

Item #23 (Luke 15)

This was Entry #22 on my website James Swetnam's Close Readings.

In Item #19 above I give my understanding of Lectio Divina. Of crucial importance to Lectio Divina as I understand it is the proper understanding of the original meaning of the biblical text, an understanding that constitutes the First Aspect, "Lectio", of Lectio Divina. In this entry (Item #23) I would like to give an example of a text interpreted in such a way that it provides ideal material for Lectio Divina. As I see it, the text of Luke 15 is subtle, so much so that it demands much reflection to plumb what seems to be its meaning (i.e., pray/read Lectio Divina according to the first aspect, "Lectio"). This, of course, implies that much time should also be taken on the application of this meaning to the present life of the one who reads/prays ("Meditatio"). Contemporary academic research into Luke 15 tends to emphasize the patterns into which it falls, i.e., the search for a Gattung (in this case, stories about two brothers). But this tends to minimize the uniqueness of Luke 15, a uniqueness which tends to invite a mulling over of the psychological depths of the chapter. Such psychological depths are certainly in keeping with Jewish stories. (Decades ago, when I was a doctoral student at the University of Oxford, a Jewish rabbinical scholar interpreted a Hebrew text for me, a text he had previously never seen. When I presented it to him he asked for a minute or two to get his bearings, and then interpreted it with much emphasis on the psychological aspects.) The chapter, as I understand it (with relevant notes), is as follows:

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The Main Focal Point of Luke 15

Mention the "Parable of the Prodigal Son" to many Christians and they will begin to remark on the force of this, one of the most well known of the "parables" of Jesus. And not without reason. The story of the prodigal son has been a major force in the Christian world down through the ages for inculcating the need for (and the rewards of) repentance. This article certainly does not wish to question the value of this service for Christians. But a careful reading of Lk 15 indicates that the prodigal son and his repentance are not the main focal point of Lk 15.¹ Such a careful reading shows that the prodigal is like a remarkably gifted actor in a supporting role in a film or play, an actor who is so good that he steals the show away from the principal actor.²

¹ There are certainly minor focal points in the chapter, and the prodigal son is undoubtedly one of them. Further, being relatively minor in the objective structure of the chapter does not preclude, of course, a point's being the major one for a given individual, as it most certainly has been in the case of the prodigal and his repentance for many a Christian in times past and present and, doubtless, future. Cf. J. C. Ryle in *Luke* (The Crossway Classic Commentaries; Wheaton, Illinois – Nottingham, England 1997), p. 205: "This parable is a forceful spiritual picture. Unlike some of our Lord's parables, it does not convey one great lesson only but many." That it certainly does, but it is the contention of this presentation that one can plausibly be presented as being foremost.

² In what follows a number of English-language commentaries on Lk 15 will be cited. The number is only a very small fraction, of course, of the total number of commentaries in English, much less commentaries in other languages. It is quite possible that the interpretation being suggested in this paper has already been given elsewhere. But if so, it has failed to gain much recognition or agreement.

Luke 15 as Parable

Making a plausible case for the main focal point of Lk 15 is a procedure that must be based on careful attention to details.

The first such detail occurs in v. 3. Here it is stated that Jesus told “a parable” (“He said to them this parable with the words”... εἶπεν δὲ πρὸς αὐτοὺς τὴν παραβολὴν ταύτην λέγων...). That is to say, all that follows is considered by the Lucan Jesus as composing one parable. True, there are three stories in Luke 15—the story of the shepherd who loses a sheep and finds it, the story of a woman who loses a coin and finds it, and a third story involving the father of two sons, the younger of these two sons, and the older of the two sons. Three stories, but only one parable.³ That is to say, the three stories are interrelated and each one has a role to play in the parable as a whole. The story involving the father and his two sons, both by reason of place and length as regards the other two stories, is the most important of the three. The challenge involved in understanding the point of Jesus’ parable, then, may be reduced to understanding how the father and his two sons are to be understood in the light of the shepherd and the woman.

