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**The Parable of God's Love for Sinners:
Luke 15:11-32¹**

Patrick J. Casey

Graduate, Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary
Lansdale, Pa.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the greatest instructor that has ever lived. From the religious leaders of Jerusalem to the common people of Galilee, those who heard him recognized his unique teaching ability. As the Master Communicator, one of his most influential tools for communicating truth was his use of parables. One-third of his teaching involved parables.

Although some may not fully understand the structure of a parable, the earthly stories that Jesus used to convey spiritual truth have penetrated the hearts of men for the past two thousand years. The word parable comes from the Greek word παραβάλλω (παρά "beside," βάλλω "to cast") denoting something being placed beside another to make a comparison. A parable taught truth about an unfamiliar subject by making a comparison to something that was familiar to the listener. The following definition of a parable has been given:

A parable is a brief story or narrative drawn from human life or from nature, not relating to some actual event, but true to life and concerning something very familiar to the

¹Reprinted from the *Calvary Baptist Theological Journal*, Spring 1989.

listeners, given for the purpose of teaching a spiritual truth.²

Parables were not unfamiliar to the Middle Eastern culture in which the Lord lived. Rabinowitz explains that parabolic teaching had been used with great frequency.

The rabbis made extensive use of parables as a definitive method of teaching in the Talmud, and especially in the Midrash. Jesus, in his parables, was employing a well-established rabbinic form of conveying ethical and moral lessons.³

The Lord, however, developed the parable to a level of artistic perfection that has never been equalled. No teacher, before or since, has produced such powerful teaching stories. One need only attempt to create a parable to appreciate the mastery of the Lord's parabolic instruction.

Each of the Lord's parables was intended to present one central truth. There may be additional truths and many applications realized from a given parable, but each parable must be understood in light of the single spiritual truth that the Lord was presenting.

It is the purpose of this study to carefully examine the parable found in Luke 15:11-32 and accurately discern the meaning intended by the one who gave it. Since this parable was presented to a specific audience of a specific culture for a specific reason, these aspects will be considered. This study of Luke 15:11-32 will attempt to: 1) examine a survey of suggested meanings by a variety of sources; 2) evaluate the scriptural

²David L. Burggraff, "A Study of the Parables in the Gospel of Luke" (Unpublished paper, 1985), 5-6.

³Louis I. Rabinowitz, "Parable" *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. by Cecil Roth, (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 13:73.

context of the passage; 3) discuss significant background information; 4) present a statement of the story proper; 5) identify the central teaching and other teachings clearly found in the passage; and 6) consider some legitimate applications.

Suggested Meanings of Luke 15:11-32

As is the case in most parables, a variety of meanings have been suggested. Because the parable includes three main characters and divides into two "episodes," the majority of sources examined gave more than one meaning, while some did not identify a central teaching. The suggested teachings surveyed generally fall into two groups: 1) those focusing on God's activity and 2) those focusing on man's activity.

Many writers view this parable as teaching the character and activity of God in relation to sinful man. Hendriksen stresses that the crux of the story lies in the activity of the father (symbolizing God).⁴ There are others who join Hendriksen in thinking the parable teaches that God has boundless mercy and abounding love toward sinners.⁵ According to Plummer, Luke 15:11-32 explains that God's all-embracing love is independent of privileges of birth and legal observances.⁶ Oesterley sees the parable as showing that God's mercy towards men must be the pattern by which men are guided in their dealings with other

⁴William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 752.

⁵*Ibid.*, 752; see also Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), 131; Simon J. Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 226; William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 214; and T.W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1949), 285.

