

“Simon, I Have Somewhat to Say unto Thee”: Judgment and Condemnation in the Parables of Jesus

CATHERINE CORMAN PARRY

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

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

And he spake this parable unto them, saying, What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine . . . and go after that which is lost, until he find it?

And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing.

And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost.

I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance. [Luke 15:1–7]

For his purposes in this parable, the Lord divides us into three groups: shepherds, sinners, and “just persons who need no repentance.” Surely he speaks with some exaggeration here, for excepting himself, the Good Shepherd, we all—shepherds and just persons—are sinners alike. In some ways, in

fact, the Lord seems in this parable to speak not from his own perceptions, but from our perceptions of ourselves. We tend to place sin in categories, to rank it as greater or lesser, and then to see ourselves as better or worse, depending on which sins we commit. Thus, the flexible nature of parable form allows us to identify with shepherd, with lost sheep, or with the ninety and nine.

“Rejoice with Me”

Today I address these remarks to the ninety and nine, or rather to those among us who, for instance, attend church even in good weather; go visiting or home teaching even in bad weather; not only bake cookies for the ill, depressed, or lonely, but try to bake them with love; all the while working to keep harmony in our homes.

If you find yourself even temporarily in this group, I would direct your attention once again to verses 6 and 7 of Luke, chapter 15.

Catherine Corman Parry was an associate professor of English at Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 7 May 1991.

And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost.

I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.

Two ideas emerge from these verses: that the shepherd anticipates his friends' excitement to be as great as his own over the found sheep, and that the heavens do not rejoice as much over ninety-nine continually faithful people as they do over one repentant sinner. The emphasis God places in other contexts on keeping the commandments and enduring to the end leads us to suppose that the Lord again exaggerates, though for what purpose he does not explain immediately. But surely it cannot have escaped him that such an exaggerated statement would make us feel uncomfortable—or more specifically, ignored, undervalued, and consequently angry. But instead of softening his language, he restates the concepts again in the next parable, this time ignoring completely the faithful ninety-nine:

Either what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it?

And when she hath found it, she calleth her friends and her neighbours together, saying, Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece which I had lost.

Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth. [Luke 15:8–10]

Immediately following this we receive what we have come to call the parable of the prodigal son. In the context of rejoicing over sinners repentant, it seems entirely appropriate that we call it this, thus focusing on the father's joy at the return of his no-longer-wayward son and his complete willingness to reintegrate the son

back into the family without further thought for his past sins. As the context of Luke, chapter 15, suggests, surely this is one aspect of the parable. It joyfully reminds us that at the center of all our faith sits the Savior's atoning blood that can wash us as free from sin as if we had never committed it: "though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isaiah 1:18); "Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more" (D&C 58:42). However, calling this the parable of the prodigal son may lead us to forget that the story concerns two sons, not just one.

Unlike the earlier parables of the lost sheep and coin, the Lord chose not to end this story with the prodigal's happy homecoming. Instead, he complicates its interpretation by focusing in the latter half of the parable on the elder son, who complains about the mercy extended to his younger brother.

The literary nature of parable form invites ambiguity and multiple interpretation. Thus its meaning is flexible and unfixed, and our interpretations must rely on thorough reading under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We have all had the experience of finding new meaning in a familiar scripture; frequently parables go even beyond this and mean more than one thing at the same time. The elder brother in this parable is a case in point. As many scriptural scholars—Elder Talmage among them—have suggested, on one level this elder son represents the Elder Son, the spiritual Firstborn and Only Begotten of the Father. He alone can say to his Father as this son says to his, "Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment." And to him alone can the Father reply, "Son, thou art ever with me" (Luke 15:29, 31). Reading the elder son in this context, it seems entirely appropriate that the father should promise him all his inheritance and make no further mention of reward for the younger son.

But on another level the elder son must represent not the Savior, but us, or at least some of us. Surely we cannot imagine the Lord who atoned for our sins complaining when the Father grants us mercy. Rather, in this context the plaintive whining of the parable's elder son sounds somewhat like me, and perhaps like you:

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

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

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.

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

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:

But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. [Luke 15:25–30]

Several things stand out in this passage. For one thing, the father wants the elder son to share his joy in the younger son's return; he wants it enough to leave the party and go plead with him to come in. For another thing, the elder son judges the sins of the younger son by making them explicit. In verse 13 of the King James translation we learn that the younger son "wasted his substance with riotous living"; in the mouth of his brother this becomes "hath devoured thy living with harlots" (v. 30). And finally, he distances himself from the former prodigal by calling him "this thy son," rather than "this my brother."

The father's response is instructive. He does not remind the elder son of his own sins, but instead acknowledges his faithful continuance:

"Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine" (v. 31). But he does, gently but undeniably, rebuke the son's unkindness: "It was meet [necessary, appropriate] that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found" (v. 32). The rebuke comes most clearly, I think, in his reminder of the young man's relationship to the other: "this thy brother was dead, and is alive again"—not "this my son," but, "this thy brother." The elder son should rejoice not simply because someone his father loves has returned, but because of his own intimate link with another soul.

The Lord's Rebuke

Let us turn now to a familiar episode in the Lord's life, recorded in Luke, chapter 10, verses 38–42:

Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house.

And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word.

But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me.

And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things:

But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.

Those of us with more of Martha than of Mary in us have long felt that this rebuke is unjust. While we do not doubt the overriding importance of listening to the Lord, does the listening have to be done during dinner preparations? Would it have hurt Mary to have joined us in serving, then we all could have sat down to hear the Lord together? And furthermore, what about the value of our work in the world? If it

weren't for us Marthas cleaning whatever we see and fussing over meals, there would be a lot of dirty, hungry people in this world. We may not live by bread alone, but I've never known anyone to live without it. Why, oh, why couldn't the Lord have said, "You're absolutely right, Martha. What are we thinking of to let you do all this work alone? We'll all help, and by the way, that centerpiece looks lovely"?

