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The Hypocritical Son

The story that we generally know as the parable of the prodigal son is perhaps the most discussed of all the parables of Jesus, but it is still possible to shed fresh light on it. In this essay Dr. Austin, who teaches in the Division of Theology and Religious Studies at Derby Lonsdale College of Higher Education, explores in an illuminating fashion the relation of the story to the immediately following parable of Jesus about the unjust steward.

Luke 15 contains three parables: The Lost Sheep (vss. 4–7), *The Lost Coin* (8–10) and, to complete what is held to be a trio of stories on a single theme, the parable of *The Prodigal Son*, styled, in the service of the theme, *The Lost Son* (11–32). In the opinion of most contemporary commentators 'there can be no doubt that chapter 15 forms one self-contained and artistically constructed unit on a single theme' as I. Howard Marshall puts it,¹ giving the whole chapter the title, 'The Gospel for the Outcast'. J. M. Creed says that despite the differences between the third parable and the preceding two, the parable of *The Prodigal Son* 'continues the leading thought of the other two'.² The supposed theme of this unified collection of stories is set out in verses 1–3:

Now all the publicans and sinners were drawing near unto [Jesus] for to hear him. And both the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them. (RSV)

Jesus had been criticised for welcoming the socially and spiritually outcast, and Luke gathers together a small collection of parables which justifies his attitude to them. So goes the argument.

The difficulty with this view is that one of the three parables must be interpreted in the light of the other two, that is, all three must be seen to be illustrating the supposed theme. The theme, rather than the content of the stories themselves, becomes the dominant interpretative criterion. This being the case, the third parable, *The Prodigal Son*, is a story the meaning of which is that God seeks out and saves men who are lost as the shepherd seeks for the lost sheep in the first parable and the woman searches for

¹ I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (1978), 597.

² J. M. Creed, *The Gospel according to St. Luke* (1953), 196.

the lost coin in the second. Of course, any identification of the shepherd in verses 4–7, still less the woman in verses 8–10 and even the father in verses 11–32, with God, runs the risk of infringing the Rule against Allegory to which modern biblical scholars are so attached. By this rule very few of the parables are allegories, and those allegorical interpretations which are attached to a few parables, such as the allegory on *The Sower* in Mk. 4:14ff. and on *The Wheat and the Tares* in Mt. 13:37ff., are rightly suspected of not coming originally from Jesus himself. Yet it is very difficult to see how any interpretation of the parables is possible without an acknowledgement that God is to be seen portrayed in one or other of their characters. Even Joachim Jeremias, the biblical theologian most resolutely opposed to allegorising interpretations, is bound to admit that while ‘the father [in *The Prodigal Son*] is not God, but an earthly father; yet some of the expressions used are meant to reveal that in his love he is the image of God.’³ And if we have in Luke 15 three parables on a theme then the shepherd and the woman provide us with ‘images of God’ also. But have we here three parables on a theme? In the first story the question is put: ‘What man of you, having a hundred sheep, and having lost one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?’ (15:4). The second story begins with a similar question: ‘Or what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a lamp, and sweep the house, and seek diligently until she find it?’ (15:8). But the third parable is not introduced with a comparable question. Jesus does *not* say, ‘Or what father, having two sons, if one leaves home and falls into bad company, does not leave the other at home and go after his boy until he finds him?’ Indeed, the father does *not* take the initiative as does the shepherd and the woman in the two previous stories. Again the other two parables conclude with a similar refrain. Thus, ‘I say unto you, that even so there shall be joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine righteous persons, which need no repentance’ (15:7) and ‘Even so, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth’ (15:10). But there is nothing similar to this at the conclusion of the third parable. The reason may be that such a refrain would be quite inappropriate. *The Prodigal Son* concludes with the account of *The Unforgiving Brother*. The note upon which the story ends is decidedly sour with no recorded response from this elder son to

³ J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (1958), 103.

the father's entreaty. But even if, as some commentators suggest, the account of Unforgiving Brother is a later addition and the third parable therefore ended with verse 24, there is still no hint of a refrain. Jesus does not say, 'Even so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth', although such a conclusion would be far more appropriate here than at the end of the other two stories, because here a penitent sinner and not a restored sheep or a found coin forms the climax of the parable. W. R. Farmer's suggestion that the structure of this chapter with two short stories followed by a larger one is a pattern typical of St. Luke and is employed by him in 13:1-9 seems unconvincing. The first two stories in chapter 13 are not parables. While the parable in 13:6-9 may illustrate the point made in 13:1-5 this is certainly not the case in chapter 15 where the parable of *The Prodigal Son* does not 'illustrate' the stories of *The Lost Sheep* and *The Lost Coin*.

