

Article

The Widening Circle: Honour, Shame, and Collectivism in the Parable of the Prodigal Son

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Abstract

This study presents a reading of Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son through the context of collectivism. After a brief survey of how honour and shame function in a collectivistic society, the essay examines the parable using Luke's expressed occasion of the story as a starting point. The three characters are examined, as each display behaviour that is outside the accepted norms of Jewish and Greco-Roman society. The study reveals that a major element of the message of Jesus lies in the re-definition of boundaries. The Lukan Jesus remarkably does not abolish the community-first value of the Pharisees and scribes, but upholds the priority of the collective through expanding the boundaries of those who are honoured. The parable is then situated into the grand Lukan narrative, showing how the Jesus movement as described in Luke-Acts widens the circle of the collective.

Keywords

Prodigal Son, Collectivism, Honour/Shame, Luke-Acts

Introduction

The expanding scholarship on the dimension of honour and shame in the New Testament offers an opportunity for a contextualized reading of the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11–32. Preachers often focus on the forgiveness of the father, or on the younger son's repentance and restoration. This study aims to shed light on a dynamic of the parable that is often neglected at the pulpit, as we situate the account into the broader context.

After a brief discussion of the influence of honour and shame in the world of Luke's narrative, we will examine the occasion of the parable as framed by the evangelist. Next, we

will examine the three characters in the parable, showing how each of them violates societal expectations. In light of the manner in which Luke frames the parable, we will focus on the interaction between the father and the older son, as this portion of the parable brings a resolution to the problem posed at the beginning of Luke 15. We will conclude that the collectivistic value of the honour-based culture was actually being preserved. However, the scandalous nature of

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the parable's message, as well as the portrayal of the Jesus movement in Luke-Acts, lies in the redefinition of the boundaries of the collective.

Honour and Shame in the Ancient Mediterranean World

An honour-based culture bases its ideals in view of the collective rather than the individual. The most immediate group is the family, often with the eldest male as its representative. Within such societies, an individual's actions affect the honour of the group and vice versa. Thus, one would be expected to place the group's reputation above an individual's needs in a collectivistic culture.

Honour is a positive value linked with how one is viewed within the group. It is associated with reputation, face, status, esteem, and respect. Thus, honour can be communicated as *social worth*. Two essential factors shape a person's honour: (1) the norms of a particular society and (2) one's reproduction of those norms in his or her behaviour.

Honour comes in two ways. First, it can be *ascribed* through one's family, apart from anything a person does. Ascribed honour is gained passively, and results in socially recognized worth, such as being of the house of David. Second, it can be *achieved* through actions that build a good reputation. Thus, achieved honour is gained actively in a public setting. A soldier who has acted courageously achieves honour within the group.¹

In the context of honour, *shame* is a response to the failure to meet expectations. Like honour, shame is ascribed through one's family or attained through behaviour. In some cases, shame is used to describe an action. A *shameful* act is met with disapproval. People had shame if

their past actions or vocations fell outside what was acceptable.

In addition, the term *shame* may also refer to a sense of propriety, making a *sense* of shame a virtue. A woman who refuses an adulterous affair displays a sense of shame. On the other hand, being *shameless* is a vice; a shameless person does not follow the patterns of proper behaviour.

In the ancient Mediterranean world, order was imposed as people were defined within the community. Honour and shame served to maintain social control. Rhetorical handbooks affirm the deep-seated identification of honour and shame in Greco-Roman culture by recommending the use of the commendable and the disgraceful to persuade one's audience.² Pliny the Younger opined that the supreme source of happiness was a good reputation that lasted (*Ep.* 9.3.3). Social propriety dictated that groups were strongly structured and exclusive. Those who were unacceptable were thus ostracized, rendering the experiences of *exclusion* and *distance* from the community associated with shame. Furthermore, punishments for shameful acts were often enacted publicly to bring humiliation in front of the people. Aulus Gellius, in describing the public beatings of notable men, lamented about the disgrace and mortification of such a degrading practice (*Noct. att.* 10.3.1).

