

Luke 15:11-32: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0:00] Luke chapter 15 verses 11 to 32. And he said, There was a man who had two sons, and the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.

And he divided his property between them. Not many days later the younger son gathered all that he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.

And when he had spent everything a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs.

And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger?

I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.

[1:01] And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

And the son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet, and bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.

For this my son was dead, and is alive again. He was lost and is found. And they began to celebrate. Now his oldest son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.

And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.

But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him. But he answered his father, Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command.

[2:08] Yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.

And he said to him, Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad. For this your brother was dead, and is alive.

He was lost, and is found. The final part of Luke chapter 15 is devoted to the parable of the lost son. We ought to read this alongside the preceding two parables, the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin.

In verse 3, these things are introduced with the statement, So he told them this parable. What this chapter contains is like three parables in one. The final parable in the cycle is that of the lost son, and there's an escalating movement as we go through.

There's a movement from one out of a hundred sheep lost, to one out of ten coins lost, to one out of two sons lost. What might have been brushed off as an acceptable loss in the first case is seen to be far more severe in the third.

[3:16] These parables are also, together, a response to the scribes and the Pharisees, and their objection to the way that Jesus eats with sinners. In the older brother figure, at the end of this parable, something that has been in the background of all of the parables to this point suddenly is thrust into the foreground and made explicit.

Once again, Jesus is showing his rhetorical mastery and his ability to tell a story with greatest effect. The parable of the lost son raises a number of questions, not least that of who its central character is.

Is it about the lost son? Is it about the father that welcomes him? Or is it about the brother who refuses to accept him upon his return? A case could be made for any of these, which might perhaps be an indication that the parable is rather more complicated than such a question supposes.

The parable might be making several points at once. The actions of the youngest son with which the parable begins are truly scandalous within that society. First of all, he asks the father to divide the inheritance between him and his brother while the father is still alive.

Then he presumably liquidates all that his father has given to him, and then takes that and goes into a far country. He has disowned his parents. He's disowned his family and dishonoured them.

[4 : 31] And then, if that was not bad enough, he squanders all that has been entrusted into his hand by his father. It's important to see the themes of kinship that are playing out within the story, as the place of such themes within this parable represents a considerable and significant move beyond the two parables that precede it.

Part of the point of this parable is to show that the stakes of what's taking place are the stakes of a family, of kinship, of the mutual recognition that should occur in a family between father and son, son and father, brother and brother.

And for this reason, it is important that the parable begins with a despicable spurning of kinship.

The younger son ends up in a very poor state indeed. He's in a far country, and he ends up working with the pigs and even desiring their food.

This is someone who has gone from the land of Israel, presumably, to a land of the Gentiles where they eat pigs, and now he wants to eat the pigs' food. Having turned his back upon his father and his family, he is not going to eat the pigs' now fallen as low as he could fall.

The younger son is in a sort of exile, in a far country among the unclean swine, and a number of people have identified the younger son as Jacob. I don't think that's quite correct, even though the story does play off the Jacob story.

[5 : 47] Jacob is the younger son, and he does go into a far country, but he is a righteous son who flees on account of the threat of his older brother. While here the younger son seems to be Israel the nation, who are a poor parody of their forefather, they've willfully chosen the way of exile, rebelling against the Lord, and squandering the blessings of the covenant.

Finally, in the state of exile, the son comes to his senses. He realises that even if he were only a hired servant in his father's house, he would be better off than he is in his current condition. And so he decides to go back, rehearsing along the way this speech that he's going to deliver to his father, a speech which, when the time comes, he is not given the time to deliver in its entirety.

Most people reading this parable presume that the father is God. A case can be made from this looking at other passages within the book of Luke. Luke chapter 11 verses 11 to 13.

Or Luke chapter 12 verses 30 to 32.

But there is another way to read this parable and the identity of the father within it.

[7 : 18] And that is to pay attention to the many times that father language has been used with reference to Abraham in the book of Luke. As he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.

In chapter 1 verse 55. The oath that he swore to our father Abraham to grant us. In chapter 1 verse 73. Bear fruits in keeping with repentance and do not begin to say to yourselves, We have Abraham as our father.

For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Chapter 3 verse 8.

And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day.

Chapter 13 verse 16. Or in chapter 13 verse 28. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves cast out.

Chapter 19 verse 9. Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham.

And perhaps the greatest example of all, in the chapter that follows this, where Lazarus is taken to the bosom of father Abraham.

[8 : 22] Considering that this is within the same cycle of parables, it is strong evidence that the father in this parable is Abraham. As the two sons recall characters in the book of Genesis, the

father could fairly naturally be associated with their patriarchal father.

