

## Making Sense of the Parables

*Interpreting the Parables of Jesus* by Craig Blomberg<sup>1</sup>

### REVIEW:

Simple 3-point parables have three characters including a \_\_\_\_\_ and two contrasting subordinates who symbolize God, his people, and those who \_\_\_\_\_ him.

**Class Objective:** *Our objective is to understand \_\_\_\_\_ to interpret the parables so that we can \_\_\_\_\_ the truth intended by Jesus in our lives.*

### SIMPLE 3-POINT PARABLES - The Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11–32)

#### I. The three main characters and their correlating identities

1. Father → God
2. Prodigal son → Tax collectors and sinners
3. Older brother → Pharisees and the teachers of the law

**Father:** “There was **a man who had two sons.**” *This pictures a Jewish father with no further identification; thus, appealing to the senses of the greater Jew audience. At the same time, God the Father is in view. The implication of the man as the Heavenly Father is reinforced by the prodigal son having sinned against “heaven” (i.e., God).*

**Tax collectors** are more properly understood as toll collectors, Jewish middlemen who worked for Rome, treasonously in others’ eyes, making a living by charging more than what they had to pass on to their imperial overlords.<sup>14</sup> “**Sinners**” were the most notorious riff-raff of society more generally, involved in seriously immoral or evil behavior.<sup>15</sup>

**Pharisees and scribes** (more literal than “teachers of the law”), on the other hand, were highly respected. Of all the Jewish leadership sects, the Pharisees were the most admired by the ordinary Jew. They appeared to be upstanding, desiring to spread the holiness associated with temple purity to every area of life.<sup>16</sup> Scribes were originally scriptural copyists, but their familiarity with the Law led them to become its teachers as well. They were found in a number of the Jewish sects but especially among the Pharisees.<sup>17</sup>

#### II. Things to consider about the parable

- Unless we understand these historical dynamics, we will fail altogether to feel the force of Jesus’ shocking story, as he inverts expectations with his “hero” and his “villain.”
- On the one hand, Jesus is not tarring all Pharisees with the same brush, merely those who have criticized him at this particular time.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, the father’s approach to the older brother is gentle enough to suggest that, at least on this occasion, Jesus is not challenging the sincerity of the Pharisees’ questions or the genuineness of their loyalty to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, Second Edition. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2012). **Almost all of this study is taken directly from Blomberg while small portions are italicized to identify a synthesis of his book or a question generated for the purpose of this study..**

- The parable, however, is not quite as lifelike as many have alleged. Would a first-century Jewish son have dared to ask his father for his share of the inheritance while the father was still alive and in good health? Would the father have capitulated so readily?
- If none of these (*surrounding*) details have special meaning at the spiritual level, one very different kind of observation still remains appropriate. . . .This narrative presents neither son as a model uniformly to be followed or avoided. God delights in the repentance of prodigals, but he would prefer that they not have to sink so low before coming to their senses. God cherishes the faithfulness of those who obey his will but does not want them to despise the rebellious who have repented.
- The parable is strikingly open-ended. Did the older brother come in the house and join the festivities? Jesus does not say, and it misreads the parable to attempt to answer the question. The more important question is what Jesus' audiences, then and ever after, do with his story.

### III. Three main characters and three main points

1. Even as the prodigal always had the option of repenting and returning home, so also all sinners, however wicked, may confess their sins and turn to God in contrition.
2. Even as the father went to elaborate lengths to offer reconciliation to the prodigal, so also God offers all people, however undeserving, lavish forgiveness of sins if they are willing to accept it.
3. Even as the older brother should not have begrudged his brother's reinstatement but rather rejoiced in it, so those who claim to be God's people should be glad and not mad that he extends his grace even to the most undeserving.

### IV. Contemporary Application

The key to unlocking the story's significance is that the invitation remains open to both kinds of sons, for all who hear or read and are willing to repent and rejoice with others who do so as well. For a Western, middle class evangelical audience, clearly the point we need most to come to grips with is how much we are like the older brother.<sup>46</sup> Gary Burge describes the astonishing uproar among Christians in Wheaton, Illinois, home to so many evangelical churches and ministries, when Prison Fellowship first wanted to purchase a home there, "staff it professionally, and house a number of Christian ex-offenders. These were men who had served their time in prison, committed their lives to Christ, passed screening tests, and now wanted to live among us." Burge continues, "To put this story in first-century terms," the reaction was equivalent to declaring, "*these were the unrighteous and they had no place here*"!<sup>47</sup>

### V. Personal Application

1. *How might you apply any of the three main points to yourself or your own life?*
2. *How might you apply it to the life of a brother or sister who is struggling in their walk with Christ?*
3. *How might you apply it to the life of an unbeliever, bringing God's perspective to their life (a form of evangelism that explains God or outright evangelism calling them to turn to God)?*

**Looking Ahead:** Another Simple 3-Point Parable (The lost sheep and the lost coin parables)