Heaven and Hell: The Parable of the Loving Father and the Judgmental Son

Todd Compton

RECENTLY I TAUGHT THE PARABLE of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) in priesthood meeting and was, as always, impressed by its beauty, simplicity, and profundity. It seemed to me as if this was the central passage in the New Testament, with its story of sin, repentance, compassion, forgiveness, heavenly joy; and with its almost frightening analysis of the opposites of compassion, forgiveness, and joy. It seemed as infinitely beautiful as it was infinitely terrible.

This parable has often been misunderstood, especially the "obedient son" who stayed home and "kept" his father's commandments. Some have taken comfort in this older son, feeling that if you stay home and keep the commandments, you will be better off than the person who sins and repents. But to Christ, the men and women who repent have equal status with those who feel they have not sinned, and people who feel they have not sinned are in fact in special danger. The older son symbolizes the Pharisee in the context of Christ's telling of the parable; on a more timeless level, he is an evocative symbol of eternal damnation, a damnation tragic and terrible because it is self-inflicted.

To understand fully this parable, it is important first of all to look at the teaching context in which Jesus told it.[1] In the beginning of chapter

1. My concern here is to interpret the parable as it is found in Luke, not to analyze the strata of oral tradition and editorial accretion in Luke 15, along with Luke's recasting of his raw material. But we should touch on these issues briefly, at least. This parable is found only in Luke, so there is no need to compare different synoptic versions. Scholars often see the settings of the parables as later accretions, reflecting the outlook of the early church after Jesus' death, rather than the actual environment in which Jesus told the parable. See Eta Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus, Introduction and Exposition* (London: SPCK, 1966), 44-45. However, it is generally accepted that the historical Jesus did tell the parable of the Prodigal Son as a response to criticisms of Pharisees when Jesus shared table fellowship with sinners. Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2d rev. ed., trans. S. H. Hooke (New York: Scribners, 1972, orig. 1947), 124, 131; Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus*, 69, 73; Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 96. More generally, it is widely accepted that the parables in the gospels are the teachings of the historical Jesus; in fact, they are a large part of our evidence for the historical Jesus, revealing a teacher of compassionate moral vision and transcendent poetic and narrative skill.

15, we read, "Now all the tax collectors and sinners [*hoi telô~nai kaì hoi hamartôloì*][2] were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling [*diegógguzon*] and saying, 'This fellow welcomes [*prosdékhetai*][3] sinners and eats with them.'"

Thus Jesus eats with the hated tax collectors, who would exact taxes on behalf of the despised overlords, the Romans, often dishonestly extorting more than was required. He also eats with "sinners," which probably included Jews who did not keep the full law, gentiles, criminals, and sexual sinners, such as prostitutes and adulterers.[4] Eating with people was a charged symbolic act in Jewish culture at the time, and strict Jews, Pharisees, and priests, Sadducees, looked upon eating with gentiles, "sinners," the ritually impure, with disgust and distaste.[5] That Jesus not only taught these people, but ate with them, was a slap in the face of the Pharisees, who were trying to live exactly by the laws of ritual purity in the Pentateuch, to the detriment of larger issues of mercy and justice, the "weightier matters of the Law" (Matt. 23:23). Moreover, Palestine was an occupied country at the time, and anyone who associated with Romans was seen as a traitor to the native country and religion.[6] However, Jesus deliberately talked and even ate with gentiles, "sinners," and tax collectors.[7]

---

2. All translations are from the New Revised Standard Version. In my Greek transcriptions, ^ represents an elongated vowel (ô is omega; ê is eta); ' is the acute accent; ` is the grave accent; ~ is the circumflex accent. The letter chi is represented by "kh."

3. This probably means that Jesus invited sinners into his home, Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 227.

4. For the meaning of "sinners" here, see Luke 18:11, Matt. 21:32; Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983; Anchor Bible 28A), 1:591; Perrin, *Rediscovering*, 92-94. For Jesus associating with a prostitute, see Luke 7:36-50, cf. Jeremias' discussion in *The Parables of Jesus*, 126. One of Jesus' more shocking and offensive statements to Jewish religious leaders was Matt. 21:31, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes [*hai pórnai*] are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." Luke 7:36-50 also suggests that the prostitute who washes Jesus' feet will gain heaven, while the Pharisee will not. These are not anti-Jewish sentiments; they apply to self-righteous formalizing lovelessness in any religion. Though the shock value of a tax collector as sinner is mostly gone in our culture, telling a prominent leader in a religious community today that a prostitute will be accepted in heaven ahead of him would still have a pronounced effect. So we see that Jesus was not a sentimentally mild teacher (though he had his gentle side). The conservative Jews in fact found his teachings and actions intolerable, in large part because he associated with sinners and gentiles, see Perrin, *Rediscovering*, 103.

5. Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 204-206; Ernst Lohmeyer, *Lord of the Temple*, trans. Stewart Todd (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1961; orig. 1942), 79-81; "Das Abendmahl," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 56 (1937): 217-26; Perrin, *Rediscovering*, 103-108; Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (London: SCM, 1971), 118.

6. Perrin emphasizes this aspect of Jesus' offense in *Rediscovering*, 103.

7. See, in addition to n4, John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 261-64; S. Scott Bartchy, "Tablefellowship with Jesus and the 'Lord's Meal' at Corinth," in *Increase in Learning: Essays in Honor of James G. Van Burne* (Manhattan, KS: Manhattan Christian College, 1979), 45-61, 57.

It is important to stress that Jesus did not associate with sinners out of love for their sins; the "tax collectors and sinners" draw near to him in a spirit of sincere interest in his teaching and in a spirit of repentance. For an example of a repentant tax collector, we have Zacchaeus (Luke 19:2-10), who promises, "if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Jesus also included a tax collector, Levi, among his twelve apostles (Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27). This would almost be an act of provocation against the nationalistic Jews, from one perspective; but from another, it would simply be an act of forgiveness and spiritual insight.

The Pharisees and scribes are entirely unconcerned with the issue of repentance, even though the concept is not absent from the Old Testament.[8]

In response to the Pharisees' contempt for Jesus when he associates with sinners, he tells three parables,[9] the last of which is the parable of the prodigal son. The first two parables are the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin. Both obviously emphasize recovering something lost. Another important idea in these two parables is that of the owner going out, leaving his comfortable central area of operations,

---

8. See, for example, Isa. 1:18-20; 44:22; 63:7-64:12; Ezek. 11:19; 18:31; 33:10-19; 36:26; Jer. 7:5-7; 31:33; Dan. 9:4-19; Hos. 6; 14; Amos 5:21-24; Jonah 3:6-4:11; 1 Kings 21. In Jonah it is even gentiles who repent, after God sends a reluctant prophet to teach them. J. Milgrom, "Repentance in the OT," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), supp. vol., 736.

9. For interpretations of Jesus' parables, see especially the following: Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesus im Lichte der rabbinischen Gleichnisse des neutestamentlichen Zeitalters* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1912), a landmark in modern parable interpretation. Jülicher attacked "allegorical" interpretation, insisting that each parable had one point alone, which was broadly ethical. While Jülicher was a necessary corrective to medieval allegorist interpretation, subsequent scholars have at least modified his positions. Recently, John Drury, *The Parables in the Gospels* (London: SPCK, 1985), flatly rejected Jülicher's "one point" interpretation, cf. Matthew Black, "The Parables as Allegory," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 42 (1960): 273-87, 282-84. C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Welwyn Garden City: Nisbet, 1935), saw the Kingdom of God as the unifying theme of the parables. His definition of parable is often quoted: "At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought." Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, originally published in 1947, was another landmark; his encyclopedic knowledge of Jewish literature and Palestinian culture placed Jesus' parables in their historical milieu, and the author strove to recover the historical Jesus through them. Robert W. Funk, "The Parable as Metaphor," in his *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), offered a literary-aesthetic approach to the parables, as did Dan O. Via, Jr., *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967). John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), combines a literary/critical viewpoint, an examination of metaphor in parable, with an interest in finding the historical Jesus. An overview of interpretation is Norman Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 89-193.

to find what was lost, actively searching ("search carefully" [*zêtei~ epimelô~s*], v. 8). Joseph Smith's Inspired Revision emphasizes this in verse 4: "and go into the wilderness after that which is lost." Clearly, the lost sheep or coin is the sinner, and the recovery is his repentance. This is made explicit by another important idea: the joy of the recoverer and his community when the lost is recovered. "And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, Rejoice with me [*Sugkhârêté moi*]; for I have found my sheep that was lost" (v. 6). Jesus then shows that this joy is an earthly reflection of heaven: "Just so, I tell you, there will be . . . joy [*kharà*] in heaven over one sinner who repents" (v. 7). "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (v. 10).[10] So these parables move from the personal level, the shepherd's relationship with the lost sheep, including recovery and joy, to the communal level, the community of Christians, who rejoice with the shepherd; to the eschatological, transcendent level, the community of heaven, and the joy felt there when sinner is transformed. These two parables, on their deepest level, define heaven as a place of joy. And the joy is defined by love for the outcast.[11]

