexts of intimate relationship. There is often a possibility for self-interest on the part of the benefactor’s readiness to help in secondary relationship. Common therefore, to both the intimate and non-intimate relationships are: the critical situation of needs, irreplaceable occasion to assist and freedom of decision.

The NT *eleos* equally implies a broader concept than is suggested by the English word mercy. It denotes kindness or concern towards someone in need, mercy, compassion, pity, clemency.⁴ It is presented in the Gospels as the divinely ordered duty of one human towards another, especially in relation to sinners. This is depicted in Jesus’ association with sinners against the exclusivism of the Scribes which in line with Hosea 6:6 is proposed as a model for the duty towards fellow humans (Matt 9:13; 12:7). *Eleos* is, along with righteousness and fidelity, one of the essential aspects of the law which may not be neglected in the interpretation and observance of the law (Matt 23:23). In concrete cases, it denotes the showing of love and the act of mercy; it implies warmth and tolerance which when observed as dispositions towards others show itself as ‘loving-kindness’ in good deeds (Rom 12:8). The exercise of *eleos* by humans attract a return of similar dispositions from God (Matt 5:7). It is the basis for the ability to love a neighbour (Luke 10:37) and implies the disposition to come to the help of those in need. It is the readiness to forgive (Matt 18:33) which will attract mercy at judgement (Jam 2:13). In classical Greek, however *eleos* denotes an emotion (pathos) occasioned by contact with another person’s affliction and thus implies concern for the welfare of others. The *eleos* of God is said to be displayed in regeneration while the regenerate is called *eleētheis hupo tou theou*.⁵

The Mercy of God

God is understood in Israel as one who is committed to his people and who in the covenant relationship freely provides for all needs. *Hesed* is a central term for expressing this relationship of God to Israel. It is the single Hebrew term which incorporates the three elements of ‘commitment’, ‘provision for need’, and ‘freedom’. These elements are emphasized in the different strands of Israel’s encounter with God. The Sinai covenant tradition highlights God’s freedom in his *hesed* when it describes God as one who brings judgement on those who hate God but shows *hesed* on those who love God and keep God’s commandments (Exod 20: 5b-6). It also provides for forgiveness as an indication that God’s *hesed* does not necessarily depend on the obedience of Israel (Exod 32-34); because he is slow to anger, abounding in mercy (Exod 34:6b-7). In the face of apostasy on the part of Israel, God offers the possibility for forgiveness. This incorporation of the possibility for forgiveness as an act of divine *hesed* absent in its use among humans is peculiar to the theological use of the term. The phrase

³ Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, “Love: Old Testament” in David Noel Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol. 4 (New York, N.Y: Doubleday, 1992), 375-381 (378).

⁴ Walter Bauer, et. al., “*Eleos*”, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 316.

⁵ Corp. Herm., XIII, 3; 8; 10; Corp. Herm., 7; Rudolf Bultmann, “*Eleos*” in Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* Vol. II, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1964), 477-487 (478).

‘abounding in *hesed*’ thus provides the essential rift between human *hesed* and divine *hesed*. On the strength of God’s radical commitment to the covenant relationship with Israel, the possibility of forgiveness springs as a divine imperative and functions as an essential instrument for the preservation of the divine-human relationship.⁶ It functions as a succour for the constantly anticipated unfaithfulness on the part of Israel and humankind to the covenant relationship. It is an act freely undertaken by God and a gift freely given by Him (Exod 33:19).

The freedom emphasis also implies that there are always consequences for unfaithfulness as shown and elaborated in the context of the exile. Thus, in Exod 34: 6b-7 God permits the consequences of sin to pursue the sinner to show the atrociousness of the nature of sin. However, God’s perpetual and unconditional commitment to the covenant with Abraham, and to David in the royal theology breeds forgiveness even to the thousandth generation and keeps the relationship alive. Though unfaithfulness attracts punishment, even in the chastisement of the sinner, God seeks to take the sinner back when there is sincere repentance. This combination of punishment and mercy is evident in the book of Judges where amidst inflamed infidelity and divine anger, there is divine mercy which sends a saviour (Judg 2:10). This blend of justice for unfaithfulness, and *hesed* for the preservation of the covenant underscores the interaction between justice and mercy in the bible. It is elaborated by the Priestly tradition in Num 14:17-19.

