

THE PRODIGAL SON

(Luke 15:11-32)

Jesus' parable of the prodigal son is a story about the relationship between being forgiven and granting forgiveness. The story first draws the listener into condemning a prodigal son. The issue for the listener is then whether to celebrate the prodigal's return to the father or to identify with the elder son in his righteous anger. The impact of the parable is to appeal for the granting of forgiveness.

The Story

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 your property that falls to me.'
And he divided his living between them.

Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living.
And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country.
And he began to be in want.

So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine.
And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate.
And no one gave him anything.

When he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, 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." '

And he arose and came to his father.
But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had 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 fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry.
For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.'

And they began to make merry.

Now his elder 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 this meant.

And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.'

But he was angry and refused to go in.

His father came out and entreated him.

But he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command.

Yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends.

But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!'

And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

It was fitting to make merry and be glad.

For this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.' "

Learning the Story

Verbal Threads

"This your brother [my son] was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found."

This sentence is the climax of the two halves of the parable (vss. 24, 32). The only variation is in the description of the prodigal as "my son" and "your brother."

"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." The prodigal says these words first to himself and then to his father (vss. 18,21). The variation is that he does not actually ask his father to be taken back as a hired servant, as he had planned. This omission in turn adds to the anticipatory silence at the end of the episode prior to the father's ecstatic commands for celebration.

"Kill the fatted calf." This phrase is the primary symbol of the celebration. It is stated first by the father (vs. 23), then the servant (vs. 27), and finally the elder son (vs. 30).

Short Sentences

The relationship between tempo and sentence length can be heard clearly in this parable. The shortness of the sentences and the episodes are indications of tempo and, therefore, of emphasis in the parable as Jesus told it. The general rule in the Gospels is that shortness creates emphasis because the words are said more slowly. In this parable you can get a sense of Jesus' storytelling style.

The first sentences in both halves of the parable are short: "There was a man who had two sons" and "Now his elder son was in the field." And, as I have punctuated the parable, all but one of the final sentences of the episodes in the first half are short (in Greek, six, four, four, seven, nineteen, and three words long). The last is the shortest, "And they began to celebrate" (vs. 24b).

Furthermore, the episodes with the shortest sentences are the first and third episodes of the elder brother half of the parable. These describe the elder brother's trip in from the fields (vs. 25) and his angry refusal to go in (vs. 28). The impact of these episodes is also increased by the reduction in episode length from three sentences to two. The slowing down of the tempo in the second half allows more time for the unspoken implications of the elder son's discovery and anger to be savored in the spaces between the words and the episodes. Jesus of Nazareth was clearly a masterful storyteller.

Thoughts, Emotions, Actions

The focus of the parable's thought is the mind of the father. His decisions pose several puzzles: his immediate granting of the son's request for the inheritance without question; his running out and embracing his son before he utters a word; and especially the extravagance of his welcome. Equally puzzling is his willingness to accept the elder son's scathing anger and to beg him to come in. That thought puzzle is the primary riddle of the parable.

The emotions of the story are deep and varied: the prodigal's despair in the pigpen, the shame and grief of his return, the father's joy, the anger of the elder son, and the father's loving plea. Implicit in the episodes describing the prodigal's adolescent excesses is also the deep disgust of the narrator. Identifying this emotional range is helpful in remembering the parable's structure.

The strongest actions of the parable are the interactions between the two sons' actions of repentance and anger and the responses of the father. The parable moves from the joy of the celebration to the impassioned plea of the father. The father's closing gesture is an unspoken appeal to forgive and to join in the celebration. The final action of the parable is left in the hands of the elder son/listener.

Listening to the Story: An Introduction to Narrative Analysis

The purpose of oral narrative analysis in biblical storytelling is the transferral of the story from one medium to another: from a writing/reading medium to a telling/listening medium. Rather than a transformation, this could be called a transmediation. In a storytelling event, three factors interact: the storyteller, the audience, and the story. An oral narrative analysis seeks to identify the discrete factors in that interaction so that an appropriate retelling of the written narrative as an oral narrative can take place. The analysis here is organized around the four qualitative components found in Aristotle's *Poetics*: plot, character, thought, and diction.