Honour was the highest social value in Greco-Roman society. Dio Chrysostom wrote that fame is more precious than life (*Rhod.* 20) and that a man would consider it worth it to be destitute as long as he is well regarded by his fellow citizens (*1 Glor.* 2). A notable method of acquiring honour in the agonistic culture was through the interaction of challenge-riposte. This is clearly displayed in Luke 10:25–37, where Luke describes an expert in the law, seeking to justify himself, challenging Jesus

¹ Notably, the word *honour* originates from the Latin *honor*, which was the name of a deity who bestowed courage on soldiers for battle. See Julian Pitt-Rivers, "Origins of Honour", *Proceedings of the British Academy* 94 (1997): 230.

² Rhet. Her. 3.3.4–5; Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.9.35–36; 2.6.2, 12; Quintilian, *Inst.* 3.7.28, 3.8.1–3. For a delineated survey of these and other texts regarding the use of honour and shame in discourse, see David A. deSilva, *Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995), 24–79.

with the question ‘who is my neighbour?’ Jesus then responds with a riposte, telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, which ascribes honour to the hated Samaritan and shame to the elite Jews. Jesus communicates that the boundaries of the collective defined as *neighbour* are kept wide to include even those ostracized by the Jews. Another example occurs in Luke 13:10–17, which portrays Jesus healing a woman on the Sabbath.³ The synagogue leader challenges Jesus, who responds with a riposte, revealing the hypocrisy of the leader. The leader, as well as all of Jesus’ opponents, are shamed in front of the crowd, who attributes honour to Jesus. In each of these accounts, Jesus’ interaction with an individual has striking impact because of the *collectivistic dynamic* involved.

Examining the Parable

In Luke’s narrative, two distinct groups are identified as listening to the parable. One consisted of outcasts: tax collectors and sinners. The term *sinner* (ἁμαρτωλός) which James Dunn deems ‘a factional term’,⁴ describes a group of Jews whose actions made them unacceptable and ostracized. The other party was seen as especially righteous: the Pharisees and the scribes. This group held high honour in their society.

Luke’s narrative indicates that the Jews of high esteem were criticizing Jesus for breaking with societal norms by associating with ostracized people. The Pharisees and scribes were grumbling that Jesus associated with sinners, eating with them (15:2). Thus, their complaint issues a challenge to Jesus.

Jesus responds to the challenge with his riposte. In response to the Pharisees and the scribes, he

tells one parable with three movements.⁵ The first two stories function as a prelude to a more complex one. In each of the first two parts, something is lost and is found, and the community is called to celebrate. In telling the first two stories, Jesus implies that anyone in that society would act the way the shepherd and the woman would. He appeals to common desire: *Who among you would not go looking for the lost sheep or the lost coin? Who among you would not celebrate when it is found?* The stories both conclude with a saying about rejoicing in heaven over a sinner who repents. Jesus then tells a story of a lost son.

The Shame of the Younger Son

The younger son’s actions bring shame on himself, the family, and on the Jewish people as a whole. First, in assuming control of the wealth in order to leave, he insults his father, severing relationship with him. While some expositors suggest that the request of the younger son for the inheritance was a heinous affront to the father,⁶ the Mishnah and Ben Sira reveal that a father could pass property to his children before death. However, these texts show that the father still had the right to live off the property until death.⁷ Care for one’s parents in old age was the way to honour them (Tob 4:3–4; Sir 3:12).

⁵ παραβολήν in 15:3 is singular.

⁶ For example, David E. Garland writes that this request says to the father ‘I wish you were already dead.’ See David E. Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 624. Cf. John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, vol. 35B of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1993), 782.

⁷ *m. B. Bat.* 8.7 and Sir 33:19–21. For an exploration of the implications of these traditions, see Yosef Rivlin, “Gift and Inheritance Law in the Judaean Desert Documents”, in Ranon Katzoff and David M. Schaps (eds), *Law in the Documents of the Judaean Desert*, vol. 96 of *Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 176–82. In addition, it was also expected for adult children in ancient Rome to provide for their parents with the estate until at least the early second century. See Richard Saller, “Corporal Punishment, Authority, Obedience”, in *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome*, ed. Beryl Rawson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 148.