As a consequence of the divine-human covenant relationship, Yahweh expects *hesed* from Israel (Hos. 4:1; 6:4,6). The expected mercy implies a dependable good will which disposes them to be primarily faithful to the commandments and consequently benevolent towards others as a favour to or on account of Yahweh. Thus, Micah’s emphasis on doing justice, loving and walking humbly with God in 6:8 expands the relationship with God beyond God and includes act of *hesed* as an active concern for the wellbeing of all people of God with or without personal relationship.

The NT *eleos* of God is in the context of his gracious faithfulness typified in his will to save (Luke 1:50, 54). It is God’s grace and goodness or kindness (Gal 6:16; 2 Cor 4:1; Mark 5:19; Luke 1: 58) towards human beings. It informs God’s conferment of life in Jesus Christ (1 Pet 1:3) and is the motive behind his saving will against human merits (Tit 3:5). It is manifested through the knowledge of God in Christ and can in relation to God be depicted as God’s saving will which precedes any human deed. God’s *eleos* is his eschatological act in salvation history which initiates and brings to fruition the process of salvation in Christ.⁷ Humans are thus to imitate God by showing mercy towards their fellow human beings (Matt 18:33).

Compassion in terms of *splanchnon/rahemim*

In the physical sense, the plural of the noun *splanchnon*, denotes inner organs of human beings and animals (Acts 1:18); ‘heart’. As the inner organs constitute the seat of emotions, the term therefore implies by extension ‘inner yearning’, ‘compassion’. It was used in older Greek literature as the seat of violent, aggressive feelings and in the Hellenistic period as the place where one becomes ‘weak’ (see Sir 30:7; Wis 50: 5c; Josephus, AS 6:1) or experiences dejection (Psalms of Solomon 2:14) or as the seat of natural maternal love (4 Macc 10:13).⁸ In the larger context then, the noun *splanchnon* implies one’s positive affection towards another and an inner yearning for communion with the other. This is translated into pity, compassion and mercy, especially in the New Testament. Thus, God’s saving eschatological appearance is linked to his ‘tender mercy or compassion’ in Luke 1:78. It is the LXX term for *rahemim* which

⁶ John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1965), 566.

⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, “Eleos”, 484.

⁸ Nikolaus Walter, “*Splanchnon*” in Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (eds.), *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 265-266 (266).

when paired with *hesed* indicates a genuine emotional state which predisposes one in favour of those who suffer misfortune or are helpless.

Compassion in this case denotes an instinctive attachment of one being for another; a feeling which is generated from the seat of emotion theologically identified as the heart. Such a feeling underscores an indissoluble bond which ties a mother to a child and generates a kind of love that is gratuitous and unmerited towards the child. It implies tenderness which is translated into action as compassion in the context of tragic event or pardon of offence. The disposition of Yahweh as *raḥemim* is compared to that of parents towards their children (Psa 103:3). In making Israel his own Yahweh exhibits *hesed* and *raḥemim* along with righteousness and judgement (Hos 2:21). Israelites are expected to exhibit same among themselves (Zech 7:9) and are to possess these attributes if they must be forgiven (Psa 25:6). In the characteristic of loving conducts expected of the elected of God in Col 3:12 ‘compassion from the heart’ is placed at the head. This peculiar Christian disposition to always realize itself in tangible deeds of compassion is identified in 1 John 3:17 as a unique expression of a Christian’s fellowship in the love of God. The motivation therefore for compassion towards others is imitation of God and the use of ‘from the heart’ implies an emphasis on the interiority and sincerity so that the one who forgives is seen to have a good heart.⁹

