

The Gracious Father Who Forgives in Luke 15:11-32: Lesson for the Church!

Cosmas Uzowulu

Introduction

The third parable in Luke 15 is made to show heaven's receptivity toward a sinner's repentance, as well as to condemn the attitude of some people who react against such divine generosity. This passage and the two previous parables portray that nothing has changed since the complaint of 5:29-30. In contrast to the officials' complaint stands the heavenly Father's attitude: unconditional acceptance and joy.

This unit is popularly known as "The Prodigal Son", a title whose roots go back to the Vulgate.¹ Some call it "The Gracious Father", and this is also a good alternative. Nonetheless, a title like "A Father and His Two Different Sons" may be even better.² The parable is close in genre to an allegory, because there are many levels of application, though not all levels be pressed. Fundamentally, there are three points of contact: the prodigal son pictures the sinner, the older son is the self-righteous leadership (or anyone who claims to serve God), and the father pictures God.³ Sinners are to come to God, and the righteous are to accept the sinner's decision to turn to him/her. It is the father's attitude to the sons that is at the center of the parable. His response, in turn, instructs people on how they should respond. The parable shows that God is pleased to have the penitent at his table.

Structure Luke 15:11-32

The structure of the passage could be construed as follows:

- a. The prodigal's sojourn (15:11-24)
 - i. Introduction (15:11)
 - ii The son's separation (15:12)
 - iii Life of sin (15:13-15)
 - iv Consequences of sin (15:16)
 - v Conversion and return (15:17-21)
 - vi The father's acceptance (15:22-24)
- b. The elder son's protest (15:25-32)
 - i. The elder son's anger (15:25-28a)
 - ii The elder son's protest (15:28b-30)

¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, x-xxiv AB 28a (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), 1083. Teresa Okure rightly calls it "Gospel and Faith in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15).

² Thomas W. Manson (*The Sayings of Jesus: As Recorded in the Gospels according to St Matthew and St Luke* (London: SCM, 1949), 284), calls it "The Two Sons", but the Father is too crucial to the picture to be left out. Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, tr. Samuel H. Hooke, NTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 128, calls it "The Parable of the Father's Love", a title adopted by Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 1084. Jesus likes to employ the two-son imagery (Matt 21:28-31).

³ Cf. Simon J. Kisttemaker, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 216.

iii The father's explanation: rejoice at repentance (15:31-32)⁴

The main theme centres on God's character, and the parable offers vindication of criticism for associating with sinners. God's forgiveness is always available. No history of sin is too great to be forgiven. Our need is to turn to God and take what he offers on his own terms. We need also to welcome those who seek forgiveness, for there is joy in heaven over those who repent. One should not compare how God blesses, but be happy that he does bless. In turning to God, one gains complete acceptance and joyful reception into God's family.

The Prodigal's Sojourn (15:11-24)

Introduction (15:11)

A brief introduction simply names the three characters: a father and two sons. The two sons control the literary action, but it is the father's response to the sons that provides the parable's message by showing how the father views each son's reaction. The opening "a certain man" is like 15:4 and 15:8, the latter of which has a woman at the parable's centre. The focus of this parable is on the father, who in this case represents God.

The Son's Separation (15:12)

The narration commences with the younger son demanding to receive the assets that will eventually be his so he can go his own way.⁵ The young man is most likely in his late teens, since he is still single.⁶ Surprisingly, the reference to the estate is graphically called *ton bion*, which literally means "the life". The son demands his portion of what his father's life will leave him.

The demand's historical and legal background is much argued, since estates normally were not divided until the father's death. If Jewish law prevails, the son would receive half of what the elder son receives, or one-third of the estate (Deut 21:17). Some Jewish texts allude to the right of a father to break up his holdings before his death, because they exhort him not to do it too early (Sir 33:19-23).⁷ Creed,⁸ points out that SB 3:545-49 alludes to the right of a father to dispose of his property by gift and thus ignore the rules of inheritance (Num 27:8-9). Similarly Creed comments that actual distribution does not occur until death, so that this custom is not alluded to here. Others argue that the son's request treats the father as if he were already dead.⁹ This is not clear, but the young man no doubt looks to sever his relationship to his father and go away.

