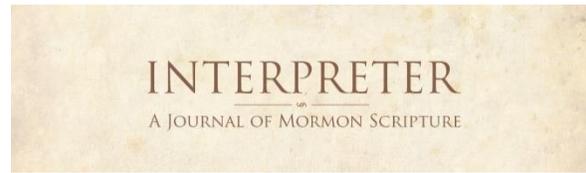




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## The Parable of the Benevolent Father and Son

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## The Parable of the Benevolent Father and Son

Matthew R. Linford

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# THE PARABLE OF THE BENEVOLENT FATHER AND SON

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**Matthew R. Linford**

*Abstract: A discussion is presented on the Parable of the Prodigal Son, including the departure of the young man into a faraway land, his return, and the welcome he received from his father. To better understand the cultural significance of this story, a Middle Eastern scholar (Kenneth Bailey) is referenced. The prodigal son breaks his father's heart when he leaves home, but at the same time his older brother fails in his duty to his family. The father in the parable represents Christ, who is seen to take upon himself the shame of his returning boy and later of his older brother. The reinstatement of the prodigal son is confirmed by the actions of the father, who embraces him, dresses him in a robe, puts shoes on his feet, has a ring placed on his finger, brings him into his house, and kills the fatted calf for him. These actions have deep gospel and cultural significance. The older son's failure to come into the feast for his brother is a public insult to his father, and his words to his father in the courtyard are a second public insult. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is shown to be similar to other stories from the scriptures, including Jesus's meal with Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-43), the Parable of the Man and His Great Supper (Luke 14:16-24), the Parable of the King and His Son's Wedding (Matthew 22:2-14), and Lehi's dream in 1 Nephi 8. Consistent elements across these stories include a feast/meal, a male authority figure who initiates or invites others to the feast, well-to-do guests who refuse the invitation, their criticism of the host of the feast and their fellowman, an application of grace, and the presence of the less favored individuals at the feast at the end of the stories. It is shown that the prodigal son represents the publicans and sinners of Jesus's day, while the older son represents the scribes and Pharisees. Emphasis is placed on the remarkable countercultural and benevolent role played by the father/patriarch in these stories.*

The parables of Jesus are masterpieces of brevity and depth. They are often incredibly rich in meaning — seemingly small details can have profound significance. Not least among these instructive stories is the Parable of the Prodigal Son recorded in Luke 15. As this will be a primary topic of this essay, the text of this parable is provided here:<sup>1</sup>

11 And he [Jesus] said, A certain man had two sons:

12 And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.

13 And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.

14 And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want.

15 And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

16 And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

17 And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!

18 I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee,

19 And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.

20 And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

21 And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes from the Bible in this essay are from the King James Version (KJV) of the text published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

22 But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet:

23 And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry:

24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

25 Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing.

26 And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant.

27 And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound.

28 And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and entreated him.

29 And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:

30 But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.

31 And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.

32 It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.

### **The Prodigal Son's Departure and Stay in a Far Land**

It appears that an awareness of the cultural context of this parable is important for understanding its message. I think this argument should resonate with Latter-day Saints for two reasons. First, in 2 Nephi 25:1, Nephi explains that Isaiah is difficult to understand unless one has an understanding of “the manner of prophesying among the Jews.” Nephi continues in verse 5 of this chapter by stating, “Yea, and my soul delighteth in the words of Isaiah, for I came out from Jerusalem, and mine eyes hath

beheld the things of the Jews, and I know that the Jews do understand the things of the prophets, *and there is none other people that understand the things which were spoken unto the Jews like unto them, save it be that they are taught after the manner of the things of the Jews.*<sup>2</sup> Clearly Jesus was the greatest of the prophets. It stands to reason that an understanding of the cultural context in which He operated would also help us understand His words. Second, one of our best-known LDS scholars, Hugh Nibley, repeatedly made reference to the Bedouins of Arabia. Nibley used their culture and that of the Middle East in general to help us better understand the Book of Mormon. In this essay, I will refer frequently to another scholar, Dr. Kenneth E. Bailey, who came to conclusions similar to Nibley's. In particular, Bailey spent decades working in the villages of the Middle East. He spoke and read the ancient and modern languages of both the scriptures and of that part of the world. Bailey observed that Middle Eastern peasants had conserved their culture in a remarkably constant way *over millennia*. This is scarcely imaginable in a culture like ours that changes so quickly. I recommend that anyone interested in the topic of this essay read Bailey's two books entitled *The Cross & the Prodigal: Luke 15 Through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants* and *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*.<sup>3</sup> Whether directly referenced or not, many of the insights in this essay on New Testament passages come from Bailey.

Most of us are very familiar with the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It begins with the words: "A certain man had two sons." We are then told that the younger son requested his inheritance. Bailey explained that in his ancient culture, this was an unthinkable act.<sup>4</sup> For a young man to demand his inheritance while his father was still alive was tantamount to saying that he wished his father were dead! Accordingly, the father would have been within his rights to become angry, to refuse, and to punish the boy. Nevertheless, the father, as he does throughout this parable, behaves in a countercultural way, and, without resistance, divides his inheritance between his sons. The Law of Moses stipulates that the younger son would receive one-third of the property and the older son a double portion, or two-thirds. And as Bailey explained so eloquently, while the

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2 Emphasis added

3 Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal: Luke 15 Through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants* (Westmont, IL; InterVarsity Press, 2005); Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Westmont, IL; InterVarsity Press 2008).

4 Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal*, 40–44.

younger son hadn't actually broken the Law of Moses in his request, he had most certainly broken his father's heart. Furthermore, the property of a family in a small village, which always included that of the extended family, would be carefully guarded and passed down from generation to generation. The loss of the resources taken by the prodigal son would have had a considerably negative impact on their wealth. And the fact that he left town so quickly would most likely have meant that he had to take whatever price he could for the property — he would have sold it at a considerable loss. Furthermore and perhaps even most importantly, this series of events would come at the price of great embarrassment to the father and the remaining family members because nothing in a little village in the Middle East is a secret.

But something else is taking place in the early lines of this parable that will probably not be noticed by Western observers. Bailey emphasizes that if there were a conflict between two parties in this ancient culture, a mediator was required to bridge their differences. They could not do this themselves because they must save face at all costs. This mediator would be chosen based on his close relationships with both parties. There was only one logical mediator between the father and the prodigal son in this parable and that was the older boy. Immediately when he saw what was happening, the older son should have rushed in and worked with all his might to clear up the matter and save the good name (and property) of his father and family. This was his sacred obligation. If he cared at all about his father or brother, he would have aggressively taken on this role. Ultimately, the fact that he does nothing can mean only one thing: He hates them both. Perhaps the older son's behavior and attitude provide a motivation for the younger son's inopportune exit. When the father died, the older son would become the head of the clan. The younger brother may have been looking for a way to get out from under him. Something appears to be rotten here.

