

# OpenTheo

## **The Parable of the Lost Son ... or is it? (with Joe McCulley and Kyle Lammott)**

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Today I am joined by two Theopolis Junior Fellows, Joe McCulley and Kyle Lammott, to discuss Luke 15:11-32—a parable perhaps best known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Within the episode we also talk about the Junior Fellows program, which is open for applicants for 2020-2021: <https://theopolisinstitute.com/junior-fellows-program/junior-fellows-application-active/>.

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### **Transcript**

Hello and welcome. Today I'm joined by two friends of mine and we'll be going through a parable. We thought we'd go through the parable of the lost son, or is it the parable of the lost son? That might be a question that we're discussing.

Who is the chief character? What is the parable about? But the people joining me are Kyle Lammott and Joe McCulley and they're two of the fellows in the current Theopolis

Junior Fellows Program. So I thought as we're looking for new students for the forthcoming program, I would introduce the program with two students who have been on it this year, who have experience of what's involved and can tell us a bit about it and then we'll have a flavor of some of the things that we've been doing and discussing together. So welcome to the show.

Thank you, good to be here. Would you be able to just, for the sake of people who've not heard anything about the Theopolis Junior Fellows, would you be able to introduce what it is? Yeah, the Junior Fellows Program has been a great opportunity to partner with Theopolis in the project that they're doing, learn from Dr. Lightheart and yourself and others about typological reading, biblical theology, liturgy, worship, and really just how to apply the scriptures to everyday life in the ministry of the church. So the program is kind of broken into three different sections where the first semester we would travel out to Birmingham and we walked through the scriptures, walked through really from Genesis to Revelation, did an overview and seeing a lot of the connections with the text and then we will go back out in January for the final semester which is going to be around liturgy and in between that we meet with Pescher groups twice a month to discuss different passages that are assigned to us.

So we break up into groups and we work through the context, the structure, exegesis, the connections, the typology, and then finally how would we preach the text. So one of the things we will be doing in the coming few minutes is exploring a text much as we would within a Pescher group. So it will give you a flavor of the sorts of study of the text that we're engaged in.

I'll be interested for your thoughts Joe on how you found the program helpful and what you would recommend for people considering it. Yeah I think for me the program hit me at a really good time of life where I had been transitioning from one thing to another and really needing a lot of structure to sort of pull me through and this summer was really wonderful going down to Birmingham, being part of keeping the hours together, worshipping three times a day with this group and learning how to chant and learning what a robust liturgy looks like and that really was very helpful for me providing another framework for worship, framework for allowing me to develop more thought and and having me be sort of continuing my studies. So I just finished seminary and this was a really nice way to ease into the summer rather than a drop-off at the end of my seminary degree.

I actually get to be in a room with guys working through a text and asking questions and wrestling with theology and that was really nice and there were themes that I picked up in my seminary time that I hadn't got to develop or really turn over in different ways, particularly biblical theology as a concept through my seminary time really was only just starting to begin to be a concept for me. You know, in the beginning in my seminary it was really about tracing these sort of general themes through the work of scripture and

it was really about kingship or about holiness or something like that and I think it's become a lot more robust, a lot more detailed, a lot more intertwined with the text and starting not just to see general themes but actually see the repetition of characters and the repetition of scenes in scripture in the Old Testament and in the New and that's been really fascinating for me and has really opened up perhaps a new way of looking at scripture and seeing God's hand in the text. So yeah, that's a really big one for me.

Thank you. As we've been going through this program we've had these twice monthly Pesha groups and in the last Pesha group we had a series of presentations from the three different groups. So we went through the story of Matthew's crucifixion, we did the demoniac in Mark chapter five and we also did the parable of the lost son or however we're going to describe it within Luke 15 and Jo and Kyle presented that and I thought it would be good to give you a flavour of some of the work that the students have been doing which I found very stimulating.

One of the things that I love is the sort of interactions that develop after you've been together for a week or so and in an intense context you begin to work on a wavelength and I found that very helpful, particularly continuing that over the Pesha groups. It's been a pleasure and an encouragement to have that sort of interaction. So without further ado I'd like to hand it over to you guys to give us an introduction to the parable of the lost son.