There is no antagonist to contrast with the protagonist in these two parables. Such a character would not feel desire for that which is lost; he would not go out to find the lost thing; he would have no joy; he would

10. Perrin regards these summations of the parables as editorial accretions, not Jesus' original words, *Rediscovering*, 101, cf. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 2:1,073, 1,075, who puts the summations at "Stage II" of the gospel tradition. See n1 above. Matthew's version of the parallel of the lost sheep (18:10-14) also has a summation, so the form of a summation can at least be seen as pre-Lucan. Matthew's summation ("so it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost") is not precisely the same as Luke's, though the central theme (love of the Father, in heaven, for the individual soul) is similar. Matthew's introduction "in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven" is quite close to Luke 15:10, sharing the theme of heaven as community.

11. So these two parables, and the parable of the prodigal son, can be seen as proclamations of the kingdom of God, which many interpreters regard as the keystone of Jesus' preaching. The kingdom of God, as taught by Jesus, welcomes the outcast and is in fact made up of outcasts to a great extent. See Johannes Weiss, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, trans. Richard Hiers and D. Larrimore Holland (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1971; orig. 1892); Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus* (Berlin: Deutsche Bibliothek, 1926); C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 1,935; Norman Perrin, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963). An overview of interpretation is Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*; see also Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969). Some interpreters (e.g., Weiss) have seen Jesus' Kingdom of God as essentially in the future, from Jesus' perspective; others (e.g., Dodd and Bultmann) have viewed it as more in the present. Perrin holds that Jesus' Kingdom of God is both present and future, and sees it as a symbol rather than a concrete reality. Bernard Brandon Scott, *Jesus, Symbol-Maker for the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), regards the Kingdom of God as a "tensive" symbol, a symbol with multiple non-exclusive meanings, just as parables are tensive, with complex meanings.

not feel joy within the community; he would not feel joy on an eschatological, transcendent level. He would, in fact, define hell instead of heaven.

This brings us to the parable of the prodigal son, which does have such a character. The "parable of the prodigal son" is a traditional title for the parable; Jesus himself, of course, did not give the parable any title. Many have felt that "parable of the prodigal son" does not do justice to the story, as it has three main characters, all of whom are important, and perhaps the repentant son is not even the central character.[12] Another title that has been proposed is "the parable of the two sons." But once again this does not include a key character, the father. Perhaps a better title is "the parable of the father's love,"[13] which highlights what may be the most important character and theme in the parable. But none of these titles or themes is wrong or exclusive. I propose as a possible title, "the parable of heaven and hell."

In this parable a well-to-do farmer has two sons. The younger of two asks for his inheritance (a common occurrence in Palestine, for the unproductive land caused many Jews to join the Jewish community in the Diaspora),[14] and the father gives it to him. The fact that the father allows this is an important point; he is not dictatorial, does not force his son to stay. Paradoxically, an important, if difficult, aspect of authentic love is, at some point, letting go, allowing a dependent freedom to make mistakes, freedom to sin, to have agency.

The son then leaves his home to live in a "distant country," where he wastes the money in "dissolute living [*zô~n asô'tôs*]." When the money is entirely gone, a famine comes to the country where he is living, and he is forced to work as a farm servant. He feeds pigs, a detail that would have particularly shocked the Jews, for swine are the most offensively unclean animal for members of the house of Israel.[15] This detail alone would have

---

12. Robert Funk, *Parables and Presence* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 60-63, views the parable from three different perspectives, with different "determiners" (the prodigal son, the father), in an intriguing treatment. For a discussion of possible titles for this parable, see Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 2:1,084. Marshall proposes "The Lost Son"; Easton, "The Waiting Father." Rubsys suggests "The Parable of the Forgiving Father," see C.F. Evans, *Saint Luke* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 589-90.