⁶Alfred Plummer, *Gospel According to St. Luke*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), 372.

men.⁷ To Christie, the parable stresses that the eyes of God are ever towards the return of the wayward.⁸ Martin, on the other hand, feels it shows that God is inviting all people to enter the kingdom.⁹ Liefeld understands the parable to be teaching that God gladly receives repentant sinners.¹⁰ Marshall considers the theme to focus on the love of God for his wayward children.¹¹ According to Smith, the parable teaches that when God recovers a lost son there is great joy.¹²

A second group of writers feel that the emphasis of the parable is upon man. Levison sees the parable as teaching the freedom and capacity for repentance.¹³ Manson feels the second part of the parable emphasizes that the righteous are not to have a harsh attitude toward sinners.¹⁴ Linnemann states that the theme of the parable is found in 15:24 (dead/alive; lost/found) but fails to explain what she means.¹⁵

⁷W.O.E. Oesterley, *The Gospel Parables in the Light of Their Jewish Background* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 189.

⁸George Christie, *An Exposition of 28 Parables of Our Lord* (Glasgow: Church of Scotland Committee of Publications, 1934), 69.

⁹John A. Martin, "Luke," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, (Wheaton: SP Publications, 1983), 244.

¹⁰Walter L. Liefeld, "Luke," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 8:983.

¹¹I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 604.

¹²B.T.D. Smith, *The Parables of the Synoptic Gospels* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1937), 193.

¹³N. Levison, *The Parables: Their Background and Local Setting* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1926), 161.

¹⁴Manson, *Sayings of Jesus*, 285.

¹⁵Eta Linnemann, *Jesus of the Parables* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 78.

A third group of writers do not state a central teaching or theme for the parable. Rather they simply discuss the details of the story.¹⁶

Scriptural Context of Luke 15:11-32

The General Context

To best understand the context of Luke 15:11-32, a general outline of Luke's gospel will be given followed by a more detailed explanation of the context surrounding the passage being considered. Martin provides the following outline of the Gospel of Luke.

- I. The Prologue and Purpose of the Gospel (1:1-4)
- II. The Births and Maturations of John and Jesus (1:5-2:52)
- III. The Preparation for Jesus' Ministry (3:1-4:13)
- IV. The Ministry of Jesus in Galilee (4:14-9:50)
- V. The Journey of Jesus Toward Jerusalem (9:51-19:27)
- VI. The Ministry of Jesus in Jerusalem (19:28-21:38)
- VII. The Death, Burial, and Resurrection of Jesus (22:1-24:53)¹⁷

The Preceding Context

On his journey to Jerusalem, the Lord has been giving instruction concerning who is and who is not a member of the kingdom of heaven. In 13:22-35 Jesus explains that most of Israel will be excluded from the kingdom. He further teaches

¹⁶F.W. Farrar, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Cambridge: University Press, 1910), 263-267; Richard C. Trench, *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord* (London: Revell, 1953), 389-423; Alexander B. Bruce, *The Parabolic Teaching of Christ*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1888), 279-294.

¹⁷Martin, "Luke," 201-202

that, contrary to Jewish thinking, many outcasts and Gentiles will participate in the kingdom (14:1-24).

At the home of a prominent Pharisee, the Lord heals a man with dropsy on the Sabbath (14:1-6). This prepares the way for the discussion to follow concerning those who were unfit to enter the kingdom (14:21). In 14:7-11 the Lord presents a parable after observing the invited guests picking out places of honor. Through this teaching-story, he warns these Jewish leaders who anticipated important positions in the kingdom that they should not presume their right to a place of honor. This parable showed that men who expect an important position in the kingdom will be humiliated unless they humble themselves in response to the kingdom message that Jesus has been preaching. The Lord then instructs the host to invite the poor and the lame—those thought to be in disfavor with God and disqualified from his kingdom. In so doing the host would demonstrate his righteousness by not ministering to others for his own recognition (14:12-14).

Jesus continues with the parable of The Great Banquet (14:15-24). He used this parable to show that the Jewish people who were originally offered the kingdom have rejected it. Now the invitation of the kingdom was going out to others, including the Gentiles. Luke changes to a different setting in 14:25-35. In this section he warns the multitudes about thoughtless discipleship.