Yeah the parable of the lost son indeed has been just a fascinating study and seen multiple angles and different layers to it. If we were to start with the context of what's going on in Luke 15 overall that fits within the third movement of Luke's gospel. The first movement really starts with the introduction and birth narrative which are the first two chapters and then Luke is broken up into different scenes, different movements of where he's ministering.

So chapter three through chapter nine verse 50 is Jesus's ministry in Galilee. He's ministering there and then in verse 51 we see this movement where he sets his face toward Jerusalem and then from Luke 9 51 through 19 27 roughly he is on his way to Jerusalem and it is this section, his journey to Jerusalem where we find chapter 15 and the parable of the lost son or the prodigal son. We'll figure out a name for it by the time we get to it.

How do you find fitting it within a particular section helps you to read the text? I mean as you say Luke is very much, it's not just an isolated narrative mixed within a grab bag of different stories, it's part of a unified text and the text is going somewhere. How have you found that informing your reading of passages like this? Yeah I think understanding the context of Luke 15 within his journey to Jerusalem is really important because this is the section where we see most of Jesus's teaching and parables coming out in Luke. I think in that section there's somewhere around 16 or 17 different parables that are used

and it's at this time also where he begins to really proclaim the kingdom to the nations as well where the administering Galilee and his interactions with the Jewish leaders up to this point has been less than promising.

So now he's starting to really see this judgment or condemnation that's coming to Israel for their lack of faith and then this incorporating of the nations. So yeah seeing the prodigal son story fit within that movement toward Jerusalem I think is very helpful. So what's going on in the immediate context of chapter 15 and the passages immediately surrounding that help to give a firmer grip on what's taking place in the parable? What are the surrounding stories about? Yeah well I think the most important thing to see in chapter 15 is really verses 1 and 2 and that really sets the context for what follows in the whole passage.

You see Jesus in chapter 14 speaking of discipleship. He speaks about the parable of the wedding feast and so on. So you have this incorporation taking place in some of these different teachings around the chapter and then in verse 1 and 2 of chapter 15 you see Jesus sitting down and he's eating with sinners and tax collectors right and he's feasting and the word there for eating he's feasting with much joy.

There's rejoicing, they're celebrating, it's a party and the scribes and the Pharisees they come and they observe this and they take up an issue with it. They have a problem with that. They think to be right before God is to separate as much as possible from sinners and tax collectors.

So this idea that Jesus, this rabbi, would be eating and sharing food and drinking with these people is really offensive and it says that they began grumbling and saying that this man receives and this is to receive with joy sinners and eats with them. So this context of the scribes and the Pharisees frustration or offense with Jesus really sets the tone for the parabolic trilogy that comes right after that. What is this parabolic trilogy that you mentioned? Yeah so in Luke 15 you see we often view as three different parables right.

The parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin and then the parable of the lost son. But this is not the best way to understand it. It's not three separate parables but rather it's one parable with three parts and we see that in Luke 15 verse 3 where Jesus responds to their grumbling by saying that he told them this parable.

It's in the singular. It's not he told them these parables but this one parable. Then he goes on to talk about the shepherd who had lost a sheep and he leaves the 99 and he goes and finds the one.

Then you have a woman who lost a coin, one of her 10 coins. So she essentially sets the other aside and searches diligently throughout the house to try to find the one coin. And then you have the father who has two sons and he lost one of them.

And then the story is about him finding that son again. So they all end at a similar point. How does that ending point help to, well how does the initial controversy help us to maybe fit them together and once we've seen that connection? Right yeah so seeing the three parables working together is absolutely necessary to be able to interpret it rightly.

They interpret each other, they illumine each other and what we see happening at the end of each of the parables or the first two parts of the parable is there is rejoicing that takes place. When the shepherd finds a sheep he rejoices and he invites his friends to come and rejoice with him. Likewise when the woman finds the coin she rejoices and invites people to come and rejoice with her.

And these two parables or these two stories show us that their rejoicing actually images the rejoicing that goes on in heaven when a sinner is found. When a sinner repents there is great rejoicing. So part of the tension that we come to with the lost son is the son is found, he's brought back in, there's a party, there's an invitation to come and rejoice to celebrate that this son who was once dead is now alive.