Nevertheless, the key element is that the son's request is benevolently granted. Once the son receives his portion, all other claims to the estate are abrogated. Each son receives his due and the young son is free to go. Seemingly, the elder son chose not to go his own way, but to keep his

⁴ Okure, *Gospel and faith in the Parable of the Prodigal Son*, divides hers into three section, 6.

⁵ This kind of request simply means "give me that which falls on me", see Tob 3:17; 6:12; similarly, see John M. Creed, *The Gospel according to St Luke* (London: Macmillan, 1930), 198; Friedrich Hauck, *TDNT* 1,529; Fitmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 1087

⁶ Cf. Ian H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 607.

⁷ Cf. Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St Luke*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: Scribner, 1896), 372.

⁸ Creed, *The Gospel according to St Luke*, 199.

⁹ Cf. Kenneth E. Baisley, *Poet and Peasant: A Literary Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 165.

holdings at home. Schrenk¹⁰ instructively suggests that this image points to the heavenly Father letting the sinner go his own way.

1.3 Life of Sin (15:13-15)

The young man's life crumbles soon after his departure. He takes his inheritance and after some time leaves his father.¹¹ He converts all his inheritance into cash, goes to a distant land, and misuses his possessions. *Diaskorpizō* ordinarily means "to scatter or disperse", but with property, it means "to waste or squander". The picture is of tossing one's possessions into the wind.¹² The young man throws away his wealth through an undisciplined, wild life.¹³ The next verse pictures a young man on a spending spree for things of no value. His attitude to life will lead to his downfall. He will quickly come into dire straits.

Some of the young's man hard time is not his own doing. True, he has spent all and has nothing to show for it, but now comes another blow – famine (*limos*). It is an intense famine, since the adjective employed to describe it is *ischyra* (strong). Nature makes his bad situation worse. His entire is falling. With no money, no family, and suffering in a very far country, the young man is in a serious crisis. The parable understates the problem with its literal *ērxato hystereisthai* (he began to lack). He enters into poverty and has nowhere to turn.

The boy reacts prudently. Yearning for food and funds, he seeks employment (*kollaō*) normally means "to associate with someone", but in this context it means "to hire out to someone". He works for a Gentile, as the nature of his work portrays, and is sent to an animal farm to be in charge the pigs. This was the most dishonourable work for a Jew, since pigs were unclean animals (Lev 11:7; Deut 14:8; Isa 65:4; 66:17; 1 Macc 1:47) In effect, the son has taken the lowest job possible – one that no Jew would even want. He is clearly taking whatever he can get.

1Consequences of Sin (15:16)

Even this humiliating job is not able to solve the young man's problem. He still suffers from hunger. In fact, the pigs are better off than he is. He desperately desires to have as much to eat as the pigs. The prodigal son wants the meal of unclean animals and cannot have it. How much lower can he go? Worse, there is no one in this distant country to offer him comfort or give him food. Is the boy meeting his just fate?

Conversion and Return (15:17-21)

The son's horrible situation finally hits him as he realizes how far he has plunged. There is deep irony in his situation: his father's hired hands are in better shape than he is. The workers in his father's farm, as a matter of course, have "plenty of bread". In contrast, the son is perishing from hunger. Whatever the merits of his current employment, his father is a better employer.

The young man later invents an intelligent plan of action. The shift to soliloquy in 15:17-19 changes the perspective of the parable from external narration to internal motive, unveiling a key turning point in the narration. The struggling son decides to acknowledge his folly before God and

¹⁰ Gottlob Schrenk, *TDNT* 5, 983-84.

¹¹ The phrase *ou pollas hēmeras* (not many days) is a figure of speech called litotes, an understatement that affirms something by using the negative. This figure is frequent in Luke: Luke 21:9; Acts 1:5; 12:18; 14:28; 15:12; plus twelve more times. See Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 1087.

¹² Cf. Otto Michel, *TDNT* 7, 422.