³ Other examples of challenge-riposte in Luke occur in 4:23–27; 6:28–35; 9:26.

⁴ James D. G. Dunn, “Pharisees, Sinners, and Jesus”, in Jacob Neusner et al. (eds), *Social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism: Essays in Tribute to Howard Clark Kee*, (Philadelphia, PA: Augsburg Fortress, 1988), 277.

Thus, in taking out his share while his father was still alive, the younger son effectively cuts off a large portion of his father's lifeline along with their relationship, bringing shame upon himself.

The son also brings shame on his family with his actions in the foreign land. The younger son's squandering and extravagance recall the foolish son depicted in Jewish wisdom instruction whose actions bring dishonour to the family.⁸ His wasteful living show him to be a fool. The patriarch of *Testament of Judah* 14:1–5 warns his children as he describes a drunkard son who associating with prostitutes.

Furthermore, the son shames the entire Jewish people as he ends up in low status among Gentiles in a far country, losing the family fortune among them and attaching himself to a local. One could probably add apostasy to his sins, as he is probably unable to observe the Sabbath or other religious practices in this land. The choice of words emphasizes his exclusion from both lands: *far* (μακρός) highlights the shame of separation from his people, and the reference to a *citizen* (πολίτης) emphasizes that he was not a citizen of the new country. He held the lowest status, shamefully feeding unclean pigs, becoming so hungry that he longed for their undesirable food. Far from home, the young man is excluded from his people. He has disgraced their name.

The shameful experience of the younger son shows that he is an outsider, mirroring the experience of the tax collectors and sinners. The son reveals his sense of shame in declaring that he is not worthy to be called his father's son. François Bovon notes that *call* (καλέω) in 15:19 reflects the language of identity (cf. Luke 6:35), as a synonym for *to be*.⁹ He wishes to settle for being an outsider at home: a hired servant had the lowest status on the property and was not

part of the family.¹⁰ Furthermore, the shame of his status and separation is later likened to being dead at 15:24.

The Shame of the Father

The father in the story also displays a series of acts that go against the accepted patterns of society. First, he grants his son's request even though he would be expected to object and refuse.¹¹ In ancient Rome, family property would only be handed over to sons before the patriarch's death as a reward after the son displays responsible character.¹² The reputation of the *paterfamilias* was based on having an orderly household. Both Jewish law and Greco-Roman literature taught that rebellious sons were to be punished, even with death in some cases.¹³ The parable does not indicate that the father had any sense of propriety in acquiescing to his son. While societal expectations dictated that he punishes his son to uphold the family honour, he does not. The father thus adds to the family's shame.

The father brings shame upon himself and on his family through his actions towards his son. Upon seeing his son far away (μακράν), he is filled with compassion, fully covering the shameful distance by running to him. This would have likely caught the attention of the hearers, as it was shameful for an older man to

¹⁰ A slave, as part of the family, would have higher status.

¹¹ cf. Sir 33:23. See also the expectation of sons to show *pietas*, the Roman value of loyalty towards their fathers. See Saller, "Corporal Punishment, Authority, Obedience", 146–7.

¹² Emiel Eyben, "Fathers and Sons", in Beryl Rawson (ed.), *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 115–6.

¹³ See Deut 21:18–21, Petronius' *Satyricon* 46, Persius' *Satire* 3:44–62, Herodas' *Mime* 3, and Josephus, *Jewish War* I. A poignant example is Brutus, the founder of the Roman republic, having his sons put to death for conspiracy against the republic. See Livy, *Ab urbe cond.* 2.4–5; Valerius Maximus 5.8.1. For a similar dynamic in relation to the parable in Luke 16:1–8a, see David Landry and Ben May, "Honor Restored: New Light on the Parable of the Prudent Steward (Luke 16:1–8a)", *JBL* 119.2 (2000): 287–309.

⁸ For example, see Prov 10:5; 19:26; Sir 22:3.

