

# NazaRemix Series — Just What IS a Nazarene? We Are Open to All

August 29/30, 2009

**Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)**

*NazaRemix Series — Just What IS a Nazarene? We Are Open to All*

Written by: Robert Ismon Brown (bbrown@chicagofirstnaz.org)

## Background Notes

**Key Scripture Text:** Luke 15

## Introduction

“Let the Church of the Nazarene be true to its commission; not great and elegant buildings; but to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and wipe away the tears of sorrowing, and gather jewels for His diadem.”

“Our church is a missionary church. It knows no difference between home and foreign fields – in these days all fields are near.”

“We were convinced that houses of worship should be plain and cheap, to save from financial burdens, and that everything should say welcome to the poor... We went in poverty, to give ourselves – and what God might give us – determined to forego provision for the future and old age, in order to see the salvation of God while we were yet here... We would be glad to do much more, yet hundreds of dollars have gone to the poor, with loving ministry of every kind, and with it a way has been opened up to the hearts of men and women, that has been unutterable joy. The gospel comes to a multitude without money and without price, and the poorest of the poor are entitled to a front seat at the Church of the Nazarene.” [Phineas Bresee, founder, Church of the Nazarene].<sup>1</sup>

The parables of Jesus were subversive stories he told to explain what he was doing. They were not simply earthly stories with heavenly meanings, as if what Jesus communicated through them had very little to do with life on earth. Among the controversial things Jesus did, which required explanation, was the way he shared table fellowship with a variety of people, many of whom failed the Jewish *kosher* litmus test. Matters of clean and unclean were markers for Second Temple Judaism, and certain of the Jewish leadership — especially the Shammaite Pharisees — judiciously maintained pressure on any groups who deviated from this distinction.

Living in a pagan world threatened Jewish identity. While the Romans granted near-term privileges to the Jewish people, nothing in the Gentile culture curtailed criticism or contamination of Jewish practice. If you were a Jewish member of a trade guild — itself no small feat — the likelihood was high that you would be asked to compromise your ethics to do business with Gentile clients. Political permissions did not translate into cultural accommodations. This was even more reason for the keepers of the sacred tradition to oppose any attempts *within Judaism* to relax the rules.

In many ways, Judaism still held forth hope that one day God Himself would arise in judgment on the enemies of Israel and restore both the people and their nation to full covenant blessings. The long exile dragged on, in the meantime, and would-be Messiahs crowded the horizon offering hope that one of them would bring about the expected rescue. At the time of Jesus, every instance of revolt led to a swift Roman containment, resulting in numerous crucifixions.

However, Jesus offered a new way of rescue, and it didn't look like the strategy proposed by the right-wing Pharisees or the politically active zealots. Instead, Jesus made the announcement of Good News that Yahweh, Israel's God, was becoming king once again, only this time, He was doing so through the words and actions of Jesus of Nazareth. When people talked about Jesus, based on the things he said about himself, they began treat

---

<sup>1</sup> In *The Nazarene*, October, 1898; cited in Ernest Alexander Girvn, *Phineas F. Bresee: A Prince in Israel, A Biography*, pp. 161ff.

him in the same way as they would the Temple or Torah or any number of identifiers of Jewish observance. People came to Jesus for the very things they once sought from the great institutions of Judaism. More dramatically, Jesus was willing to grant these things to people *inside of Israel who didn't pass the other litmus tests*. Tax collectors, prostitutes, the weak and feeble were all invited to Jesus' table, along with "other sinners."

Jesus was not satisfied to simply shore up the leaning walls and shaky foundations of the old system which had been in place since Israel's return from Babylon some six hundred years before. Much of the reformation under the earlier Ezra and the later Maccabees (Judas, Simon, etc.) had failed to live up to its expectations. Rome had handily kept official rulers at bay by compromising practices, relying on the Herodian dynasty to make that happen. The Man from Nazareth was no more happy about that than he was about the exclusiveness of the ruling elite. He once called Herod Antipas "that old fox," and when asked whether Jews should pay tribute to Caesar, he answered in a form which could be taken one of two ways: "Give to Caesar the things which are Caesar's and to God the things which are God's." Giving to Caesar what belonged to him didn't necessarily mean a nice 'n tidy separation of church and state — something which simply didn't exist in the days of Jesus! Christians would have their quarrels with Caesar and see them turn quite deadly *and bloody*.

What mattered to Jesus was not good public relations with Rome or Jerusalem. You will remember he went to the cross — thanks to both! In a moving text from the Gospels, we hear Jesus tear open his heart and weep before the world:

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36).

And further,

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! (Matthew 23:37).

Responding to his critics he replied:

And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17)

To the sick and the sinners, to the undesirables and untouchables, to the possessed and the poor — to these — Jesus came with his message and Good News. People like these were always welcome at his table. Nor did Jesus do this in defiance of the Old Testament, but rather in fulfillment of it. He made this clear when he said:

I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 8:11).

This notion of "reclining at table" (Greek: *anaklithēsontai*) literally meant to "lean back on," as was the common practice when dining with close family and friends, much as Jesus did with his disciples at the Last Supper. The whole idea of sharing such close fellowship with a variety of questionable persons would have sent chills up the spines of those who were trying to keep the ethnic markers lined up straight.

But Jesus was not concerned about the markers. He was pursuing his vocation of "seeking and saving the lost" instead. Table fellowship was a form of deep-seated protest and rich-hearted liberation. To those whom others had passed by — like the man who fell among thieves being helped by the Good Samaritan — Jesus brought healing, restoration and redemption. **Jesus was open to all.** And that has become a distinctive of the Nazarene movement in our time, following Jesus in fellowship with the most uncomfortable folks, accepting those whom others rejected — "the poorest of the poor."

In this week's study, we devote careful attention to Luke 15. Luke himself was especially interested in how the Gospel came to all kinds of people, horizontally and vertically cutting through the social spectrum, leaving nobody behind. He preserves for us a set of three parables, each with their own special nuance, each underscoring the openness of Jesus to those most in need. As we shall soon discover, Jesus tells these parables

in response to remarks made by the official religious advocates of Judaism who called into question the sort of indiscriminate table practices we have sketched above.

A brief discussion of structure in Luke 15 will guide the direction of our study. Introducing the three parables is a brief narrative setting which portrays the Pharisees and scribes as antagonists to both Jesus and those who wanted to hear him, namely, "tax collectors and sinners" (15:1-2). Immediately, Luke merges his account into the telling of three distinct parables:

1. Lost Sheep, or *A Man with a Hundred Sheep* (15:3-7)
2. Lost Coin, or *A Woman with Ten Drachmas* (15:8-10)
3. Two Lost Sons and a Prodigal Father, or *A Man Had Two Sons* (15:11-32)

Admittedly, the naming of the parables is not entirely without difficulty. Conveniently, popular sermons gain traction from simply telling of "lost sheep, lost coin, and lost son." However, something more essential is "lost" as a result! Lostness is not the only unifying theme of the three stories. We can hardly miss the extravagant "joy" and merriment which pervades all three parables. Such emphasis grows out of the original difficulty which the Pharisees have with Jesus. They complain about his table fellowship habits which escalate to full-scale parties, complete with eating and drinking in an apparently hilarious fashion. But such hilarity marked the "joy" brought by Jesus' arrival into the world. The notion of the "Messianic banquet" lies in the background.

### **Receives and Eats: Table Fellowship in Tension (15:1-2)**

The chapter opens with this brief narrative setting, drawn from the murmurings of a group of official bystanders: Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him.<sup>2</sup> And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:1-2). Sitting down to eat with people was a central feature of Jesus' ministry. One scholar has expressed it eloquently: Jesus "took his stand among the pariahs of his world, those despised by the respectable. Sinners were his table-companions and the ostracized tax collectors and prostitutes his friends."<sup>2</sup>

It's hard to believe that having a meal with someone could provoke such reactions as we witness from Jesus' enemies. Hosts at such gatherings found themselves right in the middle of the cross-fire, but were willing to bring Jesus right to their own table, regardless. The impact on Jesus' reputation is noted in all the Gospels: "Look at him! A glutton and a drinker, a friend of tax collectors and sinner" (Matthew 11:19, and elsewhere). Why such controversy?

To sit down to dinner with someone celebrated *friendship and intimacy*, and expressed *trust and acceptance*. Refusal to do so sent a strong message of rejection. All one needs to do is read the words of the rabbis found in the Pharisee schools of Hillel and Shammai (whom we have already mentioned). Pharisees expressed their view of holiness and purity through table-fellowship, starting with the tithing of all food, keeping pure during its preparation, and washing one's hands before serving it. Jacob Neusner compiled statistics from the rabbinic texts showing that 229 out of 341 passages had to do with table-fellowship! In the way they ate, and in the way they prepared their meals, and in the manner they shared their meals with others, devout Pharisees were telling the world, "This is how we are to live and conduct ourselves as Yahweh's community, not only now, but in the days when God's kingdom comes." And living lives of social separation during table fellowship was part of the purity they wanted to achieve. Failure to do so had brought Israel to its present sorry state, they taught. Success in reviving holy meals would turn the face of God once more to His people in blessing. This was their view. And Jesus did not accept it.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, p. 224.

