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# Reading Mercy in the Parables of Jesus

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**T**he parables of Jesus involve an array of issues in human lives, ranging from personal crisis to economic justice. In Jesus' time, the culture of competition and comparison had deleterious effects on the weak and marginalized. Some parables of Jesus address these problems: "Father and Two Sons" (Luke 15:11-32), "Pharisee and Tax Collector" (Luke 18:9-14), "Wheat and Weed" (Matt 13:24-30), and "Vineyard Workers" (Matt 20:1-16). In these parables, Jesus challenges his audience to read themselves and other people through the lens of mercy. Others are not the object of competition or comparison or the source of pride. They are the object of compassion and mercy, as God is merciful toward all. One should not compare with others to feel pride. Rather, one must wrestle with God, who is a paragon to emulate. This essay will explore the above four parables to see how the culture of competition and comparison is critiqued and why mercy is important to understanding Jesus' parables.

## ***Father and Two Sons (Luke 15:11-32)***

Usually, the parable of "The Father and Two Sons" has been understood allegorically. In that interpretation, the older brother/son represents merciless Pharisees or Jews, whereas the younger brother/son represents contrite sinners or gentile Christians who were forgiven and accepted by the compassionate God. Likewise, the older brother is a symbol of self-righteousness or cold-heartedness whereas the younger brother is a symbol of a new creation of humanity in God. In fact, this kind of a negative reading of the older brother is not new to those who know the rivalry stories in the Old Testament. For example, Jacob the younger brother is preferred to Esau the older (Gen 25:19-34). Both in ancient times reflected in the rivalry stories and Jesus' time in the first century CE in Palestine, rivalry, competition, and dominance are easily observed in human lives. The conflict or rivalry situation in the Old Testament is resolved through God's choice of the younger brother. Similarly, the parable of "The Father and Two Sons" has been read through this rivaling motif that the younger son/brother was chosen and loved by God.

But this parable does not support such a theme, since the father says he loves both his sons equally. The father clearly answers his older son who complains about his brother's big party: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was

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dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found" (Luke 15:31-32). Namely, the father did not choose to love his younger son only. The only reason he gives a sumptuous welcome party is because his younger son returned home safely. Otherwise, both of his sons are equally important to him, and justice and reconciliation are yet to come after this welcome feast. That is why the story is open-ended. Readers have to fill in the gap and ponder on the steps toward final reconciliation.

In this parable, the father is atypical.<sup>1</sup> The father behaves very unconventionally and risks his honor as a typical father in a village. He is doubly shamed since he fails "to discipline his son ... by acquiescing to his son's dishonorable request."<sup>2</sup> Brandon Scott observes the father's mother-like image as follows: "The father combines in himself the maternal and paternal roles. As a father he is a failure, but as a mother, he is a success."<sup>3</sup> Being overjoyed, the father forgot to inform his older son of the return of his younger brother. He is imperfect yet compassionate toward his younger son. He waits outside his house, sees his son from afar, and runs to meet him. Then, he asks the servants to prepare a big banquet

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1. This parable does not follow a system of reward and punishment in which the bad are punished and the good are rewarded. From the perspective of traditional Jewish theology, the father should not act like the one in the parable. Moreover, in the patron-client system or the honor-shame culture, the father is unfit.

2. Amy Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 50.

3. Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 122.

to welcome his son. His priority is to welcome his immature son.<sup>4</sup> In other words, mercy comes first. Justice and reconciliation must follow as time goes by. His younger son must prove that he became a new person in the family. The welcome party does not exempt him from his moral, ethical duties for the family and beyond.

The older son/brother's perspective is legitimate as he cares about the well-being of the whole family. Otherwise, his point is not to ruin his younger brother or to disobey his father. He has a right to speak up in the family with sound judgment. He is very thoughtful and patient enough not to rush to his brother. In fact, he could have run to his brother and smashed him in his cheek. Rather, he wanders outside his house, not knowing how to behave. While his voice of justice in the family is legitimate, what he misses is the mind of mercy and compassion toward his brother. Like his father, he must be merciful and compassionate to his brother. Justice can be dealt with later.