Soon after these painful events, the younger son traveled far away from home and "wasted his substance with riotous living" (v. 13). Bailey explains that this may have been nothing more than throwing parties to curry favor with his new neighbors. However, he additionally notes that it was particularly reprehensible for a Hebrew to lose his substance among the Gentiles. Accordingly, the barrier to the prodigal son's returning home had become nearly insurmountable — he would be mercilessly mocked, persecuted, and shunned if he returned to his village in rags. So, again, while the prodigal son's behavior may or may not have been immoral, he certainly didn't manage his money wisely. In the parable

of the talents (Matthew 25:24–26) and the tower (Luke 14:28–30), Jesus rebuked those who misuse their resources. In any case, after the prodigal son had “spent all,” a “mighty famine” arose, and he “began to be in want” (v. 14). He sought employment, joining “himself to a citizen of that country” who “sent him into his fields to feed swine” (v. 15) — a loathsome job for a Jew. The fact that the prodigal son’s employer was a “citizen of that country” and possessed “swine,” an unclean animal, indicates that he was not an Israelite. The prodigal son’s situation was desperate. He was away from his people, and he had lost his fortune. He was so hungry that “he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him” (v. 16). He may have stayed in this wretched condition for some time because the parable speaks of him “[coming] to himself” (v. 17). At that point, he remembered the favorable environment of the home he had left, where even the hired servants “have bread enough and to spare” (v. 17). He proposed within himself to return home but decided that his departure and fall had left him with no other options but perhaps to request to become a servant in his father’s house — at least that way he would not starve. He rehearsed the words he would say to his father — he would confess his sins and unworthiness, acknowledging that he has sinned against his father and heaven, and then ask for a much lower position than the one he had previously.

Bailey again provides some valuable textual and cultural insights here. It might be tempting to read the words “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee” (v. 21) as an indication that the prodigal son had experienced a change of heart and repented or at least had started his repentance process before he left for home. However, this phrase needs to be examined with care. We should remember that Jesus directed this parable as well as the two before it to the Pharisees, who were a sophisticated/learned audience (vv. 2–3). They would immediately have recognized the source of the words Jesus placed in the mouth of the prodigal son as “a paraphrase”<sup>5</sup> of those that Pharaoh used on Moses and Aaron during the plagues (Exodus 10:16). And, of course, Pharaoh was trying to manipulate Moses, i.e., the prodigal son’s speech was disingenuous. Indeed, Bailey suggests in his analysis that the prodigal son was trying here to find a way to save himself.<sup>6</sup> His goal appears to have been to get his father to help him become a skilled craftsman. He would endure the crushing shame of coming home, which

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5 Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal*, 59.

6 Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal*, 58–62.

only starvation could compel him to face, and hope for some education, make some money, and then reclaim a position in his society. And so he returned to his village. It must have been a long journey home because he had gone “into a far country” (v. 13).

### **The Prodigal Son’s Return**

In spite of the prodigal son’s request to receive his inheritance, the father had not disowned him. He left the door open for his son’s return. It also appears he was watching for his boy, for the scripture says: “when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him.” The father then had compassion, ran to his son, and embraced and kissed him (v. 20). Bailey’s insight is again important. He notes that the Greek word translated as *ran* was actually *raced*. The father raced to his son. As we have noted, both the father and the prodigal son understood the awful punishment and ostracism that awaited the boy. Here the father’s behavior is again absolutely extraordinary. As Bailey notes, in Middle Eastern culture, a man of the father’s stature would always walk in a slow, deliberate way.<sup>7</sup> He would never run, let alone race. In addition, for a man in robes to run, and especially for him to race, he would need to gather his robes in his arms and expose his legs. Both running and exposing his body would cause him tremendous shame in his community — these would be unthinkable acts. Thus, no doubt to his utter amazement, the prodigal son sees his father take at least some of his shame upon him, racing partly naked through the village. This act would draw at least some of the attention and scorn of the community from the returning child to the benevolent father. And here the prodigal son seems to melt. He repeats the first bit of his rehearsed speech but then leaves off the part about becoming a servant (craftsman) (v. 21). It seems at this point he has given up his plan to save himself. He now puts himself entirely into his father’s hands. Of great significance here is that only when the prodigal son understood what his father (Christ) was willing to do for him (bear his shame) could he truly repent.

Indeed, Bailey suggests that in this and the previous parable (the Lost Sheep) (Luke 15:3–7) — remember they were given as a unit — Christ is putting forward a definition of repentance. This might seem confusing. What *did* the lost sheep do to repent? The answer appears to be: He lets Christ find him and take him home. Hence, assuming the wandering sheep represents us, as Isaiah 53:6 suggests it might, we

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<sup>7</sup> Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal*, 66–74.

repent when we stop running from Christ, i.e., we stop our mad march into the wilderness, and we let Him find us and carry us home.

We see the same dynamic in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. That is, what *does* the prodigal son do to repent? The text seems to suggest that he simply let Christ (the father in the parable) save him. He put away his plan for saving himself and instead “[relied] wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save” (2 Nephi 31:19). And as Bailey observes, the prodigal son didn’t have to let the father clothe him and bring him home.<sup>8</sup> He could have insisted on his original plan of becoming a craftsman via some sort of false modesty: “Oh, no, no, really, I’m not worthy to be your son yet, I don’t deserve any of this. Please just help me go to the neighboring village and earn some money so maybe I can return home some day with a little respectability.”

If this definition of repentance holds any theological water, perhaps it helps us understand why the second principle of the gospel (repentance) follows from the first (faith in the Lord Jesus Christ). That is, while we might try to repent by doing such things as regretting our actions, paying restitution, coming up with elaborate plans to redeem ourselves, etc., perhaps until we begin to see what Christ has done and is willing to do to save us, we will never experience true repentance. Indeed, these parables may be indicating that coming to know and experience Christ’s love, for “He first loved us” (1 John 4:19), is the key to our own and other people’s real change and that repentance is more about what Christ does for us than about what we do. It also may be that all this is closely related to the concept of *receiving* we find in the scriptures.