The verb *splanchnizomai* is therefore used to express the giving of and the request for compassion and pity characteristic of its noun. Along with its noun, it is a favourite Lukan term for mercy in God’s faithful covenant relationship with Israel (Luke 1:54, 78). It constitutes for the same third Gospel the basis for Jesus’ exercise of his ministry (Luke 7:13). Thus, in the term Jesus’ ministry is identified as the incarnation of God’s faithfulness to his promised kindness to Abraham and his descendants (Luke 1:54; 15:20) and the basis for humankind’s participation in the love of God (Luke 10:33, 37). Compassionate love is God’s and is God’s eschatological statement from the covenant. The early Christian association of the verb with Jesus implies that as the “Son” Jesus acts in the stead of God as the eschatological Saviour. The use of the verb in relation to Jesus depicts therefore his messianic feature.¹⁰ While *hesed* underscores the masculine characteristics of fidelity to self and responsibility for one’s own love, *raḥemim/splanchnon* underscore the gratuitous and unmerited bond of love that links a mother to a child as an exigency of the heart. It generates a feeling of tenderness, patience and understanding, which gives room for the readiness to forgive.¹¹

Luke 15:11-32 and the Question of Nomenclature

Biblical scholars have struggled with finding a widely acceptable title for the ‘two-peaked’ parable in Luke 15:11-32. This is because the title given to a parable often reflects its theme and structure. It is traditionally identified as the parable of “The Prodigal Son”. Other headings include “The Father’s Love” associated with J. Jeremias,¹² “The Two Sons” traced to T. W. Manson,¹³ “The Merciful Father”, “The Compassionate Father and the Angry Brother”, “The Prodigal Son, the Waiting Father, and the Elder Brother”. The ‘Prodigal Son’ underscores only the first peak of the parable about sin, the consequences of sin, repentance and acceptance (vv. 11-24). It does not accommodate the second peak about the elder brother (vv. 25-32). “The Father’s Love” emphasizes the central role of the father in relation to his two sons. “The Two

⁹ Ceslas Spicq, “eleeō, eleos”, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* Vol. 1, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 477.

¹⁰ Helmut Köster, “Splanchnon” in Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* Vol. VII (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1971), 548-559 (554-555).

¹¹ John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia* (Rome, 1980), no. 4, note 50.

¹² J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Scribner’s, 1963), 128.

¹³ T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus as Recorded in the Gospels According to St. Matthew and St. Luke* (London: SCM, 1971), 284.

Sons” underscores the interface of the two sons with the attribute of their parent as a compassionate father (younger son vv. 12-24; elder son vv. 25-32). It is considered by J. Fitzmyer as hardly an improvement on the weakness of the title ‘Prodigal Son’.¹⁴ “The Compassionate Father and the Angry Brother” contrasts two attitudes (father vv. 20b-24 and elder brother vv. 25-32) towards the lost.¹⁵ “The Merciful Father” depicts the compassionate disposition of the father in relation to the younger son (vv. 12-24) as well as the older son (25-32).

The title; “The Prodigal Son, the Waiting Father, and the Elder Brother” sustained by R. Alan Culpepper emphasizes the role of the three characters. This is evident in the shifts from the prodigal son (vv. 12-20a) to the waiting father (vv. 20b-24) and to the elder brother (vv. 25-32).¹⁶ The elder brother may however be described in this heading as the angry elder brother. This work adapts the model of Culpepper and prefers the title: “The Prodigal Son, the Compassionate Father and, the Angry Brother”. It reflects the theme of Prodigality as sin, its consequences and a rethink (vv. 12-20a), Compassion towards the Prodigal (vv. 20b-24), and Lack of Compassion towards the Prodigal (vv. 25-32).