What he did say is difficult to bear, but perhaps somewhat less difficult if we examine its context. In the same way that the father in the parable of the prodigal son acknowledges his elder son's faithfulness, the Lord acknowledges Martha's care: "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things" (v. 41). Then he delivers the gentle but clear rebuke. But the rebuke would not have come had Martha not prompted it. The Lord did not go into the kitchen and tell Martha to stop cooking and come listen. Apparently he was content to let her serve him however she cared to, until she judged another person's service: "Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me" (v. 40). Martha's self-importance, expressed through her judgment of her sister, occasioned the Lord's rebuke, not her busyness with the meal.

An instant that crystallizes the Lord's displeasure at our judging others occurs in Luke, chapter 7. One of the Pharisees, Simon, invited the Lord to a meal at his home:

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,

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.

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.

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

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

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

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

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.

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

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

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. [Luke 7:37–47]

The Lord could hardly have said anything more disturbing. "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little." The way he has phrased it, the woman loved the Lord much because she needed him much, and it was her sins which created that need. In other words, the greater our sins, the greater our capacity to love? And the fewer our sins, the less we need the Lord, and therefore the less our capacity to love him? This sounds like an even more disturbing version of "joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance" (Luke 15:7).

We need, as before, to examine the context of the Lord's reply. As the woman

begins weeping on her Savior's feet, Simon makes at least two judgments: one, that the woman is a sinner, and two, that Jesus is no prophet or he would know her to be a sinner. Both of these judgments remain unvocalized; Simon speaks them "within himself," not aloud. Interestingly, though, the scriptures continue, "And Jesus answering said unto him" (v. 40). In other words, in a wonderfully ironic demonstration that he was indeed a prophet, the Lord answered Simon's unspoken thought. Further, Simon expected that the Lord should perceive the woman's sins; instead, he perceives and voices Simon's unkindness.

As we might expect, his rebuke follows the pattern of those we examined earlier. The Lord might have responded as he does in the story of the woman taken in adultery, where he reprimands the crowd for their judgment of the woman by reminding them of their own sins. In both that case and this case the Lord does not argue over the sins of the woman; rather, the issue concerns the onlookers' right to assess—or even to notice—those sins. But this time, as with the elder son in the parable, he acknowledges Simon's at least relatively successful efforts at righteous living by associating him with the debtor who owed less and by suggesting that Simon's sins may indeed be fewer than the woman's. And then, with the exaggerated phrasing we heard in the parables of the lost sheep and coin, he follows this not with praise of "the just person," but with a reaffirmation of his love for the repentant sinner. Again, the rebuke comes after the Pharisee's silent condemnation of both the Savior and the weeping woman; Simon's judgment was no less present for being unspoken. And the Lord's displeasure was no less keen.

"Judge Not, That Ye Be Not Judged"

Having established a context of judgment preceding rebuke in these cases, let us return briefly to the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin in Luke, chapter 15. The first three

verses establish the context that prompted them:

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

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

And he spake this parable unto them.

These verses, in fact, establish the context for everything that occurs in chapter 15, including the parable of the prodigal son. Seen in this light, the portion of the parable dealing with the elder son's unkindness becomes central to its interpretation, since the Lord directed the story not only to the publicans and sinners present, but to the scribes and Pharisees who judged them. Thus the message is multiple and complex, leaving no one room for self-satisfaction.

It would seem then that the Lord meant it when he said,

Judge not, that ye be not judged.

For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. [Matthew 7:1–2]

In the parables and incidents we have explored, we have seen the Lord return their sharp judgments to the heads of those who made them, so that, quite literally, they were measured by their own standards and found wanting.

We might note that when the Prophet Joseph Smith reached Matthew, chapter 7, in his translation of the Bible, he changed the wording to "Judge not unrighteously, that ye be not judged: but judge righteous judgment" (JST Matthew 7:1–2). At first glance this seems a liberating change: we need not refrain from judgment, but merely judge righteously. But what constitutes righteous judgment, and who qualifies to make it? Simon, or the elder son?

Martha, or the Pharisees, or me, or you? While there are many things we must make judgments about, the sins of another or the state of our own souls in comparison to others seems not to be among them. In his translation of the Sermon at the Temple in 3 Nephi, chapter 14, the Prophet chose to leave the Lord's words as they appear in the King James version of the Sermon on the Mount, "Judge not, that ye be not judged" (v. 1). Luke phrases his version of the passage even more explicitly:

Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.

Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven:

Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again. [Luke 6:36–38]

In the familiar passage that follows, the Lord reiterates his message not to judge by explaining why we should not:

And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?

Or how wilt thou say to thy brother: Let me pull the mote out of thine eye—and behold, a beam is in thine own eye?

Thou hypocrite, first cast the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast the mote out of thy brother's eye. [3 Nephi 14:3–5]

In other words, our own sins, no matter how few or seemingly insignificant, disqualify us as judges of other people's sins. If, therefore, we wish to judge our associates, we might wisely observe the Savior's advice to the Nephite Twelve:

And know ye that ye shall be judges of this people, according to the judgment which I shall give unto you, which shall be just. Therefore, what manner of men ought ye to be? Verily, I say unto you, even as I am. [3 Nephi 27:27]

Here the Lord links judgment with the individual doing the judging, and concludes that only those who are like him can make his judgments. In the meantime, perhaps we would do better to cast ourselves as the repentant prodigal rather than as the elder son and to sit weeping for our own sins at the Lord's feet rather than to look over his shoulder judging another's. That we may do this, I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.