<sup>3</sup> Refer to Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus*, Harrisburg, 1984, 1998, pp. 93ff.

Jesus accepted the central role of table-fellowship to teach, illustrate truth, and give a glimpse of the future. But it was more than that. It was a form of parable to him, acting out a very subversive message that in the coming kingdom, **God would accept all sorts of people at his table fellowship**. God's table is for all kinds of "lost people", and when these people finally start showing up, this is a sign that God is going to fulfill his Old Testament promises to restore His people once more. In this, Jesus had texts like Isaiah on his side:

Isaiah 25:6-8 : "On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples **a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined**. 7 And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over **all peoples**, the veil that is spread over **all nations**. 8 He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and **the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth**, for the LORD has spoken."

Jesus hosts knew first hand what it felt like to have "the reproach" removed from their lives. For they had been privileged to sit at table-fellowship with Jesus, and they also had the honor of inviting others to share that feast. When they did this, they, in a real sense, re-enacted the promised banquet of the coming age. They were living out now what the community of God would look like in the future. "This is what it will be like," they seems to be telling us, "when God finally fulfills his promises to Israel. And even now we are experiencing it, here, at table fellowship with Jesus, who rejects no one because of some false sense of holiness, but instead, calls everyone to follow him. Together we sit as sinners, living under his mercy; sick folks touched by his righteous hand of healing."

### **The Many-Layered Telling of *Lost Things Found* (15:3-10)**

It's tempting to breeze past the first ten verses of this chapter — offering a smiling nod to lost sheep and coins — and head straight for the longest and most involved parable in the account, that of the so-called Lost Son. After all, shepherds regularly lose sheep on the rugged Palestinian terrain where pastureland stingily yields nourishment to the fortunate flocks who happen to reach it. To the less fortunate who get stuck between "a rock and a hard place," should they be valued members of the flock, the responsible shepherd will seek them out, crook in hand, and fetch them back again. We say *responsible* because we could just as well say *self-interested*. No shepherd wants to lose a sheep, but we mustn't assume he's in love with it. It makes good business sense to keep the flock together and preserve as many lambs as possible. And then there's the misplaced coin — the *drachma* — not a mere penny but something with more valuable. The word itself denotes an ancient silver coin whose worth varied over time. Records from Nero's time (a few years after this story) reveal that it was about the same as a *denarius*, weighing roughly 3.4 grams. Assuming the ten *drachmas* were part of the family savings, finding the missing one was an important achievement.

Taken together, the lost sheep and coin, are parables nearly identical to each other. In them a lost object and its recovery becomes the occasion for celebration. However, the first two parables are directed to the audience — in this case the stubborn Pharisees — by use of the second person pronoun: "which of *you*?" Jesus asks them. Let's listen to the two stories:

3 So he told them this parable: 4 "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? 5 And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' 7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. 8 "Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? 9 And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' 10 Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Notice:

1. Luke lumps the two parables together, and even introduces the pair with the singular form "this parable" (Greek: *tēn parabolēn tautēn*).

2. When joining the first parable with the second (sheep, followed by coin), he begins the second with "*or what woman....*" The use of the simple conjunction "or" places the two parables as alternates of the same fundamental idea. Jesus seems to be saying, "Here's a parable about a sheep, or, if you like, I'll tell you another one about a lost coin..." The implication is that they are telling *the same story* with perhaps different segments of the audience in mind. Perhaps one will work best for this segment while the other one will operate more effectively for that one. Actually, shepherds and women didn't fare too well in Jewish society, so perhaps Jesus expects his audience to hear the stories read and yet another level — a social one. Perhaps.
3. Both recitations stress the role of "joy" at finding the lost items. Applying the parables to persons, that "rejoicing" is combined with a corresponding action in heaven — and more so — when one sinner repents.
4. Staging a celebration, tethered to a large-scale meal, was commonplace in Jesus' world. After all, Jesus is talking to the Pharisees whom he assumes held such gatherings, though limited to persons who "make the religious *cut*." Jesus might even be saying, "Even you Pharisees like good food and good drink in celebration of your good fortunes!" The parables would hardly work as protest stories if Jesus didn't successfully connect with his audience through the party activities.
5. What Jesus does in the two parables is *connect the joy of earth and the joy of heaven*. Just as a person's friends and neighbors got invited to celebrate the finding of a valuable lost thing, so heaven invites earth to join with it in rejoicing over the recovery of lost persons in God's world. Such recoveries *matter to God*: the question posed by the two parables is simple: do they *matter to us*. This beautiful connection of heaven and earth was needful at a time in Israel's history when many people saw heaven *as remote* from earth, even as they imagined that God *had gone away on a long journey and hadn't returned home yet*.<sup>4</sup> Many of the parables of Jesus which speak about a king or landlord going away and then returning actually refer to God whose absence it witnessed by the long and arduous exile experienced by His people. "Where is God?" could easily have been on the lips of Sadducees or even Pharisees who bemoaned the dilapidated shape God's people were in, and they could only explain it by assuming that God had not yet fully returned to Zion, the place He once chose to place His presence and His name.
6. Under such circumstances, *lost people* were a true embarrassment to those who wanted everything put back together as it once had been under David or Solomon. Second Temple Judaism had little place for losers, unfortunately, and those who were left behind weren't even under consideration in the project which the Pharisees launched for restoring Israel. And so when those sorts of people kept showing up on occasions when Jesus sat a table fellowship, it was a source of genuine irritation to those who wanted Israel reformed in *their way*.
7. Jesus, in the first two parables, is saying to them, "How can you refrain from celebrating when *anyone who is lost within Israel is found at last?*"
8. God is a *seeking God* who actively goes looking for the lost.
9. "Friends and neighbors" figure significantly in these two bonded stories, mentioned twice, 15:6 (*philo*i and *geitōn*) and 15:9 (*philai* and *geitonai*). Luke takes pains to distinguish the male and female forms of these words, something he consistently does so throughout his Gospel and *Acts*. This emphasis on both men and women as seekers of lost things gets applied to God Himself who is both like a *man* looking for sheep and a *woman* looking for the valuable lost coin.
10. Home is the place for celebration. And it is the place to "call together" (*sugkaleō*, 15:5, 9) friends and neighbors for a joyous celebration. This is what loving communities do when something lost has been restored to one of their members.

---

<sup>4</sup> Jesus told a number of parables with this theme of God going away and then coming back, sometimes unexpectedly. While popular interpretations of these parables regularly assign them to Jesus' *Second Coming*, it is unlikely that was his intention in telling them. What Israel (and the disciples) were grappling with was not the second coming of Jesus but his *first coming*! They had a hard enough time figuring out how the Messiah could die and rise again, let alone make sense out of a yet future coming back again. Prophecy teachers of the contemporary church have not done the study of these parables any service by constantly assigning them to the "Rapture" or some other interpretive invention. That whole school of interpretation (Dispensationalism) is built on a huge mistake which entirely misses the point Jesus was trying to make: God has gone away, Israel is in exile, but now in Jesus He has come back to Zion, and Israel is entirely unprepared for him.

Jesus' choice of two simple unadorned stories of lost and found things is calculated to gain a hearing from even the most entrenched audience. "Who can fail to appreciate feeling of relief in such cases?" Jesus is telling his listeners. Both men and women know the joy of this experience — it's a *human experience*. All the more reason for the audience to embrace the implied sentiment.

But Jesus makes certain that the connection between heaven and earth is not missed. Granted, the rejoicing is "in heaven" (*en tō ouranō*, 15:7) and "in the presence of the angels of God" (*enōpion tōn angelōn tou theou*, 15:10). Can we miss the tight association between "friends and neighbors" on earth and "the angels of God" in heaven? No great distance separates human beings from these heavenly beings — or should. In his insistence, Jesus uses the words "I say to you..." (*legō humin*), his usual way of making an authoritative pronouncement about how things really are. The will of God in heaven requires a mirroring on earth, and it is to just this point that Jesus draws his hearers in both stories. He is telling the Pharisees that *they* should join with the heavenly celebrants when *he* welcomes (*prosdechetai*) and eats with *sinners* (the *amartōloi*), for in so doing he is finding the lost sheep and the lost coin *within the family of Israel*. From the choice of verb tenses, Luke wants to make quite clear that Jesus was welcoming and eating *on a regular basis* — the present tense communicates this idea.

All of which becomes a grand setup for the primary story in the narrative, namely, the parable of the man with the two sons.

### **Prodigal Son or Prodigal Father? (15:11-32)**

Traditional titles for this section regularly refer to the "prodigal" as the key character in the third parable. Of course, he is never called that in the text, though Luke comes close to saying something like this when he refers to the son as having "squandered" (*diaskorpizō*) his "stuff" by living "recklessly" (*asōtōs*). Literally, the younger son "scattered" senselessly what he had been given by his father. We might say he "threw all care to the wind" or he "threw his money around" or he "flushed his wealth down the toilet." From this characterization, we get the picture of someone who is *incorrigible*. Our English dictionaries (*American Heritage*, for example) offer these definitions of *prodigal*:

1. Rashly or wastefully extravagant: prodigal expenditures on unneeded weaponry; a prodigal life.
2. Giving or given in abundance; lavish or profuse: prodigal praise.