The Immediate Setting

The parable given in Luke 15:11-32 is directly related to the setting described in the first two verses of this chapter. The Lord is responding to the self-righteous Pharisees who had rejected him as the Messiah and who were now criticizing him for receiving sinners (15:2). They were implying that Jesus was an irreligious man and were warning his followers not to

associate with him.¹⁸ Jesus took this opportunity to teach them about God's special concern for sinners by giving three parables: "The Caring Shepherd" (15:3-7), "The Searching Woman" (15:8-10), and "The Loving Father" (15:11-32). The parable of "The Caring Shepherd" illustrates God's love for the wayward by describing the intense affection of a shepherd for a single sheep who had strayed from the flock. The Lord further portrays God's unique concern for the lost by presenting "The Searching Woman." In this parable a woman makes an exhaustive search to recover a precious coin.

The close connection of the immediate preceding context (15:1-10) and the parable of "The Loving Father" has been questioned by some. Derrett feels that Luke 15:11-32 is not a response to the Pharisees' objection in 15:1-2.¹⁹ Austin concludes that the previous two parables (15:3-10) are a pair and not directly connected with "The Loving Father."²⁰ Pentecost and others, however, see the three parables as a unified response to the Pharisee's protest against the Lord's unusual practice of eating with tax collectors and sinners.²¹ Marshall declares "there can be no doubt that Chapter 15 forms one self-contained and artistically constructed unit with a single theme."²² Although the three parables are to be seen as a unified response, it must be recognized that each provide important aspects not contained in the others.

¹⁸Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 132.

¹⁹J. Duncan Derrett, "Law in the New Testament: The Parable of the Prodigal Son" *New Testament Studies* 14 (October 1967), 58.

²⁰Michael R. Austin, "The Hypocritical Son" *Evangelical Quarterly* 57 (October 1985), 308-310.

²¹J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 100; see also Martin, "Luke," 244; Linnemann, *Jesus of the Parables*, 73.

²²Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 597.

The Following Context

The parable of "The Loving Father" is immediately followed by a parable given to the disciples—"The Shrewd Manager" (16:1-13). The structure of verse one (δέ καί "now also") indicates that the scribes and Pharisees who had just received the Lord's parabolic instruction about God's love for sinners were also present for this parable. Their response in verse 14 further supports this. Through this parable Jesus teaches that his disciples should practice wise stewardship by using material wealth for spiritual benefit. He stresses that a person cannot have both God and money as his master, but one who faithfully uses material riches will be trusted with greater things (vv. 10-13).

The Pharisees, who loved money, reacted negatively to the Lord's instruction (16:14-18). Jesus responded with the story of "The Rich Man" (16:19-31) to show the Pharisees that being "rich" should not be equated with being righteous. This story was intended to rebuke the Pharisees who wanted signs. Yet, they had refused to believe the Scriptures and would not acknowledge the attesting miracles of Jesus.

Structure of Luke 15:11-32

The parable under consideration is most commonly known as "The Prodigal Son." It would be better, however, to call it "The Loving Father." It includes three main characters: the father, the younger son, and the older son. The parable has two parts. The first one concerns the younger son and the other concerns the older son. Yet, it must be recognized as a unified whole. Some critics consider the second part (15:25-32) to be a later addition and not part of the original parable;²³ however,

²³Smith, *Parables of the Synoptic Gospels*, 193.

Jeremias asserts that such a position is erroneous.²⁴ The unity of both parts is seen in the opening statement "two sons" (15:11), in the father's concern for both sons, and in the fact that the parable was addressed to men who were like the older brother. Morris explains that there "is not the slightest evidence that the parable ever existed without it."²⁵

The Characters of Luke 15:11-32

As with all of the Lord's parables, one must decide if allegory is present. Deissmann strongly criticizes any suggestion of allegory because it allows everyone to "celebrate the feast of his own fantasy."²⁶ Jeremias explains that the parable is not an allegory, but a story drawn from life.²⁷ However, in light of Jewish culture which was familiar with character association in story telling and the immediate problem with the original recipients (15:1-2), the significance of the main characters must be considered.

The Father

Most commentators agree that the father, at least to some degree, depicts the heavenly Father. It was not uncommon for Middle Easterners to recognize the father of a teaching story as God.²⁸ Even Jeremias, who claims no allegory is present, explains that the father's love in this parable is the image of

²⁴Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 131.