⁹ François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27*, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. Donald S. Deer (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013), 427.

lift up his robes to run. Ben Sira teaches that the way a man walks reveals who he is (Sir 19:30): the father shamefully runs in a manner associated with women.¹⁴ Furthermore, the father defiles himself by embracing his unclean son. First-century hearers of the parable would consider this behaviour scandalous.

It is possible that the father shamefully runs in order to stop his son from being shamed. It is possible that the son, in returning to his village, should have been subject to the *qetsatsah* (קִטְצָצָה), literally 'a cutting off'.¹⁵ The ceremony of disowning was reserved for shameful acts, such as selling a family heirloom or the paternal estate to outsiders. The perpetrator's relatives take barrels or pottery and break them in front of the children, saying that the individual 'has been cut off'.¹⁶ Furthermore, the other villagers could possibly respond with violence to uphold their honour, attacking the returning young man who has brought shame on the village.¹⁷ If the *qetsatsah* or a violent attack is indeed in view, then the father shames himself, not simply as an act to

reconcile with his son, but in order to spare him from being shamed by those in the village.

The father continues with more actions outside the boundaries of societal expectations. With the best robe, a ring, sandals, and a celebration with the fattened calf, the father honours his disgraced son with reinstatement to full status.¹⁸ This honour was much greater than the son was expecting, since he was seeking bread (15:17) and received the finest meat. In fact, all of this is unexpected, as the father would not be expected to respond to his wayward son this way.

The striking nature of the Lukan parable is further illuminated through comparison with a similar story told in the Buddhist text *Saddharmapundarika Sutra* 4. While both depict a wayward son returning to his father, the two narratives differ in significant places. Most notably, the *Sutra* version does not portray a swift restoration to full status for the son. He is hired to provide work, and the father does not reveal his identity until the son works for twenty years to earn back his status and place in the family. This would be considered just and in accordance with societal expectations. In Luke, however, the parable features a compassionate father who operates counterculturally, instantly restoring his son from shame to full status.

One cannot minimize the shocking nature of the father's behaviour towards his son in the Lukan parable. The text does not indicate that the father had any sense of propriety in acquiescing to his son. He is expected to exclude his son, yet he includes him. He is expected to disown or stone his son to death, but he makes him the guest of honour. The father has violated a great deal of social convention as he welcomes his son back to full status.

¹⁴ Batten contends that the shame is found in the feminine nature of the lifting up of robes to run. See Alicia Batten, "Dishonour, Gender and the Parable of the Prodigal Son", *TJT* 13.2 (1997): 194. cf. Martin Emmrich, *At the Heart of Luke: Wisdom and Reversal of Fortune* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 76. Notably, Carol Delaney contends that women are intrinsically shamed in Mediterranean culture, and improper association with femininity would bring a man shame. See Carol Delaney, "Seeds of Honor, Fields of Shame", in David D. Gilmore (ed.), *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*, American Anthropological Association 22 (Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association, 1987), 40–1.

¹⁵ Cf. Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 129.

¹⁶ Marcus Jastrow, 'קִטְצָצָה,' *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature*. For more on this, see the discussion in Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1976), 167–8.

¹⁷ For more on this phenomenon, see Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 2nd edn (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Books, 2002), 372.

¹⁸ Peter Chrysologus taught that the father does not just restore the younger son's innocence; he restores his former honour. Saint Peter Chrysologus and Saint Valerian, *Saint Peter Chrysologus, Selected Sermons and Saint Valerian, Homilies.*, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari, trans. George E. Ganss, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* 17 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1953), 38. Notably, there appears to be a parallel between the younger son's transformation from disgrace to honour and a similar portrayal of Joseph in Genesis 41:42. They are both given a ring and fine garments.

The Shame of the Older Son

The older son, in his angry response to the father, correctly determines that the actions of his younger brother and father fall outside the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. He considers himself to be the only one who has acted honourably. Notably, the older son's anger is directed towards his father, whom he accuses of violating the social system without apology. He regrets that his father has no sense of morality. He effectively says to his father: 'You are being shameless!'

With the view of the collective in mind, the older son is right. He correctly highlights the shameful nature of the actions of both his brother and his father. The Lukan narrative shows that the older son takes on the role of policing his family members' actions for the sake of the reputation of both the family and the people. He correctly calls out the scandalous nature of the actions of his brother and father in view of societal expectation.