And then the end of the parable is the tension with the older brother because he doesn't want to come and celebrate, he doesn't want to rejoice. So this last part of the parable ends open-ended. We don't know if the older brother comes in or not.

So then that kind of brings us back to the beginning with Jesus and the scribes and pharisees. And Jesus is here rejoicing, celebrating with sinners who have been found and the question is will you, older brother, scribes, pharisees join in this celebration or not. So I'd be interested, having studied this in its context, what would you name the parable? What's the parable about? Who's the central character? Have you given any thought to that question? Yeah I think the parable primarily would be about the father and then the father's reception.

The first two stories, the first two parts, it's not so much about the lost sheep but it's about the shepherd who goes and finds the sheep. It's not so much about the coin but it's about the woman who searches the house diligently for the coin. And likewise with this last part, it's not so much about the lost son as it is about the father who receives and finds the lost son and brings him back into the celebration which is in his presence there in his home.

And there I think just seeing the pattern of the parables, the introduction, maybe underlines that point. What man of you having a hundred sheep and then or what woman having ten silver coins and then there was a man who had two sons. And so there seems to be a progression and in each case it's that character that's central.

Yeah yeah and the progression intensifies as well right because you have you have a shepherd with a hundred sheep and one of them is lost. Now it's funny you read some of like the historical critical commentaries around this and they said this is completely

outrageous like what what shepherd would ever leave 99 sheep unattended just to find one. Obviously not quite grasping what Jesus is doing with the parable to tell it this way.

But so it intensifies where you have 100 sheep only one's lost and then you have a woman who has 10 coins and one is lost. Now 10% of her finances is gone. That's a big deal.

That's bigger than losing one sheep. And then it narrows down even further where you have a father with two sons and one of them's lost. So you have this intensification and the proximity also kind of narrows in with that where you have the the sheep are lost in the wilderness.

So you have the wilderness then you have the coin is lost in the house and then finally it's a son who is not in the presence of a father. So even the landscape if you would narrow in as we as we come to the climax of the parable with the son and the father. And there certainly seems to be a lot more attention given to the final parable than to the earlier two.

Can you maybe give some thoughts on the way the parable is told? Maybe the structure of it, how it's broken up, the different scenes, that sort of thing. Yeah, yeah certainly. The structure really the parable could be broken up into two different sections in the most simple outline where the first section which would be verse 11 through 24 which focuses primarily on a younger brother and then you have 25 through 32 which focuses on the older brother.

But it's the father right there at the center that brings those two stories together and hinges them. The story goes basically with the younger brother who wants to receive his part of the inheritance. So he calls his father over and demands that he gets his piece of the inheritance right away.

So the father separates his land and gives it to the two sons and the younger son then essentially I suppose sells his portion to receive funds to go to a far country and spends it. So there's this idea of moving away from the father with the younger son as he goes into a far country. He lives a life of sin.

The older brother accuses him of spending the money on prostitutes and so on as he's away. But he spends all his money and eventually runs out and says, my goodness, things are not going well for me. So he looks for work and he gets hired by a farmer to take care of the pigs and eventually he gets hungry and he's actually longing to eat the food of the pigs.

So even in this portion we have a lot of Gentile connotations with him leaving to a far country away from his father, going into an exile of sort and becoming one with the Gentiles. He joins the nations but he realizes that his life there is significantly lacking. It

would actually be better for me to be a servant in my father's house than or the servants in my father's house have it better than I have it here.

So he decides to go back. So on his way back he's thinking to himself, how am I going to approach my father when I return? And he mentions how, okay, when I get there I'm going to tell him I've sinned against heaven and I've sinned against you. Please take me back as one of your servants.

So he has this speech in mind and I think this even sets up part of the context that helps us understand why it's the father's work that really saves the son and not the son's repentance necessarily. Because the son still doesn't desire to be in the presence of the father as a son. He still hasn't fully been brought out of exile.

So he's going back not to be a son but just to be a servant. So he comes and the father sees him and runs to him and when the father embraces him at that point the father has found his lost son. I think at that point we see this return from exile right outside the father's house or outside of his property.

So he invites him back. He comes back, gives him a ring and shoes and a robe and kills the fattened calf for him to celebrate. And then at this point the parable turns the corner to the older brother where he sees, you know, what's going on and he speaks to one of the servants and the servant tells him, well your father has received back your younger brother.