The other arguments in favour of the unified nature of Luke 15 likewise fail to convince. Marshall⁴ rejects, for example, the theory of Kossen who suggested that the unifying principle of the chapter was derived from Jeremiah 31:10-20 in which God is depicted as a shepherd, Rachel is portrayed as weeping for her children, and Ephraim is represented as repenting and turning to God. But this is surely very far-fetched and demands that Luke consciously arranged the material in his chapter 15 on an Old Testament typological model.

Another reason to doubt that Luke 15:1-32 is to be read as a connected whole dominated by a single theme is that, if this was the case, Luke's habit of forming *pairs* of parables on a single theme would here be broken. In chapter 13 he gives us *The Mustard Seed* (13:18-19) and *The Leaven* (13:20), and in chapter 14, *The Tower-Builder* (14:29-30) and *The King going to Battle* (14:31-32). Yet chapter 15 does clearly contain a *pair* of parables, perhaps more closely related to each other than the pairs in chapters 13 and 14. The questions which introduce and the refrains which conclude *The Lost Sheep* and *The Lost Coin* connect those two stories intimately. Why not let them stand as a pair therefore and disconnect *The Prodigal Son* from them, especially in view of the fact that the first words of 15:11 'And he said' [*eipen de*] indicate a break from what precedes? When this disconnection takes place then it can be seen that the third parable in chapter 15 is not about a lost son. It is a parable about a father and two sons: one who was far away but came near, and

⁴ *Op. cit.*, 598.

the other who was near ('Son, thou art ever with me') but separated himself from his father and his brother by his unforgiving attitude. Unlike the parables which precede it in this chapter it is a story of contrasting responses to the prodigal love of a father who is the image of God.

Having disconnected the third parable from the pair which precedes it, where can we look for interpretative clues as to its meaning? The most obvious places are those other parables which contrast the characters or activities of two men. Those which most clearly connect with *The Prodigal Son* are *The Two Sons* in Mt. 21:28–32 and *The Two Men in the Temple* in Lk. 18:9–14. Of these the latter is, like *The Prodigal Son*, peculiar to Luke. *The Two Sons* is peculiar to Matthew. All three stories are told within the context, at least in the Gospels, of disputes with Pharisees though their actual historical context may have been different. All three stories are parables of repentance and either forgiveness (*The Prodigal Son*) or 'justification' (*The Two Men in the Temple*) or 'doing the will of the Father' (*The Two Sons*). All three are indeed about the loving acceptance of the wayward but the clear and specific thrust of all three is against the self-righteousness of pharisaical religion. We must also bring into the interpretative context those other parables and discourses which contrast two men, namely *The Rich Man and the Poor Man* in 2 Sam. 12:1, *The Rich Man and the Poor Man* in Lk. 16:19–31, *The Wise Man and the Foolish Man* in Mt. 7:24–27, *The Two Debtors* in Lk. 7:41–43 and *The Unjust Steward* in Lk. 16:1–8. In each of these stories, as in *The Prodigal Son*, the principal point is contained in the contrast between the two characters, but it is the last of these parables, that of *The Unjust Steward*, which is particularly illuminating as an interpretative clue to the meaning of *The Prodigal Son*, or rather it is that each of these two parables provides an interpretative context for the other.

Like *The Prodigal Son* which immediately precedes it *The Unjust Steward* is peculiar to St. Luke. It is addressed to the disciples unlike *The Prodigal Son* which, from its context in the Gospel, seems to have been directed at the Pharisees (15:2), but, as J. R. H. Moorman⁵ pointed out, it is a feature of Luke's presentation that he switches attention from one group of hearers to another, thus:

- 15:3 'So he told them [the Pharisees] this parable . . .'
 16:1 'He also said to the disciples . . .'

⁵ J. R. H. Moorman, *The Path to Glory* (1961), 192.

- 16:15 'But he said to them [the Pharisees] . . .'
 17:1 'And he said to his disciples . . .'
 17:20 'he answered them [the Pharisees] . . .'
 17:22 'And he said to the disciples . . .'
 18:9 'He also told this parable [*The Two Men in the Temple*] to some who trusted in themselves and despised others [the Pharisees] . . .'