I will introduce the components briefly. My suggestion would be that you work through an analysis of the parable of the prodigal son, listening for each of these dimensions of the story. Following that analysis, we will work through the parable in detail together, episode by episode. I would encourage you to note those places where your analysis differs from mine. Those differences are the stuff from which the ongoing rediscovery of the story's

life will be discovered. You also might want to refer to Ken Parker's worksheet in the Appendix for the narrative analysis on which this outline is based.

1. Plot is the structure of the story's action expressed as a decisive transaction, struggle, or change with assessable consequences in a life. It is the human action of the story. Analysis of plot proceeds in two directions.

a. Episodes – Identify the steps in the story's structure. In the prodigal son, I have already identified the episodes. Notice how each deals with a common subject matter. Also notice each time there is a change in the who, what, where, when, and how of the story. These changes often occur at the beginning of a new episode. Pay attention to any structural parallels between the beginning and ending of the story as a whole, between sections within the story, and between individual episodes.

b. Structure – Identify the overall sequence of events within which the story is placed. Where does this story fit in the overall sequence? What is the impact of this story upon the stories that precede and follow it? In what ways is it related to other stories in the Gospel? In particular, look at the book as a whole and at the section of the book in which the story occurs.

Next, listen for and note the internal structure of events in which the story is developed. What signs of tensions and resolutions are present? What is the impact of this tension/resolution sequence on the listener?

2. Character is the building of the story's characters, by which they are ascribed moral qualities. This is often based on what they seek or avoid. It is the interpersonal, human motivation of the story. There are at least three dimensions of characterization that can be identified:

a. Perspective/point of view – At some points in the story, the story's action will shift from an "objective" description of the action from an observer's perspective to a "subjective" description from a character's perspective. These "inside views" may describe a character's sense perceptions, generally of what has been seen or heard. (Descriptions of taste, touch, or smell are also inside views, but they occur infrequently in biblical narrative.) An even deeper inside view may describe a character's feelings, either directly or indirectly. These changes in narrative perspective have a great impact on the listener's relationship to the character because the events are experienced from the character's point of view. An inside view can show the listeners what is inside a character's head and heart.

b. Narrative comments – A narrator can also intervene directly in the story by making a narrative comment to the audience. In biblical stories, narrative comments are generally used to give additional information about something puzzling in the story.

c. Norms – The norms of judgment in a story are the criteria of good and bad, right and wrong, that provide the basis for the storyteller's implicit appeals to the listeners. Norms are often indirectly expressed in the attitudes of the narrator. In a biblical story, we are listening to the story event and seeking to discern the norms of the ancient storytellers and their listeners. In telling the story now, a primary problem is to translate those values so that they can be experienced by contemporary listeners. For example, what are the norms in this parable in relation to pigs? How can they be translated for twentieth century midwestern farmers? What are the norms in this story for what is good and bad, right and wrong, happy and unhappy?

d. Distance – A primary factor in human relationships is emotional distance, which can range from intimacy and identification to hostility and alienation. In a good story, these dynamics of distance change constantly in the listener's relationship to the various characters.

What are the dynamics of distance in this parable in relation to the prodigal son, the father, and the elder son? How do the dynamics of distance change?

3. Thought is the expression of the story's ideas. These ideas may either be intellectual presuppositions shared between the narrator and the audience, or they may be introduced in the story. Often the thought of a story is based on listener expectations in relation to a certain idea, which are then reversed as in the story of the paralytic. Analysis of thought pays attention to the suspense and surprise in a story's development. In this parable, the central thought is the kingdom of God. What does the parable assume about the listeners' ideas about the kingdom of God and how are these ideas reinforced and reversed? What elements of suspense and surprise are built into the parable around these ideas?

4. Diction is the communication of the story's plot, characters, and thought through the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of the storyteller. It is the actual communication of the storyteller. Analysis of diction listens for matters such as tempo, volume, verbal threads, and gesture.

a. Verbal threads – The repetition of words and phrases is the basic linking technique in oral narrative. These function as mnemonic devices as well as imaginative patterns. Listen for the repetition of words both within the story and with the stories that precede and follow it in the larger narrative. Concordance study is an indispensable tool for this research. Listen for associations and connotations, for what is heightened, reversed, and reshaped.

b. Gestures – While we have no explicit record of the gestures in the text, there are gestures implicit in the story. For example, what gestures are implied in the episodes that describe the prodigal returning to his father and the father calling to his servant? The elder son's anger and the father's response?