And the idea of receiving him, I think the ESV says safe and sound, but the word there has a far more holistic meaning. He received him back with peace. He brought him back into his shalom as the Septuagint would translate the same word for shalom.

So it brings him back. The elder son protests, has a problem with that and he refuses to go into the celebration. So the father goes out and speaks to him and they have their back and forth where the father implores the son, come join us in the celebration.

And the elder brother is frustrated because he's never had a party like this thrown for him. He's never been able to be with his friends as opposed to his family, but be with his friends and have a fattened calf killed for him. And then the parable ends with the father once again affirming that the son that was lost, or his brother was dead and now is alive.

He was lost and now is found. So that brings us to the conclusion of the story, not knowing whether or not the older brother will enter into the celebration. It's interesting just paying attention to the way the story is told because Jesus often tells parables that give the essential details just recounting what happened in just propositions that are fairly bare and unadorned.

But here you have a scenic immediacy to so many different elements of it. Him rehearsing his speech, him wishing to eat the pods that the pigs are eating, his

encounter with his father, the encounter between the father and the older brother. And in each one of these scenes there are deep emotions at play and the reader or the hearer is being invited into those in ways that maybe were not to the same extent in many of Jesus' other parables.

There's something about this parable that is far more emotionally charged and I think readers and hearers of it have always found something about this parable that is particularly powerful on an emotional level. Do you have any thoughts on that particular dimension of it, on the way that it's told? Yeah, I mean I think from a pastoral perspective, if I'm thinking about even retelling this story in the sense of a sermon, I mean there is application everywhere. So you have the older brother's exile, if you would, his refusal to come into the presence of the father.

And the reason for that is because I've already done everything I'm supposed to do. So as long as you don't change the standards on me, as long as things don't shift, I'm good. Until the father sends this and gives this incredible grace to the younger brother, right, who really didn't want to be around the father at all.

He wanted to live his life separate. And then in the return, that the father's acceptance of these sinners, of this person who maybe, you know, in our world comes to Christ later in life, someone who's lived a life away from God and then comes in and receives just this radical grace that transforms everything. Full grace, top to bottom, is very powerful and many people can identify with that.

And then you have folks who grow up in the church who likewise need this full powerful grace, but they might not see it as clearly in the same way that the elder brother didn't see it. So I think there is, in the telling of this story, it just connects with us on so many different levels, even in different seasons of our lives. I think we can identify with either the older brother or the younger brother.

So yeah, it's a timeless story in that sense. It's always, always connecting on an emotional level. How did you guys find it helpful to think about the typology and the other sort of biblical motifs and themes and type scenes, whatever, that are running through the parable? Yeah, I think the way the parable is told is that it's, there's, everything's anonymous.

You have a father, generally, you have two sons, generally. And so I think that invites, it invites the reader to ask, who exactly is he talking about here? And that can, that can both be a really helpful pastoral thing because you can, as a pastor, then ask your people to see themselves in the story, which is, I think, a right move to do. But also, you can ask, what other characters do these sound like? And I think that's what we, what we started to do in our, in our study here.

There's typology all over the Old Testament about two sons. Many stories, just thinking



of Cain and Abel and Jacob and Esau, about two sons that really, in some ways, come to have some sort of reversal where the younger serves the older in some, in some sense, or the younger comes into a place of blessing where the older falls out of that place of blessing as the firstborn. And so there's, that's, that's one of the, that's one of the things that I was really wondering about with the anonymity of the two sons.

The father had two sons. And so what, what, perhaps, what sons, you know, might reflect these two? And I think there are quite a few similarities with the Jacob and Esau story. Even reading it over again, there, there are a number of, not just the general themes, but a number of details and scenes that are really repeated in the story in the Prodigal.

So for example, there's, we have this talk of the inheritance at the beginning of the, of the parable. Well, there's a selling of Esau's birthright or his inheritance from Isaac back in Genesis 25. There's a famine also in the story in chapter 26, although that seems probably more important to Abraham, to the connection to Abraham in the Valley of Gerar than, than it has with the story of the two sons.