At first Peter refused to receive the gift Jesus wished to give him when the Savior came to wash his feet (see John 13). When he refused he was told that he would have no part with Christ unless he received the ordinance. Peter then caught on quickly. And if the number of occurrences of a word are an indication of where it is most powerfully taught in the scriptures, the Doctrine and Covenants is the winner regarding the word *receive* with 317 mentions. For example, the phrase “receive the Holy Ghost,” or a variant thereof, is used eleven times in this book of scripture. Another well-known use of the word *receive* is in Section 84:

35 And also all they who receive this priesthood receive me,  
saith the Lord;

36 For he that receiveth my servants receiveth me;

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8 Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal*, 72.

37 And he that receiveth me receiveth my Father;

38 And he that receiveth my Father receiveth my Father's kingdom; therefore all that my Father hath shall be given unto him.

With the boy in a repentant state, the Father (Christ ) goes to work. After embracing and kissing the lad (v. 20), he brings him into his house, has the best robe put upon him, a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. He also has the fatted calf killed and throws a feast stating, "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry" (v. 24). We will see that each of these things has special significance. First, the father embraces and kisses the son. In the April 1992 General Conference of the Church, Elder M. Russell Ballard recounted a dream of his grandfather Melvin J. Ballard in which his grandfather saw the Savior. Elder Melvin J. Ballard recorded: "As I approached He smiled, called my name, and stretched out His hands towards me. If I live to be a million years old I shall never forget that smile. He put His arms around me and kissed me as He took me into His bosom, and He blessed me until my whole being was thrilled."<sup>9</sup>

When Jesus came to His followers in the New World, we read that they came to Him "one by one" (3 Nephi 11:14–15) and touched His hands, feet, and side. Later in this miraculous story, after Jesus had healed the sick within the multitude, it says, "And they did all, both they who had been healed and they who were whole, bow down at his feet, and did worship him; and as many as could come for the multitude did kiss his feet, insomuch that they did bathe his feet with their tears" (3 Nephi 17:10). When Jesus first appeared to Thomas after His resurrection, He said, "Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side" (John 20:27).

These examples suggest that when Jesus appears, it is often accompanied by His touch, kiss, and/or embrace. In 2 Nephi 9, Jacob teaches that the gatekeeper of God's kingdom is the Son Himself. Is it not reasonable to expect that as we enter His kingdom, He will embrace and welcome us in a deeply personal way? Hence I think we can ask: Is the embrace of the prodigal son by the father, who represents Christ, an indication that the younger son is being welcomed into His presence?<sup>10</sup>

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9 "The Blessings of Sacrifice," April 1992 General Conference, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1992/04/the-blessings-of-sacrifice>.

10 Along these lines, is the betrayal of the Son of Man by a kiss even more insidious than it might appear at first glance? Did Judas choose a gesture of

Second, the father has his servants dress the son in a robe. In both ancient and modern times, the wearing of a robe has been a part of temple worship. The recent video entitled “Sacred Temple Clothing”<sup>11</sup> produced by the Church shows pictures of LDS temple clothing and emphasizes that the robes worn in the temples of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are “reserved for the highest sacraments of the faith.” Is the dressing of the prodigal son in a robe an indication that he is receiving these sacraments? In addition, the father does not command that the son be clothed in any old robe but rather directs that he be placed in the “best robe.” Faithful members of the Church would certainly consider the robes they wear in their temple worship to meet this qualification. And robes, garments, and raiment seem to have played an important role in other of Jesus’s parables. For example, in his masterful discussion of the Good Samaritan, John W. Welch observes: “Latter-day Saints may find even further significance in the fact that the attackers [of the man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho] apparently want the person’s clothing.” He then notes that this clothing may represent “a temple or holy garment.”<sup>12</sup> According to Bailey, “The ‘best robe’ is naturally the father’s finest robe.”<sup>13</sup> Nephi, a Hebrew who thoroughly understood Middle Eastern culture, also recognized the importance of robes in God’s economy and of being clothed in them. In his psalm he pleads: “O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness!” (2 Nephi 4:33).

The Latin Vulgate Bible<sup>14</sup> is one of the earliest extant translations of the New Testament. In my reading of it, I have found it very similar to the KJV of the Bible that is used by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. There are, however, some small but perhaps significant differences between its rendition of verse 22 of Luke 15 and the KJV translation. In my Latin-English interlinear New Testament, it reads:

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profound significance to Christ in order to mock him even as he betrayed him? Is there deeper meaning in Jesus’s response: “Betrayest thou the Son of man with a kiss?” (Luke 22:48) There was no shortage of irony in the Savior’s life — was He betrayed in a manner very similar to the one He would use to greet and offer salvation to the faithful?

11 “Sacred Temple Clothing,” LDS Media Library, <https://www.lds.org/media-library/video/2014-01-1460-sacred-temple-clothing?lang=eng>.

12 John W. Welch, “The Good Samaritan: A Type and Shadow of the Plan of Salvation” *BYU Studies* 38/2 (1999): 50–115.

13 Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal*, 71.

14 *Biblia Sacra, The Holy Bible in Latin and English* (South Bend, IN; Ex Fontibus Company, 2009).

22. Dixit autem pater ad servos suos: Cito proferte stolam primam, et induite illum, et date annulum in manum ejus, et calceamenta in pedes ejus:

with the accompanying translation:

22. And the father said to his servants: Bring forth quickly the first robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet:

The differences between the Latin Vulgate and King James versions are in the phrase, “Cito proferte stolam primam” (“Bring forth quickly the first robe”). *Cito* means quickly. *Stola* means robe or apparel, and *prima* means first, where the *m* suffix on these words is a grammatical ending that indicates that *stola* (robe) is functioning as the direct object (the accusative case) in this sentence. The word *quickly* is important. The father wasted no time in clothing the son — the salvation of his son was of primary importance. Also of interest is the phrase *stolam primam* (first robe or first apparel). Is it possible that this first robe or apparel is a reference to a robe/glory that was possessed by the son before this mortal life that is now being returned to him?

Third, a ring was placed on the prodigal son’s hand. In the ancient world signet rings often functioned as signatures for their owners. Fausset’s *Bible Dictionary* notes that Pharaoh transferred his royal authority to Joseph with a ring (Genesis 41:42), as did Ahasuerus to Haman (Ester 3:8–10) and Mordecai (Esther 8:2).<sup>15</sup> This source further notes: “In Luke 15:22 it is the father’s token of favor, dignity, and sonship to the prodigal.” Thus, this bestowal suggests an endowment of power and authority. In practical terms, the ring represents the family charge card — the power to buy and sell and to transact business.