It may be therefore that Luke intends us to interpret *The Prodigal Son* not in relation to *The Lost Sheep* and *The Lost Coin* but in relation to the parable which immediately follows it and with which it forms a pair, the switch of attention serving to throw light on both stories. When the two parables are viewed together we notice some remarkable similarities. Both stories are about relationships between two men: the father and the younger son, the father and the elder brother, the elder brother and the younger brother, the rich man and the servant. In both stories there has been reckless waste by one man of another man's property: the younger son of his father's wealth (his 'living', 15:12) and the servant of the rich man's wealth (his 'goods', 16:1). It is very instructive that only twice in the N.T. is the verb *diaskorpizein* ('to scatter' or 'to disperse') used metaphorically in the sense of 'to squander' or 'to waste': once in the parable of *The Prodigal Son* (Lk. 15:13) and once in the parable of *The Unjust Steward* (Lk. 16:1). One might say that we have here two stories about prodigality—*The Prodigal Son* and *The Prodigal Servant*. Another point of similarity between the two stories is that a turning point is reached in each when the younger son 'came to himself and said . . .' (15:17) and the servant 'said to himself . . .' (16:3). Each poses to himself a crucial question and each lays down a course of action which he then carried out, thus:

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| <p>Lk. 15:17ff. (RSV)</p> <p>17 But when he came to himself 3 he said,
 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish with hunger!</p> <p>18 I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;</p> | <p>Lk. 16:3ff. (RSV)</p> <p>And the steward said to himself,
 'What shall I do since my master is taking the stewardship away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.</p> <p>4I have decided what to do, so that people may receive me into their houses when I am put out of the stewardship.'</p> |
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- 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.’
- 20 And he arose and came to his father . . . And the son said . . .
- 5 So, summoning his master’s debtors, one by one, he said . . .

That a similar moment of self-awareness following an identical action should be described in such similar ways within an almost identical grammatical and syntactical construction in parables which stand together and which occur in only one Gospel cannot possibly be explained as a chance occurrence, and very strongly suggests that we should view these two parables as a pair and interpret them accordingly. We should read them together and allow them to resonate together.

If we view *The Prodigal Son* and *The Prodigal Servant* (as we might now call *The Unjust Steward*) together then it is seen that the son and the servant each act from motives of self-interest. The younger son’s ‘repentance’ is called forth by his recalling that his father’s hired hands have more than enough to eat while he is starving, while the servant calls in his master’s debts as a discount so that he may ingratiate himself with them pending his dismissal. The son’s repentance seems to be as much motivated by self-interest as the action of the servant. The existence where it stands of 15:17b is crucial and the force of it is only apparent when it is compared with 16:3b. If we were to add after 15:17 some such phrase as ‘. . . I have decided what to do, so that my father will receive me into his house’ (cf. 15:25; 16:4), which, in the light of the blatant self-interest of 15:17b one might suppose was in the mind of the author of the story, then we have a very close parallel between the two stories. I am not for one moment suggesting that this is the case, and there is no textual evidence whatsoever that it might be. I am simply suggesting that it *could* be the case. For why 15:17b unless it is so? Why does Jesus not simply say, ‘But when he came to himself he said, “I will arise and go to my father . . .”’ unless to suggest a self-interest parallel to that in the story of *The Prodigal Servant*? Of course no man’s self-interest is all-consuming any more than any man’s change of heart is totally self-less. The Prodigal Son returns to his father for a mix of reasons. No doubt he *was* penitent, but no doubt also he knew where his best material interests lay.

In each story the prodigal is received back into fellowship, the symbol of which is the house. The Prodigal Son is welcomed back into the father’s house (15:25) while the rich man praises his

servant and evidently retains him in his house of which he is the *oikonomos* or manager. The father in the first story welcomes his son back because his son is *there* and not on the basis of his son's prior repentance (the welcome—the forgiveness—precedes the repentance, Lk. 15:20–1). The rich man welcomes his servant back because of the servant's prudence, and certainly not because he has expressed any sorrow for his action. Father and rich man are equally prodigal, the one with compassion, the other with praise. Indeed, the rich man is more prodigal than the father, for one might expect a father to welcome a returning son but who would expect a master to praise his patently dishonest servant?

Viewing the two parables together in this way throws light on the notoriously difficult verses at Lk. 16:8 b-9. Jesus is recorded as saying that 'the sons of this world are wiser in their generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations' (Lk. 16:9 RSV). This statement could be held to apply to both parables. The sons of this world are characterized by the hypocritical younger son (as well as the self-righteous elder brother) of Lk. 15:11–32 and by the equally self-seeking servant of Lk. 16:1–9. All three ensure that they make their peace with father or master. Their motives are base but they do maintain and improve their human relationships. Even the elder brother manages to remind his father of his legitimate claim to affection and right. If Jeremias is right and the father (and the master) are images of God then, albeit for base motives, all three strive to maintain their relationship with God, and receive the commendation of Jesus. For whose motives *are* pure? Could any one of us dare to identify himself with a *truly* repentant younger son? All our righteousness is as filthy rags, and my penitence is always adulterated by self-interest. Do I not plead to be received into my father's house (the 'eternal habitations') for reasons which would be very well understood by other 'sons of this age'? The sons of light *are* sons for all their professed faith. The sons of this world are at least honest in their hypocrisy whereas the sons of light, the elder brothers of prodigal sons, do not realize that they are self-righteous so sure are they of the purity of their motives and of their election by their heavenly Father. It is at least possible that Jesus is reminding his disciples that, sons of light though they may be, they are in danger of slipping into the destructive self-righteousness of the elder brother. They are stewards (cf. 1 Cor. 4:1) and as such are the 'hired servants' of God (Lk. 10:7; cf. 1 Tim. 5:18). *They* are those who have 'bread enough to spare' (Lk. 9:17). Like the hired

