

The Prodigal Son: A Story about our Relationships

Luke 15:11-32

This well-known parable in our Byzantine liturgical tradition is read on the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, the Sunday that follows the Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee and precedes the Meatfare Sunday. Essentially these pre-Lent weeks prepare us for the Lent itself and when we read attentively both the biblical texts and the liturgical songs, we hear the emphasis on the repentance. Let us read kontakion¹ of the Sunday of Prodigal Son as an example:

*I have recklessly forgotten Your glory, O Father;
And among sinners I have scattered the riches which You had given me.
Therefore, I cry to You like the Prodigal:
“I have sinned before You, O compassionate Father;
Receive me a penitent and make me as one of Your hired servants.”*

The faithful here is perceived as a sinner who have wasted his/her father's inheritance, now acknowledges his/her faults, makes a return home and asks for his/her father's forgiveness. Interestingly, the Hebrew term “šuv” which we usually translate as “to repent” has basic meaning “to return, to come back” and, in theological contexts, it conveys the sense of “returning to the original relationship with God.” This return does not mean to do things in old ways but rather to start the completely new relationship.² The story we are about to analyze is a story about coming back home and restoring relationship. This is also a story about feelings and emotions that effect someone's decisions, choices and judgments.

Jesus often uses parables as an illuminating tool to express his own ideas and to teach about the kingdom of God. His parables could reach audience and touch upon a wide spectrum of issues. Those who heard them could easily relate to the personages and situations they had learnt. At the same time, both the hearers and writers, in our case the author of the third Gospel, had not only to transmit the parables but also to interpret them. Furthermore, Jesus' parables were challenging and unforgettable to the extent that “a recipient would had been forced inevitably to interpret.”³ The parable of the Prodigal Son is one of this kind. It both reflects the Jewish culture and tradition of the first-second centuries A. D.⁴ and poses challenges to both. Moreover, there are three personages in the story that each of us can relate to: the father, the prodigal son and the older son. In the talk we shall discuss and analyze emotions and feelings by which the heroes are driven, we shall explore how culture as important environmental factor shapes their personalities in the story and we shall look for theological as well as spiritual implications this story has for each of us.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE TEXT

¹ A poetic sermon chanted during liturgical services in Byzantine Christian tradition. Cf.

<https://www.britannica.com/art/kontakion>

² J. A. Soggin, “šuv” in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 3, ed. By E. Jenni and C. Westermann, 1312-1315.

³ J. D. Crossan, “Parable” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5, ed. By D. N. Freedmann, 150.

⁴ Anno Domini (Common Era).

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is a unique narrative in the gospel tradition. It is only Luke who picks up this parable and inserts it into his writing, in biblical scholarship it is defined as only Lukian material.⁵ This means that there was a reason why the author of the third Gospel included it into his writ. As you may know, the Gospel according to St Luke⁶ was written in 80-90 A. D. for the third generation of Christ followers who were most likely gentiles. At the beginning of his Gospel Luke explains the aim of his work:

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed. (Luke 1:1-4)⁷

The proper teaching about Christ event and deepening the knowledge are the main goals of Luke's work. In this passage, we also learn that he collects and analyzes the material previously handed down from the eyewitnesses and composed in some order. Theophilus, a recipient of the message – most likely a gentile, already a follower of Christ – now need to learn the exact truth or, in other words, to better understand what he had learned. As I mentioned earlier, the main theme of Luke's Gospel is to teach about the Kingdom of God and to explain what steps should be taken to make it real in everyday life. Moreover, this message of good news should reach all the ends of the earth because Jesus is a Savior for everyone. Accordingly, the doors of this Kingdom are open for everyone who acknowledges Jesus as Christ and/or repents of his/her own sins with no ethnic, religious, social etc. exceptions: "a sinful woman" (Lk 7:36-50); "a chief tax collector" (Lk 19:1-10); "a criminal who asks Jesus to remember him in his Kingdom" (Lk 23:39-43); Samaritans who were perceived as unclean people by the Jews (Lk 10:30-37; 17:12-19). In this context of inclusive attitude towards others, we find two very similar parables: the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32) and the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Lk 18:9-14).⁸ These stories in Luke teach about the unlimited mercy of God and universalism of the good news.