Now the point of the stories involving the shepherd and the woman is that they lost something valuable and found it. The fact that the sheep and the coin were valuable is made clear by the fact that the shepherd and the woman were extraordinarily happy to get them back—so happy that each organized a celebration. The relevance of the story about the father and the two sons would therefore seem to involve the loss of something which is valuable, the attendant discovery, and the resulting celebration. The stories of the shepherd and the woman are presented in the light of their usefulness in illuminating the story of the prodigal son in relation to his father and older brother, for each of their celebrations is explicitly linked with the joy of heaven (v. 7) or with angels (v. 10) because of the conversion of a sinner. That is to say, the joy of the shepherd and of the woman is explicitly linked to what gives joy to God, and this in turn is based on a sinner’s repentance.⁴

³ This point would seem to be obvious, but it is not. In *The Greek New Testament* (ed. B. Aland et alii; Stuttgart 2003-) pp. 269-270, the three stories in Lk 15 are labeled: “The Parable of the Lost Sheep”, “The Parable of the Last Coin”, and “The Parable of the Lost Son”. This labeling has the virtue of indicating the multiplicity of the three stories, but tends to obscure their unity, which is implied in the use of the single, “parable”, by Jesus. Cf. also: the title used for Lk 15 by *The New Jerusalem Bible* (London 1985), p. 1715: “The three parables of God’s mercy”. Or the subdivisions of Luke 15 used in the *Saint Joseph Pocket Edition of the New Testament*, pp. 186-187: “The Parable of the Lost Sheep”, “The Parable of the Lost Coin”, “The Parable of the Lost Son”. Or the following quotation from R. J. Karris, “The Gospel According to Luke” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1990), p. 707: “In three parables Luke champions the theme that God’s mercy breaks through all human restrictions of how God should act toward sinners”. Or the following quotation from W. J. Harrington, “Luke” in *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (London 1969), p. 1011: “[Luke] 15:1-32 The Parables of Mercy ... Lk has explicitly established the original *Sitz im Leben* of the three parables of this ch.” Or G. W. H. Lampe, “Luke”, in *Peake’s Commentary on the Bible* (London 1964), p. 836: “XV 3-7 The Parable of the Lost Sheep ... 11-32 The Prodigal Son—Another Lucan parable declaring God’s welcome to the outcasts ...”.
⁴ “... the focus is on the joy at the recovery of a sinner, not on the fact that Jesus is the only one to do it. That is why the parable begins, ‘Suppose one of you ...’” (D. L. Bock, *Luke* [The NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids, Michigan 1996], p. 408). “Suppose one of you ...” exemplifies a technique for drawing the listener into being a part of the story.

The search for the focal point of the parable becomes therefore a search for a conversion that gives joy to God.

The Younger Son as the Loser of Something Valuable

The younger son is clearly the one who was lost; his return to the father's household is summed up by his father in the words to the older son which end the parable: "... it is necessary to celebrate and rejoice, because this your brother was dead and has come to life, he was lost and has been found" (... εὐφρανθῆναι δὲ καὶ χαρῆναι ἔδει, ὅτι ὁ ἀδελφός σου οὗτος νεκρὸς ἦν καὶ ἔζησεν, καὶ ἀπολωλὼς καὶ εὐρέθη) (v. 32). The prodigal functions as the sheep which was lost and which was found, or the coin which was lost and which was found. This leaves two candidates for the main focal point of the parable—the father or the elder son. This analysis presumes, of course, that there is a main focal point and that this main focal point is confined to either the father or the elder son. This presumption will, it is hoped, be justified in the analysis that follows.

The Father as the Loser of Something Valuable

The words of the father cited above indicate clearly enough that he was well aware that he had lost something valuable—his younger son. The words he speaks to his older son in v. 32 indicate an exact parallel with the shepherd and the woman: he had lost something valuable, "found" it, and was reacting as they had reacted—by celebrating. And this celebration corresponds to the relevance of the two stories indicated in vv. 5 and 10: the conversion of a sinner. Thus it would seem at first glance that the father is the focal point of the third story because he is doing exactly what Jesus indicates as the relevance of the stories of the shepherd and the woman—celebrate out of joy over the conversion of a sinner.⁵

But the understanding that the father is the focal point of the third story results in difficulties involving both structure and meaning:

1) If the father is the main focal point the structure of the parable appears ill-designed. For the presentation of the elder son is situated in the climactic position: he becomes a foil for his father, but as foil he is given a climactic position in the structure of the parable more important than that of the father. If the father is the principal point of focus, the structure treats the elder son as an anti-climax.