Fourth, the prodigal son is given shoes. As Bailey notes, “Slaves go barefoot. Sons wear shoes.”<sup>16</sup>

Fifth, while the entry of the prodigal son into the father’s house is not specifically described in the parable, it must have occurred because later in the parable the older son is found outside the house while his younger brother and father are within. Again, if the father in this parable represents our Heavenly Father, then it stands to reason that the house represents our father’s abode. That is, it could represent one of our temples, one of our meetinghouses, or perhaps even the Celestial

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<sup>15</sup> “Ring,” Fausset’s Bible Dictionary, <http://www.bible-history.com/faussets/R/Ring/>

<sup>16</sup> Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal*, 71.

Kingdom. On our sacred temples we write, “Holiness to the Lord. The House of the Lord.”

Finally, we read that the father had the fatted calf killed so they could have a feast. Feasts were of great significance in the Law of Moses. We read of Jesus going up to Jerusalem for the feasts (see John 7:8–10). Leviticus 23:2 states, “Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, Concerning the feasts of the Lord, which ye shall proclaim to be holy convocations even these are my feasts.” And while the sacrament had not been introduced at this point in Jesus’s ministry, perhaps this feast can be seen as a reference to this important ordinance. In addition, there appears to be significance in the slaying of an animal at the return of the prodigal son. The Old Testament notes the slaying of a calf as a sin offering. In Leviticus 9:2, 7–8 we read:

2 And he said unto Aaron, Take thee a young calf for a sin offering, and a ram for a burnt offering, without blemish, and offer them before the Lord.

7 And Moses said unto Aaron, Go unto the altar, and offer thy sin offering, and thy burnt offering, and make an atonement for thyself, and for the people: and offer the offering of the people, and make an atonement for them; as the Lord commanded.

8 Aaron therefore went unto the altar, and slew the calf of the sin offering, which was for himself.

Bailey noted that a fatted calf will feed an entire village — the feast will be a village-wide event.<sup>17</sup> Thus, this event would further remove the prodigal son’s shame, and his reconciliation with his father would be acknowledged by the entire community.

In summary, we see a series of remarkable actions by the father (Christ), which point to the rescue, reinstatement, and reconciliation of the prodigal son. By extension, we see Christ’s willingness to bear our shame and afflictions. If in this story the prodigal son has been completely forgiven and reinstated — if he has returned “safe and sound” as the servant said, which means “unharmful, free from injury,”<sup>18</sup> it would be consistent with President Boyd K. Packer’s statement: “[T]here is no habit, no addiction, no rebellion, no transgression, no offense small or large which is exempt from the promise of complete forgiveness. No

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17 Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal*, 78.

18 “Live Journal Word\_Ancestry,” <http://word-ancestry.livejournal.com/69719.html>.

matter what has happened in your life, the Lord has prepared a way for you to come back.”<sup>19</sup>

### The Older Son

The older son was “in the field” (v. 25). We don’t know exactly what he was doing there. He may have been working. Like Isaac of old, he may have gone there to meditate (Genesis 24:63). Bailey observed, “No landowner with servants ever engages in manual labor, neither do his sons. The older son has been seated respectively in the shade somewhere, supervising the laborers.”<sup>20</sup> In any case, there is no indication that his behavior was anything less than good and honorable. And after a day of work, he was on his way home. But as he approached the house, he heard music. He called a servant and enquired as to the reason. He was informed of his brother’s return, the joy of his father receiving him again, and the ensuing celebration. However, “he was angry, and would not go in” (v. 28). Bailey indicates that this refusal was of great significance. Indeed, “At such a banquet the father sits with the guests. The older son often stands and serves the meal as a ‘head waiter.’ The important difference between the older son of the family and the other servants is that the older son joins in conversation with the seated company. By stationing the older son as a kind of hovering head waiter, the family is in effect saying, ‘You, our guests, are so great that our son is your servant.’”<sup>21</sup> (It is hard to miss the parallel between this tradition and our Heavenly Father’s plan in which His Son becomes our servant.) In any case, Bailey emphasizes that the older son’s refusal to enter is a colossal breach of etiquette. Indeed, it is “an intentional public insult to his father,” an insult to the guests, and “an open rupture of relationship between the son and his father.”<sup>22</sup>

But the father’s behavior is again astonishing. In an entirely countercultural way, he sets aside the anger and punishment that he could have justifiably unleashed on his older son and walks out to him. In effect, the father (Christ) is now bearing the shame (sin) of his older son along with the dishonor he has brought to the family. Twice in a single day, he goes out to a son to seek reconciliation and to shield him from the shame he would face in his community. By extension we again see Christ’s willingness to save and bear the shame of us all — prodigal

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19 “The Savior’s Selfless and Sacred Sacrifice,” *Ensign*, April 2015, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2015/04/the-saviors-selfless-and-sacred-sacrifice?lang=eng>.

20 Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal*, 78.

21 Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal*, 81–82.

22 Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal*, 82.

sons and older sons alike. In particular, the parable says that his father went out “and entreated him” (v. 28). Merriam-Webster defines *entreat* as: “to ask (someone) in a serious and emotional way.”<sup>23</sup> That is, we are not told what the father initially said to his older son to encourage him to come into his house and take his place, only how he said it. Nevertheless, after this first entreaty from his father, the older boy still protests:

29 . . . Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed  
I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest  
me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:

30 But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured  
thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.

Bailey notes that this interaction would have been in public, in a courtyard/open area next to the house. As justification for this interpretation, he emphasizes that the “servant” the older son questioned was most likely a village boy — the Greek word can be translated either way.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the “servant” in the parable replied to the older son by saying “your father,” which he would say if he were a village boy, and not “my master,” which he would say if he were a servant. Bailey also notes that culturally there were always groups or gangs of boys from the village, who would be too young to attend the party, who would hang around outside, listening to the music and conversation, and in general enjoying the event.<sup>25</sup> As we noted, nothing is secret in a little Middle Eastern village. Thus, it appears that the older son speaks publicly to his father in the courtyard, within earshot of the groups of boys and other guests, and thereby makes sure that his speech will be repeated in every house in the village. But there is another cultural element that we probably miss. As Bailey notes: “He rebels against his father. In this speech he insults his father for the second time in one evening by omitting any title. The phrase “O father” is an essential sign of respect. The older son chooses to be rude.”<sup>26</sup>

For the last year, Massoud Kaykhani, a Middle Eastern scholar from Iran, has been working in my laboratory at Brigham Young University. His presence seemed like an ideal opportunity for me to “fact check” Bailey’s statements with a someone intimately familiar with Middle

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23 “Entreat,” Merriam-Webster, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/entreat>.

