

# Exegesis of Luke 15:11-32

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## “The Parable of the Lost Son”

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### I. Context Analysis

#### A. Redemptive Context

The big picture began in the Garden of Eden as God set Adam up to multiply his image and to have dominion over the world, but Adam rebelled against God’s benevolence and created his own set of rules. The whole family tree of civilization followed Adam into sin. Years later God called Abraham out of the pagan world and promised to make him into a great nation in order to be a blessing to the world. As the nation of Israel (Abraham’s grandson) grew in numbers in Egypt, the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites, so God raised up Moses to lead the Israelites up out of Egypt. He then gave them a law so that they would live according to God’s will and lead the other nations out of God’s curse into His blessing.

In the Promised Land God chose David to be the King of Israel. God promised Israel that a “Messiah” (anointed one) of David’s line would some day rule over the house of Israel forever. But this promise fell into shadow after David’s son, Solomon, died and the northern and southern tribes split. To make things worse, the Assyrian Empire overran the north in 722 BC and the Babylonian Empire exiled the southern tribes in 586 BC, because of the people’s idolatry. A remnant from the south returned after 70 years but remained unrepentant. The Medo-Persian, Greek, and Roman Empires dominated them for the next 500 years.

The unfulfilled promises of the Kingdom brought great expectation of a Messiah to usher in the Kingdom. As Jesus the Messiah entered center stage to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom through parables, he is greeted with mixed reviews. The religious leaders of the day hated him, but

“sinners” were drawn to him. Jesus told the Parable of the Lost Son after his baptism on his journey to Jerusalem before his crucifixion, resurrection and his future coming as King of the earth.

**B. Historical Context**

Although the Gospel of Luke is anonymously written, it is generally attributed to Luke, a Physician who was not an eyewitness nor Jewish. We know a bit about Luke from literary evidence in Acts, the sequel to Luke. Paul met Luke during his second missionary journey and accompanied him off and on over the following years. The date when the Gospel of Luke was written was probably around AD 70. The primary audience was Theophilus, an influential figure about whom we know little.

The secondary audience was probably Greek Gentiles and Jews who had questions about the inclusion of Gentiles in God’s covenant people. The purpose of this book was to demonstrate how the gospel of the Kingdom came to the world. Luke assures the audience that Jesus is at the center of God’s redemptive plan.

Characters in the Parable	younger son	older son
Historical Audience of the Parable	tax collectors and "sinners"	Pharisees
Original Audience of Luke	Theophilus	
Secondary Audience of Luke	Gentiles	Jews

The parable of the lost son was common to everyday life. An ancient letter shows a son pleading to a mother to be received back into the family (Bock, 1306). Estates were not usually divided until the father’s death, however it was not forbidden to give an early inheritance (Bock, 1310). The son treated his father as already dead. An estate between two sons would be divided 2/3 to the older, 1/3 to the younger (Deut 21:17).

Pigs were viewed as unclean animals to Jews and being a pig herder would be the lowest job imaginable for a Jew. The bean that pigs ate was either a sweet bean from a carob or locust tree, or a bitter thorny berry (Bock, 1311). When the son comes home to the father he asks to be the lowest of three classes of laborers (misthios in Greek), who was hired for one day at a time. This is in comparison to a higher class of slave (doulos in Greek), which was cared for like one of the family.

The robe was a long flowing garment. The ring may have contained a seal and thus represented that he was a member of the family. Sandals were a symbol of wealth. The fattened calf was eaten on major holidays, such as the Day of Atonement. It was specially fed and prepared in advance for these occasions, and they rarely ate meat in Palestine. In contrast a goat, the animal to which the older son referred to not even getting, was of little worth (Bock, 1315). The audience of Jesus' parable was tax collectors (the hedonists) and Pharisees (the religious right).