²⁵C.I. Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 240.

²⁶Adolf Deissmann, "The Parable of the Prodigal Son" *Religion in Life* 1 (1932), 333.

²⁷Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 128.

²⁸Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 190.

God's love.²⁹ He also concludes that the parable describes what God is like.³⁰ Since the parable seems to indicate a distinction between the father and God (15:18), it is best to see the father in the story as merely portraying the characteristics and attitudes of God.

The Younger Son

In the younger son there is an obvious allusion to the tax collectors slighted in 15:1-2 by the Pharisees. To the Jewish mind, the younger son joining a citizen of another country (15:15) would have quickly associated the younger son with the tax-collectors who had renounced the laws of their religion and gone into the service of the Gentiles.³¹ Linnemann stresses, however, that the son does not "mean" tax collectors.³² Hendriksen and others recognize the younger son as portraying all penitent sinners in general.³³ Although this application is possible, the younger son appears to depict the irreligious sinner in contrast to the older depicting the religious sinner. Some have suggested that Gentiles may be represented by the younger son,³⁴ but this idea is foreign to the original scope of the parable.

The Older Son

Given the context of 15:1-2, it is obvious that the Lord was identifying the critical scribes and Pharisees with the older son described in this parable. The attitude and action of the older

²⁹Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 128.

³⁰Ibid., 131.

³¹Linnemann, *Jesus of the Parables*, 128.

³²Ibid.

³³Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel of Luke*, 57; see also Levison, *The Parables*, 159.

³⁴Plummer, *Gospel According to St. Luke*, 371.

son reveals the frame of mind typical of the dominant type of Pharisee.³⁵ To the contrary, Smith suggests that the elder brother is not a type of the self-righteous.³⁶ Because of the original setting, it is important to see the connection of the older son with the critical self-righteous Pharisees. The older son in this story, however, need not be limited only to illustrate the Pharisees and scribes who were present but also represents all "religious" sinners.

The Cultural Background of Luke 15:11-32

The Rebellion of the Younger Prodigal Son

The story begins with a request by the younger son to receive his share of the estate. Although some claim the request was not unusual,³⁷ Bailey explains why this assumption is incorrect.

In all Middle Eastern literature (aside from this parable) from ancient times to the present, there is no case of any son, older or younger, asking for his inheritance from a father who was still in good health.³⁸

Levison notes that there is no custom among Jews or Arabs which entitled the son to a share of the father's wealth while the father is alive.³⁹ The original listeners would have realized that the younger son was requesting something he had no right to receive until his father died. The Lord's audience would have

³⁵Oesterley, *The Gospel Parables*, 190.

³⁶Smith, *Parables of the Synoptic Gospels*, 194.

³⁷Linnemann, *Jesus of the Parables*, 74-75.

³⁸Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 164.

³⁹Levison, *The Parables*, 156.

expected the father to discipline the boy for such a cruel demand.⁴⁰ Yet, in honoring the request, the father displayed extraordinary love.

Concerning the amount of the younger son's inheritance there is some debate. Most commentators appeal to Deuteronomy 21:17 to establish that he received one third of the estate. Derrett insists it would have been two ninths because the father, deserving living expenses, would have kept an appropriate amount of the son's portion.⁴¹ Whatever the amount, the younger son was severing his relationship with his father and forfeiting any future rights as a son.

As the story unfolds the Lord includes details that would have important implications to the original audience. For a Jew to serve a foreign citizen would mean he renounced the laws of his father's religion (like the tax collectors). To be a "swine-shepherd" was the most contemptible occupation for a Jew because they were considered unclean animals.⁴² The swine food described in 15:16 was carob pods from the *ceratonia siliqua* shrub familiar to the region.⁴³ Linnemann suggests that the carob pods described here may have some significance in light of a Jewish proverb, "When the Israelites stand in need of carob-beans, then they return (to God)."⁴⁴ With artistic precision, the Lord directs the minds of his listeners to view the younger brother as an unworthy, ungrateful, undeserving sinner. The deplorable actions of the younger son greatly magnify the attitude displayed by the father later in this parable.

