

With this parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus has drawn those listening into the drama  
Pharisees and Scribes find themselves in a participation theater  
Where they become part of the drama—at first because they identify with the story  
Prodigal son asked for his inheritance, which he spent in the far country  
Ran out of money during a famine, fed pigs and devised a plan to stay alive  
Audience heard their views on sin and salvation in the speech and actions of the prodigal son  
They see him return confident that his father will train him as a craftsman so he can earn money  
Then suddenly the father breaks the pattern by offering love to the son  
Son accepts the love and the prodigal is reconciled, abandoning plan to become a craftsman  
A banquet is ordered and all eagerly expect a grand celebration

In this—the third scene of the drama—the Pharisees and Scribes are given a voice  
In the person of the older son, the response of the Pharisees to Jesus is expressed in words

The older son comes back to the village home after working in the fields  
As he walks down the narrow streets of the village, he hears music and dancing  
It is a loud, boisterous and joyful music and celebration emanating from his own family home  
One would expect him to enter, greet guests, and join the party  
Rather the older son stays out in the courtyard and asks what is going on  
It is generally assumed that he talks with a servant or a slave  
However, the same Greek word could refer to a son, young boy, servants, or slaves  
Servants/slaves are busy in the house and it can't be the son  
Young boys from the village are hanging around outside watching from the edge  
In a village everyone knows what is going on—including the young boys—public events

The boy responds, *'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf,  
because he has got him back safe and sound.'*

First he announces that the younger son has come home  
Then he tells about the banquet that is happening as they speak  
Third, he tells the community understanding of the father's motive  
This is the common perception by the community of what took place

The son coming home is all the father's doing  
The father restored him to the family and to the community  
The word usually translated as the son coming home "safe and sound" is worth noting  
Sounds like he came home in good health—however he was starving in the far country  
Then he walked home, arriving barefoot and probably in rags  
His robust health is likely in question  
This same Greek word used here is translated from the Hebrew "shalom" in the LXX  
The younger son has come home to a restored relationship with his father  
There is shalom between the prodigal son and the father  
The village observed the father's demonstration of love and the son's acceptance  
Which the boys in the courtyard relay to the older son  
Actually the younger son's good health would be more acceptable to the older son  
But the reconciliation being celebrated is another matter  
That means that the future status of the prodigal son has already been decided  
Implied: Your father extended shalom to your brother. How will you receive him?

The older brother became angry and refused to enter the banquet hall  
By this refusal, the older son deliberately insults his father and his younger brother  
He has no love or respect for either one of them  
In this, the older brother acts out the feelings of the Pharisees and Scribes about Jesus  
They now have been given their active role in the drama

We aren't told how the father knows of the older brother's angry refusal to enter the banquet  
Clearly the word spreads across the courtyard and into the banquet hall so everyone knows  
This is a public shaming of the older brother against his father  
Worse than the shaming of the prodigal asking for half his inheritance—  
Because it is a public occasion hosted by the father  
While the younger brother shamed the father in private, although it became public  
A traditional Middle Eastern father would order the slaves to take the son away  
After the banquet finished, the father will deal with the son, likely beating him  
But the father in our story is not patterned after a traditional Middle Eastern father  
Jesus, himself, is defining the meaning of Father—of the Divine Father

The story continues... *"His father came out and began to plead with him."*  
The father leaves the seated guests and goes out into the courtyard with his older son  
Everyone is watching and listening—the music and dancing stop—what will he do?  
For the second time in one day, the father does the unthinkable and demonstrates love  
He responds in love to a son who has publicly shamed him  
He does not rebuke the older son for his hardness of heart  
He truly loves his son and wants him to enter the banquet with him  
Just as Jesus desires that the scribes and Pharisees enter the Kingdom of God  
...just as much as the sinners and tax collectors are welcomed  
The father treats both sons tenderly  
Literally the Greek says, *"He came out seeking to reconcile him"*