24 Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal*, 79–80.

25 Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal*, 79.

26 Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal*, 84.

Eastern culture. As I described the parable and Bailey's explanation of it, Massoud repeatedly nodded his head in agreement. Massoud then offered his own commentary on the respect that is due to fathers in his culture. He explained that even today:

- (i) The father in a family must be obeyed absolutely. While one may be able to request to do something or explain why one might like to take a certain course of action, if the father thinks otherwise, one has no choice but to follow one's father's counsel.
- (ii) One must show constant respect to one's father. Massoud stated that even though he is 50 years old and a distinguished professor at a university, not to mention the fact that nearly 100 masters and PhD students have graduated under his supervision, which is a major accomplishment, any time his father enters a room where he is, he must stand and remain standing until his father is seated. He said it does not matter how many times his father enters the room — it could be ten times in an hour. Each and every time he must show this same respect.
- (iii) Failure to respect and obey one's father will result in severe penalties within the community — one will be labeled and gossiped about as a "terrible person."

These observations about Middle Eastern culture further confirm the grossly inadequate behavior of both sons and the gracious, benevolent responses of their father.

Continuing his analysis, Bailey notes that we really have no good reason to believe the older son's comment about his brother devouring his father's living "with harlots."<sup>27</sup> He hadn't spoken with his brother, and there is no indication they had made any contact. How would he have known? The older brother is also wrong about his brother devouring his father's living in general. While the circumstances of their parting were far from ideal, the younger brother had been legally given his inheritance, it was no longer the father's, and the boy could spend it as he chose. At the same time, in verse 30, the older son is whining about

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27 Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal*, 53.

the current state of affairs. He clearly resents the fact that while he then owned all the property, according to Middle Eastern tradition his father was entitled to administer the profits of it as long as he was still alive, i.e., this is why his father can instruct that the fatted calf be killed and a party be thrown. This may be the motivation for the father's gentle reminder of their interconnectedness: "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine" (v. 31).

By using the words: "this thy son" (v. 30) in his speech, the older son also seems to depersonalize and objectify his younger brother, i.e., he neither refers to him by name nor acknowledges their fraternal relationship. The book *Anatomy of Peace* describes the self-betrayal that takes place when we fail to serve others as we know we should. Here are some quotes from the book that may pertain to the behavior of the older son. The teacher in *Anatomy of Peace* is asked by a student: "How is a choice to betray oneself a choice to go to war?" He answers: "Because when I betray myself ... I create within myself a new need — a need that causes me to see others accusingly, a need that causes me to care about something other than truth and solutions." The teacher then discusses an earlier failure in his life to serve another person, remarking: "[T]he moment I began to violate the basic call of his humanity upon me, I created within me a new need, a need that didn't exist the moment before; I needed to be justified for violating the truth I knew in that moment. ... Having violated this truth, my entire perception now raced to make me justified. ... [W]hen I betray myself, others' faults become immediately inflated in my heart and mind. I begin to 'horribilize' others. That is, I begin to make them out to be worse than they really are. And I do this because the worse they are, the more justified I feel. A needy man on the street suddenly represents a threat to my very peace and freedom. A person to help becomes an object to blame."<sup>28</sup> If, as Bailey claims, the older son had repeatedly violated his obligations to his father and brother, he would have to justify himself for his behavior. Arguably, his speech to his father is an attempt at this irrational "horribilization" of his sibling and even his father.

Bailey also makes the important observation that in the older son's statement, "yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends" (v. 29), he is clearly indicating that neither his father nor his brother is his friend — he had no interest in celebrating with them.<sup>29</sup>

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28 The Arbinger Institute, *The Anatomy of Peace*, (Oakland, CA; Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2006), 94–96.

29 Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal*, 85.

There is much of Bailey's analysis that I have not mentioned, and it is compelling, but one thing should not be overlooked here in this discussion, and that is the motivation for Jesus's giving the three parables in Luke 15. The first two verses of the chapter read:

1 Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him.

2 And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.

Again there is a part of these verses that is, for the most part, lost on us in the West. As Bailey notes, in the Middle Eastern culture of Jesus's day, eating with another person was of tremendous significance.<sup>30</sup> It signaled a deep level of acceptance, friendship, and intimacy. The scribes and Pharisees are highly critical of Jesus, even incensed with him, for associating with/accepting/eating with publicans and sinners. The three parables that follow these two verses appear to be a response to their complaint. In particular, in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the father represents Jesus, the older son represents the scribes and Pharisees, and the prodigal son represents the publicans and sinners. In this parable we see Jesus point out to the leaders in Israel how they (the older son) had repeatedly shirked their duty in the church and to their fellow man. The older son's claim never to have broken any of his father's commandments appears to echo the repeated claim of the scribes and Pharisees that they rigorously followed the law. And of course we should be skeptical of any who claim never to have sinned (see 1 John 1:8). Indeed, it is ironic that in the very act of proclaiming his flawlessness, the older son is acting against the will of the father and sinning.

We see next, in a remarkable way, how the first words of Chapter 15 have come full circle at the end of the chapter. At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus was criticized for eating with undesirables. At the end of the chapter, the father (Jesus) has thrown a feast for the undesirable prodigal son (publicans and sinners), i.e., he is eating with him, while the older son (scribes and Pharisees) is found outside the feast criticizing him for it. The parable then ends *without* a clear resolution. What will the older son do? Does he listen to his father, accept the grace he is being offered, and come into the tent, taking his appointed place? Or does he remain angry and bitter and in a state of rebellion? We are left hanging. This ambiguous conclusion appears to be directed at the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus appears to be saying to them, "I'm still here,

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30 Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal*, 28–29.

and there's still time. I'm working with you even though you haven't acted appropriately as leaders in Israel. Can't you see how, even now, I'm bearing your shame again and again? I have grounds to disinherit you, but instead I choose to gently reason with you. In the same way I'm willing to bring home your brother, the Prodigal, and save him, I want you in my house as well. Will you come in?" Lamentably, we know the choice the scribes and Pharisees ultimately made.