2) If the father is the main focal point the meaning of the parable appears at odds with its life setting. That life setting is the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes at the consorting of tax-collectors and scribes with sinners (vv. 1-2). This grumbling is presented with the implication that it is negative, with the result that Jesus tells a

⁵ "This parable [i.e., vv. 11-32] is often called 'The Prodigal Son,' but it is really about different reactions to the prodigal. The key reaction is that of the father, who is excited to receive his son back. Thus a better name for the parable is 'The Forgiving Father.' A sub-theme is the reaction of the older brother, so that one can subtitle the parable with the addendum 'and the Begrudging Brother'" (Bock, *Luke*, p. 412). The present study takes the position that the reaction of the father is the norm by which the reaction of the older brother is to be judged, and that it is this reaction of the older brother that is the main focal point of the parable as it stands. He is invited to make the father's norm his norm, i.e., the Pharisees and scribes are invited to make the father's norms their norm. The reactions of the older son and of the Pharisees and scribes to this example of the father are what is at stake.

parable to point out the need of change on the part of the grumblers (v. 3).⁶ But the father is not the one in need of change, as the story of the father and his two sons makes clear.

The Older Son as the Loser of Something Valuable

If the elder son is considered the focal point of the parable the principal aspects of the chapter come into focus:

- 1) If the elder son is considered the main focal point the role of the elder son matches the climactic place given him by the structure of the text;
- 2) If the elder son is considered the main focal point the meaning of the parable seems to fit the life setting of the parable much better: the elder son is in need of change just as the Pharisees and scribes are.

Implications Involved in the Parable's Interpretation

Once the main focal point of the parable is more plausibly attributed to the elder son, other aspects can be addressed.

The principal aspect that needs addressing is the precise nature of the fault being attributed to the Pharisees and scribes. The emphasis on joy and rejoicing (cf. vv. 6-7, vv. 9-10, and v. 32) suggests that these reactions are essential to understand what Jesus is driving at. The older son would seem to be ready to forgive his brother, but only in a grudging way. But his younger brother should be as valuable to him as the sheep is to the shepherd and the coin is to the woman—and as he is to the father.⁷ That is, when his younger brother is found he should be overjoyed.

Beneath the anger of the elder son and the joy of the father lie fundamental differences in their attitude to the younger son. The father loved both sons and loved them deeply. His love for the younger is shown by the fact that he saw the son from a distance and went out to meet him and kissed him, all before he was aware of the son's attitude of repentance (v. 20). But the father went out to meet the elder son as well (v. 28), and instead of becoming incensed at the elder son's insensitivity, gently reminded him that this was his brother he was complaining about (ὁ ἀδελφός σου—v. 31). That is to say, the father loved the younger son precisely as his son. (Cf. the way he addresses the older son: “child”—τέκνον—v. 31). The older son, on the other hand, complained about his younger brother even before he knew of his repentance (v. 30). In speaking of his brother he does not even refer to him as such, but scornfully speaks of him to his father as “this son of yours” (ὁ υἱός σου οὗτος). His attitude leads him to contrast the younger's profligacy with his own long years

⁶ The way the first two stories are introduced (“What man among you ...” [v. 4], and “What woman ...” v. 8) clearly aims at the correction of the grumblers by introducing an *a fortiori* argument based on their presumed involvement in the stories of the lost sheep and lost coin (cf. the use of οὐ in v. 4 and οὐχί in v. 8, introductory words which expect a positive reply) leading to similar conduct with regard to the lost son.

⁷ “It was the music and dancing that offended the older son. Of course, let the younger son return home. Judaism and Christianity have clear provisions for the restoration of the penitent returnee, but where does it say that such provisions include a banquet with music and dancing? Has the party canceled the seriousness of sin and repentance?” (F. B. Craddock, *Luke* (Interpretation; Louisville 1990), 188.