But the interesting part about the famine in the story of the Prodigal is that it's a famine that, famines typically kill people, and this is a famine that brings somebody back to their senses. Brings them back to life, so to speak, in the story of the Prodigal. He comes to himself after this famine, and that's a, that's a, quite a reversal for what famine normally does.

So the Prodigal, I, the way I was thinking about it, and we had a couple, we had a little small discussion during our Peshah group, and that really was helpful, because the way I was thinking about it was the Prodigal seemed a lot like, the younger son, seemed a lot like Esau. In the story Jacob and Esau, the father, Isaac, loves Esau because he ate of Esau's game. He ate of the fruit of his hunt, but in the Prodigal story, the father loves the son and feeds him with the fattened calf in the end.

Again, the Prodigal is like Esau, who ate and drank and rose in his way after he sold his inheritance for the Red Sea, and in the story of the Prodigal, it's almost a reversed order, where the son gets up and goes his way, and then he squanders the whole inheritance, eating and drinking. There's the similarity between joining himself to foreigners. Esau joins himself to foreigners in marriage, and then the younger son joins himself to a foreigner in servitude, becomes a servant to this keeper of swine, and the older brother does seem a lot like Jacob in many respects.

He is the complete or obedient boy. The younger son ends up becoming reconciled, but the older son disassociates himself from the family and slights his father in the end. So there's some really fascinating themes that seem repeated in the life of this Prodigal family, this father and his two sons.

And it is interesting, I think, thinking about the scenic comparisons, because you

mentioned the associations with Esau and Jacob, and this is interesting because you can see ways in which you could associate both characters with both Esau and Jacob. And I think perhaps the things that I found particularly interesting about it are the ways that certain scenes seem to call back to Old Testament scenes, particularly the events of the greeting of the father and the event of the older son being in the field and coming near. The first one, it's interesting, the description, comparing it with the description of Esau's greeting of Jacob when he returns from his sojourn with Laban.

So you have in verse 20, And he arose and came to his father, but while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and while he was still, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And if we get to Genesis chapter 33, But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept. It's a very similar greeting, but here it's not the older brother giving it.

In the original story, the older brother actually gives the greeting, but in this story, it's the father that gives the greeting and the older brother that refuses to do so. The other interesting scene is the older son is in the field and he comes and draws near to the house. He hears music and dancing, and then he hears what's happened with the younger brother.

And it reminds me of Esau being in the field, in the hunt, coming in from the field, hearing the news that his younger brother has been blessed instead of him. And again, the tensions between the older and the younger brother and then the father being brought into that. What is my place? How do I stand relative to you, father? And the way that that plays out in the background, I think it casts certain features of the story in a new relief.

Because if you're the scribes and the Pharisees, you're used to reading the story of Genesis and placing yourself as a particular character. And Jesus is taking those familiar story patterns and maybe switching them around a bit. And it's not just musical chairs.

Jesus isn't just mixing up the characters in a random way. There's a very specific way in which he's unsettling certain ways the Pharisees and scribes would like to have characterized themselves and forcing them to associate with different characters in the story or see the characters in a way that challenges how they're accustomed to characterizing themselves. Yeah, yeah.

I liked in our discussion, we also talked about how it was, I thought for a moment that the prodigal was again like Esau in that he goes into the east. He goes into the foreign country. But also the prodigal, that's kind of what Jacob, he's probably, we talked about him being more closely like Jacob in that respect because Jacob is sent to Laban and actually comes under the servitude of another, which is not a positive situation for him.

And ends up, although it does, he ends up being blessed and he ends up blessing Laban

in the meantime. But the prodigal himself goes into the foreign country and joins himself to a foreigner and experiences the famine there. So yeah, there's a number of respects where it does seem like there are characters we're being asked, maybe not being asked, but there's characters that are weighted with background with the prodigal story.

And it seems like some of these images and scenes are being recalled in this story. And yeah, it's not necessarily for the sake of saying, are you like the prodigal? Have you been lost? And even if you are lost, you should return home. Like come home.

That's a good teaching of the story. And yet, it's also for those who are not welcoming of others. It's for those who are in the household of God and are not welcoming their brothers and sisters, are not on the forefront, excited for them.

And yeah, there's a lot there with recalling some older themes. And the question at the end, are you going to come into the feast? Is really getting back to the very beginning of the confrontation with the Scribes and Pharisees, the way that they're accusing Christ and essentially they're being invited in. Why not join? Because these are your brothers.