However, the older son's actions are ironically shameful. First, his refusal to go in violates proper decorum. His responsibilities as the eldest included a leadership role in important occasions, especially ones that honour a special guest.¹⁹ The older son has not become part of this celebration, and this would be clear to the guests in attendance. In addition, the older son humiliates his father by not entering his celebration, denying him the esteem of being a great benefactor or patron.²⁰ Thus, with such a momentous event, the older son's absence is shameful.

Furthermore, he violates relational ties with both his brother and his father. In his tirade, he calls his brother 'this son of yours' and fails to

address his father by an honorific title.²¹ His words reveal no desire for relationship. In contrast to his father who celebrates the *inclusion* of his son, the older son desires a goat to celebrate with his friends at the *exclusion* of his father. Since the father still had the right to live off the property, the older son's complaint about the father's use of the property effectively treats him as dead. Furthermore, he doubly pronounces death on his father through his expressed desire to use the wealth at his father's exclusion. The older son thus dishonours his father, questioning his judgment and behaving disobediently.

The older son's violations of decorum and dishonour of his father occur in public, as this would undoubtedly be a large gathering. Malina and Rohrbaugh point out that a party involving the fattened calf would probably involve the entire village.²² In addition, one would imagine that the angry tirade outside the party would be easily overheard by others, especially those noticing the father's absence.

Ironically, in refusing to join the celebration, the eldest becomes the outsider. While the language of *near* and *far* characterized the shame of the younger son, honour and shame are vividly illustrated by *inside* and *outside* for the older son. The change to the imperfect tense (ἤθελεν and ἐξελεῖν) in 15:28 indicates that the son's refusal and the father's urging are both continuing states. The older son is refusing to go *inside* to the celebration, and the father has to come *outside* to be pleading with him. While his actions towards his father would be a warrant for ostracization, he effectively excludes himself from his family's celebration.

The older son has failed to uphold the family reputation and honour and has severed relationships with his brother and father. While the younger son was outwardly rebellious and estranged, the older son has been inwardly rebellious and estranged. Despite claiming

¹⁹ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 132.

²⁰ Willi Braun, examining the parable of the banquet in Luke 14:12–24, gives a thorough treatment of the dishonour placed on the host when the invited guests refuse. The rejection brings deep shame. See Willi Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric in Luke 14* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 108, 113. John M.G. Barclay offers a delineated treatment of patronage in both Greco-Roman and Jewish contexts. See John M.G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 35–45. cf. Alicia J. Batten, *Friendship and Benefaction in James* (Dorset: Deo, 2010), 75–8.

²¹ Notably, his 'sinner' brother actually did call his father πατήρ (15:21).

²² Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 291.

perfect loyalty to his father's commands, he dishonours his father, demonstrating that he is more concerned with compliance than the kinship relationship. He appeals to societal expectations about the family but ultimately does not show concern for his family.

The Father's Response as Jesus' Riposte

The parable in Luke 15 is framed as a response to the Pharisees' complaint. The narrative describes Jesus responding to the challenge issued in 15:2. In the parable, the older brother's complaint mirrors the Pharisees' complaint. In challenging Jesus's association with sinners, the Pharisees accuse him of violating the societal code without regard to propriety. In their view, Jesus' disregard for the accepted standards makes him the reprobate. His actions are scandalous, outside the expectations of what is right. In other words, they accuse Jesus of being shameless.²³

While modern expositors often focus on the forgiveness of the father and his reconciliation of the younger son, Jesus' riposte to the Pharisees occurs at the conclusion of the parable, with the father's response to his older son's complaint. Thus, while the themes of forgiveness and reconciliation are present, the consideration of collectivistic dynamics brings prominence to the bigger picture of societal expectations.