of slavish obedience (v. 29)⁸, thus ignoring the fundamental relationship attached to the fact of being “son”.⁹ In contrast, the prodigal is well aware of this fundamental relationship: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you, I am no longer worthy to be called your son” (Πάτερ, ἤμαρτον εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ ἐνώπιόν σου, οὐκέτι εἰμὶ ἄξιος κληθῆναι υἱός σου). The older son had to be reminded of his relationship to his father by the remark “Child, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours” (Τέκνον, σύ πάντοτε μετ’ ἐμοῦ εἶ, καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐμὰ σά ἐστιν), that is to say, he is the older son and because his brother has renounced his share in the inheritance the entire fortune of the father’s is his. In sum: the elder son did not value his younger brother as a fellow son of their father and thus did not have the proper relationship he should have had as son not only toward his brother but toward his father as well.¹⁰ Perhaps it would be fair to say that the elder son did not know how to love as a son and brother.¹¹

But, of course, the theme of love based on kinship is not the only important theme in this carefully-designed masterpiece. The two introductory stories about the lost sheep and the lost coin each end with an application to a sinner who is repentant (vv. 7 and 10). The application is verified in the case of the prodigal by his own admission that he has sinned (v. 21). Thus is effected the transition from a lost thing (a sheep and a coin) to a lost person, the son who is “found” though the process of repentance for sin (cf. the words ἀπολωλὸς καὶ εὐρέθη ending the parable in v. 32). The action of the father corresponding to this attitude of contrition of the prodigal is of course forgiveness, but there is no explicit mention of the act of forgiving in the parable, even though the prodigal admits to having sinned against him and against God (v. 21). This act of forgiveness can be presumed from the portrayal of the father, and from the father’s attitude toward the prodigal, expressed in the parable.¹² By its details the parable can be seen to presume it. And with this presumption of forgiveness mercy would seem to be included, for on mercy all true repentance is based. This tacit assumption of the attitude and the resultant act of forgiveness is instructive. It indicates that mercy and forgiveness are so intrinsically bound up with the nature of a true father that they can be safely presumed wherever there is true fatherhood. And this inevitably suggests that the parable has larger implications than relevance for individuals as such.

⁸ “His [sc., the older son’s] relation to his father is a servile one” (A. Plummer, *The Gospel according to S. Luke* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh 1968), p. 378.

⁹ “The older son represents the Pharisees. The unkindness, moroseness, and self-sufficiency of the older son are the exact type of spirit shown by those who find fault with our Lord for showing kindness to tax collectors and sinners” (Ryle, *Luke*, p. 209). “

¹⁰ “One purpose of the parable was to induce the Pharisees to come in and claim their share of the Father’s affection and of the heavenly joy. Another was to prove to the outcasts and sinners with what generous love they had been welcomed” (Plummer, *Luke*, p. 379).

¹¹ “**25-32.** In the episode of the elder son the murmuring of the Pharisees is rebuked, and that in the gentlest manner. They are reminded that they are sons, and that to them of right belongs the first place. God and His gifts have always been accessible to them (ver. 31), and if they reject them, it is their own fault. But self-righteousness and exclusiveness are sinful, and may be as fatal as extravagance and licentiousness” (Plummer, *Luke*, p. 377).

¹² With regard to the robe, the ring and sandals of v. 22 cf. the remarks of Plummer (*Luke*, p. 376): “None of the three things ordered are necessities. The father is not merely supplying the wants of his son, who has returned in miserable and scanty clothing. He is doing him honour.”

The Larger Dimension of Luke 15

The parable of Luke 15 is obviously thought-provokingly suggestive at the level of individual religious commitment, not only for the grumbling Pharisees and scribes, but also for any person who is conscious of the proclivity of good people to sit in judgment on persons they fancy to be less good.¹³ But Luke 15 is even more suggestive at the level of group religious commitment. In this second reading the father represents God,¹⁴ the older son represents the Jews, and the younger son represents the Gentiles.¹⁵ Details in the story support this reading. The mention in vv. 15-16 of the pigs that the prodigal is assigned to feed suggests that he has thrown in his lot with the Gentiles. The slave-like attitude in v. 29 towards the father's wishes suggests the comportment of Jews who concentrate excessively on the letter of the Law. In this reading Jesus takes the grumbling of the "Pharisees and scribes"—could this be a merism referring to the totality of the Jews, those who were not lettered and those who were?—and uses it as an occasion to give his view of the call of the Gentiles in the context of the Jews as God's Chosen People. The Chosen Nature of the Jews is by no means brought into question; if anything, it is reinforced.¹⁶ But their attitude towards the reconciliation between God and the Gentiles definitely is brought into question. Jesus in Lk 15 is the focal point of this reconciliation in the life setting that gave him the occasion to speak the parable.