From the conclusions of this analysis, the actual shaping of a telling of the story will be developed. Three general guidelines for rendering the story are as follows:

1. *Adapt delivery* verbally and nonverbally to the story's character.

2. *Achieve clarity* for the audience by alternate wordings and, where needed, brief explanations.

3. *Avoid trivialization* by keeping metaphorical terms and the primary narrative forms. In particular, don't trivialize the story by describing what it means or by giving a moral unless it is in the story itself.

The following analysis of the parable of the prodigal son is presented in a more detailed manner so that you can see how the study of a biblical text as an oral narrative might be done.

Episode 1 (15:11-12)

The norms of judgment operative in the evaluation of the request of the younger son are the major issue of this episode. Kenneth Bailey has the most illuminating treatment of this issue. He cites extensive evidence from both ancient Jewish literature and from modern Middle Eastern culture in support of his contention that "the prodigal is shown as wishing for his father's death in his request for his portion" (Bailey 1976,161). He reports that he has discussed this issue with people throughout the Middle East. Almost universally, when asked what it would mean if a son were to make this request of his father, the response has been that the request means he wants his father to die. The degree of emotional shock such a request implies today is clearly indicated by the only two instances Bailey found of a son actually making such a request. They are so revealing about the dynamics of the norms of judgment in this episode that they deserve extensive quotation:

In the first case Pastor Viken Galoustian of Iran, with a convert church of Oriental Jews, reported to me that one of his leading parishioners, in great anguish, reported to him, "My son wants me to die!" The concerned pastor discovered that the son had broached the question of the inheritance. Three months later the father, a Hebrew Christian (a physician), in previously good health, died. The mother said, "He died that night!" meaning that the night the son dared to ask for his inheritance the father "died." The shock to him was so great that life was over that night. In the second case a Syrian farmer's *older* son asked for his inheritance. In great anger his father drove him from the house. (Bailey 1976, 162)

While it is open to question whether this is conclusive evidence in relation to the first century, customs in the Middle East have not changed markedly in this regard. There is a key passage from the Mishna (Baba Bathra viii. 7) that reads:

If one assign in writing his property to his children, he must write, "from today and after (my) death."... If one assign in writing his estate to his son (to become his) after his death, the father cannot sell it since it is conveyed to his son, and the son cannot sell it because it is under the father's control. ...The father may pluck up (produce) and feed it to whomsoever he pleases, but whatever he left plucked up belongs to his heirs. (Bailey 1976, 164)

This tradition of the father passing the inheritance while he was still healthy carried with it the right of benefitting from the property until his death; he continued to enjoy the "usufruct." Thus, while the son obtains the right of possession, he does not have the right to dispose of the property (Jeremias 1962, 128-29; Bailey 1976, 163).

The immediate effect of the characterization of the younger son is, therefore, to make him a highly alien character. The father's granting the request is itself somewhat surprising. There is a strong possibility, as indicated by the instance of the Syrian farmer quoted earlier, that Jesus' listeners would have expected the father to throw the son out of the house in anger. But Jesus presents the father as one who simply observed the custom and divided the inheritance between them. The younger son's share of the inheritance was probably one-third; the elder son's two-thirds.

Episode 2 (15:13-14)

The son's actions go quickly from bad to worse. The implication of the first sentence of the second episode is that he not only asked for ownership of the property but also demanded the right of disposal. Only if he had received this right could he have sold the property. This is still another level of offense against his father and the family. Sale of the family's land was an extremely radical and offensive action. And the implication of the phrase "far country" is that he went to Gentile territory. While the son's disposal of the property was offensive, his use of the money multiplies the offense. To spend the family's inheritance in a Gentile country would certainly have been judged very negatively by Jesus' Palestinian listeners. Furthermore, he spent the money in loose living.

There may be a note of some irony in Jesus' report that a famine arose in that land. Famines were relatively frequent in Palestine and one of the reasons why persons emigrated was in order to avoid these crises. It may well be that Jesus is appealing here for a response such as "It serves him right!" A certain gloating at the misfortune of hometown kids who try to make it in the big city and end up in trouble is a relatively timeless phenomenon.

There is no necessary implication in the phrase usually translated as "loose living" that he spent the money immorally. The only exegetical basis for this reading is the older brother's later statement that he wasted the inheritance with prostitutes. The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament explains the phrase in this manner: "The dissipated life of

the Prodigal... is simply depicted as carefree and spendthrift in contrast to the approaching dearth" (vol. 1, 507). Jesus may intentionally imply that the elder son read his brother's behavior in the worst possible light. But this in no way minimizes the offensiveness of the young man's actions for Jesus' listeners.

