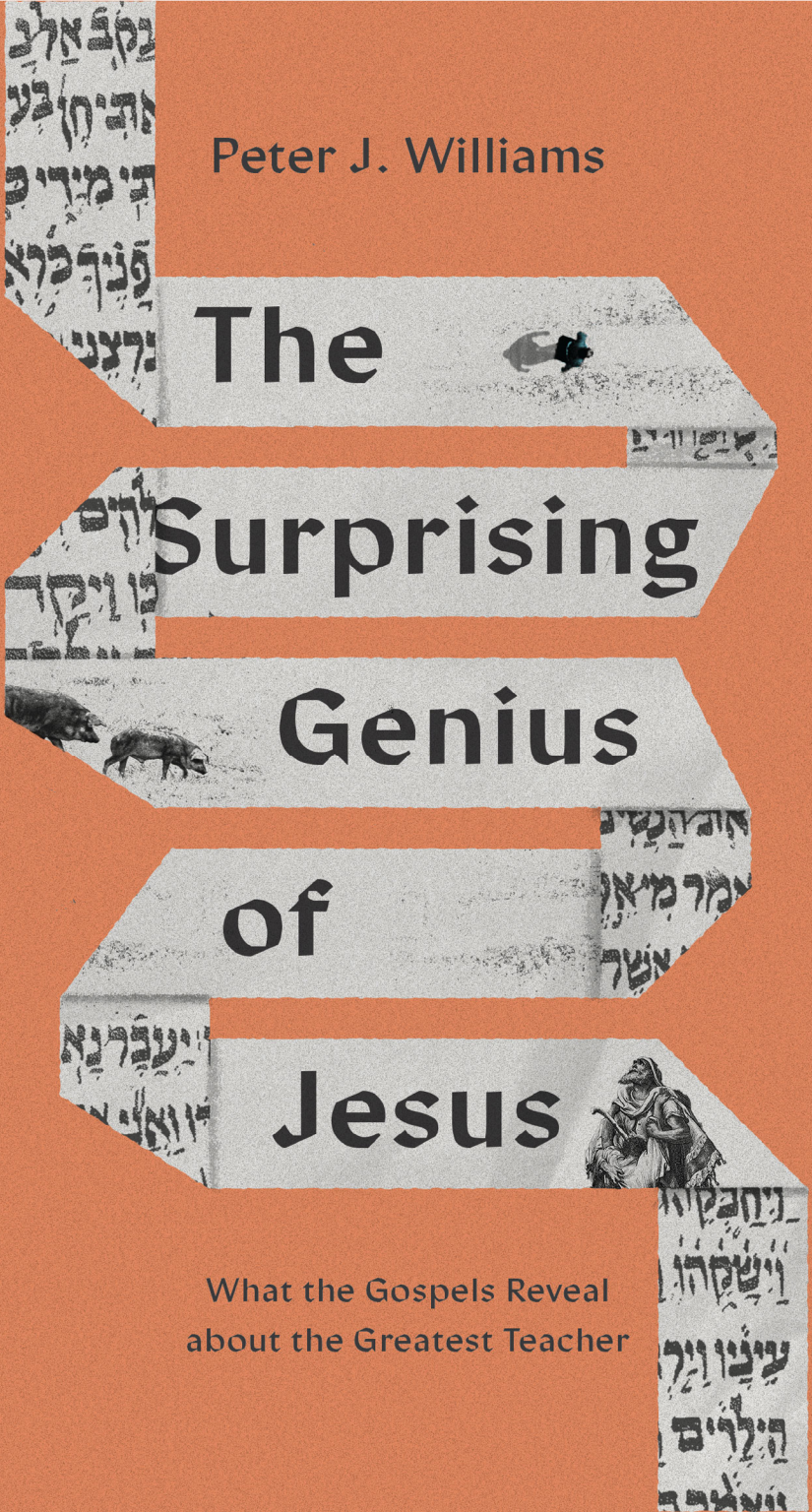
Peter J. Williams

The Surprising Genius of Jesus



What the Gospels Reveal about the Greatest Teacher

"This fascinating study shows how Jesus's parables, such as that of the prodigal son, are not only powerful stories but also treasure troves of suggestive allusions to the Old Testament. Although short, this book contains a wealth of wisdom to give today's readers insight into Luke's parables, thereby helping them understand more of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. A gripping and illuminating read!"