13. See Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 128.

14. Ibid., 129. Some four million Jews lived in the Diaspora; only half a million in Palestine.

15. Orthodox Jews regarded herders of any sort, even shepherds, as religiously suspect, see Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 128; *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1969) 303-12. Naturally, swineherds were utterly reviled. "Cursed be the man who breeds swine," states a Jewish text, b. Baba Qamma 82b, as quoted in Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 129. A good Jew is not to help a Jewish swineherd out of a pit, Perrin, *Rediscovering*, 96, cf. Hermann Strack-Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 6 vols. (Munich: Beck, 1922-61; 1928), 4:359.

caused the orthodox Jew to view the prodigal son as worse than a gentile; he has become an apostate. Moreover, the young man is so hungry that he covets the "pods" he is feeding to the swine. In this state of degradation, he decides to return to the farm of his father and work for him, not as a son, but as a servant. He prepares his speech: "I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." The son was probably nervous, tense, desperate as he traveled home. Perrin writes, after explaining the perceived apostasy of a swineherd, "This then is the crux of the parable as Jesus told it. As far as many of his hearers were concerned, and certainly as far as the ones to whom the parable was particularly addressed were concerned, at this point the son becomes dead in his father's eyes and any self-respecting Jewish father would have spurned him had he returned in such disgrace."[16]

He approached his home, but "while he was still far off, his father saw him, and was filled with compassion; he ran, and put his arms around him and kissed him [*éti dè autou~ makràn apékhontos ei~den autòn ho patê'r autou~ kaì esplagkhnísthê kaì dramô'n epépesen epì tòn trákhêlon autou~ kaì katephílêsen autón*]." Thus the father runs out of his home to receive his sinning son; he does not sit at home and wait to be approached. As in the parables of the lost sheep and coin, the protagonist actively goes out to reclaim the sinner. Jeremias notes that running is "a most unusual and undignified procedure for an aged oriental even though he is in such haste."[17] Perrin describes the father's actions as "extravagant," given Jewish culture at the time, "and no doubt the extravagance is deliberate." The father's forgiveness and love were probably seen as reprehensible by the listening Pharisees.[18] Far from excluding the sinner from the community, he runs out to draw him into it. He "was filled with compassion [*esplagkhnísthê*]"; he embraces his long lost younger son. It is important to note that even though the younger son had repented, the father did not know this when he embraced him. The repentant sinner causes joy; but the Christlike person loves all, the repentant and unrepentant.[19]

There are many elements with ritual resonances woven into this story; rituals are based on customary actions of everyday life which become heightened by religious use but which still retain their normal everyday meanings. The embrace and kiss is a common everyday action, yet embraces and kisses have been a part of rituals from time immemo-

16. Perrin, *Rediscovering*, 96.

17. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 130.

18. Perrin, *Rediscovering*, 96

19. Cf. T.W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus as Recorded in the Gospels according to St. Matthew and St. Luke Arranged with Introduction and Commentary* (London: SCM, 1971), 286. For the love of God equating with the love of a father, see Ps. 103:13; Isa. 64:7-8.

rial.[20] Here the embrace symbolizes love of a parent for a child; forgiveness and compassion for a wayward child; and, on a more transcendent level, the love of God for his children. That is not to suggest that Christ meant this to be seen as a ritual act, simply that all ritual gives heightened meaning to everyday occurrences.

The kiss here is also a sign of equality; the father embraces his son like an equal, not like a servant. He does not allow the son to fall to his knees and kiss his hand or feet, the normal gesture for a suppliant or servant.[21] The son begins his speech, but the father cuts him off before he can finish it. The loving parent's response rejects completely the son's statement that he is not worthy to be called a son anymore. The father directs servants to bring for the son the "best" robe (*stolê'n tê'n prô'tên*, the "first" robe), shoes, and a ring for his hand. The robe again has ritual resonance. Probably the returning son was dressed in rags; these would be set aside, and he would be dressed in new clothing. In most initiation ritual, old clothes are taken off, a liminal moment of nakedness, and then new clothes are put on.[22] They symbolize a new, sacred status—repentance, laying aside our sins to take on a new Christlike identity—and also represent God's forgiveness. The robe is also a symbol of authority and honor. "When the king wishes to honour a deserving official, he presents him with a costly robe," writes Jeremias.[23]

The ring has great significance here, for in antiquity the ring often served as an important emblem of authority—impressed in wax, it acted as the owner's signature. Thus the father restores his repentant son to his old status as a son and representative. Rings also had significance in ancient ritual as tokens of identity. Perhaps the best modern parallels would be driver's licenses, social security cards, credit cards, check books, and

---

20. See my "The Handclasp and Embrace as Tokens of Recognition," in *By Study and By Faith*, ed. John Lundquist and Stephen Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1990), 1:611-42.