⁴⁰Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 165.

⁴¹Derrett, "Law in the New Testament," 62.

⁴²Abraham R. Rihbany, *The Syrian Christ* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916), 109.

⁴³Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 172.

⁴⁴Linnemann, *Jesus of the Parables*, 76.

There is much debate concerning the younger son's "repentance" when he returned to his father. Some are convinced that he did not display true repentance. Hubbard explains:

Those who make this an example of true repentance read something into the story that Jesus never put there. It [his return to his father] is simply the desire of a hungry man to eat.⁴⁵

Bailey suggests that the son "desired to earn his own way" as a hired servant and did not originally intend to humble himself in true repentance.⁴⁶ In Jewish thinking, a man was expected to make reparations before he could repent.⁴⁷ Yet, in this parable the Lord was presenting a new ethic. An examination of the text reveals that the younger son did have a genuine change of heart. Formerly, he demanded his inheritance as a son, but now he hopes to be treated as a hireling. Hunger may have prompted the younger son to think of home, but he willingly acknowledges that he has "sinned against heaven (God)" (15:18). He prepares a full confession without excuse and recognizes his unworthiness (15:19). The younger son clearly demonstrated genuine repentance.

The Response of the Loving Father

The father's response to his son's return would have greatly surprised the Jews to whom Jesus is speaking. The fact that the father recognizes the son from a long way off and immediately responds reveals that the father had never stopped caring for the one who deserted him. It would have been expected that the

⁴⁵George Hubbard, *The Teachings of Jesus in Parables* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1907), 300.

⁴⁶Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 183.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 180.

father totally disown such a rebellious son when he left. Yet, this father was anxiously waiting for his return. The father's running to meet his son was far from commonplace. An Oriental nobleman with flowing robes never runs anywhere because to do so would be humiliating.⁴⁸ The Lord had been criticized for his unusual practice of eating with sinners and tax collectors. The father's dramatic demonstration of love and humiliation was just as unexpected and unusual. In the Lord's welcome of sinners (15:1) and now here in the father's reception of his wayward son, Jesus was presenting a new ethic contrary to the thinking of his day. God and his Son are willing to accept even the worst of sinners who come in true repentance.

The compassionate father greets his wayward son with a kiss. Jeremias feels the kiss was a sign of forgiveness (cf. 2 Samuel 14:33).⁴⁹ The "best robe" given to the son may have been the father's ceremonial robe which in the East is a mark of high distinction.⁵⁰ Bailey views the ring as a signet ring indicating trust and authority.⁵¹ The gift of sandals was significant. A slave would travel barefoot, but a free man would wear sandals.⁵² Some have abandoned the context and any connection to the intended meaning by suggesting that the robe refers to the sacrifice of Christ and the ring signifies the gift of restoration in the Spirit.⁵³ The three gifts of the father must be seen as tokens of complete forgiveness and total reinstatement.

The killing of the fatted calf indicates a public celebration. A calf instead of a goat or sheep demonstrates that the entire village would be invited.⁵⁴ This public rejoicing with the whole

⁴⁸Ibid., 181.

⁴⁹Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 130.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 185.

⁵²Kistemaker, *Parables of Jesus*, 221.

⁵³Trench, *Notes on the Parables*, 412.

⁵⁴Rihbany, *The Syrian Christ*, 160.

community indicates total acceptance of the son by the father. In spite of his unworthiness, the wayward son has been restored. The young prodigal who had been "dead" has now "come to life again" (15:24). The statement "he was lost and has been found" (14:24, 32), reveals the similarity of this parable with the previous two (15:6, 9). The great rejoicing over this repentant son also parallels the rejoicing in the parables of "The Caring Shepherd" and "The Searching Woman."