It must be recognized that the father does not challenge the older son's value of putting the family first. He upholds the kinship relationships. Rather than punishing his older son for his disobedience and public disgrace of him and the family, his words are loving. He calls his older son τέκνον, a more affectionate term than υἱός.²⁴ In explaining the necessary nature of the celebration, he corrects the older son by calling the younger son 'your brother'

(ἀδελφός σου). The father communicates that the party celebrates their reunion as a family. This is consistent with the first two parts of the parable at large: in the conclusions to the short stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin, Jesus declares that there is rejoicing in heaven when a sinner repents (Luke 15:7, 10). The celebration is for the family including another wayward son. Likewise, the father chooses to express the family-first value by re-incorporating the younger son rather than exclude him. Jesus does not challenge the group-first mentality upheld by the Pharisees. Rather, Jesus challenges the boundaries of those included in the people of God.

The Lukan Jesus' message embedded in the father's speech is the celebration of the family being restored. Thus, Jesus upholds the collectivistic mentality of society. Like the portrayal of the loving father in the parable, Jesus does not choose sides; he dines with both Pharisees (14:1) and sinners (15:1). Through this parable, Jesus challenges the elite to celebrate the *boundaries of the group expanding* to include those who had been previously excluded. He desires to bring the family together. After all, as Jesus states, the tax collectors and sinners are also 'your brother(s)'. In the parable, the father's desire is for the older son to join in the celebration. Likewise, Jesus' message calls the elite Jews to do the same.

Kenneth Bailey proposes that Jesus retells the account of Jacob, whose rebellion and return personifies the story of Israel. In almost identical fashion, Jacob receives a 'threefold welcome' from Esau: running, falling on his neck and a kiss.²⁵ If Bailey is right that both Esau and the parable's father represent the Lord, then Jesus may be shaming the Pharisees by indicating that God's compassion for a reunited family is displayed by the 'hated' (Mal 1:3) Esau, yet not by them.

²³ cf. Luke 7:33–34.

²⁴ Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, 1319.

²⁵ Bailey has the most prominent treatment of this connection. See Bailey 2003, 167. I am indebted to Peter J. Williams steering me towards this concept.

Jesus does not challenge the collectivistic mentality of the Pharisees, but he expresses it in a different manner. The father is indeed shameless in his willingness to break with convention. But he does this in his compassionate desire to reconcile the family. Jesus' riposte recognizes that he is engaging in shameless behaviour, but this is done for the sake of including and honouring the excluded and shamed.

Thus, the context of Luke 15 and dynamics of collectivistic culture reveal that Jesus is *re-defining the boundaries of those who receive favour*. The lines are expanded to include those who are normally excluded. Where, previously, scribes and Pharisees were included and sinners and tax collector excluded, the lines are redrawn to include scribes, sinners, Pharisees, and tax collectors.

While modern interpreters correctly identify the themes of forgiveness, repentance, and restoration, the parable also teaches that Jesus includes and esteems those who have been ostracized by society, calling the elite Jews to celebrate this inclusion in the same way there is rejoicing in heaven (Luke 15:7, 10).

The Parable's Representation of the Jesus Movement

As we situate the parable in the grand Lukan narrative, the shameless message of Jesus in this celebrated parable reflects the Lukan message of Jesus' ministry as a whole. Chapter 15 of Luke has been described as 'the heart of the Third Gospel', with its literary position and theological emphasis.²⁶ Luke's overall narrative demonstrates the increasingly inclusive nature of God's mercy. The collectivistic nature of the group is preserved while the group boundaries continue to expand.

The Lukan narrative shows how the boundaries of those receiving honour incrementally

expand. The gospel account opens within solid Jewish confines of the fulfilment of prophecy, the centrality of the temple, and the genealogy of Jesus. As the narrative continues, the boundaries of the Jesus movement expand to include outcasts at the chagrin of the most respected Jews. Jesus' teaching on the plain (Luke 6:27–36) calls for love applied beyond the normally accepted boundaries: towards one's enemies. The widening circle continues to be reflected in many accounts unique to Luke, such as the Parable of the Good Samaritan and the encounter with Zacchaeus. Different people groups, once excluded or marginalized, are given honour: Samaritans, the poor, tax collectors, women, and children. The account continues into Acts, the boundaries are pushed further, illustrated by the progression of Acts 1:8—first Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth. Along the way, the marginalized Hellenistic Jews are included, and finally, Gentiles are incorporated into the community. This is the new order of the kingdom of God. The standards have been redefined; there is a new household.²⁷