Episode 3 (15:15-16)

The word usually translated "to join" means "to join together, cling, closely associate." Bailey notes that "in the Middle East the desperation of the indigent leads him to attach himself like glue to any potential benefactor" (Bailey 1976, 170). And this Gentile gave him the most repulsive job for a Jewish boy: a pig herder. The degree of revulsion that Jews had for swine is difficult for us to feel. Swine were seen as unclean animals. Associating with them made the young man unclean and, therefore, unable to practice his religion in any way (Jeremias 1962, 129). By taking this job, he becomes virtually a traitor to Judaism. Thus, it is written in the Mishnah, tractate Baba Kamma viii. 7, "Cursed be the man who would breed swine." In order for us to feel the degree of revulsion this description had for Jesus' listeners, it is necessary to combine the associations of the most repulsive animals (bats, rats, snakes) and symbols of national desecration (flag burning, active collaboration with the enemy).

The question of why he did not eat the carob pods has been answered variously. According to Bailey, some types of carob pods were and continue to be eaten in the Middle East, particularly during periods of famine. *Ceratonia siliqua*, which is usually identified with the material described here, is widely eaten (1976,173). Bailey's answer is that Jesus was referring to a wild variety of khamub that was bitter to the taste. My sense of this sentence is that Jesus is describing the young man's internal agony of being so hungry that he wanted to eat the swine's food but that he would not because the idea was so repulsive. Imagine wanting to eat the food that one was feeding to a repulsive animal such as a rat or a snake. The revulsion is associated with becoming like that animal by eating the same food.

The final short sentence of the episode describes his desperation as a starving Jew in a Gentile country. The only other source of food would have been a gift. But in a time of famine an alien like him was not a likely candidate for charity.

Episode 4 (15:17-19)

The description of his turning inside himself is similar to other introductions to an inside view in Jesus' parables (e.g., the introduction to the rich man, Luke 12:17; also Luke 16:3). They have the same structure: a question regarding a present problem followed by an action decision. In each instance the inside view creates greater sympathy. This is the turning point in the distance relationship to the young man. Prior to this, every new statement about his actions or thoughts has heightened the hostile and alienating aspects of his characterization. Even the insight into his wanting to eat the carob pods is repulsive in its impact. But here the dynamics change.

A major question in relation to the young man's speech is whether it really signifies a repentance. After all, he rightly recognized that he was starving to death and that he had burned his bridges when he left; he had in fact given up every right of sonship. Now he is only acknowledging what is perfectly evident to everyone. As Bailey has stated: "From a Jewish understanding of repentance, ... ,the prodigal's motivation in the far country is suspect

and needs some verification. The motivation is hunger. If he had been financially successful, he would not have considered returning home" (Bailey 1976, 176).

This is a problem of norms of judgment. We tend to equate righteousness with unselfishness, the renunciation of self-interest. As a result, we are tempted to conclude that when the son calculates his own advantage, he is being selfish. Since he goes back in order to save his own skin, he is not really repenting. My conclusion is that neither Jesus nor his audience would have regarded acting in self-interest as bad. Jesus continually appeals to enlightened self-interest in his teachings (e.g., the parables of the dishonest steward, the rich fool, the rich man and Lazarus, the ten virgins, the talents, and the Last Judgment). His question is, do you act wisely in your own interest in light of the coming of the kingdom of God, or do you act stupidly? Jesus assumes that his listeners are smart, calculating persons who are trying to live. A continual question underlying the parables is, in the light of the coming kingdom of God, what is in your best interest? Jesus does not present the calculation of personal self-interest as wrong. But since we have come to understand the absence of calculation as the essence of true repentance, we often tend to read that norm of judgment back into the parables.

The young man's internal dialogue is not set in a context of negative evaluation. He is making a realistic assessment of the situation. Jesus appeals here for a change from alienation to sympathy in relation to the son.