The Presuppositions of Mercy in Luke 15:11-32

The structure of the parable underscores the centrality of the theme of compassion and mercy. In the life experience of family dynamics from which the parable is drawn, the younger son in his volte-face relies on a paternal compassion of his father while the elder son on the other hand reacts in anger to the father’s compassion. The father’s merciful role which flows from his compassionate disposition as a parent is evident in both parties. In the parable, the father is a figure of God who in his mercy is at work in Jesus among sinners and the righteous. The younger son represents the tax collectors and sinners mentioned in vv. 1 and 2 while the elder son is a figure of the Pharisees and Scribes introduced in v. 2. The parable continues the Lukan theme of Jesus as a tension between the outcasts and the righteous in his ministry of extending the pardoning love of God to humanity. The study of the parable is undertaken to identify principally the presuppositions of mercy and in part of justice.

The Younger Son’s Prodigality (12-20a) and the Father’s Compassion (20b-24)

The parable underscores the basic relationship that exists between the father and his two sons, (v. 11: A man who had two sons). This bond, underscored in the terms ‘father’, ‘two sons’, ‘my son’, ‘your son’, and ‘your brother’ constitutes an interpretive framework for the passage. The younger son’s use of the vocative *pater* (father) for his human father underscores recognition of that paternal and filial bond that exists between them and from this bond flow rights and obligations. That relationship gives the younger son the right to his father’s property in v. 12. It was customary for a father to divide his property principally among his male children (Num 36: 7-9) especially in the context of imminent death (Sir 33:19-23). The elder son had pride of place and was to receive twice the portion given to others (see Deut 21:17).

The younger son’s departure from the father in v. 13 is the exercise of his freedom, and the subsequent unavailability of the services of the father in v. 17 is the logical consequence of that departure. It exonerates the father from the obligation of providing for an absent son. In this consists the juridical dimension of the relationship which is justice activated by the action of the younger son. His departure and actions are described as sin in v. 18, in justice they deprive him of the right to the fatherhood of his father in vv. 19 and 21. It depicts a stay out of favour

¹⁴ Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XIV* (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1985), 1084.

¹⁵ Peter Rhea Jones, *The Teaching of the Parables* (Nashville: Broadman, 1982), 175.

¹⁶ R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke” in Leander E. Keck (ed.), *The New Interpreter’s Bible* Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 3-490 (300).

in a strange land and recalls the exile of the Israelites among pagans occasioned by their unfaithfulness to the covenant with God (Jer 5:19).

The adverb *asōtōs* in v. 13 implies privative-*a* and denotes “in a non-salutary manner”. In 1 Pet 4:3 the noun form of the adverb is used to sum up Gentile debauchery as licentiousness and lawless idolatry”. The younger son lived a profligate life. The arrival of famine recalls the idea of famine as a covenant curse (Lev 26; Deut 28) and as prophetic pronouncement of judgement on a covenant-breaking people (Jer 24:10). Thus, the younger son’s estrangement from his family leads to poverty and privation. The consequence is the decision to contaminate himself by taking care of pigs considered as unclean animals. His decision and actions thus give rise to a degeneration and uncleanness associated with pigs (Lev 11: 7; Deut 14:8). Later rabbinic teachings invoke a curse on the man who raises pigs.¹⁷

The decision to return to the father and the compassion of the father towards him in v. 20 are founded on an acknowledgment of an existing father-son relationship. By his departure he justly fell off the father’s favour but by that sense of fidelity and responsibility to his fatherhood characteristic of a father’s love for a son the father is compassionate towards him. He shows love gratuitously to an unmerited son and receives him back. The visceral feeling within the father is expressed by the verb *esplanchnisthē* in v. 20; the verb expresses his profound and authentic sentiment. This sentiment is consequently vented in the movement of the father who going out of his way on seeing his son, runs towards him, embraces and kisses him. The verb is used in Luke 7:13 of Jesus in relation to the dead son of the widow of Nain (see also Luke 1: 78; 10:33). Seeing implies experiencing and therefore knowing, compassion comes from experiencing or realizing the crises of the other. Thus, the father sees a son rather than a prodigal; it is this ability to see a son that makes the difference and enhances his haste towards him. It contrasts with the refusal of the elder brother to see the younger brother and his consequent lack of compassion. The intimate gesture of embracing and kissing recalls the reconciliation between Esau and Jacob (LXX Gen 33:4) and that between Joseph and his brothers (Gen 45:14-15). Luke’s use of these terms relies primarily on the LXX and underscores the theme of reconciliation in a family.