In sum, mercy must be the foundation of the family upon which justice and peace may be built, as time goes by. The process of reconciliation takes time and intentional efforts by the members of the family. Indeed, none of the characters in this parable are perfect and all have work to do. The father has a moral duty to discipline his younger son and needs to recognize the good work of his older son. The older son/brother needs to see the big picture of the family that stands on the basis of mercy, justice, and peace. He needs to overcome emotions of comparison or competition with his brother. The true sense of pride must come from his solidarity with his brother. The younger son/brother must show his transformation after the party is over.

#### *Pharisee and Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14)*

Tax collectors were marginalized people in Jewish society who collected taxes for Rome. In contrast, the Pharisees were the most religious people, concerned with keeping the law. Both the Pharisee and the tax collector in this parable enter the Temple to pray. But the content and attitude of their prayers are different from each other. The Pharisee's prayer looks like a model of an excellent prayer. He regularly fasts and gives a tithing. His prayer is similar to the prayer in the Talmud: "I give thanks to thee, O Lord my God, that thou hast given me my lot with those who sit in the seat of learning, and not with those who sit at the street corners; for I am early to work, and they are early to work; I am early to work on words of the Torah and they are early to work on things of no moment."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, R. Judah says: "A man must recite three benedictions every day: 'Blessed be You, Lord, who did not make me a gentile. Blessed be You, Lord, who did not make me uneducated. Blessed be You, Lord, who did not make me a

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4. The younger son dishonors his father by asking for a share of his property (15:12), which is shameful to his father. In Jewish tradition, inheritance is not transferred until the parents die to prevent their children from fighting with each other or from stopping to honor them (Num 36:7-9; 27:8-11; Sirach 33:20-24).

5. Talmud, b. Ber 28b. Similarly, in Qumran Thanksgiving Hymns, 1QH 7:34; 15:34.

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woman."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the Pharisee feels great and blessed because he lives by his own faith.<sup>7</sup> In that sense, he is not a hypocrite. But his prayer sounds elite, self-centered, and uncaring for others when he compares himself with those who are unlike him. So he prays proudly: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income" (Luke 18:11-12). What is problematic is not that the Pharisee thanks God for his blessings or his identity but that there is no sense of sympathy for those who are unfortunate. He calls them: "thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." Rather, he should pray like this: "Lord, be merciful to them." Others are not the source of his pride but the object of compassion. The Pharisee does not realize he is also a human being who is very weak and needs the mercy of God. He should feel that he is also small before God and others. He does not know God wants a humbled mind through which God may have a good relationship with him.

In contrast, the tax collector's prayer is terse and truthful. He stands far off and would not even look up to heaven, beating his breast and saying: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 8:13). He feels unworthy of God's grace. Beating one's breast is a sign of remorse and repentance. His prayer echoes Ps 51: "Have mercy on me, God, in your goodness; in your abundant compassion blot out my offense." Eventually, the tax collector is declared justified by God. Justification means he has a good relationship with God because of his humbled mind. Here, justification is not a forensic concept that his legal status was changed from sinner to a righteous person once and forever. But it means his relationship with God is established in the right way. Otherwise, after the temple prayer, he must show his good conduct.

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6. Tosefta, Ber. 6.18

7. Jesus differs from the Pharisees' strict observance of the law and interprets it through the lens of mercy. For example, Jesus heals the sick on the Sabbath, and his justification for breaking the law and rationale for his healing is expressed like this in Mark: "The Sabbath was made for humans, and not humans for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).

***Wheat and Weed (Matt 13:24-30)***

The parable of “The Wheat and Weed” reveals the realistic picture of the community or society where good and bad coexist. The question is how to deal with the problem of evil or the existence of “bad” people in the community. Matthew deals with this issue and its conclusion is to delay judgment until the day of judgment. Until then, people have chances to turn to God (c.f., Matt 13:47-50; 25:31-46). In the parable of the net, Jesus says: “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

When Jesus tells the parable of the Wheat and Weed, he deals with the coexistence of good and bad in society. In this story, someone sows only good seed in his field but later finds that weeds grow together with the plants (13:24b, 26). So servants report to the householder and ask: “Then do you want us to go and gather them?” (13:28b). But the master replies, “No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them” (13:29). Jesus’ challenging point is what to do with the existence of the weeds. Apparently, the wisdom of the culture says the earlier the weeds are removed, the better for the plants. But the master asks his servants to leave them alone because wheat can be hurt. The master’s idea seems unrealistic and costly because the poisonous weeds can contaminate the grain of wheat. At the harvest, the separation between grain and weeds is more difficult than otherwise. But the master has a different idea in dealing with the weeds. Unlike a typical farmer, he allows wheat and weed to grow together until the harvest. In other words, early separation of them is prohibited. On the one hand, it is hard to separate between good and bad in the real world. There is no perfect person who can judge others. Even a good person may have enemies or evil in his/her mind. On the other hand, God’s will is to save all, good and bad. Until the last day of judgment, what Christians must do is not to separate or judge but to love them, wrestling with God.