While the primary audience for this parable appears to have been the scribes and Pharisees, they don't seem to have been the only ones within earshot of the Savior when he offered it (see again Luke 15:1–2). Accordingly, is each one of us also being placed in the position of the older son? Is grace being extended to us in the same way? Do we get to write the end of this parable for ourselves? Will we choose to put aside any feelings of entitlement, resentment, offense, and self-righteousness toward God and our fellow man to enjoy the blessings that have been promised to us?

### **Comparison of the Parable of the Prodigal Son to Other Stories/Parables in the Scriptures**

The Parable of the Prodigal Son appears to end with some irony. The less fortunate, less well off, penniless, younger son is saved, while the older, wealthier, more entitled boy is not, or at least his salvation is pending. Is this a pattern that shows up in other places in the scriptures? Below, we will discuss some of Jesus's other parables that seem to contain a similar form, along with Lehi's dream in the Book of Mormon. We will see that there appears to be an archetypal story that underlies all these scriptures.

#### **Example 1**

In Luke 7:36–43 we read:

36 And one of the Pharisees desired him that he would eat with him. And he went into the Pharisee's house, and sat down to meat.

37 And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment,

38 And stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs

of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.

39 Now when the Pharisee which had bidden him saw it, he spake within himself, saying, This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner.

40 And Jesus answering said unto him, Simon, I have somewhat to say unto thee. And he saith, Master, say on.

41 There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty.

42 And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most?

43 Simon answered and said, I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most. And he said unto him, Thou hast rightly judged.

44 And he turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head.

45 Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet.

46 My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment.

47 Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.

48 And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven.

49 And they that sat at meat with him began to say within themselves, Who is this that forgiveth sins also?

50 And he said to the woman, Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace.

Is it possible that there are two feasts taking place simultaneously in this story? Clearly there is the physical meal being served in Simon's house, during which Luke records that a woman of the city, who was a sinner, anointed Jesus's feet in a particularly tender way.

Just as associating with publicans, sinners, and undesirables had aroused the anger of the Pharisees in the first verses of Luke 15 and

also of the older son in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the woman's actions triggered in Simon the Pharisee thoughts of criticism towards both the Savior and the woman. Knowing his thoughts, Jesus spoke to him of a creditor who had two debtors, where one owed ten times more than the other: 500 vs. 50 pence. Neither could pay his debt, but more importantly, like the prodigal son who "had spent all" (v. 14), "they had nothing to pay." This remarkable creditor, who represents the Father and the Son, "frankly forgave them both."

Jesus then asks which debtor will love the creditor more. Simon correctly answers that it is the one who had the larger debt. The Lord then immediately compares the woman to the 500-pence debtor, and perhaps by extension Simon to the 50-pence debtor. He contrasts the woman's humble, tender actions of adoration to Simon's indifference. Because Jesus stated in His story that the creditor "frankly forgave" both debtors, it seems as if Jesus came to Simon's dinner willing to fully forgive both the woman, whose sins were "many," and Simon, whose sins may have been an order of magnitude less.

Was Jesus inviting both the woman and Simon to a metaphorical feast — a feast within a feast in which they could have their sins remitted and be made right with God? Jesus's apparent willingness to forgive both sinners, one of whom was a Pharisee, would be consistent with His statement, "For I am no respecter of persons" (D&C 1:35). This message also appears to be consistent with the one He delivers to the Pharisees in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Is the conclusion of this story similar to that of the Parable of the Prodigal Son in which Christ extends His mercy to both brothers, but it is the less fortunate/less favored individual (the younger son) who gains it? Of course, the Parable of the Prodigal Son suggests that both brothers were sinful and problematic. Thus, by analogy, Simon's sins of pride, spiritual arrogance, and a disdain for others may be as bad as the woman's.

On the other hand, Jesus makes a point of stating that her sins were "many" and suggests a 10:1 ratio between hers and Simon's. What seems to be clear is the final irony in these situations, in which the outwardly less fortunate, less favored individuals have obtained the grace of God, while the more prominent people, who have proclaimed their righteousness, have not accepted it. In both stories all the main characters (the woman, Simon, the prodigal son, and the older son) are very much in need of divine rescue.

This general theme of the need we all have for grace, perhaps more than we might think or want to admit, was beautifully addressed by

Elder Dale G. Renlund in a story he related in the April 2015 General Conference. He said:

Some years ago a wonderful young man named Curtis was called to serve a mission. He was the kind of missionary every mission president prays for. He was focused and worked hard. At one point he was assigned a missionary companion who was immature, socially awkward, and not particularly enthusiastic about getting the work done.

One day, while they were riding their bicycles, Curtis looked back and saw that his companion had inexplicably gotten off his bike and was walking. Silently, Curtis expressed his frustration to God; what a chore it was to be saddled with a companion he had to drag around in order to accomplish anything. Moments later, Curtis had a profound impression, as if God were saying to him, “You know, Curtis, compared to me, the two of you aren’t all that different.”<sup>31</sup>

## Example 2

In Luke 14 we read:

16 Then said he [Jesus] unto him, A certain man made a great supper, and bade many:

17 And sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready.

18 And they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it: I pray thee have me excused.

19 And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused.

20 And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.

21 So that servant came, and shewed his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind.

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31 “Latter-day Saints Keep on Trying,” April 2015 General Conference, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2015/04/latter-day-saints-keep-on-trying>.

22 And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room.

23 And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.

24 For I say unto you, That none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper.

This parable begins with the same words as the Parable of the Prodigal Son: “A certain man.” This again appears to be a reference to our Heavenly Father and his Son. We are then immediately told this man “made a great supper” and “bade many” to come to his feast. We are next told that at “supper time” this man’s servant was sent out to say to the invited ones: “Come; for all things are now ready.” This invitation should not have come as a surprise to these individuals — again, it was “supper time” and they had previously been invited/bidden. However, one by one these individuals refuse the man’s invitation, all using some type of worldly excuse. In his book *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, Bailey explains that these excuses were ridiculous, hollow, and deeply insulting. No one in Jesus’s day would buy a piece of property without *previously* inspecting it meticulously, and no one would buy oxen without *previously* proving them, again with the greatest degree of care. Bailey explains a cultural equivalent of these excuses. Imagine a group of people invited to dinner at someone’s home, chatting in the living room before the meal. The hostess walks in and calls everyone to dinner saying, “The food’s on the table.” One guest then says, “I have to go feed my cat,” and walks out the door. Another says, “I have to pay some bills,” and similarly leaves. With regards to the third fellow, Bailey writes that his “excuse is unspeakably offensive. . . . He does not even ask to be excused. The third guest is very rudely saying, ‘I have a woman in the back of the house, and I am busy with her. Don’t expect me at your banquet. I am not coming.’”<sup>32</sup> Bailey further suggests there is collusion between these guests. Not only were they publicly insulting the man, but their actions were subversive — a feast could go on without one guest, but if all refused, there would be no event.<sup>33</sup>

Like the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, this man’s response is amazing. While initially angry at the original guests, he takes the energy he could have used to retaliate and, as Bailey notes, reprocesses it

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32 Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 313–16.