But is the younger son the only prodigal in the story? Let's listen to the reading:

11 And he said, "There was a man who had two sons.

12 "And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. 13 Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. 14 And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. 16 And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. 17 "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. 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. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. 23 And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. 24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

25 "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 27 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.' 28 But he was angry and

refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, 29 but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' 31 And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found'" (Luke 15:11-32).

When Jesus begins the third story in the trilogy, he does not simply throw in another "or" as if to coordinate this third telling with the other stories. Rather, he begins with "A certain man had two sons," leading the reader to surmise that the title for this parable should be: "A Man Who Had Two Sons." Within Jewish composition, using the first words of a literary piece as its title was common. Compare the five books of Moses, the Torah: in Hebrew, each book is labeled by its opening phrase. For example, *Genesis* is the Greek title for the Hebrew book called *berē'shîth*, "in the beginning," which is the true title for the book, and its first words.

Some notable differences and contrasts to the prior ones appear in this parable. Jesus narrates in the *third person*, unlike the other two stories addressed to "you," that is, to his audience. This strategy "blocks" the Pharisees from immediately assuming that they are like *the father* in the story, which they certainly are not! The *joy* is more explicit, complete with "killing the fatted calf." Especially unusual is the introduction of an antagonist into the plot: the elder son who directly opposes his father's plan. This other son is made to look exactly like the Pharisees who complain about Jesus' partying ways. In effect, the father addresses the Pharisees when he pleads with the elder son to rejoice with him over the recovery of the lost son come home.

What emerges from the telling of the third story is the boundless love of the father toward both his younger and elder sons. We sometimes get the impression that Jesus is stridently angry with the traditional Jewish leadership, as if to write them off for their resistance to him. Through this third parable in the series, Jesus makes clear that God remains the father *both* of the younger and elder sons. Ironically, the father pleads, not with the rebellious and wanton younger son — whom he welcomes with forgiveness and love — but with the elder son, inviting him to acknowledge "this brother of yours" (*ho adelphos sou houtos*). It is through the elder brother that Jesus speaks to the Pharisees with the pronoun "you" and "yours."

Some translations render 15:32 with the words, "We had to celebrate and be glad." However, the pronoun does not appear in the Greek text, either by itself or in conjunction with the verb "had." The underlying Greek construction uses the more ambiguous expression "it was necessary, proper" (imperfect tense of *dei*) along with the infinitives of the two verbs *euphrainō* ("make glad, cheer up, rejoice, be glad, celebrate") and *chairō* ("rejoice, be glad"). Both words combine to form a consecutive thought, namely, that the act of celebration contributes to the emotion of joys, even as rejoicing *requires* "the party" in order to be fulfilled. "We had no choice..." is the sense of this: "we absolutely needed to celebrate under the circumstances; not to do so would be unthinkable."

### Crafting the Parable

Two Acts make up the parable: one about the younger, the other about the elder son.<sup>5</sup>

#### Act One

Breath-taking speed carries the audience through a densely told account of the younger son in the Act One which readily falls into ten sections. Luke constructs the latticework of the parable with participles and main verbs:

Section	Participle	Main Verb
1	Gathering together	He departed He squandered
2	Having spent	It happened He began

<sup>5</sup> We are helped by Bernard Brandon Scott's fine book *Hear Then the Parable*, Minneapolis, 1989, pp. 106-108.

Section	Participle	Main Verb
3	Going	He (son) was attached He (citizen) sent He (son) longed No one gave

The younger son's plan to request the early withdrawal of his inheritance meets with unmitigated disaster. Everything goes wrong. The verbs highlight the simple fact that the younger son *lost control*: verbs involving what the *son* did get eclipsed by verbs with subjects *other than the son*. He is finally at the mercy of "what happened" (Greek: *egeneto*; Note: this translates the underlying Hebrew or Aramaic verb form *wayhî*, "Here's what happened..."). Having lost his possessions, the younger son lost control and others make his decisions for him — unhappily. His life collapses into passivity.

Section	Participle	Main Verb
4	Coming	He said
5	"Rising up"	"I will go" "I will say"
6	Rising up	He came

The story embeds the younger son's conversation with himself in the middle of the narrative. At last, the younger son resolves to do something, imagining that his actions will secure for him the necessary recovery from his spiraling downfall. It's the closest thing to repentance found in the story.

Section	Participle	Main Verb
7	Being away	His father saw He had compassion
8	Running	He fell He kissed

Act One reaches its denouement. Using his seventh participle, Luke tells us that the distance separating father and son cannot keep them apart. From the eighth participle, we now know that the father closed the remaining distance.

The scene changes once more, as the characters rush to the party:

Section	Participle	Main Verb
9	[quickly, <i>an adverb in place of the participle</i> ]	Bring and clothe Put Bring and kill
10	Eating	Let us make merry

Skillfully, Luke's rendering of the story breaks up the consistent use of participles as he introduces the adverb *tachu*, "swiftly, with haste, quickly." The father's attention gets directed to celebrating the recovery of the younger son, and he mustn't lose anytime in doing so.

### Act Two

The tone, mood and structure of Act Two "feel" different, as the verb forms seem less pronounced and shape the story only in minor ways:

Section	Participle	Main Verb
11	Coming	He drew near He heard
12	Calling	He inquired

Verbs of "coming" dominate the action of these sentences. Out in the field, the older son, who is "away from" the house, must come, draw near, call, inquire. His own work prevents him from being among the first to know

what has transpired. His father has "business" which he must learn second-hand. Ironically, the older son must overcome his own "distance" of being "in the field," counter-posed to the younger son who had been out "in the far country." Further distance gets created by the elder son's anger upon hearing the reason for the celebration.

Section	Participle	Main Verb
13	Coming out	He pleaded
14	Answering	He said

The father must "come out" because he has already joined the party — the celebration which the older son refuses to join. That is, the father is required to leave the festivities in order to address the anger of his recalcitrant elder son. Yet, the father does so graciously — and pleadingly. What is the answer of the elder son to his father's pleading? It is a long and arduous defense of his own faithfulness to the father, followed by a hostile reminder that the father never did anything even approaching the party he has thrown for the wayward younger brother.

Then, in a carefully worded and rhythmic Greek construction, Luke captures the heart of the father toward his elder son:

You	always	with me	are	
<i>Su</i>	<i>pantote</i>	<i>met'emou</i>	<i>Ei</i>	
and everything	that [is]	mine	yours	is
<i>kai panta</i>	<i>ta</i>	<i>ema</i>	<i>sa</i>	<i>estin</i>

By sharp contrast, the father's response to the elder son has a soft and poetic quality about it, crafted by Luke's artistry in preserving the underlying phrasing of Jesus' own speech.

In summary, the younger son's path *downward* finds redemption in his *movement* upward, and the widened distance of both sons is contravened by the heart of the father who wants the elder son to see his younger brother *lovingly* as "this brother of yours" (*ho adelphos sou houtos*) and not *critically* "this son of yours" (*ho huios sou houtos*).

The two Acts are of unequal length (15:11-24 vs. 15:25-32). When telling the story of the younger son, Jesus offers a full account: beginning, middle and end. With the conclusion of 15:24, the audience could be satisfied — it has a happy ending after all. However, Act One ends with a tantalizing "So they began to celebrate..." (*ērxanto euphainesthai*). Something had *begun*, Jesus seems to be saying, but how did it *continue*? Much like Jesus welcoming and eating with "sinners," he had *begun something* — how would it turn out for *Jesus* and the *sinners*? And so, while the audience might find closure with Act One, something lingers and is incomplete. Thus, the message of Act Two follows, drawing attention to the *unresolved* problem of the elder son both in his relationship with the father and the younger son, his brother.

### Beyond Structure to Deeper Meaning

The whole parable unfolds in a dozen "lines" of tightly told narrative. We'd like to examine them up-close.

#### Line 1

<sup>11</sup> And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them.

The original audience would have heard the double themes of "inheritance" and "sibling rivalry" as Jesus begins the story. Jewish law saw a difference between the right of *possession* and the right of *disposition*. The younger son asks for both, it seems, and proceeds to sell his portion of the inheritance, going off to "seek his fortune" in the outside world. Other Hebrew texts outside the Bible, such as Sirach 33:19-23, warn fathers about allowing such early "cashing out" of family estates, counseling them,

While you are still alive and have breath in you, do not let any one take your place. For it is better that your children should ask from you than that you should look to the hands of your sons. Excel in all that you do; bring no stain upon your honor. At the time you end the days of your life, in the hour of death, distribute your inheritance.

Ken Bailey<sup>6</sup> points out, in light of this warning, that such scenarios as happened in the case of the parable, were infrequent precisely for the reasons outlined. This makes, of course, the plot of the story even more intriguing, since the father is allowing for something — early possession and disposition — which most Jewish fathers would forbid. From the rabbis we learn:

Three cry out and are not answered. Namely, he who has money and lends it without witnesses; ... he who transfers his property to his children in his lifetime [*Babylonian Talmud, b. B. Mes. 75b*].