21. See Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus*, 77; Karl Bornhäuser, *Studien zum Sondergut des Lukas* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1934), 114.

22. For clothing changes in ritual, J. Gwyn Griffiths, *The Isis-Book* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 308-14, 356-57. Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, trans. Willard Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), is a good general introduction to initiation ritual. Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. M. Vizedom and G. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), and Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), emphasize liminality, passage, in ritual. Not surprisingly, the parable of the prodigal son was often referred to by early Christian fathers writing on baptism, Christian initiation (where the candidate took off his regular clothes, was baptized naked, then put on a new, white robe), e.g., *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, trans. R. H. Connolly, in *Texts and Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909), 8.1: 39; Gregory of Nyssa, *De Oratione Dominica* 5 (*Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne [Paris: Migne, 1857 and onward], 44:1,184 B-D); cf. a translation by H. Graef (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1954; Ancient Christian Writers 18).

23. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 131.

documents giving power of attorney.[24] Jeremias astutely notes the Old Testament parallel for the robe and ring: when Joseph becomes grand vizier in Egypt, he is given "a ring, a robe of fine linen, and a golden chain" (Gen. 41:42).[25]

Some interpreters of this parable have suggested that the returning prodigal son does not regain his old status; the ring and the best robe do not support this reading. The sincerely repentant will be accepted into full fellowship in the community of church and heaven. However, some may ask, what is the good of not sinning if the prodigal son is returned to full status as son? The answer, of course, is that sin is existentially destructive, alienating, painful; the prodigal son experiences deep suffering, physical and psychic, before his return.

The father, then, orders the servants to kill the fatted calf, "and let us eat, and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." Here we have the explicit link to the previous two parables: the lostness of the sinner and joy when he is found. And we also have the idea of death and resurrection, which again has theological and ritual resonances. Often rites of initiation (literally, "entrance") used symbolisms of death and life to symbolize newness of life.[26] Thus baptism is both a death and a resurrection.[27]

As in the previous two parables, the rejoicing is not private—it is a community event, "let us eat and celebrate." There is a joyful feast, in which the fatted calf is eaten. This is another detail with ritual resonance in the ancient world, for eating meat was a much rarer event in antiquity than it is today; often it took place only in times of festival, and it always involved the religious ritual of animal sacrifice.[28] The celebration also in-

---

24. See Gen. 41:42; 1 Macc. 6:15. This use of the ring as token of identity was commonplace in the ancient world: "Among the Greeks, the ring performed many of the functions of the signature in the modern world," A. W. Gomme and F. H. Sandbach, *Menander, A Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 336. It was used for securing property, "signing" documents, sealing messages, pledging bargains, see J. Henry Middleton, *The Engraved Gems of Classical Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891), 22-34. For the ring in initiation ritual, see Susan Cole, *Theoi Megaloi* (Leiden: Brill, 1984), 29-30, 115n242. In Samothracian initiation rite, a "ring became a token of the protection conferred on the initiate by his initiation." In the Gnostic Christian group, the Mandaeans, the ring was a symbol of priesthood, E. J. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran* (Leiden: Brill, 1962), 31, 36.

25. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 130.

26. Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*.

27. See Rom. 6:4: "we have been buried with him by baptism into his death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." Cf. Col. 2:12.

28. Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 56. "The sacrifice is a festive occasion for the community. The contrast with everyday life is marked with washing, dressing in clear garments, and adornment, in particular, wearing a garland woven from twigs on the head . . ." Of course, the Jews followed different specific ritual, but the general principle was the same; animal sacrifice was a sacred, festal event.

cludes "music and dancing [*sumphônías kaì khorô~n*]."[29] It is clear from the other parables in Luke that this lively, joyful scene represents heaven, just as in the previous two parables, joy in heaven among angels is explicitly mentioned. Here is Christ's definition of heaven: communal joy over the reception of the returning outcast and a feast with music and dancing. It is interesting that in Nauvoo Mormonism, church leaders danced in the Nauvoo temple. On 30 December 1845, in the temple, a violinist played, the hornpipe was danced, then Brigham Young himself led out the French fours. "The spirit of dancing increased until the whole floor was covered with dancers."[30] These were not stately hymns; the violinist was playing rhythmic dance music. By one view of heaven (Jesus'), this is entirely appropriate for temple worship; by a Puritanical view of heaven, it is shockingly inappropriate.