And the relationship between the father and the son is you have the father and the younger son, and then you have the father and the older son. And there are reversals taking place there. Any thoughts on those? One of the interesting movements with the father, and we see at the beginning with the younger brother, the father representing God, right? God the father.

And Israel exile, there's themes of that throughout the Old Testament. And the father bringing them back, right? And bringing them back and feasting with them. So we see that at the beginning of of the story, but then we see Jesus essentially beginning to assume the identity of the father, or the father almost morphs into the figure of Christ, really around the time when the older brother comes onto the scene.

Because the older brother, when he's asking about what's going on with the party and the celebration, the servant tells him that your father has received back the younger brother. Which is the same idea at the very beginning where, to your point Alistair, where the scribes and Pharisees are upset with Jesus because he has received sinners. So then you have this subtle identification of Jesus himself with the father, which certainly would have been very impactful, I think, for the scribes and Pharisees as they begin to see themselves identified as the older brother in the story.

And Jesus's invitation to come and be received by himself, thus the father, into his presence in order to be a part of the feast. So I think there is that kind of movement there with the father and the two sides of the story. I would raise the possibility at least that the father might be Abraham as well.

In the next chapter you have Father Abraham with the rich man and Lazarus. You have

earlier on the question of who are the true children of Abraham. You have a couple of Jesus healing, Zacchaeus and the woman who's been afflicted for 18 years.

In both of those cases they're called son of Abraham and daughter of Abraham. So it's a possibility at least that the father might be Abraham within the story. But Jesus' association, that Jesus is the one who's really implementing this feast, he's the one who is standing for the father's welcome, I think is very important.

Another thing that is fascinating is hearing some of the rhetorical conflict that's taking place in that final scene particularly. Things like the older brother's dissociation from his brother and implicitly also from his father. He never calls his father father.

His father calls him son but he never calls him father. The other thing you notice is the way he says, but when this son of yours came, I mean he's his brother, but the way he's speaking about him is similar to some of the conflicts that we have in the story of Jacob and his relationship to his sons after the selling of Joseph. He speaks of them as if there's a degree of distance and disowning and here you have a similar sort of thing.

And the statement that the father makes, son you're always with me and all that is mine is yours, is the most close and deep association being expressed there. And then there is that invitation, but in some ways a conditional invitation. It is fitting to celebrate and be glad for this, your brother, not just my son, but your brother was dead and is alive, he is lost and is found.

And there are many other features of that. For instance, the fact he has been dead and now is alive. This is a story of resurrection that's going on.

You have themes of resurrection in the story of the rich man of Lazarus, but here those resurrection themes are appearing fairly early on in the gospel and they're being connected to something of the return of the lost sheep, the lost sons of the house of Israel. How do you think of the characterization of the older son, particularly in his earlier part of his conversation with his father? Because it seems to me there's some way in which he presents himself that seems, in some ways he's taking on many of the characteristics of the younger son at the beginning of the story. Yeah, he's, I mean, the older son, just thinking about the story of Joseph, the older son really does seem like he's the cusp of being Judah in that story.

And Judah finally in the end, after Joseph is exalted to the right hand of Pharaoh, and after they play that back and forth of keeping Benjamin, Judah finally sort of stands up for his family and stands up for his father's house and actually is going to protect his brothers. But we don't see that with the prodigal yet. I mean, there are a number of other themes in connection with the Joseph story where in the story of the prodigal, I mean, the younger son comes back and the father puts his signet ring on his hand.

That's the same sort of scene that we see with Joseph and the Pharaoh, where in Genesis 41, the Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand and clothed him in the garments of fine linen, put a gold chain about his neck, and he's welcomed and restored or positioned into the place of Pharaoh's house. And it's the same sort of restoration we see of the prodigal son. The servants are told to go and gather these gifts.

It's actually the servants who in the father's house who have the task of restoring the son to the proper place. And the older, yeah, he just does not seem like he ends up like Judah, if I'm remembering that correctly, where he doesn't end up coming yet. Anyway, it looks like the listeners, the hearers are being called to respond.