¹³ The *hapax legomenon* *asōtōs* speaks of a debauched, profligate life and so Luke 15:30 speaks of the son's time with prostitute. Conceptual parallels are found in Eph 5:18; Titus 1:6; 1 Pet 4:4

to his father. This combination is a *merism* to portray that he sinned against God and his father. The young man will act quickly and humbly. He is very aware that he has forfeited all rights to sonship and inheritance, but it is better to cast himself on his father's mercy than remain in a very far country, living a life lower than the unclean beasts and suffering hunger. The confession demonstrates his repentance, coming to the father bearing nothing but his need. He plans to turn and come home, openly confessing his failure and foolishness. His attempt to live carelessly and independent of any constraints is madness and a failure. It has resulted in something less than a human existence.

The son decides what he will tell his father: he will place himself at his father's discretion, asserts no rights, and recognize that he has no claims. He is unworthy of being received as a family member. His plea is simply for daily care and sustenance as a day worker, the lowest of three classes of labourers. A slave (*doulos*) was like part of the family, although part of the lower class. The day labourer was hired only on special occasions for one day at a time, and so was less cared for. The boy's demand shows that he wants to be a minimal burden. He is ready to be the lowest of the low. As one of these labourers, he still will be better off than he now is on his own. He accepts the consequences of his choices. There are no excuses, only confession and a humble request. The image shows what repentance looks like: no claims, just reliance on God's mercy and provision.

The boy departs and carries out his resolution to return and confess to his father. Little can he anticipate the reaction that awaits him. The father spots him while he is still far away and reacts immediately with compassion and acceptance.¹⁴ As one who initiates, the father now becomes the centre of the parable. Surely the son must have wondered how his father would respond to his confession. He does not have to wonder long: the father runs to him and gives him a giant hug, breaking all protocol.¹⁵ Here compassion reigns (Luke 7:13; 10:33). The father shows his joy by greeting his son with a kiss (*kataphileō*). This alludes to a tender kiss of affection. It depicts acceptance of the son before the son says a word (2 Sam 14:33). A relationship is being restored.¹⁶ With repentance comes reconciliation. All of these details are designed to portray the basic emotion expressed. The scene reminds one of the common picture of soldiers returning from a long separation from their families. The emotion is fundamental to the love that exists within a family and powerfully portrays the love of God.

Despite the warm welcome, the son offers his confession, just as he had resolved to do. The confession of humility leaves the son in the hands of his father. Those who come humbly to God can know that he will receive them (John 1:12). A picture of sincere repentance is also in view. Such a parallel fits the picture of the sinner who turns to the Father.

The Father's Acceptance (15:22-24)

The father receives the son back with full privileges: the servants are told to clothe the son immediately and put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. The receiving of a ring adds to the image of being ornately dressed. The ring may contain a seal and thus represent the son's membership in the family, but it stops short of being a transfer of authority. Here there is an allusion to Joseph's being clothed by Pharaoh with a ring, fine clothes, and a gold chain (Gen

¹⁴ Cf. Okure, *Gospel and Faith in the Parable of the Prodigal Son*.

¹⁵ Cf. Jeremias, *The Parable of Jesus*, 130.

¹⁶ Cf. Ian H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 610

41:42). One can as well see a picture like that in Esth 6:6-11 of the king knowing Mordecai (cf. Esth 3:10; 8:2; Ezek 16:10). Certainly it matches the picture of acceptance present in these passages but the son is not assuming an office above his brother. They have equal access to the father. The sandals are also a symbol of wealth; contextually the suggestion is that the son had been barefoot and destitute.¹⁷ Therefore, the prodigal son goes from destitution to restoration.

The concept of joy and triumph continues: the father calls for a celebration in honour of his son's return. They will sacrifice the fattened calf (*ho moschos ho siteutos*) eaten on major religious holidays like the Day of Atonement.¹⁸ Such an animal was specially fed and prepared for these occasions.¹⁹ The father gives the reason (*hoti*) for the celebration. The son has been resurrected. The father has regained a lost son; the son he expected never to see again has returned. New life and recovery of the lost are what results from repentance. The father explains the significance of what has happened, and the celebration commences.

The Elder Son's Protest (15:25-32)

The Elder Son's Anger (15:25-28a)

Awareness now turns to the elder brother's response, who from this point on dominates the parable with the father. Seemingly a son who always did his duty, he had been labouring in the field during his brother's return. The party was going on when he returned. As the elder brother approaches the house, he hears the jollification of music and dancing. Something is taking place, but the elder brother does not know the cause of the celebration.