What's at stake for a father who gives his property up in this way? One word: *honor*, along with position, maintenance, and control. As long as the father supports the family, he is in charge. By allowing the inheritance to go in this way, he risks much. Once more, listen to the rabbis:

This is the order of inheritance: If a man die and have no son, then you shall cause his inheritance to pass unto his daughter (Num. 27:8) — the son precedes the daughter, and all the son's offspring precede the daughter ... The son and the daughter are alike concerning inheritance, except that the [firstborn] son takes a double portion of the father's property...and the daughters receive maintenance from the father's property... If a man assign his goods to his sons he must write, "From today and after my death." ... If a man assign his goods to his son to be his after his death, the father cannot sell them since they are assigned to his son, and the son cannot sell them since they are in the father's possession;...if the son sold them, the buyer has no claim on them until the father dies. The father may pluck up [the crop of a field which he has so assigned] and give to eat to whom he will...If he left elder sons and younger sons, the elder sons may not care for themselves [out of the common inheritance] at the cost of the younger sons, nor may the younger sons claim maintenance at the cost of the elder son, but they all share alike.

The *Mishnah* is obviously trying to address the precise problem which developed in the parable. What this tells us is that the actions of both the younger son and the father don't reflect positively on either one. We might say that the father has acted in a recklessly fashion *allowing the younger son* to do what he did. Worse, the younger son, by asking for his portion of the inheritance *before his father's death*, is in effect saying, "Dad, I wish you *were dead!*" Moreover, once the younger son made the request (and was granted it), he could not longer remain at home — his place there was completely untenable.

If we look closely at the Greek text of Luke 15:12, we hear the younger son ask for his *meros tēs ousias*, "portion of the being." This construction, *ousias*, is based on the verb "to be," construed as "property, wealth, or money," those items which maintained the "being" or *existence* of the father, and, in due course, of the heirs. When the actual division of property took place, the text says that the father divided to them *ton bion*, literally, "the life," again interpreted as "livelihood, property, possessions." In effect, when the father effects possession and disposition of his *bios*, "life," he allows the younger son "to kill him," in a socio-economic sense.

But the opening line is about more than *property*. It's about *paternity*, in this case, being the father of "two sons." More importantly is the familiar theme of how younger and older sons relate to each other in the family unit. Torah tried to protect inheritance for the elder (Deuteronomy 21:15-17), but the Old Testament is filled with recurring instances of younger brothers in rivalry with their elder siblings, with mixed outcomes: Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Joseph (or Benjamin) and the other Twelve sons of Jacob. Outrageous behavior by younger sons results in their gaining advantage, for example. Rebekah plays favorites with Jacob; Jacob "loves" Joseph; David prefers Solomon as king over the other heirs to the throne, including Absalom. When the rabbis comment on Psalm 9:1, they use it as an occasion to say:

---

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jacob & the Prodigal: How Jesus Retold Israel's Story*, Intervarsity Press, 2003; also, *The Cross & the Prodigal: Luke 15 through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants*, Intervarsity Press, 2005.

...God has set love of little children in their fathers' hearts. For example, there was a king who had two sons, one grown up, the other a little one. The grown-up one was scrubbed clean, and the little one was covered with dirt, but the king loved the little one more than he loved the grown-up one [*Midrash on Psalm 9*].

Such stereotypes help shape Jesus' telling of the parable: certainly in the case of the younger son, deep in despair among the swine, we have a "little one covered with dirt!" Combine the themes of inheritance badly divided, and sons misshapen by birth-order, and the parable becomes a grand story filled with contradictions and rich with possibilities. Jesus fully intended to exploit each and every angle in responding to his critical audience, and to reaffirm the mission of Israel to all kinds of people.

### Line 2

<sup>13</sup> Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.

By telling us that the son "gathered all he had," the story makes clear that he had no intention of contributing to his father's maintenance out of the proceeds. The worse case has materialized for the father. His risk with the inheritance is proving perilous. When a person goes away "to a far country" (*chōran makran*), he is cutting family ties and embarking on a *test* — we would say *quest*. Certainly there is a large *question* written all over how things will turn out for him. "This isn't going to end well," we might be inclined to say. However, the ordinary audience, hearing this part of the story, has high expectations, not low ones. They expect to see the heroic young man "make good." Anybody reading *Genesis* would recall Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, surmising that even as they left home and made good, so the young man for whom the father risked everything would not disappoint.

But that's not what happened! Rather than invest his inheritance and advance his situation — perhaps like Joseph one day bringing his father "down to Egypt" where there was plenty of food in a world filled with famine — the young man of the parable becomes reckless (like his father's decision to divide the inheritance), losing everything through "wild living." Luke, as we noted, chooses the Greek word *asōtōs* which means "incurable." By connotation the term points to a destructive, dissipated life. The young son has become a rogue not a rich man.

### Line 3

<sup>14</sup> And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

By introducing *the famine* into the story, the audience hears echoes of Old Testament stories like Joseph in Egypt during years of plenty and years of want. The difference, of course, is that Joseph was a wise younger son who managed the kingdom so well that he could actually help his elder brothers and father when famine came to the land of Canaan. The younger son, by contrast, can help no one. He cannot even help himself. Will the audience be sympathetic to the younger son now? After all, the famine was not his doing, but the common tragedy of a whole society over which he had no control. Oddly, the younger son shows a modicum of wisdom in spite of his desperate situation. For the first time, he finds himself "in need" (*hustereisthai*, "to lack, have need of, be inferior to, be in want, be worse off"). Literally, he "falls behind." All of his vaunted plans to capitalize on his inheritance — at his father's expense — have landed him in real *extremity*. He can no longer *help himself* after having *helped himself to his father's possessions*.

The phrase "Necessity ... the mother of invention," appears in Plato's *Republic* (Book II. 369C), and applies to the younger son in his desperation. I used to remind my children, "Hunger is a great motivator," — advice doubly true for the son who ran out of money in the midst of a famine. His own family (and its wealth) can no longer help. The younger son must move *outside his own family*, his own tribe, for help. Joined to a foreigner — a Gentile who keeps pigs — he finds himself outside of *kosher* as well, consuming the swines' food while

maintaining their existence. The Jewish writings are filled with sarcasms and curses about anyone who deals in pigs. To be among swine is to be like a Gentile.

His last ditch effort as survival — at *bios* — fails. The carob beans, ordinarily fed to pigs, are kept from him, and all he has to eat are husks. Ironically, the young man who chased after the *ousia* and the *bios* — the substance of his father's own existence — has none for himself, reduced to a diet below swine. A Jewish maxim declares that "Israel needs carob to be forced to repentance."<sup>7</sup> Will the stereotypic younger son break free of his abrupt failures and prove to be another Jacob or Joseph? By now the audience is wholly puzzled and searches for clues to the direction of the story.

#### Line 4

<sup>17</sup> "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" <sup>20a</sup> And he arose and came to his father.

A glimmer of light at last! "Coming to himself," the next crucial participle in the text, offers hope that the younger son is overcoming his self-destructive downward spiral. In the Greek, Luke uses a phrase which may suggest that the young man is thinking about his past, which for a time has been *lost* to him. We might say the roguish son lost his mind, but is starting to find it again. Whether or not this is really *repentance* might be a premature judgment. After all, the open thoughts of the younger son, disclosed to the audience, take the form of a pragmatic assessment of his situation. That is, it's still about food: "more than enough bread," "perish here with hunger." But how will he "go back"? *Can* he go back? He has resigned himself to the obvious: he cannot go back *as a son*. He *could* go back as a "hired servant" (*misthios*). As such, he would be *entitled to bread*.

But he is weighed down by sin, and it takes two distinct forms:

1. By attaching himself to a foreigner and feeding swine, the younger son has rejected Judaism, his religious faith.
2. By losing the inheritance, designated riskily by his father, he will not be able to contribute to the care of his father in his old age — his major family duty. Worse, what once belonged to his father, now is in the hands of Gentiles!

The younger son sizes up his legal predicament. He can't get back either his sonship or his inheritance. All that he can now possess *he must earn as a hired servant*. The deadly result of his failure is that his father has become, in his mind, the heavy hand of the law with demands against him as a son, but not against him as a servant.

We have reached a major turn in the plot as the parable presses in a new direction. The answer for the son lies in returning to the father *as a master* and he himself as a hired hand. Can the audience possibly imagine what to expect next? Will they suspect that the son's shrewd maneuver will result in full restoration? Or will they see the son, pathetically, as having gotten out of a scrape by the skin of his teeth? One thing is certain: "heaven" is not far from the young man's mind. Among Jewish people of Jesus' day, speaking the name of God explicitly was done cautiously, and in this case, when the young man says that he "sinned against *shamayim* — heaven — he is simply saying that he has sinned against *God* without uttering the sacred name. "Heaven" was often a "stand-in" or proxy word for the holy name of *Yahweh*, as was *Adonai* ("Lord") or *Hashem* ("the Name"). Even in his repentance, the younger son shows extreme reserve and reduced expectations. *Better a servant than a swine, but still less than a son*.

