

Prodigal Son - the Lesson to the Righteous
A Series on Tax Collectors and Sinners: Part 2

When Jesus sits with tax collectors and other social outcasts, Jewish religious authorities disapprove by making judgements of their relationship with God based on their profession and outward appearance (Luke 15:1-2). With the parables of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin, Jesus establishes that the “lost” are the tax collectors and other sinners without a shepherd; a person’s profession or social status does not define the relationship one has with God (Matt 21:31-32; Luke 3:11-13; 7:29)!

As Jesus continues this literary unit of parables to speak to other hearers of this conversation with Jewish religious authorities, He appeals to the lost with the first half of the Parable of the Prodigal Son:

And He said, “A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.’ So he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. But when he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.”’ So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’ And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:11-24)

The parable itself has a ring of truth, and the appeal to the lost is the forgiveness that the wayward undeserving younger son receives from his father. For a Jew, who may be of a despised socio-economic class, the continual and impossible attempts at atonement for his sins in accordance to Pharisaic laws, and awareness of God’s word would sow doubt of his status:

Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.” (Ex 19:5-6)

The appeal is not just the prospect of forgiveness but also to the joy of God the Father. In telling the parables, it is Jesus Christ, the Messiah Son of Man, who is offering this salvation.

Now when Jesus heard that John had been taken into custody, He withdrew into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet:

“The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
“The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great Light,
And those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death,
Upon them a Light dawned.”

From that time Jesus began to preach and say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matt 4:12-17)

While the first half of the Parable of the Prodigal Son is about the lost son, Jesus presents the second half of the story, about the older obedient brother, as a contrast and with the disciples in view (Luke 16:1):

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“Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.’ But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. But he answered and said to his father, ‘Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.’” (Luke 15:25-32)

Despite having Matthew the tax collector as a fellow disciple (Matt 10:3), Messianic Jews, who may share the prejudice of Jewish religious authorities towards tax collectors and other sinners, are confronted with Jesus’ story of pride and jealousy of the older brother. Like Jewish religious authorities, they lack *agapē* love; but, in the context of their fellow brothers in Jesus Christ (John 13:34-35). Like the parables of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin, there is great joy in the recovery of the lost son.

Jesus speaks frequently of this potential resentment among Believers:

And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name’s sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life. **But many who are first will be last; and the last, first.** (Matt 19:29-30)

“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.’ When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received denarius. When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, saying, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.’ But he answered and said to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?’ **So the last shall be first, and the first last.**” (Matt 20:8-16)

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is often focused on the lost wayward son; however, just as important is Jesus Christ’s message to fellow Believers and His portrayal of the magnitude of God’s *agapē* love.