33 Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 315.

into grace.<sup>34</sup> (Bailey repeatedly refers to this grace as “costly love.”<sup>35</sup>) He extends an invitation to the less fortunate around him, instructing his servant to “bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind.” These were the undesirables in Jesus’s day, and the Pharisees despised them — consider how the Pharisees treated the man Jesus gave sight to in John 9:1–34. When there was yet room in the house, the servant was told to “Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.”

There is irony in this story. Those who had been invited appear to have been prosperous. In addition, they seem to have had a fairly close relationship with the man. (In Middle Eastern culture, you invite your friends to your parties.) Nevertheless, they refuse to go to his feast, rejecting his invitation in an insulting manner. In contrast, those who had originally received no invitation and who certainly do not appear to be as well off as the invited ones, are inside the man’s house at the end of the parable.

### Example 3

In Matthew 22 we read:

2 The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son,

3 And sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come.

4 Again, he sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage.

5 But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise:

6 And the remnant took his servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them.

7 But when the king heard thereof, he was wroth: and he sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city.

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34 Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 316.

35 Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 70.

8 Then saith he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy.

9 Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage.

10 So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests.

11 And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment:

12 And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless.

13 Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

14 For many are called, but few are chosen.

This parable is very similar to the one we just considered from Luke 14. Here, a king organizes an event of great significance — the marriage of his son. Surely those who had received an invitation (“them that were bidden”) would come celebrate with him. His servants go call those individuals. It was time. The feast was ready, and the animals were slaughtered. However, these guests “made light of” his invitation. Some turned to their worldly, economic pursuits, while others mistreated the king’s servants and even killed them. The king destroyed those who had murdered his representatives. His servants are then commanded to find whomsoever they can, going into the highways, to come to the celebration.

The parable states that they “gathered ... as many as they found, both bad and good” so that the wedding would have guests. Again, this story ends with irony in a manner similar to those we have been considering. The invited ones, who must have been close to the king, who were apparently wealthy or in some way preferred, are found outside his feast, while those who were initially without invitation are brought in. Another item here also deserves mention. The king enters the hall for the feast and sees a man who is not properly attired. He asks him how he entered, but the man could not answer for himself. The king then has him expelled into outer darkness. The importance of proper clothing, the “wedding garment,” is again suggestive that the dwelling of this king is connected to the temple.

### Example 4

In 1 Nephi 8 we read about Lehi's dream of the tree of life. Lehi, a father and patriarch, describes this tree as bearing a fruit that is "most sweet, above all that I ever before tasted. Yea, and I beheld that the fruit thereof was white, to exceed all the whiteness that I had ever seen" (1 Nephi 8: 11). Alma suggests that there is, perhaps, also a feast taking place here. In Alma 32: 41–42 we read:

41 But if ye will nourish the word, yea, nourish the tree as it beginneth to grow, by your faith with great diligence, and with patience, looking forward to the fruit thereof, it shall take root; and behold it shall be a tree springing up unto everlasting life.

42 And because of your diligence and your faith and your patience with the word in nourishing it, that it may take root in you, behold, by and by ye shall pluck the fruit thereof, which is most precious, which is sweet above all that is sweet, and which is white above all that is white, yea, and pure above all that is pure; *and ye shall feast upon this fruit* even until ye are filled, that ye hunger not, neither shall ye thirst.<sup>36</sup>

Standing at the tree, Lehi sees his family and calls/invites them to join him. Nephi and Sam, the younger sons, and their mother come to the tree. The older sons refuse to do so. Clearly there is irony here. The oldest sons, Laman and Lemuel, one of whom had the birthright and both of whom were invited, refuse the invitation. Arguably, they are the ones who should have been closest to their father. However, in the first two books of Nephi we learn they rebelled and murmured against Lehi and even conspired to kill him. The response of this patriarch is remarkable. Like the men in the parables we have been discussing, Lehi turns what must have been incredible disappointment and pain into grace as he reaches out to his wayward children. That is, after recounting his dream to them, Lehi entreats them "with all the feeling of a tender parent, that they would hearken to his words, that perhaps the Lord would be merciful to them" (1 Nephi 8:37). Is there a parallel here between the father walking out to and entreating the older son in the Parable of the Prodigal Son and Lehi's words to Laman and Lemuel?

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<sup>36</sup> emphasis added

### Similarities Between the Stories/Parables Considered Herein

In the previous section, we noted some parallels between the stories/parables we have been discussing. To highlight these similarities they are outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1. Comparison of Stories/Parables Considered Herein**

Story	Parable of the Prodigal Son	Story of Simon the Pharisee	Parable of the Man and his Great Supper	Parable of the King and his son's wedding	Lehi's Dream
<b>Event</b>	The prodigal son's home-coming / a feast	The meal at Simon's house but really the "feast" Jesus was offering	"a great supper"	A wedding dinner	Be at the tree, eat of the fruit – a feast
<b>Male authority figure who initiated and/or invited others to the feast</b>	"A certain man," a father of two sons, had servants	Jesus	"A certain man" had a servant	A king	Father Lehi
<b>Those invited, but who have not or would not participate in the event</b>	The older son, an heir of wealth, had the birthright	Simon the Pharisee, in the "in" crowd	Those on the guest list – friends of the man, appear to be well off	Those on the guest list – friends of the man, appear to be well off	Laman and Lemuel, the older sons of a wealthy man
<b>Reasons for not accepting the invitation</b>	Resentment and criticism toward his brother and father, entitlement, self-righteousness	Criticism of the Savior and the woman, disbelief	Ostensibly, preoccupation with the things of the world, but they appear to be trying to undermine the event	Preoccupation with the things of the world, disdain for the king	Anger at / criticism of father and brother, disbelief