The brother certainly would be curious about a celebration that he does not know about. He has no idea what has brought the party about. So he calls one of the servants to inquire about the cause of the festive atmosphere. The servant explains the reason for the celebration. The safe return of a healthy son was a time for celebration, and the father has taken him back with joy. The elder brother is not pleased with the festivities. In fact, he is angered. He even regards his father's action as a sign of favouritism, especially in light of his own faithfulness to his father. It seems the elder brother fears a further paring away of his estate. This section is interesting and ironic: the elder brother stays outside the house and cannot bring himself to go in and celebrate his brother's return. The apparent insider is an outsider.

The Elder Son's Protest (15:28b-30)

The father again takes the initiative, coming out and reasoning and pleading with the son to be part of the celebration. Reconciliation with the father should extend across the whole family. *Parekalei* portrays a repeated effort to persuade the elder son, not a single request. Perhaps the brother did not realise that the son had returned in humility. The elder son is unmoved by his brother's safe return. He focuses on himself in opposition to his brother. He demands justice, making comparisons with his father's treatment of him. The father's joy contrast with the elder brother's anger. It is all a matter of perspective.

The elder brother explains his position, reflecting the parable's deep irony, which works at two levels and allows the parable to be called a "parable of reversal".²⁰ First, as already noted, the son

¹⁷ Cf. Eta Linnemann, *Jesus of the Parables: Introduction and Exposition*, trans David J. Sturdy (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 77.

¹⁸ Otto Michel, *TDNT*, 4: 760-61.

¹⁹ Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 611.

²⁰ Cf. John D. Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 73-75.

who was lost and outside is now inside, while the inside elder brother complains from outside. In addition, the son who was obedient and faithful – even to the point of working like a slave – has no reward or celebration, while the son who wandered and squandered is given a huge celebration. What the younger son felt fortunate to become (a mere servant) the older brother resents. In effect, the older son demands, “Where is justice?”

Numerous efforts criticize the son’s complaint and draw comparisons to the historical situation that Jesus addressed. Some see evidence of the Pharisee’s attitude in the idea of keeping all the law, which is seen as a proof that the Pharisees are pictured in the elder son.²¹ But it is hardly clear that such a detailed claim is intended, given the absence of any rebuke from the father.²² Nevertheless, the self-righteous, inward focus displayed here is most likely intended as a rebuke. The reference is to anyone (whether Pharisee or not) who disdains repentance, including also the Pharisees and the scribes (Luke 15:2). The brother is seen only in relationship to the father’s treatment of him. The father does not condemn or reject the elder son. The son has the same access to the father as his brother does.

The elder son’s concern for justice is natural. But the point is that God’s action is gracious, not deserved. We do not merit it; it is given to us freely. Repentance yields God’s kindness, which wipes the slate clean and is a reason to rejoice. The brother is so devoured by the issue of fairness that he cannot rejoice at the beneficial change that has come to his brother. The brother’s anger emerges clearly as he complains directly and publicly to the father. Irony abounds: the “obedient” son is disobedient here, and the gracious father is made to look unfaithful and unfair. The faithful son’s feelings are hurt, and the father’s integrity and even-handedness are called into question. He separates himself from his sibling entirely and faults his father for being so kind to the reprobate family member, his own blood brother.

The complaint continues. The elder brother now turns from the father’s lack of support of him to his gracious treatment of his brother. His anger is clearly obvious, as he will not even acknowledge his relationship to his brother: he calls him “your son” and “this one”.²³ His is no longer his brother. He contrasts the son’s activity and the father’s response in an unfavourable light. Describing the lifestyle of the brother in most unflattering terms, he charges him with devouring the father’s earing with immorality, namely harlots, a charge echoing Prov 29:3. Given the son’s move to a distant land, how did the elder brother know what his brother did when he was away? Had they heard about his behaviour and subsequent plight through some grapevine? Is the elder brother engaging in purely hostile speculation? Does he simply know his brother well that he can guess what had happened to him? None of these questions are directly answered in the narrative, but the elder’s attitude is clear: his brother is the rebellious son of Deut 21:18-21 who should be disowned, not honoured. In effect, the brother is complaining that immorality holds more merit with the father than faithfulness. Where is justice?