---

<sup>7</sup> Scott, p. 115; also, Asher Feldman, *Parables and Similes*, Cambridge, 1927, p. 124; T. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus*, SCM Press, 1949, p. 288.

### Line 5

<sup>20b</sup> But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

Spatial metaphors function as symbols for social alienation and failure. At this juncture, apart from the father's action, the younger son indeed remains "still a long way off" (*eti de autou makran apechontos*). Previously, whatever *happened* to the younger son *rested* with the father's willingness to divide the inheritance *before his own death*. Now, whatever *happens* to the younger son *rests* with what the father is *willing to do*. The distance closes because the father decides to close it. A rabbinic *Pesher* (R. 184b-185a) tells a similar story:

A king had a son who had gone astray from his father a journey of a hundred days; his friends said to him, "Return to your father;" he said, "I cannot." Then his father sent to say, "Return as far as you can, and I will come to you the rest of the way." So God say, "Return to me, and I will return to you."

That latter quotation comes from the last book of the prophets, Malachi 3:7, and is based on the Hebrew form *shūb*, "to turn, to return." It also appears in Zechariah 1:3. In the prophets, the invitation is a direct call to return *from exile*, the powerful symbol of God's own return to Zion where He promised to become King once again among His people.

What the father in the parable does is wholly out of character in the context of Mediterranean ideas about how masters and patrons should act under the circumstances. The townsfolk would normally be outraged that a father should allow his son to so badly abuse his honor in the first place. But to allow that same son *to return* seems unthinkable. For the father not only represented *his own honor*, he also bore the burden of how all honor relationships would be viewed by the town in the future.

Kissing and embracing are dramatic actions of forgiveness and even have the nuance of *maternal signs* of a nourishing nature. The younger son's mother is never mentioned in the story, although she would no doubt have felt the deep loss of her son's departure and the shame of his arrogant actions. What the audience is being setup to witness is that God is both father and mother in His dealings with wayward Israel. Had God been conceived wholly in patriarchal terms, huge elements in the story would have been entirely lost.

### Line 6

<sup>21</sup> And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

Strangely, but perhaps not entirely so, the son's rehearsed speech is presented, though in an edited form. Admitting his sin and his lack of worth to be the father's son, the younger son *does not make his modest proposal* to become one of the father's *hired servants*. The audience no doubt waited for those words, having been let in on that part of the "deal" considered by the son in 15:19a. Not hearing them — you can almost see them mouthing the words, but then shocked that Jesus does not repeat them — the audience undoubtedly turned in expectancy to the Master Story-teller for some new clue and fresh twist in the tale. That's how parables worked. No good storyteller using this literary form would simply repeat the same old plot but would surprise the audience by the radical changes made to the familiar plot or to the cast of characters. It would be like telling my grandson, Lucas, the story of Goldilocks and the three bears, except starting out with "Goldilocks and the three elephants," instead. I'd fully expect him to retort, "No, grandpa, not the three *elephants*, the three *bears*." Of course, I might hold my ground, making the case for some new hidden secret about Goldilocks and how the three bears left town and the circus came the day afterwards with three elephants in tow. He would, then, expect me to make all of the story *work right*, given the changed cast of *very important characters*.

Jesus used parables in this novel way, switching outcomes, promoting minor characters, and pruning major ones. By dropping "make me one of your hired servants..." he no doubt captured the attention of the Pharisees and the rest of his audience. With this final exchange, the story in which the younger son is the subject is

effectively concluded. From this point forward, the father becomes "the controlling subject, and the son the object of his affection."<sup>8</sup>

#### Line 7

<sup>22</sup> But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. <sup>23</sup> And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

"His servants" do indeed become the object of the father's commands, only the younger son is not among the servants! Instead, the parable goes about the business of telling how the rogue son-turned-beggar, once more becomes the father's son. What powerful symbols of restoration does the father use as he gives public testimony to his younger son's renewed status? The father *invests* his younger son with three outward signs of family status:

1. "The best robe (*stolēn tēn prōtēn*) and clothe (*endusate*) him." Luke is careful with his Greek terms. Jesus is not commanding a simple "dressing" up of the younger son; he is calling for the *investiture of his son with familial honor*. The rags which the son wore, fresh from his sojourn among Gentiles caring for swine, are undoubtedly removed to make way for the "*first* robe," following the exact Greek term used here. This robe can be none other than the father's own robe, for in such a household, no other "first" robe could possibly exist. The Old Testament uses similar language of Joseph (Genesis 41:42) and Mordecai (Esther 3:10; 8:2) whose degradations were followed by exaltations to high office involving "robe" ceremonies. We find a comparable case in Zechariah 3:  
<sup>3</sup> Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. <sup>4</sup> And the angel said to those who were standing before him, "Remove the filthy garments from him." And to him he said, "Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments." <sup>5</sup> And I said, "Let them put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments. And the angel of the LORD was standing by. <sup>6</sup> And the angel of the LORD solemnly assured Joshua, <sup>7</sup> "Thus says the LORD of hosts: If you will walk in my ways and keep my charge, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here (Zechariah 3:3-7).
2. "A ring for his hand" (*dote daktulion eis tēn cheira autou*). Literally, "give a ring into his hand," or perhaps, "give a ring for his hand." This is likely the familial signet ring, confirming the authority of the son to make decisions within the household and on behalf of the father. Placing on the ring *on his hand* points to putting things under his control. This is an especially startling privilege in light of the poor judgment shown by the younger son in badly managing his portion of the father's inheritance. What could possibly persuade the father to believe that the younger son is capable of wisely exercising such prerogatives? Only a father who *believed in his son with a father's love to back him up* would do such a thing. The parable continues to pile up the improbabilities in order to make the case for the remarkable, if not extravagant, nature of the father's love for his lost-and-found son.
3. "Shoes for his feet" (*hupodēmata eis tous podas*). Anything placed by a servant *under the son's feet* points to acknowledging the son's authority over it. Scripture is filled with instances of God "placing all things" under the feet of Jesus as a sign that Jesus has conquered or mastered them (see 1 Corinthians 15:25, 27; Ephesians 1:22; Hebrews 2:8).

The restoration of the younger son means giving him back his place of honor — an honor lost to him when he took an early inheritance and insinuating a death wish over his father. The father does not merely supply necessities (food, clothing) to his son: he secures for him his honored place *as his son*.

What are we to make of "killing the fatted calf" in conjunction with the "feast"? These are all symbols of the *reversal* of his former condition. Once starving, considered dead, living in a foreign land, and attached to a Gentile master, he is now richly feasting at his father's royal table, arrayed in the visible signs of his renewed status as the son, and eating kosher!. Of course, echoes are heard of the Messianic feast (see above) which likewise reverses the fortunes of God's people and then invites the nations to share in the banquet. The Old

---

<sup>8</sup> Scott, p. 117.

Testament is full of references to God "restoring the fortunes (Hebrew: *shabîth*, *shabûth*)" of His people (Deuteronomy 30:3; Psalm 126:4; Jeremiah 30:18; 32:33; 33:11, 26; 48:47; 49:6, 39; Hosea 7:1; Joel 3:1; Zephaniah 2:7; 3:20). The Hebrew roots used in this case refer to God "turning" or "returning."

### Line 8

<sup>25</sup> "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.

Ask any first century Jewish schoolboy "What older brother was in the field and then came into the house?" His answer would be immediate: "Esau, the *elder* brother of Jacob." Read Genesis 25:27-34 for the details. In that account, Esau the elder brother is called "a man of the open country" and his skill for hunting wild game delighted his father Isaac who "loved Esau." By contrast Jacob, the younger brother, was domestic and delighted his mother who "loved Jacob." This sets up the conflict which works itself out in the story. The comparison with the Father Who Had Two Sons is not tit-for-tat, but suggestive. It involves the inheritance ("birthright") conveyed by Isaac, and, in the case of Jacob, extorting the portion allotted to Esau whose hunger leads him to "sell" his share for a "mess of pottage." Famine plays into the story (26:1ff), as does deception and Jacob's theft of the father's blessing, much to the chagrin of Esau. The result: Jacob is forced to flee home and begin a long and unsatisfying exile, a fugitive from his family and from God (see Genesis 27). Unlike the younger son in our parable, Jacob is not reduced to poverty in the end, but he does require God's blessing to turn his life around. The blessing comes after Jacob "wrestles" with God's angel (Genesis 32) and eventually meets up with Esau in a scene of fraternal reconciliation. That scene is worth quoting here since it bears resemblance to our parable in certain aspects:

Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men; so he divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two maidservants. <sup>2</sup> He put the maidservants and their children in front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear. <sup>3</sup> He himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother. <sup>4</sup> But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept (Genesis 33:1-4).