Furthermore, Jesus' listeners knew the degree of humiliation that would be involved in such a return. His resolution to go home and confess to his father includes a realistic assessment of his offense against not only his father but also the entire community. For the prodigal to go home a failure will mean humiliation and mockery. Indeed, he will probably be rejected—even by his father. That is, Jesus' listeners would have known well the consequences of such a return. The son will have to "eat humble pie." Thus, the evidence indicates that Jesus presented the young man as being willing to accept this degree of humiliation. Jesus is here describing repentance, a turning around and a seeking of reconciliation with the father.

His statement itself is repentant in nature. He resolves to make a total confession to his father. The two objects of his sin, "against God and before you," are named explicitly, as is the appropriate judgment, the loss of the rights of sonship. This speech stands in total contrast to the son's first statement to his father. Both begin with the same word, "Father." And both end with an imperative. But the first has a tone of arrogance while the second sounds a note of pleading, of humble request. And his request is that he be given the lowest position in the family's hierarchy. The depth of this statement is awesome. He had declared his independence. For him now to turn around and accept this humble position in relation to his father is the essence of repentance.

Note the order of his description of his sin—"against heaven and before you." The connotations of these phrases are eschatological and cultic. To sin against heaven is to ally oneself with those cosmic powers that struggle against the powers of heaven. He has set himself against heaven, against the powers of the new age. The phrase "before you" is cultic language that is associated with being before God (for example, Exod. 3:6; 22:8-9; 34:20, 23). The implication is that he has committed this sin publicly in the sight of his father. Thus, his projection of his confession is a full and open statement of his action with no equivocation or attempt to hide what he has done.

The statement regarding his sonship builds upon the central importance of the name in Hebrew culture. The power of the name was at the heart of identity, for God and for each person. "Hallowed be Thy name" states the basic hope that God's name will be honored and

respected by all. Thus, to give up one's name is to give up one's identity. And, in the first century, one's name was composed of a first name and one's father's name, for example, Simon bar-Jonah-Simon, son of John. His statement is then that he is no longer worthy to bear the family's name. To have lost the inheritance is serious. But to lose one's name is to lose everything. We speak of seeking to "clear my name." For Jesus' audience, this degree of voluntary confession was extreme.

Finally, the question has been raised about the degree of status that he requested in asking to be treated as a hired hand. Bailey has argued that this was a position of some stature, and that the son in requesting this position was planning to ask for a degree of freedom and independence that he later rejected during the actual meeting with his father. Thus, he sees the true act of repentance as coming only in the actual speech to the father in which he gives up any requests and simply throws himself upon his father's mercy (Bailey 1976, 177-79). Bailey then argues that Jesus presents the young man as still calculating a face-saving position in planning to make this request. My sense of the younger son's plan to ask his father to treat him as a hired hand is that he was asking to be seated at the last chair at the banquet. He is projecting a willingness to accept the lowest position. It is then a climactic expression of his willingness to accept permanently a position of humility in relation to his father and in contrast to his former position.

Episode 5 (15:20-21)

The younger son immediately acts upon his decision. In my mind, the picture of the return has generally been on a prairie-like place with a farm house out in the middle of some fields; the father runs down a long road to embrace his son. Bailey's argument is that Jesus' listeners would have known that homes, even of large landholders, were generally in town. Their picture would have been of the father going out to meet him at the edge of the village. The highly expressive word which describes the father's feeling upon seeing his son is *splagnizomai*, which, as was noted earlier, literally means "to turn over the bowels, to have pity or compassion." This is an inside view of the father's feelings as he sees his son.

Bailey's comments about the surprising character of the father's running to greet his son are delightful:

An oriental nobleman with flowing robes never runs anywhere. To do so is humiliating. A pastor of my acquaintance was not accepted as the pastor of a particular church because in the judgment of the elders, he walked down the street too fast. This custom is preserved even in a modern Middle Eastern metropolis by the Orthodox priest who, of course, still wears the long robes and is careful to walk at a slow, dignified pace. (Bailey 1976, 181)

The father is presented by Jesus as one who is unconcerned about custom or humiliation in his compassion and love for his son. The kiss is a sign of forgiveness (see, e.g., II Sam. 14:33).

Jesus makes the actual doing of the confession even more humbling than its contemplation. The impact of the son's speech is created by the comparison to what he had planned to say. The speech is begun just as planned. But he leaves off the last request for a position as a hired hand. Most commentators have assumed that the absence of the final line was caused by the father's interruption, which does not allow the son to finish. In that instance, Jesus would not have paused between the son's statement and the father's response. But the episode divisions indicate that Jesus made a major pause after the son's confession. In

this case, the impact of the absence of the last line is that the younger son renounces the possibility of asking for anything and throws himself upon his father's mercy.