To finally conclude, this part of the talk, the parable of the lost son is narrated after the parable of the lost sheep (Lk 15:3-7) and the parable of the lost coin (Lk 15:8-10). All three are introduced by the common remark: "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him (Christ). And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Lk 15:1-2). The religious leaders often criticized Jesus for having common meals and conversations with the "wrong" people. That kind of attitude was a great challenge for the former because in Jesus' behavior they saw the disobedience to the law, in particular that of purity. However, what Jesus did was to show how a given law could become a stereotype, a cliché that subsumed the person as God's image. It does not mean though that the

⁵ The Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke have a lot of material in common and present their stories in the same order, for that reason in biblical scholarship they are defined as synoptic gospels. They can be viewed syn-optically, *i. e.* side-by-side. Yet, Matthew and Luke have material peculiar just to their gospels and it corresponds to the interests of each author and his audience. Cf. F. M. Gillman, "Synoptic Problem" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, ed. By D. N. Freedmann, 263-270.

⁶ The Acts of the Apostles is a second book that Luke wrote as a continuation of the stories in the Gospel. The rapid growth of early Church and issues the community had to deal with are vividly described in this book.

⁷ English translation is from the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-Revised-Standard-Version-Catholic-Edition-NRSVCE-Bible/#booklist> Otherwise will be indicated.

⁸ В. А. Андросова, *Библия для всех. Новый Завет*, 243-244.

tax collectors and/or sinners⁹ were free of any responsibility. In fact, a sinner ought to repent: a sheep and a coin are found, and a son comes to his senses and returns home. The repentance means to endorse Christ teaching by following him in everyday life: it is not just strict observance of the law, it is living in/with Christ. Remarkably, the return of the lost sheep, coin, son asks for a joyous celebration: “Celebrate with me” (Lk 15:6, 9, 23). God rejoices when a lost child returns home.

Let us now turn to each personage in the parable and analyze his behavior from socio-cultural and theological perspectives.

FATHER

His own younger son socially humiliates the father in this story and, at the same time, the father does not even challenge his son’s decision, just accepts it. Why is it so? Even nowadays to ask a living parent for the inheritance is considered as an insult and the message might sound like “I wish you were dead already.” In ancient times this act of the prodigal son would have been assumed as a rebellion against the father in this case and, as a result, could have led to the death penalty.¹⁰ Thus, we read in the Book of Deuteronomy:

If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place. They shall say to the elders of his town, “This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.” Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear, and be afraid. (Deut 21:18-21)

Behavior of the younger son shows his absolute carelessness about the law in general and his disrespect for own father in particular. He would definitely know that his decision to inherit while the parent is alive and in good health would have brought a shame upon his father. Father is also aware of this social view on the situation and that people would think of him as either a spoiling parent of such an immoral son or simply as an incapable parent even to contest his younger son’s request. Ben Sira emphasizes this social view on the situation:

To son or wife, to brother or friend, do not give power over yourself, as long as you live; and do not give your property to another, in case you change your mind and must ask for it. While you are still alive and have breath in you, do not let anyone take your place. For it is better that your children should ask from you than that you should look to the hand of your children. Excel in all that you do; bring no stain upon your honor. At the time when you end the days of your life, in the hour of death, distribute your inheritance. (Syr 33:20-24)

The younger son, however, does not stop there: he sells the inherited property, including the land. It should be noted that the Jewish law allowed a father to regulate which possessions (especially land) would go to which son before his death, but they could have taken possession only after their father’s death. The father was a manager of all the assets and received the land’s

⁹ There is a debate as to the identity of these sinners. Most likely, it is a term to define the people who, according to the religious authority of the time, did not know the law properly and did not follow it. Cf. N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone. Bible Study Guide*, 126.

¹⁰ C. S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 278.

profits until his death. Therefore, this son could have known what would be his portion but could not legally sell his assets.¹¹ Nevertheless, he does it.

One more comment ought to be made regarding the selling of the land. For the Jews the land was a sign of the covenant between God and his chosen people, it was a precious gift. For that particular reason during the settlement time the land was carefully allotted to each tribe and the borders could not be moved. This goes down to the households and families. There is a famous story in the First Book of Kings about Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21). The king Ahab wanted to buy it because he liked it and it was just beside his palace. Naboth, however, refused king's offer to do so because "the LORD forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance" (1 Kings 21:3). He died unjustly because he obeyed the law and kept the land in his family property. It was imperative to preserve the land within ancestral borders as a sign of the covenant. Furthermore, there was a Levitical law that protected the land:

If anyone of your kin falls into difficulty and sells a piece of property, then the next of kin shall come and redeem what the relative has sold.²⁶ If the person has no one to redeem it, but then prospers and finds sufficient means to do so,²⁷ the years since its sale shall be computed and the difference shall be refunded to the person to whom it was sold, and the property shall be returned.²⁸ But if there are not sufficient means to recover it, what was sold shall remain with the purchaser until the year of jubilee; in the jubilee it shall be released, and the property shall be returned. (Lev 25:25-28)

Of course, the father knows that selling the land by his younger son would bring more shame upon him and it most likely did. Yet he agrees. His personage is remarkable in an unconventional way: his love towards his son exceeds any social and cultural judgment, even more the law itself. He let his son go because he loves him.