servant in Lk. 16 who is made a friend by his master by his foresight in making friends with his master's debtors, so, mixed though their motives inevitably are, the disciples should maintain their relationship with God so that when the 'unrighteous mammon', the corrupt and corrupting standards of the age which has taught them the 'virtue' of self-interest, shall fail them then they will be near to a merciful God. The disciples are mere men after all. God the Father, the Rich Man of grace, accepts them as they are and for what they are, self-interest, hypocrisy, worldly prudence and all. He asks no questions of the prodigal son who is also the prodigal servant. He gracefully accepts that for whatever reason, son and servant have come close to him and he moves towards them in justifying, forgiving, accepting love, for, men as they are, they know not what they do. Seen together in this way, with each parable providing an interpretative basis for the other, one can see them as stories of Christian realism. They depict men as they are in relation to God as he is in the extravagant and, humanly speaking, truly scandalous, recklessness of his love.

We can now consider the other parables which contrast the characters and reactions of two men and see what light they throw on the parable of *The Prodigal Son*. The story of *The Prodigal Servant* is followed almost immediately by another contrast in the parable of *The Rich Man and the Beggar* in Lk. 16:19–31 which is again peculiar to St. Luke, belonging to his special section (9:51–18:14). Both parables speak of The End. Both, says Jeremias, articulate 'the challenge of the crisis'. The axe is even now laid at the root of the unfruitful fig-tree of Israel. The moment of judgement is at hand, and these parables, as indeed others, are to be understood as the proclamation of the imminent eschaton. Thus the story of *The Debtor* in Lk. 12:58ff. (par. Mt. 5:25–6) sounds a note of great urgency. Do not delay. Make peace with your adversary. Soon you will both appear before God the Judge. *The Prodigal Servant*, on Jeremias's reading of it, is a story recommending bold, resolute and urgent action in the face of the challenge of the hour. *The Rich Man and the Beggar* is clearly eschatological with its message that the time for repentance has passed and the chasm between God and man is now unbridgeable for though a man should rise from the dead those who have not heeded Moses and the prophets will not be convinced even by him. There can be no appeal to Abraham's special favour as the rich man's 'father' (16:24). Only 'fruits that befit repentance' and not the mere mouthing of the appeal 'we have Abraham as our father' will avert the axe laid to the root of the tree (Mt. 3:9; Lk. 3:8). This general eschatological thrust of

the story is clear enough. But there is something more. As with *The Prodigal Son* the emphasis in *The Rich Man and the Beggar* falls in the second half of the story where attention is focussed clearly on pharisaical religion. The religion alike of the elder brother in Lk. 15:25ff. and the five brothers in Lk. 16:27 is a religion which is based upon the privilege of kinship in 'my father's house'. But the call himself to repent and open-heartedly to accept his wayward brother as he himself has been accepted—which is in fact the *only* call to enter his father's house—is a call to which the elder brother cannot respond (Lk. 15:28). It is a call the rich man and his five brothers have not responded to either. Pharisaical religion of whatever tradition cannot respond to the call to repentance because it cannot place itself in the wrong and seek the forgiveness of God. This, however mixed their motives, is just what the prodigal son and the prodigal servant seek to do. They have been welcomed back into the father's (the master's) house with all their failings and hypocrisies and double standards for they have recognized who and what they are, and they know that God knows them for what they are. They are sinners. No 'Pharisee' can ever admit to that.

So although these parables are undoubtedly eschatological in emphasis it is legitimate to find in them this second complex of meanings which speak of our need to be realistic and open about ourselves, to acknowledge the base motives in our religious profession, to realize, with John Bunyan, that there is dirt in our own tears and filthiness in the bottom of our prayers.⁶ The motives of the prodigal son can be no purer than those of the prodigal servant in this respect. Yet to know what we are is the essential first step to our true turning again as sons and servants of God the Father, rich beyond measure in love and grace.

⁶ John Bunyan, *The Holy War*, in *Works* (1860 edition), iii, 301.