The elements of exaggeration in Jesus' parables are of crucial importance. My hypothesis is that the elements of exaggeration (hyperbole) or total reversal of expectations are those points in the parables at which the story ceases to be about something that could have happened in a Galilean village in A.D. 30-33 and becomes a metaphor of the kingdom of God. Until that point of exaggeration or reversal, the listener can interpret the story in relation to this world. But once the story's plausibility cracks, it ceases to be a realistic description of an actual event and becomes a parable, a metaphor of the kingdom.

The first point of hyperbole in this story is the father's running to greet his son. No father in the experience of Jesus' listeners would have greeted a delinquent son in this manner. It is an exaggeration of affection beyond belief.

Episode 6 (15:22-24)

But the father's homecoming celebration for his son is the parable's greatest exaggeration. The celebration is beyond all appropriate proportions. The episode is filled with allusions to the eschatological banquet. The image of the robe has eschatological connotations (e.g., see Isa. 61:10; Rev. 4:4; 7:9, 14; 22:14). For example, in Mark 2:21 Jesus compares the Messianic Age to a new garment. The ring was probably understood to be a signet ring, a sign of authority. Thus, in Genesis 41:42 the gift of the ring and festal garments is a sign that Joseph is invested with Pharaoh's powers. The shoes were a sign of his being a free man in the house rather than a servant (cf. Jeremias 1962, 189). The killing of the calf rather than a goat or a lamb means that this is a major celebration such as would happen only for the marriage of the eldest son, the visit of the governor of the province, or some other grand occasion. The son is treated, therefore, as a guest of honor. The traditions of hospitality and grand celebration are combined with the granting of all the symbols of authority. It is probable that Jesus told it in a grand manner with exaggeration of voice and manner.

Episode 7 (15:25)

The elder son's entry into the story is presented slowly and with an extensive inside view describing what he heard. The effect of the episode for the listeners is that unique delight or agony of knowing something that someone else is about to discover, such as the birth of a child or the death of a loved one. The music and dancing refer to the celebration that followed the feast. The norms of judgment are all positive in relation to the elder son. He has been working and his discovery of the celebration builds the anticipation of his response.

Episode 8 (15:26-27)

The elder son's realization of what has happened is narrated in a straightforward manner. It may be that the servant's report is given in that unique tone of one who knows that he has news that will make the recipient very upset.

Episode 9 (15:28)

The most intimate insight into the elder son's feelings is the description of his outrage and refusal to enter. As Bailey points out, this was a serious offense, since he was expected to

be present. The father's coming out to him is humiliating to the father, as are all such public demonstrations of inner family conflicts in the Middle East. However, the elder son is at this point still a very sympathetic character. Throughout these three episodes, the slowing down of the tempo of the parable gives the listener time to consider the full implications of the elder son's discovery from his point of view.

The father's response to the elder son is to beg him to come in. Once again, he chooses to humble himself for the sake of his son.

Episode 10 (15:29-30)

The elder son insults his father by omitting the term of address. This is the first negative action of the elder son. His accusation is a classic statement from the perspective of the Deuteronomic theology of reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked. The two sentences are in antithetical parallelism:

<i>The elder son</i>	<i>The younger son</i>
a. I have slaved for you and never disobeyed.	a. This son of yours has squandered the inheritance on whores.
b. I have never been given even a goat.	b. You kill for him the fatted calf.

The elder son's speech is a scathing attack on his father's integrity. He accuses him of an exact reversal of justice. His logic is sound, but his attitude toward his father is in marked contrast to his brother's attitude.

In the course of the speech, he dissociates himself from the family. He omits his father's title, identifies himself as a slave rather than a son, identifies his brother as "this son of yours," and states that his idea of a celebration would be to have a party with his friends rather than with the family. A primary norm of judgment in Jesus' culture was family solidarity. It is possible that the elder son's outrage was somewhat offensive to Jesus' listeners. In the recital of this episode, therefore, the most appropriate manner is probably an excessive anger, cutting and extremely insulting in tone. The exegesis would indicate that some distance was created from the elder brother in this speech.