Now this lost son comes back. He returns with nothing and seems not to expect a lot from his father. However, what the father does: he runs to meet his younger son, to give him a kiss and most probably a heartfelt hug. In ancient culture it was not dignified for elderly people to run, father would need to pull up his garb to run. Yet another unconventional behavior. At the same time, the kissing was appropriate for a family member.¹² We do not hear in the story any rebukes like "I warned you. Did you know that this would happen? You are guilty and have to accept your mistake". The father just runs and hugs his son and shows the honor by culturally vested tradition (he gives an expensive cloth and a ring). A ring might indicate a reinstatement to the sonship. His love is simply unconditional and overcomes all limits.

As a final touch of the father's reaction to the return of the prodigal son is the invitation to celebrate this event in a great banquet: "Get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" (Lk 15:23). A fatted calf would have been enough to feed a village. In other words, the father organizes a big festive party. In Jewish tradition common meals were essential for family life, for building up relationships, for emotional bonding: for instance, important decisions such as marriage contracts were made at the table, an important part of Pesach celebration is a family festive meal, Lady Wisdom teaches at the table, Christ leaves himself at the table. Through this generous homecoming welcome "we have as vivid picture as anywhere in Jesus' teaching of what God's love is like, and of what Jesus himself took as the model for his own ministry of welcome to the outcast and the sinner."¹³

¹¹ C. S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 279.

¹² C. S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 279-280.

¹³ N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone. Bible Study Guide*, 129.

THE YOUNGER SON

Now let us turn briefly to the younger son's story. We hear that he just approaches to his father and asks for the inheritance. Next step is to sell his portion and to set off for adventures. We do not hear the reason why he wants to leave his home; whether he has any plans where to go and how to use the money. As it appears in the text after he simply wants "to be free" of all the duties and have fun. This kind of freedom leads him to ruin – he spends all the money and has no means to survive. As a younger son in the family, he most probably had little experience of dealing with the finances. In the household where he grew up there were the father and the older brother to take care of these matters.¹⁴ In fact, he runs out of money, in order to survive, now attaches himself to a non-Jew, "to one of the citizens of that country", and eats with the pigs. He becomes ritually impure, which makes him an outcast for his own people, and his glorious life now turns into a shame – he lives and eats with the pigs. A risk of starving to death brings him back to his senses. The fantasies about a super cool and joyous life vanish in the face of impending death and, at the same time, the memories about home serve as an encouragement to return.

The younger son finally thinks! He finally recognizes how immoral his attitude was towards his father!

But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up 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 like one of your hired hands." (Lk 15:17-19)

In case of the younger son, it was the fear of the death that had changed his life and had made him realize that his choice was a choice of a loser. By the way, the Hebrew noun "khatah" and the Greek noun "hamartia" for sin both have basic meaning "to miss a goal or way." In other words, a sinner is a person who loses his/her goal or misses his/her way, someone who is not successful in life.

A famous New Testament scholar N. T. Wright compares the experience of the younger son in a foreign land with the experience of the Jews during the exodus from Egypt and the Babylonian exile.¹⁵ These two events are essential for the chosen people concept and are foundational for the identity of Israel as a nation. These two events helped Israel to rethink her relationship with God and with each other. Exodus and exile served as catalysts for shaping a new religious identity and liberated people from the spiritual slavery. Prophet Jeremiah saw this exilic experience as a necessary experience for rebellious people. They had to get into nightmare to finally understand how idolatry they had practiced, how their neglect of Ten Commandments, and the lack of love to others are alienate them from God, how their immoral practices ruin their relationships with God. Only the feeling of their impending death brought them to senses and they reunited with God. Prophet Ezekiel in chapter 37 describes the return from the exile using the language of resurrection:

Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with

¹⁴ C. S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 279.

¹⁵ N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone. Bible Study Guide*, 129. The Babylonian exile took place in 586-536 B. C. A part of population, including royal family and his officers, was exiled into Babylon. Prophet Jeremiah foreseen this event as a punishment for people's disobedience to God. The exile is also perceived as a new exodus by Jewish writers.

skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.”
(Ez 37:5-6)

“For Jesus to tell a story about a wicked son, lost in a foreign land, who was welcomed back with a lavish party – this was bound to be heard as a reference to the hope of Israel. ‘This my son was dead, and is alive’; ever since Ezekiel 37 the idea of resurrection had been used as picture-language for the true return from exile.”¹⁶

To conclude, the parable of the prodigal son teaches us that this experience of nightmare by the younger son is sometimes needed in spiritual life. Moreover, we as members of the community should embrace this lost person with unconditional love as the personage of the father has showed us.