Another parable in Luke, that of the host and his "great feast" (14:16-25), provides an apt comparison. In this parable many are invited to a feast and refuse to come. When they use excuses and turn the host down, he sends his servants out to invite "the poor, and the crippled, the blind and the lame." Moreover, he sends the servants "into the streets and lanes of the town," then "into the roads and lanes," which probably indicates gentiles as the invitees.[31] Here again the feast symbolizes heavenly salvation, which the original invitees (many in the Jewish nation, many in the upper classes) will spurn and which the poor, the disabled, the gentiles will attend. This parable is much like the parable of the wedding feast in Matthew 22:2-14. A central point of comparison for the prodigal son parable is the paradox of guests not wanting to attend the wedding feast, a joyful occasion, a celebration. Anyone who has attended modern Jewish weddings knows how joyful and unbridled they can be. There is no good reason why the guests of the parables should turn away from such a feast; nevertheless, pressed by business or everyday concerns, many turn away from music, dancing, making merry, drinking, feasting,

---

29. *sum-phônía* ("together-sound") may be music played by several instruments, or one instrument playing harmony, see Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and adapted by William Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 781. If we take the former interpretation, it is an evocative symbol for community as producing something beyond the sum of its parts. In this chapter of Luke, joy reaches its fullness in community, just as in music the greatest beauty comes through combinations of instruments.

30. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1902-32), 7:557; William Clayton journal, 30 Dec. 1845, in *An Intimate Chronicle*, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books in association with Smith Research Associates, 1981), 244; Juanita Brooks, *John Doyle Lee* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1992), 86-87. For dancing, cf. leaping for joy in Luke 6:23.

31. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 2:1,053.

joy. Another important point is that the master of the feast eats with the poor and the ritually impure, the disabled and the gentiles, as did Christ, and that the original invitees do not attend the feast and are not found in heaven.

Thus the feast in the prodigal son parable is a remarkably non-Puritanical depiction of heaven: it includes music, dancing, making merry. There is nothing joyless, stern, inhibited, or strait-laced about this heaven; it is a spontaneous, collective celebration.

Another remarkable non-Puritanical element of the parable of the prodigal son is the father's attitude toward sexual sin. The older son will accuse the younger son of sexual sin, associating with prostitutes, which is probably an accurate charge. But in contrast the father is completely and immediately willing to accept the sexual sinner back into the community. In dealing with sexual transgression, Christ evidently would teach complete forgiveness and forgetting of the transgression for the repentant sinner; the value of the returning son is much greater than the fact that he has made mistakes. Furthermore, the loving father does not require the prodigal son to undergo an extended and humiliating public probation before he receives forgiveness; he is not accepted under a cloud; he does not have to wear a scarlet A on his clothes. Forgiveness, in this parable, is immediate and total.

We now turn to the oldest son, a portrayal of great psychological penetration. Here we have the theme of "staying away from the feast"—denying oneself joy and celebration—in the name of righteousness.[32] When the prodigal son returns, the oldest son is in the fields and hears the music and dancing. He questions a servant and learns that his brother has returned and that his father has declared a celebration feast. "Then he became angry, and refused to go in [*ôrgísthê dè kaì ouk ê'thelen eiselthei~n*]." Point by point, we can contrast the father and the oldest son, looking at how they respond to the return of the repentant son. The father runs out to welcome his repentant son; the older son will not even go into the house to meet him. The father embraces the younger son and shows compassion for him; the older son shows no love or compassion at all. The father restores complete sonship and authority to the younger son, and draws him into the community; the older son withdraws from a community including the younger son.

---

32. Some interpreters have regarded this part of the parable as superfluous, even added by later editors; Evans, e.g., in *Saint Luke*, 588, regards it as "a somewhat lame appendix." See also J. T. Sanders, "Tradition and Redaction in Luke 15.11-32," NTS 15 (1968-69): 433-38, and J. Wellhausen, *Das Evangelium Lucae übersetz und erklärt* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1904), 81-85. But most commentators, myself among them, see it as central to the original parable, see C. Carlston, "Reminiscence and Redaction in Luke 15:11-32," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94 (1975): 368-90; Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968) 196; Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 131; Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 2:1,085.