The parable underscores in this context the fact that the mercy needed by the son and requested for is the prerogative of only the father who freely exercises it and would ordinarily not be reprimanded for refusing it. It is gratuitous and springs from the very goodness of the heart from which love and kindness flow. And the father’s free decision to act in favour of the younger son depicts commitment. Thus, in the parable, the three essential elements of ‘commitment’, ‘provision of need’ and ‘freedom’, identified as characteristic of the Old Testament term *hesed* are evident. The presupposition of acknowledgment of faults and request for favour is equally important. This is evident in the coming “to himself” (17a) and return of the younger son; it is this gesture which predisposes him to experience the father’s compassion.

His monologue acknowledges his loss of legal claim to the father as son especially after having retrieved his portion of the inheritance. The loss of the status of a son is equally emotionally derived from his reckless living. T. Okure sustains however, that the decision to return to his father is not due to repentance but to the desperate need for survival.¹⁸ W. Shea suggests in the context of Amos 4: 6-11 that hardship consequent on famine and the fear of a more severe

¹⁷ Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XIV*, 1088.

¹⁸ Teresa Okure, “Gospel and Faith in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15)”, in Anthony Ewherido, et al. (eds.), *The Bible on Faith and Evangelization: Acts of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria* Vol. 6, (Port Harcourt: CABAN Publications, 2015), 169-196 (182).

hardship can also be used as a call to repentance.¹⁹ Though occasioned by hardship and privation, the decision to return to the father is founded on his anticipation of acceptance based on a father's love for a son; a recognition of an existing relationship with his father which could make rejection a distant option. As T. W. Manson suggests, the parable underscores God's love for sinful persons while they are still sinners, before they repent; and that it is the divine love that makes the sinners' repentance possible.²⁰ Sin against heaven or God and the father recalls Pharaoh's confession to Moses and Aaron in Exod 10:16 and denotes an acknowledgement of a fault committed.

The Elder Son's Anger at the Father's Exercise of Mercy (25-32)

The father's merciful disposition initiates a banquet of mercy (vv. 22-24) which meets with the disapproval of the elder son in v. 28a. The compassionate disposition of the father contrasts with the anger of the elder son who sees no basis for a show of compassion despite an existing relationship between him and his father's younger son. His disapproval consists in an anger which hates prodigality, rejects both rebirth from prodigality and compassion towards the prodigal. The earlier part of the story represents the two sons in terms of their relationship to their father; thus, the other son is introduced as the elder son in v. 25. The relationship of the elder son to the father however, shifts to the younger son who in v. 27 is introduced as his brother. In other words, as sons of their father, there is, beyond their father, an existing fraternal bond between the two of them. The elder son's indisposition to acknowledge this bond constrains him to still refer to the other son as the fathers' son in v. 30 "this son of yours". The father on the other hand reminds him of that fraternal bond by describing the younger son in v. 32 as "this your brother". This insistence on the relationship between the two is underscored in the contrast that exists especially in the father's description of the younger son before the servants in v. 24 as "this my son". The inability of the elder son to acknowledge an existing relationship of brotherliness with the brother remains an obstacle to his showing mercy and being compassionate towards him.

The consequence is his refusal to return home and be part of the feast of mercy. The home of the father who is rich in mercy and compassion becomes uncomfortable for the son who refuses to participate in the fathers' compassion. Of the two sons, therefore, the faithful one is yet to return and risked being lost by the father. This brings the reader of the parable to the motive for which Jesus narrated the story in 15:1-2. Ability to share in the father's compassion remains a condition for a place in the home of the compassionate father, and even the most virtuous may be less merciful and may therefore risk salvation;²¹ hence the invitation in Luke 6:36 to 'be merciful as your heavenly father is merciful'.