Some have strayed from the intended meaning of the restoration of the younger son in the parable of "The Loving Father." They suggest this parable shows that God as Father freely forgives without any demand for satisfaction, punishment, or payment.⁵⁵ According to this thinking, mere repentance without a mediator is sufficient for restoration with God. Such a misunderstanding of the atonement purchased by Christ cannot be defended from this parable, other instruction from Jesus, or Scripture as a whole. As a parable, the story of Luke 15:11-32 obviously does not provide a full explanation of the doctrine of the atonement nor was it intended to. Nevertheless, an examination of Luke's entire gospel reveals a clear presentation of Christ as Savior and his sacrificial death on the cross for sin (Luke 23:33-38; 24:46-47). There are an abundant number of verses in the New Testament that indicate Christ's substitutionary death provided the only way for forgiveness (Matt. 20:28; Romans 5:8; 1 Cor. 15:3-4). There is absolutely no legitimate defense for such an erroneous interpretation of this parable.

The Rebellion of the Older Prodigal Son

The second episode of the parable finds its focus on the older brother (15:25-32). As mentioned before, this is not a later

⁵⁵R.G. Crawford, "A Parable of the Atonement," *Evangelical Quarterly* 50 (January-March 1978), 2; he identifies this erroneous interpretation of Luke 15:11-32 in his article that refutes it.

addition but an essential part of the story that directly relates to the Pharisees and the scribes who were like the older brother. The parables of "The Caring Shepherd" and "The Searching Woman" both suggested the attitude that the critical Pharisees and scribes of 15:2 should have had. This parable gives a picture of their actual character and conduct in the older son.

The attitude displayed by the older son may have seemed justifiable to the religious leaders who listened. The merciful treatment of the younger son contradicted their standard that repentance must include reparation. The Lord's Jewish audience, however, would have quickly recognized that the older son, like the younger, did not enjoy a right relationship with his father. His public refusal to participate in his father's celebration was extremely insulting in a culture that had a high regard for the authority of a father.⁵⁶ Although his father entreated him in a kind manner (15:29), this older son, unlike his younger brother, omits the personal address to his father (15:30) and in so doing "heaps reproaches upon his father."⁵⁷

As the story continues, the Lord reveals further defects in the older son's character. He has been living in his father's house with the spirit of a slave (15:29, "I have slaved for you")⁵⁸ feeling that he deserved great reward for his service. His claim that he had "never neglected" a command of his father is shown to be a self-righteous overestimation in light of the way he is presently treating his father. Bailey suggests that the older son shows disgust with his father's house in saying "that I might be merry with all my friends" (15:29).⁵⁹ The older brother reveals his self-centeredness in desiring a meal with his friends rather

⁵⁶Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 195.

⁵⁷Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 131.

⁵⁸Rudolf Tuente, "δοῦλος" *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. by Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 592-598; he discusses the significance of "δουλεύω."

⁵⁹Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 198.

than rejoicing in the recovery of a lost brother. In all this the Lord shows that the older son was equally lost in his state of self-righteousness. He did not enjoy the relationship that his father desired for him (15:31), and he failed to comprehend the great value of a lost son being found. The older son was the prodigal who stayed home.

The Response of the Loving Father

The loving response of the father to the older son would have surprised the original hearers. They would have expected the father to react with outrage. However, the father overlooks the omission of title, the arrogance, the self-righteousness, the insults, and lovingly speaks to his son. In his action and attitude, the older son has invited punishment; yet his father comes to him entreating. The father, in an unexpected act of humility, goes out to the older son just as he ran out to meet the younger and demonstrates his perfect love for both. In not revealing the response of the older son, who depicts the attitude of the Pharisees and scribes, the Lord leaves his listeners with a choice concerning how they will respond to the love of God.

The Story of Luke 15:11-32

Explanation

A man with two sons was approached by the younger who requested to receive his share of the estate. The father gave him his portion and then the son traveled to a distant land where he squandered all his money with loose living. With his funds depleted and a famine in the land, he hired himself to a foreigner who gave him the detestable job of feeding swine. In a state of hunger and having nothing to eat, he remembered his father who abundantly cared for his servants. The younger son repented of his sin against his father and God and returned to make

confession of his sin and to request reinstatement as his father's hired servant. In a most unusual display of love and humility, the father ran to meet the returning son and kissed him. The son was given a special robe, a signet ring, and sandals for his feet as tokens of his complete forgiveness and restoration. His full reinstatement to sonship was celebrated by the entire town with the killing of the fatted calf.