The older son speaks: *"Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you..."*  
The older son omits using a title when speaking to his father—no "Father, listen..."  
Bad manners and insulting—first time in the parable the title is omitted  
He claims that he's been working like a slave for his father  
Whereas he knows he will one day inherit the rest of the estate  
Meaning that all the work he has done will be for his eventual personal benefit  
*"I have never disobeyed your command..."*  
The older son claims to have kept his commands, but he shames his father in public  
He kept the letter of the law, not the spirit—he shattered his relationship with his father  
*"... you have never given me even a young goat..."*  
He accuses his father of playing favorites, but this isn't actually a fair statement  
The entire estate belongs to the older son and he could have a banquet any time  
He's angry that he is not able to dispose of the estate as he chooses—wants father dead  
*"... so that I might celebrate with my friends."*  
The older son doesn't want to be with the family—his "friends" don't include the family  
*"But when this son of yours came back..."*  
He refuses to say "my brother"—again distancing himself from the family

*"... who has devoured your property with prostitutes..."*

There is no indication in the original language that there was any moral indiscretion  
This is simply an angry brother's conjecture and accusation—but he doesn't know  
If he had heard about the pigs—he would have accused him of that, which did happen  
All of these accusations are made in public with the purpose of destroying the celebration  
The self-righteous spirit of the brother is dominating and poisoning the brother  
He wants the shalom broken and the younger brother rejected in a cutting off ceremony

*"You killed the fattest calf for him"*

He is wrong in thinking that the banquet celebration is in honor of the younger son  
Although this is the common assumption  
Celebrations in the first two parables in this trilogy were not for the lost sheep or coin  
But for the shepherd and woman that found the lost sheep and coin  
The party is for the father who recovered his son with shalom  
The father is the center of the banquet—the honored person  
The community accepts the prodigal son only because of the father's actions  
God will be praised that he is back and the father is congratulated  
The older brother gets it wrong—as do the Pharisees and scribes  
If he sees the father's love for the prodigal—he opens himself to a larger truth

In this parable, Jesus addresses the human predicament of insiders and outsiders  
Insiders appear to keep the way of faith and life—outsiders break them  
For insiders, it is easy to develop a sense of superiority and a judgmental attitude  
Pharisees and Scribes fit this insider mode perfectly  
To let go of this insider superiority and judgment means that they lose control

Both sons have broken relationship with the father—both sons are lost—each is worse than the other  
In both cases, the father initiates a response of compassion and love—asking nothing in return  
In both cases this response of compassion and love is made publicly  
Both sons are equally welcome at the banquet

*—"Beloved son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."*

This is an absolutely unexpected response and everyone present is stunned by it  
The father's anger is reprocessed into grace at great cost  
The father knows the son is worried about his rights—all that is mine is yours!  
Father reassures him that there is nothing to worry about and never has been  
Father reassures him that he won't give the estate away to the younger son  
Father is saying the older son can relax and enter the banquet hall  
And in so doing be reconciled to his father and his brother

*"We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life;  
he was lost and has been found."*

This is the third celebration in response to the lost being found  
Jesus is saying—I do eat with sinners, celebrating with them their welcome home  
We don't celebrate their sin, but my costly love  
But I also welcome insiders—insiders and outsiders—Everyone!  
Older brothers and younger brothers—Pharisees and sinners—all are welcome  
You too can come and eat at the banquet table  
Do you not understand?!?—if I don't eat with sinners, I can't eat with you!

The parable stops! Abruptly!

The next scene is left unwritten as it can only be written by the Pharisees themselves  
The audience must finish the play  
The outsiders have accepted and are in fellowship with the father  
Will the insiders accept?

The unwritten end to the story that Jesus wants would go something like this...

*The older son embraced his father, entered the house, and was reconciled to his brother and to his father. And the father celebrated together with his two sons. The lost has been found!*

Everyone is invited to enter the celebration and live with the father

No sin is great enough to keep you out  
No obedience is good enough to get you in  
All must come through the love and welcome of the father—freely given to all  
We simply have to let go...  
Let go of our well rehearsed schemes to earn God's good graces  
Let go of our ability to be the good person and live on that goodness  
We all need the grace and compassion that God offers us

Too often those who have been broken by life find it easier to accept this radical love  
While those of us who thought we did it right and that should earn us our place—find it harder  
Like in Luke 14 where we read the story of the Great Banquet  
Those originally invited had excuses keeping them away  
And so the outsiders were invited to take their places  
But not because that is God's choice to exclude anyone

All are invited to accept this radical love that God offers us—it is enough for everyone!

[Source material for the Biblical Study: Bailey, Kenneth E. (1992). *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.]