Episode 11 (15:31-32)

The father uses the title of affection, literally meaning "child," which was used, for example, by Jesus in addressing the paralytic (Mark 2:5). He assures the elder son of his rights by describing the actual situation in relation to the inheritance at this point. Since he had already divided the inheritance and given his sons ownership, everything that the father had belonged to his son. His defense is a repetition of the initial statement announcing the celebration. It is necessary to celebrate because of the greatness of this victory. It is an appeal for recognition of the necessity of celebration. The most poignant moment in the speech is his reversal of the name the elder son used for the younger son, from "this son of yours" to "your brother." The unspoken appeal at the end of the parable is to forgive both of them and to join the celebration.

Since the story has been established as a parable during the episode of the banquet, the paradox at the end of the parable is that the younger son is sitting at the eschatological

banquet, forgiven and included in the family. The elder brother is, by his own decision, sitting outside the banquet, outraged at the injustice he has suffered and alienated from his family.

The major issue in the historical interpretation of this parable is whether this parable was told by Jesus to the Pharisees and other critics of his ministry in defense of his practice of eating with sinners and tax collectors, or whether this was a parable of proclamation of the kingdom of God. Generally, this parable has, when interpreted as a parable of the kingdom of God, focused on the younger son. Thus, many ministers who preach on this parable leave out the entire section on the elder son. The parable is thereby interpreted as a proclamation of the forgiveness of repentant sinners. However, when this parable has been heard with the elder son section, as Jesus intended, the focus of attention has often shifted in allegorical manner to an identification of those who are like the elder son. Thus, the conclusion has often been that Jesus was addressing those who would be most like the elder son, namely, Jesus' critics and those who were primarily concerned about the observance of the law, namely, the Pharisees.

My conclusion is that the whole parable was intended for the common folk of Galilee. A central dynamic of the parable was to make clear the relationship between forgiveness and the kingdom of God. The parable does these things:

1. The first episodes of the parable create total alienation from the younger son. The appeals for condemnation in the first three episodes of the parable are extremely radical and polemical in character.

2. The younger son's repentance and return is presented from a sympathetic inside view; the appeal is for recognition and acceptance of his repentance. But the expectation of Jesus was that his listeners would continue to be somewhat skeptical and reserve any major reversal of judgment. The degree of shift is too briefly developed to enable such a total transformation of judgment to take place.

3. The father's welcome of the son both prior to and especially after his confession is exaggerated and goes beyond what any earthly father would do. His extravagant reception and the signs of authority and power that he gives to his son are all analogous to the investiture of the children of God which was expected in the Messianic Age. The impact of this is then a total reversal of expectations. The appeal in the parable is to join the celebration. But the norms of judgment that would make that possible are not fully established and reinforced in the parable itself. The father's response is beyond all possible righteousness and is so excessive as to be unbelievable.

4. The norms of judgment in relation to the elder son are thoroughly believable and present in the audience. The degree of identification with the elder son in his discovery of the celebration and his subsequent anger is very high. Jesus appeals for identification with one who has been treated unfairly by a father. At the same time, the recognition of the negative and embarrassing character of the elder son's action in refusing to go in may well be implicit in the story.

5. The elder son's speech is sympathetic but excessive. The degree of his dissociation from the family and his insults to both his father and his brother are severe. Nevertheless, the father's response is not a condemnation of the elder son but is rather an appeal to him to recognize the justice of the situation in relation to both his own position and that of his brother. It is an appeal to accept his brother again as a member of the family.

6. The paradox at the end of the parable is that the prodigal son is sitting at the banquet of the kingdom of God. In the language of the parable, he is in. The elder son is out.

The parable's dynamics involve a double reversal. The listener's relationship to the younger son begins in total alienation and moves to a high degree of sympathy. On the other

hand, the relationship to the elder son begins in sympathy and ends with critical distance. As a parable of the kingdom, the parable is a total reversal of expectations: the sinner is in and the righteous one is out. The key to understanding and experiencing the parable's dynamics is in the norms of judgment that control the attitudes toward the sons.

The most direct connection in Jesus' teaching with this parable occurs in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12). Jesus continually teaches the inextricable relationship between forgiving others and the possibility of receiving forgiveness oneself. There is no possibility of receiving forgiveness without also giving it. The parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt. 18:23-35) is another instance of this same theme in Jesus' teaching. The paradox of the prodigal son parable is that the elder son chooses not to participate in the banquet because of his sense of injustice and his unwillingness to forgive his brother. Thus, this parable was and is addressed to all those who find it difficult to forgive others and to accept forgiveness themselves.