The acknowledgement of his long and faithful services not being rewarded with at least a kid contrasts with the killing of the fatted calf in favour of the younger son. A kid; 'a young he-goat' is of less value compared to the fattened calf. This comparison underscores the attention sinners get from God despite their unfaithfulness. It appears greater in relation to the compensation the virtuous get and raises the question of justice in the relationship between God, the virtuous and the unvirtuous. It equally questions the apparent advantage sinners have over the righteous especially given that while an act of repentance can change the damnable destiny of a sinner, a single sin can upturn the redemptive destiny of the righteous. Virtue thus appears to be less favourably rewarded than vice. This theme is effectively Lukan and recalls

¹⁹ William H. Shea, "Famine", in David Noel Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol. II (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 769-773 (772).

²⁰ T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus*, 286.

²¹ Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, *The Parables of Mercy* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2015), 10.

Luke 17:9-10. The father however, goes on to affectionately highlight what compensation means and how much of it the elder son has without knowing and what not having that compensation means in the younger son. Being around with the father “you are always with me” (v. 31b) implies having an unlimited access to the intimate presence of the father and all that is available to the father “all that I have is yours” (v. 31c) and therefore not being ‘dead’ (life) and not being ‘lost.’ Wondering away from the father inhibits access to the father’s intimate presence and his resources and leads to deprivation. This lack of access to the father’s intimacy serves as the logical and therefore just consequence of unrighteousness and implies ‘death’ and being ‘lost’. The father’s preponderant intimate presence is therefore the greatest of compensation for faithfulness because there is no deprivation and no sense of insecurity.

The invitation to celebrate is expressed with the peculiar Lukan theological imperative *edei* (v. 32). The term denotes in the context of salvation history, the imperative of the salvific ministry of Jesus on earth as the Son of Man (Luke 19:10). It expresses in this circumstance that, participation at the table of mercy with the father in the project of salvation is an imperative for all children of God. It implies the communal dimension of mercy and the need for the righteous to be part of God’s compassion and be imitators of God’s compassion. Essentially, it implies that the righteous and the unrighteous are both sons and daughters of the same father; the joy or sadness of one affects the other. The virtuous who lacks mercy is as much at risk as the unvirtuous and poses the same challenges to the father who goes out twice to meet his two sons. Mercy is part of the patrimony of the father which must equally be inherited by those who are his and are interested in his inheritance. The phrase “all that is mine is yours” (Luke 15:31b) is to be appreciated not only from the point of view of the father’s material possessions, it is also essentially inclusive of the father’s disposition of compassion towards his own. The elder son must strive to possess both. The feast, therefore, expresses the victory of love and life over selfishness and exclusionism. It underscores an understanding of mercy as an expression of the love of God for a sinner while still in sin and before repentance. It is this divine love that provides the incentive for repentance.²²

Conclusion

The primary presupposition in the request for and granting of mercy is relationship which could be intimate or non-intimate. In the parable of the two sons, this is underscored in the inalienable bond of father-son relationship, and the fraternal bond between the elder and younger sons. This relationship generates a mutual feeling of love which in specific circumstances of critical situational needs is expressed as definite action in terms of mercy and compassion. It is in humankind’s recognition of this existing relationship that compassion is generated and the deeds of mercy are performed. It is through the deeds of mercy that mercy as an attitude acquires concrete shape. The difference between ‘my son’, ‘your son’ and ‘your brother’ in the parable provides the variables for the emphasis.