What is striking in the Genesis story is how Esau did not wait for Jacob to fully approach — though his younger brother is obviously bowing *before* they finally meet — but "ran to meet Jacob" in just the same way as the father in Jesus' story ran to his younger son, "threw his arms around his neck and kissed him" (Genesis 33:4). This can be no accident, nor is the parallel merely incidental. What Jesus skillfully did in his own parable of The Man Who Had Two Sons was borrow elements of the Jacob-Esau story and re-combined them in a new way to tell a new story with a wholly different ending. At least in the *Genesis* story Esau, the man who "despised his own inheritance," finally made peace (*shalom*) with his younger brother. That is, of course, the goal of Jesus' parable but in a fresh way. Esau had every reason to hate Jacob and seek restitution for his conniving and theft. Frankly, Jacob figured Esau would seek remedy and arranged the meeting with him in fear and trembling. Just read Genesis 32:1ff for the details and the elaborate preparation plans.

Buried inside the story of Esau and Jacob is the touching encounter between the two brothers after many years. When at last they meet, and it becomes clear that the old animosity has subsided, Jacob presses Esau to accept a token of his gratitude:

<sup>10</sup> "No, please!" said Jacob. "If I have found favor in your eyes, accept this gift from me. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably (Genesis 33:10).

What is it about Esau that evokes such a response from Jacob? No doubt it is a sense of relief that Esau is not bent on retribution — something which stalked Jacob these many years. Still, a further reading of the text reveals a deep cautiousness on the part of both brothers who, though showing signs of reconciliation, posture themselves warily and are not quite sure of their respective intentions.

It's not difficult to see how the Esau-Jacob story shapes the telling of the parable. On the one hand, Esau looks like the father in the parable, coming out to meet Jacob and exchange tokens of affection. But on the other hand, the suspicion and reserve lingers, even as the elder brother complains to his father about the waywardness

of the younger son. Reading "the meaning" of uncertain events is a major theme of both the Esau-Jacob story and the parable.

The elder brother inquires from the household servants as to the significance of the music and dancing. Luke uses the Greek optative mood when phrasing this inquiry: *ti an eiē tauta*, literally, "what might be these things..." Ordinarily the optative has a tentativeness and contingency about it. The ambiguity and uncertainty of the situation is evident.

#### Line 9

<sup>27</sup> 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.'

The servant tells the elder son what the audience already knows about the younger son, and we might wonder why the storyteller bothers to repeat this obvious bit of detail. He probably wants to reaffirm the correctness of the father's action in the eyes of the audience. The servant's reply is succinct: 1) the younger son has come; 2) the father killed the fatted calf; 3) the reason is offered: the father has received the younger son back safely. The Greek verb *hēkō* ("to come") literally means "have come, be present, reach" and is in the present tense, suggesting, perhaps, that the younger son is finally home to stay. The nuance of "having arrived" at an intended destination is also included in the idea.

Further, the servant shifts the identity from "the younger son" to "your brother," in preparation for the conversation between the father and the elder son. The servant acts as a clarifier of the ambiguous situation, supplying both an explanation of the music, and how the elder son should now view the younger son — as "your brother." It is unlikely that the elder son is prepared for this change in attitude, having written off the younger son as "dead" within the social framework of the village.

Then there is the affirmation of well-being. The father has received the younger son in good health. The Greek word to "receive" actually means "to get back, recover," implying that the father had been deprived of the son, but now he has been restored to the father (Greek: *apolambanō*). Rather than treat the wasted inheritance as the thing of which the father has been deprived, the servant treats the younger son as that which has been unjustly taken from the father, but now restored. Moreover, the condition of the younger son, unlike the wasted inheritance, is "healthy." The Greek word is *hugianonta*, the present active participle of *hugianō* — the basis for our English word "hygiene." Usually translations use the word "sound" to communicate this idea, although the overall sense of well-being in mind and body is really meant.

#### Line 10

<sup>28</sup> But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him,

The story's tone and mood shifts at this point, as it reaches a watershed moment. The suspense ends as the emotional state of the elder son is revealed. The unspoken is finally expressed. Until this point, nothing has been said about the elder son's feelings. Using the verb *orgizomai*, "to be angry, furious," Luke communicates the elder son's outrage, dramatized by his unwillingness "to go in." Social ostracism functions as punishment in a society of honor and shame. The elder son no doubt believes he has grounds for acting in this way:

1. The younger son's departure with his portion of the inheritance meant that the total inheritance was halved. If we re-read 15:12, we note that the request of the younger son for his portion led the father "to divide his property *between them*."
2. Such a division meant that the elder son bore the full obligation to care for his father *using his half of the inheritance to do so*. At the father's death, even less inheritance would remain for the elder son, having spent it on his father's maintenance. Had the younger son remained, the two sons would have shared the maintenance, leaving more for both sons after the father's death.
3. All of this becomes accentuated in a "limited goods" society.

But the elder son's actions create a new alienation and a new shame. By refusing to participate in the party thrown by the father, the elder son not only insults the younger son, he also insults the good will of his father. In effect, he has broken the Fourth Commandment and become guilty of a sin just as serious as that of the younger son, and in a much shorter period of time. What will the father do? The answer to this question will reveal the true character of the father *one more time*. Already, the audience knows what sort of father he is by his lavish acceptance of the younger son, restoring him to the family unit after such outrageous conduct. Will the father reconcile with the elder son after the insult he has shown?

The father knows what the elder son is feeling because he goes out to "entreat him." The familiar Greek word *parakaleō* is used in this context where it probably means "beg, urge, encourage, appeal" but could also imply "invite, summon," in light of the elder son's refusal to join the party. Censure is not one of the intended meanings. None of the father's words are recorded until first the elder son has spoken. By now, the audience has a good sense of the father's character, and doesn't require additional information.

### Line 11

Luke 15:29-30 <sup>29</sup> but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!

As if to preempt whatever invitation the father might issue to him to join the celebration, the elder son immediately begins his refusal with words about himself. His argument of refusal rests on the "many years" he has "served" his father. The Greek verb *douleuō* ordinarily implies work performed as a slave or servant in a household, leading some translators to propose, "I worked like a slave..." or simply, "I slaved." This tells us that the elder son received only the right of possession but not of disposition when the father divided the inheritance between the two sons. By contrast, the younger son had been given both when he left home, as we shall see from the flow of the argument. The elder son casts his relationship with the father as one, not of a son, but of a slave, who dutifully never disobeys.

Oddly, the elder son portrays himself as working like a slave but then expecting the father to treat him like a son through the system of reward: "never gave me a goat...to celebrate with my friends..." He expects the reward of grace while styling his service to his father as that of a slave. It is a strange combination of service-reward values. How many masters would grant their slaves the right to have a party with their friends? Evidently the elder son lives with a conflicted understanding of his relationship to his father — a relationship provoked, presumably, by the actions of the younger son. Had the younger son not been "a bad boy," none of this would be happening.

When the elder son describes the "coming" of the younger son, he does not use the same language as did the servant. Instead, he uses the simple *erchomai* which means simply "to come," carrying no connotation that the arrival is desired or well-received. It's as if the elder son says, "So one day, the kid just shows up!" The Greek word order places the misdeeds of the younger son ahead of the arrival itself. Those offences include: 1) devouring the father's property; 2) the use of prostitutes. To this, the elder son adds the offence *of the father*: you killed the fatted calf for him.

As to the "devouring" of the father's property, we note the use of the word *bios*, a word used earlier in the parable to describe the inheritance itself as the father's very "life" — the literal meaning of the expression. In effect, the younger son "gobbled up" the father's *life* when the younger son took his own portion of the inheritance, having the right of both *possession* and of *disposition*. The word "to devour" is a compound form comprised of the normal word for "to eat" combined with the idea of "down" (*katesthiō*). In classical usage, the term referred to a predator eating its prey. The force of *kata* in the verb form is to *completely* consume

something, an apt characterization of how the younger son completely used up the inheritance through his wanton ways.

The mention of "prostitutes" pushes the offence into the area of the family bloodline. The Greek word for prostitute is *pornē*, a root with several English derivatives. In effect, the younger son's cavorting with harlots compromised any offspring he might have *in the name of the father's family*. Who knows how many children he fathered through his illicit conduct? — this seems to be the suggestion. "Will they turn up some day and demand inheritance rights too? And yet you want to take your younger son back? Really, father!" The younger son has profited from his profligacy, while the elder son has been nothing but faithful *all these years*. The overt criticism of the father by his elder son calls into question the father's wisdom.

We must not miss the not-to-subtle use of the phrase "this son of yours" (Greek: *ho huios sou houtos*, "the son of yours, this one..."). The elder son wants to define the identity of the younger son wholly in terms of what he has done to shame the father and the family. Moreover, the use of second-person pronouns shifts the relationship entirely onto the father and away from the elder brother. It's a bit like the account in Genesis 4 when Cain complains to God when asked about his younger brother Abel: "Am I my brother's keeper?" In that case, shamed by God's non-acceptance of Cain's original offering and the acceptance of Abel's, Cain distances himself from further ties to his brother. He acts as if Abel is *not his brother at all*. That is the case here. It is possible that Jesus intended this connection of the two stories in the mind of the audience. "He may be *your* son but he is not *my* brother."