It is very clear that the parable celebrates repentance and the granting of forgiveness. It is an attack on those attitudes that might lead us not to forgive and to miss our own needs for forgiveness. It is an appeal for the justice and righteousness of forgiveness in relation to all the enemies of righteousness. The proclamation of the kingdom is then the necessary interrelationship between one's own forgiveness and entry into the kingdom and the granting of forgiveness to others. The direction of distance in relation to the elder son is, however, in the opposite direction as that of the younger son. The parable creates alienation from the elder son. It forces reflection upon the paradox of his response.

Thus, while the parable could undoubtedly have been meaningful to the Pharisees as a defense of Jesus' ministry to sinners and as an appeal for the Pharisees' recognition of the rightness of that ministry, my assessment is that the parable was addressed to a much more general and universal situation. Jesus' listeners were primarily common folk in Galilee, men and women who would be able to understand and participate fully in this story. The problem Jesus was addressing in this parable is one he addresses frequently: condemnation is catching. If we condemn others, we condemn ourselves. And if we have been forgiven, we must forgive others. We all are both the prodigal son and the righteous son; so were the Pharisees. Jesus addresses the paradox in the relationship that all of us as individuals and as groups have to the kingdom of God.

Connections

An essential part of telling biblical stories is to identify with the story. Detachment is fine for scholarship, but a dispassionate telling is generally deadly. A helpful metaphor is that of a vase. The words of the story are a vase, a container into which our experience can be poured. Thus, one way of exploring the story is to identify experiences in your own life that have the same dynamics or emotions. These connections may help you find an oral interpretation of the words that is real for you. It is one way of making these ancient words your own.

Take, for example, the swine in this story. Imagine the animals that are the most repulsive to you: rats, roaches, bats, snakes, or whatever. The image in the story is that you would be eating the same food with them. Then describe that imagined experience with full emotional intensity.

Another approach would be to think of the most repulsive association with food you have ever experienced. I remember when we moved into our first parsonage in an inner-city metropolitan church. The house had not been lived in for some months except by persons

who would sleep there for a night or two. We went to the grocery store and came back with things to put in the refrigerator. When we opened the refrigerator, there was food oozing with green and yellow mold, and maggots were crawling out of the food all over the walls of the refrigerator. It was literally crawling with bacteria. All I have to do is to think of that refrigerator and I know how to tell the episode about the swine. The younger son was so hungry that he wanted to eat the food from that refrigerator. There were also rats in the house. For me, another ready connection is that he wanted to eat the garbage that the rats ate in the adjoining lots. By telling the story of the maggots or the rats to myself or a friend, I can discover the connection that will enable me to tell the episode of the swine convincingly.

A second area of possible connections is with repentance. The young man in the story has to swallow his pride, recognize the great wrong he has done, and project what he would do and say if he went home. The connection is with experiences of shame. Many of these most vivid experiences are rooted in childhood. Some memory of coming home and publicly acknowledging something of which you were deeply ashamed will help to give the young man's words meaning for you. It is not necessary to change the words. In fact, the words of the biblical story can provide a healthier context for those memories than telling your story directly.

Other possible connections are with joy and anger. The father's joy at the return of the prodigal is wholly excessive. It is total ecstasy. The moments of greatest joy in your life are your connection with the story. The elder son's realization of what his father has done for his brother creates in him the ultimate rage. When have you been angry and jealous that someone else has received an award or privilege that you wanted or deserved?

Telling the Story

There are many contexts in which to tell the story. And the parable of the prodigal son opens many contexts for reflection. But the primary action of the parable is to connect with our experiences of needing forgiveness from God and needing to grant forgiveness to others. A way both to hear and to tell this parable is, therefore, to be open to hearing this story of Jesus in relation to those present realities.

Either for yourself or a group, these questions can provide a context for telling the parable: When have you been forgiven? When have you found it difficult to forgive someone else? In what ways are you now in need of forgiveness? Whom do you need now to forgive? The focus of these questions can be either personal or communal. That is, the persons who come to mind may be either individuals or groups of people. To tell the story to oneself or to someone else may be an occasion that will shed new light on this relationship. The telling of the parable itself can be a time when the real presence of the kingdom of God is made clear. In the silence that follows the father's plea, the question is, how will we complete the parable?