***Vineyard Workers (Matt 20:1-16)***

In the parable of “The Vineyard Workers,” the master is atypical in society since he is concerned about full employment and justice for all workers. Some scholars see the master as an evil character who exploits his laborers in ways that make them compete with each other while paying not enough pay to all. But that reading is hardly persuasive, as we will see. The landlord goes out to find laborers five times, which is unusual because he could send his manager. He even goes out to the market at five o’clock, an hour before the closing of the vineyard. He sends all workers, healthy or sick, old or young, to the vineyard. Indeed, all workers needed work. They are not lazy but jobless (*argos* in vv. 3, 6).

As pay time is near, all laborers wait for their wage. Those who joined the vineyard late in the afternoon receive one denarion and so those who came early in the morning expect to receive more

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even though they came with the agreement of the usual daily wage. To their surprise, they also receive the same one denarion. So they complain to the master “like the grumbling of the Israelites in the desert” (Exod 17:3; Num 11:1; 14:27, 29). However, this complaint is groundless because they were contracted with one denarion, which is the usual daily wage — proper to their daily living. Being preoccupied with greed, they do not see the needs of others who came late. Moreover, there is no guarantee that these workers who came early in the morning worked harder than the rest. All of them are employed even at different times. They are all paid the same. That is an important concept of justice, which is economic justice. This story is reminiscent of the manna story in Exod 16:16: “This is what the LORD has commanded: ‘Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.’”

The master defends his action above, saying: “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am good (*agathos*)?” (16:15). Here *agathos* means “good.” He says he is good because he cares about economic justice for all and full employment. The character of “good” applies to God, as Jesus says in Mark 10:18: “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” Otherwise, “generous” is not a good translation of *agathos*. The master’s point is not that he can do whatever he wants because he is generous or mighty. His rationale is that he is good or merciful.<sup>8</sup>

8. Here the master is like God, who wants all his creation and people to live in justice and peace in his garden, which is the world. In extension, all people are to find work in his creation. All people are to be fed in it. This is an economic justice envisioned in this parable. In fact, this kind of equal distribution of pay is found in 1 Sam 30:24-25 when David distributes the share of the spoil equally among those who go down into the battle and those who stay by the baggage (v.24).

## Conclusion

In the selected parables, we have seen the importance of mercy, the key virtue that Jesus employs in his stories. Mercy is the starting point for the family, as in the “Father and Two Sons.” While justice is important, the first thing to do is to have mercy toward one another, as God is merciful toward all. Otherwise, reconciliation takes time and needs intentional efforts by all members of the family. Mercy is also the basis for one’s attitude toward others, as in the “Pharisee and Tax Collector.” The Pharisee’s problem is not the attitude of self-righteousness, but the lack of a merciful mind toward the unfortunate. He forgets he is also a mere human being who needs God’s mercy. Others are not the source of one’s pride. He must compare with God, who is merciful and demanding the imitation of his character. Matt 5:43-48 is a good reminder of this teaching that God is a paragon to emulate:

<sup>43</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ <sup>44</sup> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup> For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? <sup>48</sup> Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

*Teleios* in 5:48 means “to be perfect, complete or whole.” One can be perfect through mercy, extending God’s love and mercy to even enemies.

Mercy should also remain important to community behavior, as in the “Wheat and Weed.” In any community, indeed, in the world at large, there is a mixture of good and evil. The caution is one cannot hurry to judge others. One must introspect oneself and see others through the lens of mercy. Otherwise, if judgment or separation is done in the present, no one can stand it. Mercy must be also the key virtue in matters of economic lives, as in “The Father and Two Sons.” Justice without mercy is as cruel as a society without mercy. In the above parable, justice is economic justice, a form of distributive justice. The workers who joined the vineyard late need the same income as others for their daily lives. The master argues that he is good because he cares for all workers in his vineyard, including those who came late. He is good because he is righteous and merciful.

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