How will the audience assess the elder son's arguments and his attitude toward his father? We might want to re-examine the elder son's opening word: "See..." from *idou*, a common verb, in the imperative, used to call attention to something. The elder son does not address his father by name, but immediately rushes to the offences he argues have taken place — offences by both father and younger son. In some ways, the elder son usurps a head-of-the-house role, acting as if the father is not capable of leading his household anymore. "See" is normally spoken by a person who stands in a superior place — one who is in a position "to know" or "to direct attention." In meaning, it approximates our "Look here!" and is not commonly spoken by someone who respects or honors the one to whom the words are directed.

The elder son is by all accounts lodging a grievance against both his father and the younger son, and he seeks remedy before returning to the social circle of the family. He has placed himself outside that circle, charging injustice on the part of the father.

#### Line 12

<sup>31</sup> And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup> It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'

In no way does the father allow the preemption of the elder young son to shape his attitude. He calls him "child" (from *teknon*) and not the usual "son" (*huios*). This is a term of endearment and affection and carries none of the official standing held by a "son" with claims to the inheritance. A good comparison is Galatians 4 where Paul contrasts the "child" with the "son:"

What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child (*nēpios*), he is no different from a slave (*doulos*), although he owns the whole estate. <sup>2</sup> He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. <sup>3</sup> So also, when we were children (*nēpioi*), we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. <sup>4</sup> But when the time had fully come (*to plērōma tou chronou*), God sent his Son (*hion*), born of a woman, born under law, <sup>5</sup> to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons (*huiōthesian*). <sup>6</sup> Because you are sons (*huioi*), God sent the Spirit of his Son (*huiou*) into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." <sup>7</sup> So you are no longer a slave (*doulos*), but a son (*huios*); and since you are a son (*huios*), God has made you also an heir (Galatians 4:1-7).

The long-term implications of this extended passage are tempting. Paul tells us how the process of inheritance is *suppose to work* — the time of inheritance rights is suppose to be "set by the father," not demanded by the son, as in the case of the parable. Furthermore, the role of the "child" before the "fullness of time" — the time chosen by the father — was paramount to a slave since the child required teaching and guidance.

Applying this to the parable, we see the father addressing the elder son as "child" (using *teknon*) not "son" *huios*. The translators ought to clarify this distinction. How are we to interpret this choice of words? Clearly the father is asking the elder son not to see himself in *legal terms*, as the *heir of the estate*, but as the father's dear child. He wants the elder son return to the *native relationship not the legal one*. The native "child" carries the terms of affection and relationship, the sort of thing the father implies when he tells the elder son:

1. "You are always with me."
2. "Everything that is mine is yours."

Jesus used the same sort of language when he prayed to his Father: "<sup>10</sup> All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them" (John 17:10) — words which plainly celebrated the relationship Father and Son had with each other from eternity past. In the case of our parable, the father suggests to his elder son that *from his point of view* nothing has changed. If the elder son thinks there is distance and alienation, it is not because the father has moved away, but because the elder son has.

A startling revelation appears in the story. "All these years..." from the elder son's perspective, he slaved away for the father. "Always..." from the father's perspective, the son has been "with him" and all that belonged to the father "is yours." What's revealing is that the elder son and the father should see their relationship in such different terms. What mattered most to the father was "You are always with me," and only secondarily, "everything that is mine is yours." The verb forms are present tense: *su pantote met' emou ei*, "You always with me **are**;" *panta tae ma sa estin*, "all the my-things your-things **are**."

An argument could be made that until this point in the parable, careful use of legal titles for the sons has been observed. But once the impasse between father and elder son has been reached, the titles change significantly. The father calls the elder son, "child," returning once more to the more basic, primitive and *maternal* connection he has with his "boy." Somehow in all the legal machinations of inheritance, in all the demands for "rights of possession" and "rights of disposition," the relationship between father and son had suffered greatly. The father deeply wants that to be restored.

Likewise, as the father turns his attention to the younger son, he refers to him as "your brother," just as the servant did when explaining to the elder son the strange sound of music. The father seems to imitate the word order and sentence structure in his description of the younger son: *ho adelphos sou houtos nekros ēn kai ezēsen, kai apolōlōs kai heurethē*, "The brother of yours, this one was dead and has been made alive, and was lost and has been found." In "point, counter-point" fashion, the father replaces "the son of yours, this one..." with "the brother of yours, this one..." Not only does the father reaffirm his own relationship with the younger son, he seeks to restore the relationship between elder son and younger son at the same time. "The party is necessary," the father maintains, "as part of the reconciliation *between you and your brother*." The work of restoration must include all members of the father's family, including the elder son who supposes himself offended by both the actions of the younger brother and the actions of the father.

### **The Parable as Critique**

The audience is left wondering about how things might have turned out. There is no decisive ending and that is intentional — that was the way parables worked. Effectively, the audience must think aloud the possible endings. But they don't do this in a vacuum. Their own values and inclinations enter the process, and that itself is revealing.

We commented earlier about the role of the Esau-Jacob story in shaping the parable. The Old Testament elevated that story to the level of a *type*, a theme-setting and memory-shaping story. According to the ancient

tradition, God favored the younger son over the elder son, choosing the younger son in the process. Again, we recall the rabbinic parable in which the younger son was "dirty," while the older one was "scrubbed clean," and yet the father loved the "dirty" son. Israel had adopted this theme as its national reason for being. The prophets end with the words of Malachi 1:2-3, "Jacob I loved; Esau I hated..." Within Jewish interpretation of Jesus' day, such texts which supported the two-son theme, favored Israel over against the Gentiles. When questioned, "Why did God choose Israel among the all the nations?" the rabbis would respond with the schema of the two sons, favoring the younger over the elder.

But the problem lies with there needing to be a favorite son at all. In one sense, the Christian gospel declares that Jesus is the Favored Son, and whoever he invites to the father's table is welcome, no matter what they have done. Neither Jew nor Gentile gets to make that decision. Indeed, the parable affirms two things: the younger son is welcomed back to the father's table; *and*, the elder son has always been welcome at the father's table. Strangely, the elder son acts in ways which suggest otherwise. While the audience might be prepared to cast stones at the elder son for his accusatory and ungrateful conduct (thanks to the traditional theme), Jesus turns the theme of the two sons on its head and declares that the elder son is in no wise rejected because the younger son — prodigal though he might have been — is accepted. The father rejects neither; both are chosen.

Scott is helpful here:

Even more is at stake. The younger son violates the moral code and gets a feast; the elder rejects the father but gets all. The father is interested neither in morality nor in inheritance. He is concerned with the unity of his sons. If the sons play the roles laid out for them in the two-sons mytheme, the father's play seems to be Ps. 133:1: "How good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell in unity."

In the parable the kingdom is not something that decides between but something that unifies. The father does not reject. The metaphor for the kingdom is the father's coming out, both for the younger son and for the elder. Apart from him is division and failure.<sup>9</sup>

What Jesus does is critique the traditional theme of the two sons in which one is rejected at the expense of the other. Israel, in a national sense, is no longer the favored, younger son. Like Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, even prodigals like the Samaritans can save a Jew from the ditch! Again, Scott: "The audience must come to terms with one who in the [story] was rejected and in parable inherits all."

### **Insiders and Outsiders**

Was Israel the chosen people? Our answer is a qualified "yes," provided we make clear what it means to be *chosen*. At no time did God choose Israel *for their own sake*. Israel was God's chosen on behalf of the whole world. Precisely at the point historically where that sense of chosenness was replaced by a sense of entitlement and privilege, did Israel lose its status. In the parable, the elder son remained an insider during the years his younger brother sowed his wild oats. Yet, this sense of chosenness did not seem to make him happy. Building up inside himself was a deep and savage resentment. Half the inheritance was gone, and he was being asked to carry the whole load. That was also true for national Israel whose population was a diminished shadow of its former self. Those who fancied themselves the guardians of Israel's national life — the keepers of the sacred markers — hardly exhibited the joyful attitude consistent with being blessed heirs of the promises. Stingily, they held fast things like Sabbath, kosher, Temple, Torah, and land, clinging to them as the only sure symbols of national identity. Those who failed to honor them were rejected.

Then comes Jesus who had all the marks of an insider, but who freely offered the privilege of chosenness to those whom the insiders rejected as outsiders. He called the lost within Israel to come to him in order to find a place once more at the Father's table. By his actions he revealed what God as *Father* actually looked like. Yet in his choice of outsiders (tax collectors, prostitutes, and "other sinners"), Jesus never rejected the insiders who sincerely wanted to respond to the attentive love of their Father. We can hardly ignore the case of Nicodemus, a

---

<sup>9</sup> Scott, p. 125.

ruler of the Jews (John 3), for example. The powerful images of the mother hen gathering her chicks — but being rejected — tell all too well the same story, as Jesus likens them to Jerusalem and himself (see above).

Jesus' world was filled with younger sons and older sons, and they didn't particularly like each other. The former found no welcome *from* within official Judaism, while the latter had little welcome *for* anyone else. To both groups Jesus came, offering the same Good News. He was, to be sure, *open to all*. The generational divide within his own people would find fresh versions as the Christian movement grew. Jews vs. Gentiles, elders vs. young, men vs. women, progressives vs. traditionalists — each pairing of privileged opposites illustrate the deep-seated antagonism faced by the Church throughout its history. Jesus resists the privileged roles of insiders and outsiders. His father *runs to meet* the younger son but also *comes out to plead* with the elder son. They are — each of them — his sons.