Lurking under this amazingly evocative parable seems to be the supposition that

¹³ Cf. the discerning comments of Plummer with regard to v. 7: "δικαίους οἵτινες οὐ χρείαν ἔχουσιν μετανοίας. 'Righteous who are of such a character as to have no need of repentance.' The οἵτινες does not prove that δικαίους means those who are really righteous. It will fit any explanation of δικαίους and οὐ χρείαν ἔχουσιν. If both expressions be taken literally, the ninety-nine represent a hypothetical class, an ideal which since the Fall has not been reached. But as Jesus is answering Pharisaic objections to intercourse with flagrant sinners, both expressions may be ironical and refer to the external propriety of those whose care about legal observances prevents them from feeling any need of repentance. Comp. v. 31" (Plummer, *Luke*, p. 369). And of Craddock: "... it is very difficult not to think Jews *or* Gentiles, poor *or* rich, saint *or* sinner, publican *or* Pharisee, older son *or* younger son. But God's love is both /and, not either/or. The embrace of the younger son did not mean the rejection of the older; the love of tax collectors and sinners does not at all negate love of Pharisees and scribes" (Craddock, *Luke*, p. 188).

¹⁴ A plausible case can be made for holding that the "Christian name" of God is "Father". Cf. J. Swetnam, "ὁ ἀπόστολος in Hebrews 3,1", *Biblica* 89 (2008) 256-261.

¹⁵ "In the wider application of the parable the younger son may represent the Gentiles, and the elder the Jews" (Plummer, *Luke*, p. 371).

¹⁶ Lampe's reading of the story of the prodigal son, while oddly maintaining that the story is a parable (as noted above), has the following perceptive remarks: "**11-32. The Prodigal Son**—Another Lucan parable declaring God's welcome to the outcasts (and, by implication, to the Gentiles) and the recalcitrant attitude of the Jews. The point is the same as that of the preceding parables, more fully worked out in respect of God's love, the repentance of the outcast, and the blindness of the Jews to their obligations towards their 'unrighteous' brethren. ... **15.** The son's degradation suggests the application of the parable to the Gentiles. **20.** The father's welcome precedes the son's confession, and begins while the son is still far off. **22.** The ring signifies authority in the household. **29.** The elder brother, in whose position the Jews stand, is wholly unperceiving. The basis of his relationship to his father is servitude, and keeping commandments in a Pharisaic manner. By calling his brother 'this son of yours' he fails to recognize his brotherhood with outcast sinners. **31.** The privileged status of Israel and the Pharisees is recognized by implication. Lk. always sees the Christian mission as directed in the first instance to the Jews as the chosen people. **32.** 'Your brother' corrects the unbrotherly attitude of the Pharisee" (Lampe, "Luke", p. 836).

each and every sinner, repentant or not, is of immense and unique worth. This is the only reading that makes sense out of the celebratory joy of the shepherd, of the woman and of the father, and of their expectations as regards the one sheep, the one coin and the one son even before they were found. And of Jesus with regard to the tax-collectors and sinners. Repentance is clearly of key importance. But even before repentance the prodigal and the tax-collectors and sinners merit extraordinary concern, just as after repentance their being found merits irrational exuberance.

Summary

Lk 15 in its entirety is a carefully-wrought parable containing three stories: the story of the shepherd and his lost sheep and the joy which he experienced when he found it; the story of the woman and her lost coin and the joy which she experienced when she found it; and the story of the father with two sons, and the different reactions of the father and of the older son when the younger son is first lost and then found. The first two stories are pointed toward the third. The focal point of the third story is the negative reaction of the older son who is presented as not valuing his brother as he should. The father's obvious joy at the "finding" of his younger son provides the contrast needed to highlight the deficient attitude of the older son. The parable, spoken by Jesus on the occasion of the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes at the coming to Jesus of tax-collectors and sinners, has obvious relevance for the attitude of the Pharisees and scribes as individuals toward sinners (and, by implication, of all persons who fancy as living in God's favor). But the parable also has larger implications, for it seems to be pointed toward the Pharisees and scribes as representatives of an Israel privileged by God. **(15 May 2009; 31 July 2019)**