### C. Literary Context

The genre of this passage is a parable in the context of Gospel writing. Luke contains 17 parables, of which 15 are unique to Luke. The subject of most of the parables is the Kingdom of God. This parable is close to an allegory in that it has multiple layers of application. Just prior to this passage Jesus tells large crowds about a great banquet to come (14:12-24) and that the cost of being a disciple requires absolute surrender (14:25-35). Jesus then tells three parables of lost items. The third 'lost' parable is the climax, "The Parable of the Lost Son." After this section is the parable of the Shrewd Manager (16:1-15).

1:1 - 2:52	<b>Luke's Preface and Introduction:</b> of John and Jesus
3:1 - 4:13	<b>Preparation for ministry:</b> annointed by God
4:14 - 9:50	<b>Galilean ministry:</b> revelation of Jesus
9:51 - 19:44	<b>Jerusalem Journey:</b> Jewish rejection & the new way
19:45 - 24:53	<b>Jerusalem:</b> The Innocent One slain and raised

One major theme in Luke is God's plan. Jesus, the center of this plan, is portrayed as the Messiah-Servant-Prophet and Lord (Bock, 29). Another issue in Luke is the law within the new community (Bock, 39). This passage is one of four examples of repentance and mercy found in Luke (Bock, 36): the sick patient (5:31-32), the prodigal son (15:17-21), the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (18:9-14), Zaccheus the Tax Collector (19:1-10).

## II. Content Analysis

**A. Genre:** This passage is a parable in the midst of Gospel.

### B. Textual Outline

#### Act I (The Path of the Younger Son):

**Characters:** father, younger son, older son, a citizen of a distant country, father's servants

**Setting:** There was a man with two sons (11).

**Problem:** (12-16)

**Begins:** The younger son asks for his inheritance so the father divides his property between the two sons (12).

**Develops:** The younger son leaves and wildly squanders his wealth (13).

**Escalates:** Having spent everything a famine comes and puts him in need, so he hires himself to feed pigs, but remains hungry and destitute (14-16).

**Crisis:** The son comes to his senses and resolves to go home to seek mercy from his father and become the lowest of his servants (17-20a).

**Resolution:** The father runs to embrace the repentant son and lavishes on him the gifts of family status and kills the fattened calf to celebrate the son's unexpected return, because the son was dead/lost but now is alive/found (20b-24a).

**Following Actions and Lessons:** The celebration begins (24b).

#### Act II (The Path of the Older Son):

**Setting:** The older son is working in the field and arrives home to music and dancing (25a).

**Problem:** (26-28)

**Begins:** The older son asks a servant what happened and finds out his brother returned home and the father killed the fattened calf (26-27).

**Develops:** The older brother refused to join the party in anger (28a).

**Escalates:** The father pleads with the older son to join them, but the son angrily compares his righteousness with his brother and complains of the father's mercy toward the younger son (28b-30).

**Crisis:** The father tells the older son that he is always with him and rich toward him, but that the family needs to joyfully celebrate the younger son's return (31-32).

**Resolution:** n/a

**Following Actions and Lessons:** n/a

**3. Author's Big Idea (ABI):** Jesus tells a parable in which a father is merciful and extravagant towards his humble repentant son despite former disloyalty and squandering his father's estate, while his older son looks to his own "slavery" instead of joyfully celebrating his younger brother return.

#### **4. Explanation of ABI/Intent**

This parable is about the dynamics of the new covenant. All of the elements of the covenant are present: divine benevolence, human loyalty, blessings and curses. The father's benevolence (his estate and later extravagance toward the younger son) is preeminent. The younger son is initially disloyal to the father when he runs away and then he repents and become loyal again. The older son seems to be initially loyal, but appears disloyal to his father at the end. The younger son receives curses after he leaves his father and blessings when he returns. The older son assumes that if he is loyal (in his mind slaving for his father) he will get his father's blessing, but he forgets that loyalty doesn't bring him the father's estate (benevolence). That preceded any actions by the sons.