### **Reclaiming the Joy**

We have already noted that Second Temple Judaism seemed bereft of joy, yet in all three parables told in Luke 15, joy runs like a thread. For the father in the third parable, joy is rooted in his compassion (15:20) and assumes concrete form in his embrace of the returning son. He won't even let the younger son finish his rehearsed speech as he comes to meet him. The full attention of his servant-force is brought to bear on one task: preparing for the party! Does the younger son need any incentive to join the party? Hardly, and probably had plenty of earlier practice at parties of a wholly different kind!

But the younger son learned *a new way* to make merry. He learned the new way of joy without squandering his inheritance and without leaving home. He found out that joy lives in the father's house after all. The old way of joy led him into poverty and swine's pen. The old way of joy wasted his life. The old way of joy left him a stranger in a foreign land at the mercy of harsh masters. Not so with the new way of joy.

Ironically, the elder son also had a joy problem. He and the father had been together the whole time, and yet the elder son had no joy. When the younger son comes home, the joyless life bubbles to the surface. The elder son refuses to address his father as "father," whereas the younger son does so immediately. The elder son refuses to call the younger son "my brother." Though an insider, he acts every bit like an *outsider* — outside the banquet hall, alienated from his family, conversant only with the hired hands who seem wiser and happier than he. Upon reflection, he tells his father how oppressive his life had been at home, slaving away "these many years." And this was also the case with the Pharisees who saw their own existence under God as oppressive, viewing their obedience not as a joyful opportunity to serve, but a debt to be paid.

Can we miss the resentment of the elder son? "You never let me have a party for my friends!" "You threw a party for your dissolute younger son!" Can we miss the resentment of the Pharisees? "You pay more attention to tax collectors and prostitutes than you do to us!" A little glimpse of this appears in Luke 18:9-14:

<sup>9</sup> To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: <sup>10</sup> "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men-- robbers, evildoers, adulterers-- or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' <sup>13</sup> "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' <sup>14</sup> "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The confidence of privilege and position had hardly played itself out consistently for the Pharisees.<sup>10</sup> Yet they clung to it, looking down on others. In the words of Jesus, they "exalted" themselves, distancing themselves from "other men." Their enumeration of righteous deeds contributed to their own sense of self-importance. But did any of that change their outward situation? Did their insistence on being *insiders* exalt their national life?

---

<sup>10</sup> J. Bradley Chance in his "Luke 15: Seeking the Outsiders," *Review and Expositor*, 94 (1997), pp.249-256, supplies important points in the argument we present here.

Was not Israel still in exile, living under Rome's thumb, a divided and troubled people? For all its efforts, had the theology of the Pharisees gotten Israel any closer to God or to His blessings? Alienated, oppressed, and resentful: such is the religious character of those who see themselves as righteous and in need of no repentance. The older son, standing outside the banquet hall, illustrates to the reader where people with such a religious disposition end up. His cock-sure assumption that he was an "insider" is precisely what made him an "outsider." The flow of Luke's narrative in chapters 14-15 invites readers to recognize that the banquet (see 14:15-24), for the returning son serves as an image of the eschatological banquet of joy. And who is inside? The sinner who repented. Who is outside? The "righteous" who needed no repentance.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

A strange reversal has occurred in the economy of God's salvation. Outsiders, tax collectors, sinners, and rebellious children, lost sheep and coins, have become insiders. Insiders, scribes, Pharisees, safe sheep, securely deposited coins, and obedient children, run the risk of being outside.

But the mercy of God extends to all. True, when the series of parables ends, it is the younger rebellious son who shares in the joy of the banquet. Yet, by going outside to reconcile with the elder son, the father shows that it matters not to God who stands on the outside. Whether one is outside due to disobedience and profligacy or whether one is outside due to self-righteousness which alienates from God and His people, it matters not to the merciful God who meets us in Jesus Christ.

What the father says to the elder son is not condemnation, but assurance. He still calls the alienated, resentful, and oppressed son, his "son!" — one who is "always with me" and for whom "all that is mine is yours." He calls on the elder son to cease excluding himself from the joy of the banquet. This son has choices to make also. The righteous son also needs to be restored.

The parables talk about the mercy of God — for both insiders and outsiders. When anyone is absent from the banquet hall, the host must leave the guests and "go outside." To his surprise he may well find, not the younger son this time, but the elder one standing there — outside. Will the younger son wonder, "Where's big brother?" Will he have difficulty facing him at last? Will the forgiven son receive the joyless son? Forgiven sinners can also murmur against privileged insiders who chose to stand outside. Where do we stand?

### **XI. The Church (From the *Articles of Faith*)**

...

The mission of the Church in the world is to continue the redemptive work of Christ in the power of the Spirit through holy living, evangelism, discipleship, and service.

...

(Exodus 19:3; Jeremiah 31:33; Matthew 8:11; 10:7; 16:13-19, 24; 18:15-20; 28:19-20; John 17:14-26; 20:21-23; Acts 1:7-8; 2:32-47; 6:1-2; 13:1; 14:23; Romans 2:28-29; 4:16; 10:9-15; 11:13-32; 12:1-8; 15:1-3; 1 Corinthians 3:5-9; 7:17; 11:1, 17-33; 12:3, 12-31; 14:26-40; 2 Corinthians 5:11-6:1; Galatians 5:6, 13-14; 6:1-5, 15; Ephesians 4:1-17; 5:25-27; Philippians 2:1-16; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12; 1 Timothy 4:13; Hebrews 10:19-25; 1 Peter 1:1-2, 13; 2:4-12, 21; 4:1-2, 10-11; 1 John 4:17; Jude 24; Revelation 5:9-10)

#### **Statement of Mission**

Church of the Nazarene

To make Christ-like disciples in the nations.

The seven words in the statement of mission embody the historical essentials of Nazarene mission— evangelism, sanctification, discipleship, compassion, and equipping all who respond in faith. They build on our core values of being "Christian," "holiness," and "missional."

Glory to God. Amen.

**Digger Deeper:** *NazaRemix — Just What IS a Nazarene? We Are Open to All*  
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *NazaRemix — Just What IS a Nazarene? We Are Open to All*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. This week's lesson is from Luke 15. Prayerfully read the complete chapter. As you do so, build a simple outline, noting the key sections. What common threads tie all of the sections together?
2. What circumstances, described in 15:1-2, prompted Jesus to relate the three parables found in 15:3-32? Why do the named groups of persons come to Jesus (15:1), and why do the religious leaders object to this (15:2)? Discuss the importance of Jesus having "Table Fellowship." Read also Matthew 8:11.
3. How important is the idea of "lostness" to the theme of Jesus' three parables? What is it about being "lost" that moves the hearts of people in those parables? How does this relate to God's perspective on human beings? Read Matthew 9:36, 23:37, and Mark 2:17 for related themes.
4. Compare the parable of the "sheep" to the parable of the "coin." Why do you think Jesus tells these two stories first, and why do you think they appear in this order? How does each story end? Why is that important to the message Jesus wants to convey? How does each ending relate to what we learn in 15:1?
5. When Jesus begins telling the third parable, how does he change his approach (compare the pronouns)?
6. The common title for this parable is "The Prodigal Son" or "The Lost Son." After reading 15:11-32, would you suggest a different title, one which takes into consideration everything the parable tries to say?
7. When the younger son asks for his inheritance, what does that imply about the way he sees his father?
8. List the ways the younger son "loses" everything. What definite needs surface in his heart as a result? How does he plan "to go home"? Note his rehearsed speech: what motivates it? What is his strategy?
9. How does the father respond to the younger son's return? Does this surprise you? How would the townspeople have responded? How do we know that the father still regards the young man as his "son"?
10. Act One of this parable ends at 15:24. How is this ending the same as the endings of the sheep and coin parables? What hint does Jesus offer the audience in 15:24 that the story is not finished?
11. What role does the elder brother have in Act Two (15:25-32)? Describe his reactions to the reasons for having a celebration. What seems to disturb him most about this?
12. How would you characterize the elder son's relationship to his father, based on what we read in 15:29-30?
13. In what ways does the father try to correct his relationship to the elder son (see 15:31-32)?
14. Given the circumstances in 15:1-2, involving the religious leaders and Jesus, how are these three parables appropriate? With whom might the Pharisees relate in the sheep and coin parables? How does that change when they hear the parable of The Father Who Had Two Sons?
15. Can you offer a simple definition of a "parable," based on the way Jesus crafted these three? How does a parable "work"? What must an audience do after they hear a parable? What might Jesus' audience be motivated to do after hearing the third parable?
16. Based on the parables in Luke 15, what applications might we make in the way we undertake Christian mission? What hindrances alienate us from our mission field? In what ways are we like the younger son? The elder son? The father?
17. List three ways the third parable impacted your understanding of Christian mission and acceptance.