Are you going to be like Judah? Are you going to actually welcome these people in and take charge of your family that's come back? And yeah, even with some of the language, we talked about some of the household language, he was a son with an inheritance. And then he went and became a misthios, a hired servant of a foreigner, the younger son did. And he, in that position, then longed to be a misthios, a hired servant in his father's house, because obviously the hired servants in his father's house were being treated much better.

And then when he returns, the father calls the the douloos, or the douloi, the slaves to come and to restore him to a place of honor. And then the older son calls the pace, the child servant over to hear what's going on. And then the older son says, I have served you, when he's speaking to the father, I've slaved, I've doulo you, I played the slave in your house, and I'm not getting anything out of it.

And so there, that play of household, sonship, and servitude is very strong in the story. Because as you point out, at the end of the story, it seems as if it's the older son that is actually in the place of the slave. He's the one who's imposed that status upon himself.

He sees himself as slaving for his father, rather than actually, as the father says, all that belongs to the father is his. And he's with him always. There's no barrier between them.

There's no hostility, there's no distance, there's no subjection in that sense. He's a full son, he's a full heir, and yet he places himself outside of the feast, he places himself in that position of self-imposed exile. And he ends up being in the position of a hired servant in his own understanding.

And so he's trapped by nothing but shackles that he's placed upon himself. The other thing that's interesting is just seeing that theme of the child that's lost and brought back to life. That's the story of Joseph again, as you mentioned, that if there's any child that is lost and then comes back to life, it would seem to be the story of, certainly from Jacob's perspective, it's the story of Joseph.

And so these background stories, you're reading through the book of Genesis, and you read that story, and your heart is excited to hear about the return of Joseph. And all these deeply moving scenes of tears and reconciliation and hugs and these sorts of things. And then Jesus paints the same sort of scene and the question is, are you going to hold yourself out of this? It seems this is exactly where you want to be.

You want to be celebrating with the Father who's had this lost son restored to him. But that requires that you need to heal all these different breaches. And it fits very much, I think, with Jesus' teaching more generally on forgiving others and God forgiving us.

That these things are connected together and the welcoming of others and God's welcome of us. That if you're not going to welcome your brother, you're actually holding yourself outside. Because that's where the joy of the Father is found, in the presence of the angels over this one sheep that's returned.

And not just a sheep, but this dearly loved son. Another story that I've heard in the background of this, maybe rightly or wrongly, that I find interesting is the story of Moses going down Mount Sinai. And he's coming down Mount Sinai and he hears this commotion and noise in the camp.

And Joshua asks Moses what's going on. There's dancing and there's this commotion and then there's not a fatted calf, but a golden calf. And at that point Moses intercedes with the Father for Israel.

And yet here in this situation, it's as if that intercession is reversed. That this person, this older son who could have been actually interceding for his younger brother and actually standing up for him and seeking to see him restored fully. And joining in the Father's joy in that, ends up having the anger of Moses.

But the anger is not an expression of the Father's anger that is then used to prevent the Father from exacting his anger upon a rebellious son. But is used to try and object to the Father's welcome and grace and forgiveness. Yeah, I wonder now that you mentioned that, there's with the act of the giving of the inheritance at the beginning of the story.

I suppose I assumed that the inheritance to the older brother was also given in that. That there was that handing off of the household, of the sort of grueling and responsibility over the household given to the older son. That he's now coming into taking sort of authority for what's going on in this place as the Father is now sort of on his way out, so to speak.

But I haven't, and so now perhaps in the sort of rest of the story, we don't see the older son acting as if he is his father's son. As if he is the one who's now stepping into the what, who his father is and how his father acted and his father's relationships with all these other people. But we see him bitter and not overflowing with substance, so to

speak.

Those Greek words in the beginning are really fascinating. You know, he gives up his property. Well, that's *ousia*, it's his substance and some of the early church fathers really ran with that.

But I do think that there's something there where when the prodigal is restored, he's restored to a place of mercy giving, a place of forgiveness, and a place of bringing people back in. And the older brother, the older son, never had that. He never really acted like his father who was overflowing with mercy and overflowing with gift.

So, and even at the end of the prodigal story, the fact that he doesn't recognize that his father is one who overflows in gift, but he has to serve him. He has to slave in his house. He has to treat him like Egypt, or he was treating him like Egypt, instead of treating him like one who is gracious and kind and who's giving a blessing, overflowing with blessing.