When the younger son returned in repentance he was granted the status of a son again. He surely understands that the father's extravagance has no mechanical correlation to his works, and is able to truly be a son, but what about the older son? Does he behave like a son or like a dog, expecting rewards because of his works? How will the older son embrace the younger son? These questions remain open for the audience to ponder. This parable has two parts: the path of the younger son (15:11-24) and the path of the older son (15:25-32).

The parable *introduces* the three characters with a focus on the father. The younger son was probably in his late teens, because he is still single (Bock, 1309).

The *problem begins* when the younger son asks for his inheritance. The word “estate” is “*ton bion*” in Greek, which means “the life.” He basically was asking for what his father life would leave him (Bock, 1309). This was unusual practice and revealed that the son thought of his father as dead. Furthermore as he left home, he showed that he didn’t want to live under his father’s rule. He pursued his own lifestyle independent of his father, a sign of contempt.

The *problem develops* as the son tosses his wealth into the wind—that is he wastes his possessions on a wild, undisciplined lifestyle (Bock, 1310). The *problem escalates* when a severe famine comes. He is unprepared for such a trial, which makes his hard time worse. In poverty in a land with no family, he does what anyone would do: work. His job, to feed pigs, is the lowest job imaginable and he is so desperate that he becomes jealous of the pigs’ food. This is a graphic picture of the despair and humbling of the younger son.

The *crisis* occurs when he realizes the depths of his problem in the pigpen. His lifestyle—though it might have been fun for a while—has led him to the worst place imaginable. He comes to his senses when he reflects on how his father’s servants are in better shape than he is. If he goes home how will he be received? A thought of, “Will they accept me back home?” is implied. His sonship and inheritance was gone (Bock, 1313). So he devises a plan: he’ll throw himself on his father’s mercy and become the lowest servant of his father’s house, a day laborer (*misthios* in Greek) who isn’t cared for as a member of the household (Bock, 1312). And so he walks home. His physical turnaround is a symbol of what is going on in his heart.

The *resolution* begins while the son is still far away. The father’s run to the son is an absolute shock, because this would never happen in Middle Eastern culture (Bock, 1313). The son lived a shameful life and deserved to be shamed by the father, but instead the father took the shame upon himself. Despite the father’s warm welcome, the son still offers his confession to the father. He says

exactly what he resolved to say, except that he omitted the “becoming a servant” part. This probably was omitted for two reasons. First, the son was probably shocked by the warm welcome. Second, it seems like he may have been interrupted by his father actions of extravagance. Asking to be a day laborer would have been an insult to his father (Bock, 1314).

Instead the father calls for a great celebration to rejoice the sons’ return. The reason for the celebration was that the son has been resurrected, that he was ‘dead’ but now is ‘alive.’ This is very significant because the son experiences a brand new relationship with the father. All of the sins of the past are not taken into account and they can begin a new relationship. This new commitment is shown by the father’s extreme benevolence and the son’s renewed loyalty (assumed). The *following actions and lessons* are that the celebration begins.

The *setting* of Act 2 begins with the older son working in the field and arriving home to music. The older son dominates the story with the father from this point on (Bock, 1316). This seems odd, in light of the celebration of the younger son.

The *problem begins* when the older son asks a servant to find out what is happening. The *problem develops* as the older son is obviously not happy about it. He receives it as a sign that the younger son is more favored than him. Maybe he thought that the father was giving away the older son’s estate. To the older son, the younger son was dead and out of his life forever. He can’t even be in the same room as his brother, so he ironically isolates himself outside the house (Bock, 1317).

The *problem escalates* when the older son elevates himself and lowers his brother. “I am better than my brother,” he says in so many words. He calls the father’s justice into account. He basically says, I have been comparatively better than my brother, but I didn’t get the blessings. The older brother doesn’t want the younger brother to have a clean slate. He is indignant that he has to work so hard for his blessing, but the younger son just gets the father’s favor without loyalty. The older brother wrongly believes that it is his “slavery” that has brought the father’s blessing to him. And he forgets that the estate is his!