<b>How the more favored individuals treated the male authority figure</b>	The older son refused to perform his familial duty and insulted the father publicly	Simon did not respect Jesus when He came to his home	They publicly insulted him	They publicly insulted him, some attacked and killed his servants	They rejected his counsel; murmured against him, and plotted against him
<b>Application of grace</b>	The father does not disown either son. He humiliates himself by coming out to both of them, i.e., he bears their shame.	Jesus extends an offer to remit the sins of the woman and Simon	The man does not retaliate against those who had insulted him, using his energy to invite the less fortunate to his feast	The king takes action against those who killed his servants – he had boundaries – but then invites the less fortunate to his feast	Lehi entreats Laman and Lemuel “with all the feeling of a tender parent ...”
<b>Those forgiven or in the house (God’s presence) at the end of the story</b>	The prodigal son, the younger son of the father, who had returned in poverty	The woman whose “sins were many”	The poor, maimed, halt, etc., those in the highway, etc.	Any the servants of the king could find: “both bad and good”	The mother and younger sons

There is a series of common elements in these stories. In each case there is a special event, a feast, meal, or dinner. A male authority figure, a father, a king, or Jesus, invites one or more people to this important meal. He is close to these people, and they are generally well to do — more prosperous and/or more favored by birth than their siblings/fellow man/neighbors. But they refuse the man’s invitation. They resent him, ignore him, criticize him, publicly insult him, deny him the basic respect he would deserve, and generally look down upon their fellow man. For the most part, the father/authority figure does not disown or punish them for their actions or retaliate. Instead he chooses to apply grace/costly love. He entreats and reasons with those who have insulted him. Nevertheless, there is a line that cannot be crossed. He takes swift and definitive action against those who have killed his servants. There is

irony in these stories. In each case, the younger son(s), less prominent or wealthy individuals, and/or those on the margins of society are present at the feast when the stories end. Some of these stories contain temple imagery — special clothing or the father’s home (this is not listed in the table). In the April 1997 General Conference of the Church, Elder Henry B. Eyring gave a talk entitled: “Finding Safety in Counsel.” He said: “When the words of prophets seem repetitive, that should rivet our attention [on what they say].”<sup>37</sup> Given the repetitive nature of the story outlined in Table 1, we may want to ask ourselves why it is presented so many times in the scriptures and what we can learn from it. Are we seeing an important archetypal story here? What does it teach us about the atonement and Christ’s grace? What does it teach us about the nature of God the Father? Are there warnings we can apply in our lives regarding how we respond to God and his servants as well as how we treat our fellow man?

### **The Parable of the Benevolent Father and Son**

In his October 2003 conference talk, Elder Holland emphasized that Jesus came to teach us about the nature of His Father, where, in essence, He showed us God the Father by showing us Himself.<sup>38</sup> This appears to be the real focus of the Parable of the Prodigal Son — not to focus on a foolish, wasteful young man or his critical older brother but rather to reveal the benevolent nature of the Father and the Son. As we have seen, the father in this story, along with the other patriarchs considered herein, is in every way remarkable. When the younger son requests his inheritance, the father gives it to him without disowning him. He leaves the door open for him to return and experience His grace. When the young man comes to himself he remembers his father: “How many hired servants of my father have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father.” This father was a good provider who even took care of his servants well. Through a series of actions (embracing the son, clothing him, etc.), the father acts to save his returning child.

The Father possesses great wisdom. Neither son in this parable appears to have been able to see himself as he was, but the Father could. The younger son thought he was not worthy even to be called his Father’s

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<sup>37</sup> “Finding Safety in Counsel,” April 1997 General Conference, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1997/05/finding-safety-in-counsel.p1?lang=eng>.

<sup>38</sup> “The Grandeur of God,” October 2003 General Conference, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2003/11/the-grandeur-of-god?lang=eng>.

son, and he thought he had to save himself. The story suggests that the Father thought otherwise and received and fully reinstated him. The older son claimed perfection and to be far superior to his brother. The Father gently reasoned with him, overlooking his pointed insults. We see a Father who is greatly desirous to administer the ordinances of salvation to His children. We encounter a being who is no respecter of persons. This is a Father filled with love and tenderness. He is filled with emotion — think about the embrace he gave to his younger son and of his desire to rejoice and hold a feast. This Father never criticizes either son. This is a Father who meets both boys where they are; he comes out to both of them. Here is a father who is constant in his love towards his children. This is a Father desirous to grant eternal life to his children at the cost of bearing their sins and shame.

All of this should give us great comfort. Joseph Smith spoke of the importance of comprehending God’s character. And because we have all “sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), is it not wonderful to know the nature of our benevolent Father and His benevolent Son — that they will be eagerly watching and waiting for us to return and that they will welcome us home with open arms? When we are consumed with criticism of others, entitlement, resentment, self-righteousness, etc., is it not cause for rejoicing to know that our Father/Jesus will gently entreat us to put aside our hard feelings and reenter His presence? I find it interesting that essentially none of the characters who are found in God’s presence at the end of these stories appear to be without flaw — the prodigal son, the woman who was a sinner, the poor, maimed, halt, those in the highways, and Lehi’s family. In particular, while Nephi knew of God’s love and greatness, he also struggled with his own imperfections (we all do). I think he summarized well both our mortal condition and the goodness of God towards us when he wrote in 2 Nephi 4:19, “And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins; nevertheless, I know in whom I have trusted.”

I apologize for the personal indulgence here. It may sound strange, but for many years, any time I have heard a certain phrase in Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* I have thought of my Heavenly Father. At the family Christmas dinner, Bob Cratchett proposes a toast to his boss, Ebenezer Scrooge, calling him “the founder of the feast!” His wife then berates him because she knows what a despicable individual Scrooge is. I hesitate to use a phrase to describe my Heavenly Father and/or His Son that was originally applied to such an imperfect character in a novel, although it is

noteworthy that Scrooge completely alters the course of his life — he too seems to be a prodigal son, and our analysis here suggests that God cares much more about the final repentant state we attain to in this life than any earlier sinful one. In any case, I cannot hear the phrase “the founder of the feast” without thinking of my Heavenly Father. And are not He and His Son the founders of our feast? Are They not the founders of every good feast, including the feasts considered herein? After centuries of inertia, the likelihood of changing the name of the Parable of the Prodigal Son seems extremely low. Nevertheless, given the remarkable natures of the Father and the Son exhibited in this story, who in my mind are its heroes and central characters, I think a better name for this parable might be “The Parable of the Benevolent Father and Son.”<sup>39</sup> We might then better focus our attention on what this parable teaches us about our Father’s and his Son’s greatness, mercy, and love for each of us.

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<sup>39</sup> For similar reasons, Bailey also suggested that the parable is poorly named. He proposes a different, but related, name for it.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco, CA; Jossey-Bass, 2011).