Carl, you mentioned earlier the way that Christ seems to, in some sense, merge with the father. And I think the way that Joe was describing things there actually helps to unpack what's taking place. That Christ is the one who's welcoming sinners, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, and others.

That he is all that the older brother should be. He's the one who's actually being the majordomo at the feast. He's the one that's welcoming the younger sons back.

And he's the one that is extending everything about the character of the father to these lost sheep. Yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely. I think that's a really powerful part of the story, is to see Jesus, again, particularly being the one who is inviting not only sinners and tax collectors to feast with him, but also the scribes and the Pharisees.

And he is the one that embodies God for his people and bringing them back into his presence. And the two dialogues that we see on either side of this story is the father with the younger son when he comes close to the house, right? He meets them outside. And there is this death and resurrection language because he brings them back.

And then he goes and he meets the older brother on the outside as well. He goes out to meet him. And if the older brother would have come back in, there would have been that same sort of death and resurrection language for him as well.

So, yeah, seeing Christ being able to offer that to the sinners and to the righteous folks of the day, I think it's just a very powerful thing that only God speaks like that. And at the end, we can often read Jesus' teaching as rebuking the scribes and the Pharisees. And he does that.

But yet, this rebuke is, if there is a rebuke, it's framed within an invitation. And the implicit rebuke is only if they're rejecting that invitation. It's the rejection of that

invitation, the rejection of their sharing in the joy of the father.

That's where the rebuke would come in. But they're bringing that upon themselves because Christ comes with the invitation of the father. And if they accept that, they can enter into the fullness of the father's joy.

Have you any more thoughts on preaching this? How do you take some of those themes that you've been exploring, some of the structural elements, other things like that, and bring them together into a more powerful presentation of this passage to a congregation? Yeah. Yeah, I think with a passage like this, there's so much familiarity with it that you have to almost deconstruct a little bit. I think certainly looking at the story as a whole, the parable, the three parts would be necessary in order to even begin to unpack what's going on with the son and the father.

But yeah, I think to preach it, the big thing that we would want to see is that rejoicing and life come in the presence of the father, right? It is where he is, there is life. Where he is, there is rejoicing. Where he is, there is feasting, festivity, and shalom, and peace.

All of these things is in his presence. So when we look at the younger son, you see this leaving the father's presence, a death that occurs. And then the father going and finding him and bringing him back as the resurrection.

And he brings him back into his presence, right? So I think you'd certainly want to highlight the death and resurrection of the younger son. And then as you shift to the older brother, restate that life and joy and feasting is in the presence of the father. And the invitation then is to go to the older son who has also left the presence of the father, who has also gone into this death.

And the father again goes out to him and invites him to come into his presence to receive resurrection. And then that's where again the big question at the end is, will we go and find life and joy and resurrection in the presence of God or do we look for that elsewhere, right? The older son is looking for it in his ability to be a good servant as opposed to being a son in his presence. The younger brother is looking for life and all the joys of the world with his exile into a far country, spending all of his money.

But ultimately it comes back to life and joy is in the presence of the father. And that's the invitation that we give. And there part of the challenge I imagine is that if we're calling it, if we were to call it the parable of the lost son, it wouldn't be clear which son is the lost one.

Yeah, exactly. Because I think that's the beauty of the parables. They're both lost.

They're both lost and it's only with the father that you're found. Once you're with him, then you're no longer lost, you're found. Thank you both so much for coming on.



It's been wonderful to discuss this and I look forward to continuing our discussions of various passages in the Pesha groups, but maybe have you on here again to discuss something more. But for anyone who's interested in the Junior Fellows Programme, I'm going to leave the details for that in the show notes. And I highly recommend that if you're interested in getting more into depth in scripture, particularly for the purposes of ministry, if you want to understand how liturgy works, how to lead liturgy well, and just to see how these things come together and to spend time in company with other people who are walking the same path and thinking about the same issues, I highly recommend the course.

And if you want to contact me, use my contact details, contact form on my blog and I can tell you more about it. For now though, thank you so much for coming on the show, Carl and Joe. It's been a pleasure to have you.

Yeah, thank you for having us.