The *crisis* happens when the father shames himself a second time by coming out to the older son. This older son had lost touch with his father's heart and needed to be put in his place. His vertical comparison with his brother destroyed the joy of celebration that should have come as a result of the younger son's repentance. The younger son needed to be accepted not only by his father, but by his older brother too.

There is no *resolution* or *following actions*. This is because Jesus and Luke want the self-righteous Pharisees to ponder on what they should do. This is similar to when Nathan tells a story to David to convict him of sin and to bring repentance (2 Samuel 12). You should feel the tension of the unresolved story. Will the older change his mind and accept his younger brother?

### **III. Correlation/Application**

#### **1. Discontinuities:**

##### **a. Personal differences:**

- We live in North America, not in an ancient near east parable.
- We don't get inheritances like this anymore.

##### **b. Cultural differences**

- Famine isn't a common problem in the Western world.
- We don't wear robes, have family rings, or think of sandals as rich clothes.
- We don't ordinarily work for our parent's business.

##### **c. Redemptive history**

- We see the significance of the grace of the cross in a way that the original hearers didn't.
- Jesus had not given the Spirit yet.

#### **2. Continuities**

##### **a. God**

- God still wants sinners to repent and come to Him.

- God still expects the self-righteous to see Him as the benefactor.
- God is still benevolent and merciful and loves people.

#### **b. People**

- People still squander wealth in wild living.
- We still try to earn God's benevolence through works.
- People still get jealous.
- People still want love and acceptance.

#### **c. Redemptive history**

- God is still offering mercy to those who trust in him
- There is still time for more sinners to repent.
- God still calls us to rejoice and not be jealous/hard-hearted.

**3. Theological Big Idea (TBI):** God is merciful and extravagant towards those who humbly repent, but rebukes those who celebrate their own self-righteousness instead of celebrating repentant sinners.

#### **4. Personal Impact**

**Earning God's Favor:** Just like the older son, we tend to think that we can earn God's favor if we are good enough. For some reason, it's really easy for me to think that I deserve God's benevolence. The reality though is that God's goodness towards me has little to do with my good works. Certainly God requires my loyalty, therefore living like the younger son is not the right path. But I can never be good enough to deserve God's love.

**Not Good Enough for God:** Running in the exact opposite direction in my heart is my tendency to believe that if God knew where I've been he wouldn't want a relationship with me. I tend to experience this the most when I am straying away from God's will and living to please myself and my own plans. While it is true that God is not pleased with my sin, his benevolence again is not based on my righteousness, but on His Character. If I know that I am living counter to His Will, God is

closer than I think if I simply turn around and humbly approach him in confession. He longs to run towards me if I turn back to Him.

**Comparison:** Not only do I compare with God, I continually deal with comparing my life with other people. This takes two different forms: downward comparison and upward comparison. I compare downwardly (like the older son) when I want to justify my life as good and righteous. I tend to do this when I feel like I'm not getting what I am not appreciated. I compare upwardly (like the younger son might have) when I see others' works and righteousness and don't think that I'm good enough to associate with them. This leads me to isolate myself from them, especially if that person is harsh or self-righteous, because I don't want to experience their judgment on my life.

#### Am I a Pharisee?

1. Do you depend on your own righteousness to earn God's blessing?
2. Since you don't really want to obey all of the law, do you just emphasize the things you want to do and ignore the rest?
3. In order to justify your righteousness, do you compare yourself with other people that are less righteous than you? Although they might hate you, at least you will feel good about yourself.

The alternative to comparison with people is to enter into a vertical relationship only with God, not with people. I will always be better than some and worse than some, but compared to God I will always be the lesser. Comparing vertically with other people puts us in a weird relationship of superiority that destroys relationships and leads to many hard feelings. But when I compare myself vertically only with God, it frees me to see others the way God does. And this attitude allows me to truly love other people as an extension of God's love.

#### IV. Bibliography

Darrell L. Bock. Luke Volume I&II. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996.