When the older son returned from his work in the fields, he refused to participate in his father's joyous celebration given on behalf of his recovered brother. He publicly humiliated his father by this refusal to join the feast and further reproached him by omitting his father's title and complaining about no reward for his years of service. His actions revealed his self-righteousness; indeed, *he* was the prodigal who stayed home. The older son's final response is not given, but the father closes with an explanation that the recovery of a lost son requires rejoicing.

Meaning

This wonderful parable of Jesus is a picture of the incredible love that God has for sinners. The story presents two sons who were equally lost though one moved away and the other stayed home. The younger son portrays the "irreligious sinner" and would immediately be associated with the tax collectors and sinners mentioned in context (15:1). The older son illustrates the "religious sinner" who is caught up in his own self-righteousness and obviously identifies the Pharisees and scribes who were present. Some see the principal figure of this parable as the older son because the original audience included self-righteous men who were criticizing the Lord. Others feel that the younger son is the primary focus of the story as one who depicts genuine repentance. The central character, however, is indeed the father whose incredible love and concern is displayed to both sons who were equally unworthy of his great compassion.

The central teaching that Jesus presented through this parable is very important: God actively displays his abounding love to all sinners with a desire to restore them to himself. A proper understanding of God's love for sinners was desperately needed by the original recipients and is also needed by men today. The Lord's touching story about two prodigal sons reveals that God's love and mercy are far greater than the love and mercy commonly displayed by man. Through this parable the Lord shows that God is vitally concerned with the repentance of sinners and has a yearning love for all the lost. Although God never condones or minimizes sin, he is eager and able to restore those who have offended him. The forgiveness of God is always complete and results in total restoration. Like the father of the two prodigals, God does not force sinners to come to him, but he anxiously awaits for them to come. Contrary to the views of the religious leaders of his day, Jesus taught a new ethic—God's love and mercy are independent of man's worthiness.

Application

Jesus presented the parable of "The Loving Father" so that his audience would understand the incredible love God has for sinners. He wanted this truth to challenge the way they thought, but more importantly change the way they lived. And the Lord desires the same for readers today.

The twentieth century audience of this magnificent teaching-story must not be content analyzing the parable's first century significance and fail to allow Christ's dynamic instruction to impact their own lives. Kistemaker explains that an essential step in proper interpretation of Jesus' parables involves translating their meaning in terms relevant to the needs of today.⁶⁰ Those who study the parable of "The Loving Father" must be willing to

⁶⁰Kistemaker, *Parables of Jesus*, xxiv.

examine their lives in light of the lesson it so clearly teaches. Unfortunately, a distorted view of God's love for sinners has not been restricted to the Pharisees and scribes of Jesus' day. Misunderstanding and indifference towards God's love continue to invade the lives of believers as well as unbelievers; those educated in the Scriptures as well as the unlearned.

The love and mercy of God so beautifully portrayed in this parable should be a pattern for men in their interaction with other men. We are never instructed by God to minimize sin. But the one who rejects repentant sinners is not in line with the Father's will. We must recognize that jealousy, pride, and self-righteousness are as terrible as open rebellion against God. All who understand the pointed instruction of this parable should have an increased appreciation for God's love. The parable of "The Loving Father" should challenge every reader to evaluate his attitude toward God as well as his attitude toward other sinners. This touching story should motivate those who have never received the free gift of God's love to respond to the forgiveness and restoration offered through Christ. For true believers, this parable should increase their dedication to the one who has displayed such remarkable love by restoring them to his favor.

Like the original recipients, today's readers are left with a choice. They must choose how they will respond to the incredible love of God so perfectly portrayed in the parable of "The Loving Father."