The Father’s Explanation: Rejoice at Repentance (15:31-32)

The father has a ready reply. He speaks to the son’s concerns first and then to the issue of the brother in 15:32. The father’s reply is as gentle as the son’s complaint was harsh. He asserts the

²¹ Cf. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St Luke*, 378; similarly, Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 1091.

²² Cf. Erich Klostermann, *Das Lukasevangelium*, Handbuch zum Neuen Testament 5 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1929), 160; Linnemann, *Jesus of the Parables*, 79.

²³ “This one” represents contempt in Matt 20:12; Luke 18:11; Acts 17:18. See also Jeremias, 1963a, 131.

faithfulness of the elder brother and his special place in his heart. He reminds the son again and again that all he owns belongs to him, neither the father's activity nor the brother's return in any way diminishes the elder's status. In a sense, he has always had access to the celebration. The animals are his.

The second issue is the brother. The father will not allow the son's complaint to stand nor will he allow the elder brother to separate himself from his brother. So the father speaks of the younger brother as *ho adelphos sou houtos* (this brother of yours). In other words, "He is not just my son – he is also your brother". Hence the father attests the necessity of celebration, not just its appropriateness, by the use of *edei*. It was morally right to rejoice, given the circumstances of the return. A resurrection of sort has occurred. A dead brother is now alive. That which was lost has been found. Such circumstances should rejoice in joy, not question about fairness. Justice means that acceptance should greet such a turnaround. Jesus' listeners are left with an implied question: what will the elder son do now?

Lesson for the Church

The attitude of God is at the centre of the parable. We can be assured that he approaches sinners who turn to him with open arms. Even more, God goes on the active search for sinners, taking the initiative with them, for he came "to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10). He rejoices to bring us into his family, and he celebrates our turning to him. Indeed T. Okure makes it clear that "God, moved by pity and compassion, goes in search of sinful humanity".²⁴ Pope Francis in his First Encyclical opines that "the salvation which God offers us is the work of his mercy".²⁵ The Church should endeavour to stress this aspect of the good news today given the unfortunate manner modern pastors and priests present God as one who blesses those who settle Him through material things.²⁶

In this parable, the father of the prodigal son breaks all protocol to welcome his son. God from the beginning has been doing that. And in Jesus of Nazareth divinity came to embrace humanity. This parable invites the Church as a community to reflect on how she responds to the lost. The church should rejoice when a sinner comes back to the community. The parable indicates that Jesus prefers a community filled with people who can forgive and restore those who turn to God.

The parable equally makes it clear that activity for God by itself or proximity to him is not the same as knowing him through a relationship grounded in conscious, humble turning to him. The attitude of the prodigal son on returning home demonstrates the essence of repentance. As the prodigal son approaches his father, he relies completely on his mercy, completely humble and recognizing that the only right he has is the appeal for his father's help. Christ came to call sinners to repentance (5:31-32). This should be the attitude and character of the Church towards all her children especially the lost.

Conclusion

The text is certainly about God's attitude and activity toward sinners and the way others respond to them. God's character is seen in the longing and loving father, who is very anxious to embrace

²⁴ Okure, *Gospel and Faith in the Parable of the Prodigal Son*, 1

²⁵ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (Rome: Editrice Vaticana, 2013), n.112.

²⁶ Cf. Bernard O. Ukwuegbu et al, eds., *Divine Blessings and Material Wealth in the Bible*, in the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (P.H. CABAN, 2014).

the departing son and keep him as a member of his family, though he will not force him to stay home. Though the father did not prevent him from leaving when he asks to do so, but his response on his return makes it clear that he was thinking about the departed son all along.

His quick embrace shows his love for the son was constant and the pain of his departure real. His forgiveness is total and immediate. The past pain has been washed away in the waves of joy at the son's return. The discussion of the father with the older son shows he is ready to defend the return, urging others associated with him in the house to give an equally warm welcome. Furthermore, the story is simply about God the Father, revealing his character as compassionate and forgiving. This should be the character of the Church if she wants to be effective in her mission of salvation.