THE OLDER SON

Let us now analyze the figure of the older brother. According to the Jewish law, the older brother, who is most like a first-born child, was to inherit a double portion (cf. Deut 21:17). Namely, in contrast to the younger brother he would have received two thirds of the inheritance and socially and financially would have been in a better position.¹⁷ In the parable we do not hear his opinion about the younger brother’s decision to sell his inheritance and to leave home. We may only guess, but we certainly hear his strong opinion about the festive meal the father has organized for the younger brother upon his return. Emotions of anger and rebuke towards his father dominate. The older son sees father’s welcoming reaction to the return of the prodigal son as injustice and as a typical sign of parental favoritism. After all, his is right to demand justice and culturally he has these privileges. Nevertheless, the way he addresses his father and talks with him in the Jewish value system is inappropriate. First, he does not say “father”, but just “look” – imperative second person singular – and, secondly, he poses a question “have not I served you for so long?” The Greek verb “duleuo” in this question is even stronger – “served as a slave.” In other words, he insults his own father by not addressing him properly and perceives his work at home as slavery. Thirdly, he refuses to enter the house and to join the party even though the father invites him and gives his reason for organizing the celebration.

Most biblical commentators state that in this parable Luke contrasts two spiritual paths: that of Jesus who shows mercy and love towards sinners and tax-collectors and that of the Pharisees who show their strong commitment to the law that ends up as a burden. Well, I would not agree with this statement completely that is to say that all the Pharisees practiced exclusivist spirituality. They needed time to think and comprehend what Jesus himself was doing with the interpretation of the law in his times. I think the end of the parable with no comments from the older son is left in this way on purpose. It teaches us also not to judge immediately this older brother as well.

Creating the figure of the older son Jesus teaches about the danger of placing the law above the human dignity. There is a great book in the Old Testament named after its hero – Job. When we read the book attentively, we notice that the author poses challenges to the traditional view on suffering. Job was a righteous person, he did everything the law required for him personally and even offered sacrifices on behalf of his children just in case they had sinned. His righteousness is acknowledged socially, everyone knows is a just person, and economically his is

¹⁶ N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone. Bible Study Guide*, 129.

¹⁷ C. S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 279.

doing very well. Suddenly for him and his family and friends he loses everything, including his health. No one on earth does not know what happened in heaven and they need to understand what is going with Job. Three friends and one young man come to Job to explain his nightmare and everyone even though expressing it differently state that Job is a sinner and he has to repent. Suffering was understood only as a sign of punishment. Job disagrees with such an interpretation and urges God to intervene. When finally God speaks to Job he does not provide any reason for Job's cause but Job is relieved. Why? Because he experienced God. Job did not need any explanations any more:

Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.' I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes. (Job 42:3-6)

Moreover, even though Job was very harsh in his laments against God, he was justified and not his comforters. The friends were sure they know the law and can talk on behalf of God. The book of Job teaches us to think out of box and not to be legalistic when we treat someone. We should abandon harsh legalism because we can easily fall into superiority complex by creating an image of God that fits our perceptions. This is what happened with the older son: he could not leave his comfort zone, his box where he knew everything and felt at ease. Socially and culturally his position would have been acceptable. Jesus, however, teaches us to challenge what culturally and socially seems to be fine and acceptable and not to become superior to those who stumble.

One final comment on the issue of "servitude" that the older son points to. It seems that he considered his work as obligatory and most likely as beneficiary. He was to inherit two thirds of the father's property. Yet, he describes his work as that of a slave. Psalm 1 that opens the entire collection of the Psalms in the Old Testament contains a portrayal of righteous persons and in verse two, in particular, describes the attitude of the just to the Torah (Law): "Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night." In other words, the life of righteous centers on the Law, but it is not a heavy burden (something I have to do or I am used to do as part of my tradition), it is a joy and happiness to be live by the Torah. This is the basis for real success in life. The elder brother in his **self**-righteousness lost the sense of joy and happiness. His behavior showed neither empathy no mercy. He just served his farther for years but this work does not seem to give him joy. He simply concentrated on himself and thus on his self-righteousness. Such personal attitude excludes others who ran off this track and yet atoned for his sins and ask a pardon. He forgot that "Sabbath is for a human and not vice versa." We do not hear what happened afterwards, did he find peace with his father and younger brother? The story teaches us that it is ok to have the feelings of anger and disappointment but not to remain there. It suggest to let the joy and happiness for others be part of your life.