Perhaps stronger evidence still is the fact that the action of the father is that which is characteristic of Abraham. Abraham's very entry into fatherhood was related to his hospitality extended to the angels, in Genesis chapter 18.

In verses 2 to 8 of that chapter. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the earth and said, O Lord, if I have found favour in your sight, do not pass by your servant.

Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on, since you have come to your servant.

So they said, Do as you have said. And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, Quick, three seers of fine flour, knead it and make cakes. And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man who prepared it quickly.

[9 : 33] Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them. And he stood by them under the tree while they ate. Abraham's action of running to greet the visitors, and also his preparation of the fattened calf, are things that stand out in this passage.

Much as they are elements that stand out in the parable of the lost son. The younger son returns, expecting and hoping to be treated like a servant. But rather than being welcomed like a hired servant, he is welcomed as a loved son.

There are ways in which this story would remind the hearer of the story of Jacob and Esau, particularly the story of two sons, and the older and the younger, and other details of the story point to that Old Testament narrative.

But the details are all topsy-turvy. Israel hasn't followed the script. Notice the greeting of the father in verse 20 is precisely the same as the greeting given by Esau to the returning Jacob in Genesis chapter 33 verses 3 to 4.

The parable plays off the story of Esau and Jacob in other ways.

[10 : 44] Genesis chapter 27 verse 30 is something that comes earlier. As soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, when Jacob has scarcely gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, Esau his brother came in from his hunting.

In this case there seems to be a close parallel between Esau and the older brother. The older brother comes in from the field and sees that his father has to his mind wrongfully blessed his younger brother, and he's angry, utterly disowning his younger brother.

So on the one hand we have the positive action of Esau when he restored his relationship with Jacob, when he greeted him as Jacob returned to the land. But we also have the negative action of Esau hanging in the background, when he sought to kill his brother after he came in from the field to find that his father had blessed his brother instead of him.

This characterisation is subtle but important, because the character that the Pharisees and the scribes would naturally associate with would be the older brother. They'd be scandalised by the action of the younger brother.

And yet there are these troubling indications in the characterisation of the different figures in the narrative that the older brother is not the good guy. Just as the younger son has to come to his senses, to come to himself, so the older brother has to come to himself, to become like Esau in welcoming back the younger brother, who he feels has wronged him.

[12 : 01] But he has not yet done so. The older brother in this story shuts himself out of the feast, rather than welcoming his returning brother. Note how he rhetorically disowns his brother, your son.

Now in the beginning of the parable it was the younger brother who disowned his family by his actions. Now the older brother is disowning his brother, and implicitly disowning his father in the process.

All these years I have served you. He thinks of himself as a servant. The younger brother sought to be welcomed back as a servant. And now the older brother has been thinking about himself as a servant all the way along.

We might be led to ask, who indeed is the last son in this parable? We should also notice the father's insistent recognition of both of the sons as his sons, and his refusal to reduce them to the status of servants.

Just as there is an inversion of the role of Jacob and Esau, there might be an inversion of the role of Moses too. Like Moses, the older brother returns to hear the sound of music and dancing, wondering what is taking place.

[13 : 05] There is also a calf involved. Exodus chapter 32 verses 17 to 19. When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, There is a noise of war in the camp.

But he said, It is not the sound of shouting for victory, or the sound of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing that I hear. And as soon as he came near the camp, and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands, and broke them at the foot of the mountain.

The Pharisees and the scribes might feel anger that they would imagine makes them like Moses. They see themselves as the guardians of the covenant, that these people, these sinners, have broken. However, even in his anger, Moses sought to intercede for the people, to ensure that the lost son of Israel not be cast away by the father, but that he be restored, and know the presence and fellowship of the father in his midst.

By stark contrast, the anger of the scribes and the Pharisees is at the scandal of God's grace in restoring such an idolatrous nation. These three parables speak of the value of those who have been lost, the need to go to lengths to find them, the incredible joy at their return, and the tragedy and loss in locking oneself out of this joy on account of one's resentment.

The climax of this story, like the previous ones, is not the act of finding itself, but the joy of the feast that follows. And the key concern is that everyone join in this joy, that it be a common joy that people share in.

[14 : 34] The previous two parables have given this expectation of sharing in the joy. Rejoice with me, for I have found what is lost. And then that expectation is broken in this final case, and we see the tragedy of the son, who will not recognize his brother, will not join in the joy of his father.

The end of this parable leaves things hanging and unresolved. Think about the end of the book of Jonah as a similar example of this. The resolution must take place within the actions and the response of the hearers of the parable.

A question to consider. How do the themes of kinship that are at the heart of this parable help us to think better about the original situation that prompted Jesus' teaching in these parables, in his eating with sinners?