The father-son relationship depicted in the parable highlights the lasting bond between God and humankind in which God’s creation of humankind is the act of love. When in sin, the human person activates a juridical separation from God, God’s faithfulness and fidelity to this bond of love generates mercy. In the context of God-human relationship, human kind is active in justice while God is most active in mercy. This mercy of God precedes repentance and serves as motivation for repentance; the sinner’s consciousness of this divine mercy serves as an incentive for repentance. The elder son’s belongingness to his father imposes on him the obligation to participate in his fathers’ compassion. Through this participation he is to see the father’s younger son as his brother and on the strength of that fraternal relationship activate

²² Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XIV*, 1086.

compassion, show mercy and rejoice. Humankind has the same origin recognized by Christians as God who is the father of all. Persons are therefore brothers and sisters to each other and based on this bond are to show and celebrate mercy. The deeds of mercy towards fellow human beings are a participation in the compassion of God, and a unique expression of a Christian's fellowship in the love of God. One such deed of mercy evident in the parable of the two sons consists in identifying with and welcoming with joy those who have failed. Such disposition offers them opportunities for a redress and restores their lost human dignity. It is an *imitatio Dei* which draws one closer to the God of mercy who commands mercy. In the *theosis* of Gregory of Nyssa mercy and good deeds divinize those who perform them and make of them the image of the Primordial Being.²³

The parable illustrates and justifies the generous love of God that cares for the outcast or sinner; it is especially an interpretation of the disposition of God in Jesus as the merciful father whose love activates compassion (see Jer. 31:18-20). The activated compassion as the movement of the heart towards ones' good manifests itself in terms of mercy towards the lost (son) and comprehension towards the indisposition of the supposed 'faithful son'. Jesus acts in the stead of God as he shows mercy to outcasts by welcoming them with joy and seeking to convince the unaccommodating righteous of the need to accept the outcasts. It depicts also the tension that can exist between God's merciful disposition and the indisposition of the virtuous who may lack mercy. Thus, the elder son's anger depicts the discomfort of the Pharisees and Scribes in vv. 1-2 and contrasts with the father's compassion in v. 28. The parable therefore educates on the need for mercy as an imitation of the love of God and a participation in the compassion of God. God desires mercy for sinners and each time humans offer this mercy and create opportunities for repentance God's will is accomplished.

Mercy is therefore a fatherly disposition of God towards humankind as his creation and an attitude which God's children must acquire to manifest their status as sons and daughters of God. It is a favourable disposition towards others; it is inevitable, regenerating, self-realizing and expressive. It is a human heart laid bare and uncovered in the depth of compassion in the face of a neighbour in need. It is a love that regenerates and restores lost dignity. It is the virtue which unites human beings to God and others in friendship. As Aquinas sustains, it is the sum total of the Christian religion which likens human beings to God in the context of similarity of works.²⁴ It is, in Todd Walatka's summary of Thomas Aquinas, that particular form of love which strives to alleviate suffering of another and which conforms persons to the God who is merciful".²⁵ It is the most fundamental form of love that can be expressed to fellow human beings and to have compassion or mercy is thus "the equivalent of an inner visceral impulse that connects someone to the other".²⁶

Mercy and compassion are the attributes of God whose essence is love, to be in God is a disposition to be primarily faithful to the commandment of love and consequently, be benevolent towards others as a favour to or on account of God. It is the basis for the ability to love a neighbour (Luke 10:37), and implies the disposition to come to the help of those in need. It is in human beings' imitation of the mercy of God that God's compassionate love is multiplied and felt among persons.

²³ Gregory of Nyssa, "On Good Works", in Susan R. Holman (ed.), *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 193-199 (197).

²⁴ Thomas Aquinas, ST. II-II, 30, 4, ad 2 and ad 3.

²⁵ Todd Walatka, "The Principle of Mercy: Jon Sobrino and the Catholic Theological Tradition", *Theological Studies* 77 no.1 (2016), 96-117 (102).

²⁶ Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, *The Parables of Mercy*, 13.

Mercy is not inherent, but an acquired virtue; an inner disposition that is to be nurtured and sustained in the imitation of the father of mercy. In its essential trait, it is expressed in the form of forgiveness but from the point of view of compassion the heart is moved to a recognition of a neighbour whose dignity is at risk. It takes place through a relationship that flows from the heart and receives concrete expressions in words and deeds and presupposes the desire for help.