²⁷ Peter Chrysologus taught that the younger son in this parable, along with the steward in Luke 16:1–13, represents the Gentiles. Ambrose of Milan suggests the same. See William B. Palardy, trans., *St. Peter Chrysologus: Selected Sermons Volume 3*, The Fathers of the Church, a New Translation (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2004), 183.; Saint Ambrose of Milan, *Exposition of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke: With, Fragments on the Prophecy of Isaias*, trans. Theodosia Tomkinson (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 1998), 326–7. This view can fit with the evangelist's allusions of Gentile inclusion (2:32, 3:6, 3:14, 4:25–27, 11:29–32).

Cyril of Alexandria denies the view that the older son represents Israel according to the flesh, citing Jer 2:5 and Isa 29:13 Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke*, trans. R. Payne Smith (United States: Studion, 1983), 432–3.

In a postcolonial reading of the parable from an East Asian perspective, Park refers to the reconstruction of the household (*oikos*). See Rohun Park, 'Revisiting the Parable of the Prodigal Son for Decolonization: Luke's Reconfiguration of Oikos in 15:11–32', *BiblInt* 17.5 (2009): 507–20.

²⁶ Greg Forbes, *The God of Old: The Role of the Lukan Parables in the Purpose of Luke's Gospel* (Sheffield: Bloomsbury T. & T. Clark, 2000), 109; Emmrich, *At the Heart of Luke*, 67.

Some consider the parable as an example of the theme of 'great reversal' in Luke-Acts.²⁸ However, while the younger son's experience displays reversals associated with his status, the concept of reversal does not fit well with the social interaction of the Jesus movement on a larger scale. After all, the rich and righteous are not always brought low. The Pharisees are not necessarily excluded, even though their self-righteousness and opposition to Jesus put them in danger of this. Likewise, the parable does not indicate how the older son responds in the end, even though he is in danger of being excluded based on his response. Thus, the notion of a 'great reversal' only accounts for the younger son's restoration to the father in this parable. The collectivistic dynamic of this parable and upholds the prominence of the interaction between the older son and the father, as well as the horizontal impact of the family and societal expectations. This focus indicates that the collectivistic value has not been reversed but upheld by the father in the parable. It is the *definition* of the group that has changed; the boundaries have expanded. Thus, we can describe the social interaction as a *widening of the circle*.

Jerome Neyrey, borrowing a phrase from the account of Jason and the brothers in front of the

city officials in Thessalonica (Acts 17:6), writes that Jesus and his followers 'turned the world upside down'. They challenged the placement of lines in a world where people drew them for the sake of control. While continuing to honour the values of purity and the priority of the collective, the Jesus movement offered 'a reformed system'.²⁹

Set in the midst of Luke's travel narrative, the parable is thus seen as a microcosm of the social interaction surrounding the Jesus movement. They have turned the world upside down and pushed the boundaries of the circle. Jesus' message calls hearers to celebrate when sinners, formerly excluded, are brought in and honoured with full status as part of the family.

Conclusion

In expositions of the parable, the dynamics of societal expectations in ancient near eastern society are often set aside as the journey of the younger son receives primary attention. An understanding of the collectivistic culture in which the parable is told allows those in the pews to grasp the scandalous nature of Jesus' message. In addition, the parable fits well into the grand narrative of Luke-Acts, showing the increasingly inclusive nature of the kingdom of God.

²⁸ For example, see Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story Luke Tells: Luke's Unique Witness to the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 34–5; John O. York, *The Last Shall Be First: The Rhetoric of Reversal in Luke* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 152–4; Larry Keith Drake, "The Reversal Theme in Luke's Gospel" (PhD Thesis: Saint Louis University, 1985), 216–21.

²⁹ Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, "Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World", in Jerome H. Neyrey (ed.), *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 271–99, on 271. For more on this dynamic, see Dunn, "Pharisees, Sinners, and Jesus", 283.