The next step in the drama is surprising and again shows the father's all-encompassing love. He learns that his oldest son is not joining the feast, and he leaves the comfort and joy of his home, leaves the celebration, to try to bring his elder son—who is erring like his younger son but in an entirely different way—into the feast. The ensuing conversation further develops the character of the older son. He protests to his father: he has served him many years, "And I have never disobeyed your command." But the father never gave him even a kid (less valuable than the calf) so he could have a party with his friends.

The stark lack of love for the younger brother combined with the boast, "And I have never disobeyed your command," is striking. One thinks of Christ stating that the two greatest commandments are to love God with all might, heart, mind, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:36-39; cf. 23:23). (The second commandment is "like unto" the first; therefore, one cannot love God unless one authentically loves one's fellow man.) The oldest son is thus not faultless—he lacks brotherly love. He is a worse sinner than the younger son, for he thinks he is perfect but is entirely without love.

Here one thinks of the parable of the prayers of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). The Pharisee thanks God that he is not "like other people," unjust, adulterers, "or even like this tax collector." He boasts to God about how much he fasts and pays his tithing. But the tax collector stands "far off," will not lift his eyes to heaven, smites himself on the breast, and prays only, "God be merciful to me a sinner." Jesus explains that, paradoxically, the tax collector is justified, not the Pharisee. The Pharisee uses his outward compliance with commandments to mask the fact that he does not love his fellowmen. Most importantly, the tax collector, who has undoubtedly sinned previously by his dishonesty, knows that he *has been* a sinner; the Pharisee does not know that he *is* a sinner. One thinks of Scott Peck's fascinating analysis of evil, *People of the Lie*, in which the truly evil are those who thrive on controlling and manipulating others, who cannot love, but who want to be seen as loving, and are often very skillful at exhibiting counterfeit love.[33] Such people, when parents, often destroy members of their families at the same time they want their families to be seen as models.

Like the Pharisee, the older son, after describing his own "complete" righteousness, throws his brother's sins at his father. "This son of yours . . . who has devoured your property with prostitutes [*metà pornô~n*]."

---

33. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985). Dr. Herve Cleckley, a specialist on sociopaths, writes, "The observer is confronted with a convincing mask of sanity. We are dealing not with a complete man at all, but with something that suggests a subtly constructed reflex machine which can mimic the human personality perfectly." Quoted in Ann Rule, *The Stranger Beside Me* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), 403.

Though the older son may not have known exactly, it is reasonable to surmise that the younger actually did spend his money in this way. But it is an unjust accusation for the present time, because the "lost" son has thoroughly, sincerely repented of his sins, after great suffering. Like the Pharisees, the older son does not take this into consideration; once a sinner, always a sinner. Once a dishonest tax collector, always a dishonest tax collector. Comparable is the parable, troubling to readers who feel salvation is a matter of strict justice, of the hired laborer who works a full day getting the same reward as the laborer who comes late and works fewer hours (Matt. 20:1-16). This is clearly a parable emphasizing that the repentant sinner receives a reward equal to that of the person who has been living righteously, who has "not sinned." But the person who has not sinned, who has worked a full day, puts himself or herself in peril by protesting injustice and by being unforgiving.

A telling detail is the phrase: "this son of yours [*ho huiós sou hou~tos*]."[34] In the older son's view, the younger son is not worthy to be called his brother, so once again, the lack of brotherly love is emphasized.[35]

The older son, then, is explicitly the symbol of the judgmental, separatist Pharisee, he who will not eat with the sinner and is contemptuous of those who do.[36] For sinners to repent and be allowed into full fellowship strikes them as unjust, an attack on their own righteousness. Christ, telling this story to the Pharisees, characterizes them (or, at least, his group of them) by the unforgiving, unloving, joyless character of the older brother. The contrast with the forgiving father is striking and is the main crux of the story.

The father's reply ends the parable: "Son [*téknon*],[37] you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." Here the father reassures his older son that he has not been disinherited, but the return of the lost brother merited celebration. This statement is clearly conditional. If the son wants to be "always with" the father, the father wants him and will receive him. But he must repent, just as, in a different way, his brother had to repent. He must learn to love his brother, join the feast, authentically celebrate with his father

---

34. *hou~tos* is contemptuous, Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 597; Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 131.

35. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 131, refers to the Pharisees' "joyless, loveless, thankless and self-righteous lives."

36. This is generally accepted, cf. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 131. Contra: Evans, *Saint Luke*, 592.

37. Scott, *Jesus Symbol-Maker*, 56, translates it as "dear child"; cf. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 808. The father meets the elder son's contempt, anger, and lovelessness with calm, sincere affection.

and brother, and recognize his brother as full co-heir.

The story ends on an entirely ambiguous note, and we may end it however we wish. One wonders: did the older brother rejoin the feast? Judging from the context of Luke, and the Gospels, he did not. The Pharisees, in the Gospels, are not generally repentant. In the parable of the wedding feast, mentioned above, the first-invited do not attend. Jesus knows that it is difficult for someone who is judgmental, loveless, incapable of authentic joy or celebration to return to acceptance, love, joyful celebration.

Thus the picture of the older son is a carefully drawn evocation of hell. In heaven is the feast, with joyful, hieratic meal, celebration, dancing, and music. Presiding there is a forgiving, loving father; and there also are brothers and sisters who have sinned but who have repented.

Hell, on the other hand, is made up of those who feel that they are better than those at the feast; who remember only the former sins of the invitees and cannot forgive them. Their inability to forgive is an inability to love. And when the father goes out to bring them to the feast, they protest their complete righteousness and the sins of the repentant sinners at the feast. Thus they exclude themselves from joy and celebration. There is no more chilling view of hell than the loveless, joyless, judgmental, self-excluding hell depicted in the parable of the prodigal son.

Nevertheless, the father leaves the joyful celebration, "descends" to hell, far from the security and light of the home, to reclaim his judgmental son. He refuses "to allow him to reject his own sonship," and the older son "is offered grace," just as the younger son was offered it.[38]

So we come to realize that heaven is most centrally defined by the father's love. This is the love of God for all of us sinners, all of us making wrong decisions every day of our lives. God does not rejoice in excluding the sinner from heaven; in fact, he does all he can to reclaim him or her; he runs out to accept the sinning younger son and returns him to full fellowship in the family, in the community, even restores him to authority (as the ring shows). And when the other son sins in a different, more dangerous way (the sin of thinking you are fully righteous, which leads to a lack of love, a contempt for perceived sinners, an inner coldness), the father once again goes out of his way to try to reclaim him.

Jesus' parables are not mere aesthetic constructs, beautifully vivid and moving as they are; they are models for action, challenges to our spiritual limitations and inertia. If we follow Jesus' prodigal son teachings, we will seek to emulate the energetic, all-accepting love of the Father[39] and truly forgive our brothers and sisters. We will see them as

---

38. Scott, *Jesus, Symbol-Maker,* 57.

39. Cf. A. L. Rubsys, "The Parable of the Forgiving Father," *Readings in Biblical Morality,* ed. C. L. Salm (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 103-108. For the father of the parable representing the love of God the Father, see Black, "The Parables as Allegory," 284.

valuable even as they are lost—even when they are lost in a narrow, judgmental, self-excluding way, and are psychically destructive to the community.[40] And we will develop the capacity for the deep and joyful celebration of heaven.

40. This parable could be interpreted as Christ's message to his disciples that they must love the Pharisee. Recent research on the Pharisees has emphasized that, though the Gospels tend to view them unsympathetically, as one-dimensionally bad, the Pharisees began as a movement that tried to regain integrity of religious life by observing the purity codes of the Law, the Old Testament, which many Jews had forgotten. Many Pharisees were entirely sincere and idealistic in this effort, and many "Hellenized" Jews had become worldly, secular, even pagan. But the fact that extremist Pharisees, in a sincere, even heroic effort to live by legalistic minutiae of a divine standard of purity, could sometimes entirely misunderstand the spiritual heart of the book they were following, shows that appeals to "purity" can be rhetoric cloaking lovelessness. For a useful overview of interpretation of the Pharisees, see Anthony J. Saldarini, "Pharisees," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary,* ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992); also Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadduceees in Palestinian Society* (Wilmington, DE: M. Glazier, 1988); J. Bowker, *Jesus and the Pharisees* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); and Ellis Rivkin, *The Hidden Revolution: The Pharisees' Search for the Kingdom Within* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978).