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"Jesus's parable of the prodigal son is a masterpiece in the history of storytelling. Not only does it make a powerful impact on people of all cultures, it is intricately and poetically composed and rife with allusions to Old Testament narratives, especially about Jacob and Esau. Other parables demonstrate these same characteristics. Whoever composed them deserved to be called a genius, and Jesus (rather than one of his followers) is the best candidate for that individual. *The Surprising Genius of Jesus*, though a little book, is chock-full of observations about Jesus's teaching that should make readers admire him even more than they may already do."

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"Whoever came up with the parable of the prodigal son must have had a forensic knowledge and deep understanding of the Old Testament, as well as an unrivaled ability to connect with simple people and confound and outwit the superintelligent. The one who said those words knew what he was doing—his intentions and claims are made very clear to whoever will take them seriously. Peter J. Williams's excellent and very readable book is unique in considering the shocking wisdom of Jesus's teaching, and it presents Jesus as accessible to everyone yet wise enough to confound even the intellectuals."

Tim Farron, Member of Parliament, United Kingdom

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What the Gospels Reveal about the Greatest Teacher

Peter J. Williams

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The Surprising Genius of Jesus: What the Gospels Reveal about the Greatest Teacher

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For Tim and Fiona

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Preface

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT the cleverness of Jesus. It argues both that clever teaching is attributed to Jesus and that Jesus actually said those clever things. My hope is that readers who are Christians come away with a renewed awe at the depth of Jesus's words and that any who are not Christians see Jesus's genius and recognize that he must be more than merely an extraordinarily gifted teacher. Much of this book is about one passage—Luke 15:11–32—and about how it is a brilliant story, reflecting the mind of a genius. For an application of the meaning of that text for today, I cannot recommend highly enough Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Dutton, 2008).

I am grateful to the trustees and staff of Tyndale House, Cambridge, for giving me the time to write this book and to many friends who were willing to read this book in a rough draft and offer suggestions for improvement. These readers include Esther Atsen, James Bejon, Keith Bintley, Ezra Brainard, Dr. John Hayward, Miriam Hulley, Dr. Dirk Jongkind, Zachary Klein, Demsin Lachin, David Laing, Dr. Stephen Lloyd, Stephen McCausland,

Greg and Jennifer Mayer, Dr. Kaspars Ozoliņš, Toby Payne, Lily Rivers, Cristo Rodriguez, Kathryn Williams (my better half), Tim Williams (a lovely older brother), and Jordan Worley.

Biblical quotations from the English Standard Version are marked ESV. Other biblical quotations are my own translations or are lightly adapted from the ESV.

Introduction

I discovered that I had been unconsciously
trained to admire everything about Jesus
except his intellectual astuteness.

KENNETH BAILEY
Finding the Lost

OVER THE YEARS thousands of people have been described as geniuses.[1] Aristotle (384–322 BC), Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791), and Albert Einstein (1879–1955) are among the more famous ones. But the term *genius* is almost never applied to Jesus of Nazareth.[2] Probably about two billion Christians would claim to follow his teachings, which is more than follow the teachings of any other person in history. But most of the Christians I mix with would be more likely to

1 As of March 2022, Amazon has over four thousand books in the category of biographies that include the word *genius* in their title.

2 An exception is the recent motivational book by Erwin Raphael McManus, *The Genius of Jesus: The Man Who Changed Everything* (New York: Convergent, 2021).

see Jesus's intelligence as a necessary corollary of his divine nature than to point to specific things he said as examples of remarkable intellect. When Jesus is viewed as a teacher, as Christian philosopher Dallas Willard wryly comments, "Frankly, he is not taken to be a person of much ability."[3]

One reason others are seen as geniuses but Jesus is not could be what they have left behind. Aristotle left books of philosophy and analysis; da Vinci, inventions and exquisite paintings; Mozart, sublime music; Einstein, theories that are foundational for modern physics. And Jesus? He never wrote a book. But could we say that he left Christianity behind? The problem is that its art, history, institutions, philosophy, and so on are often regarded as a *response* to Jesus, not something he himself thought up. At least we can agree that many things under the label of Christianity have nothing at all to do with the teachings of Jesus.

This book argues that Jesus should be considered a genius, not merely because a vast number of people today claim to follow him but also because of the cleverness and wisdom of his teaching. The teaching attributed to him combines impressive factual knowledge with even more impressive depth of insight, coherence, and simplicity. He was literally able to teach two groups with very different knowledge levels simultaneously. Evidence for Jesus's teaching is found in the four earliest records of Jesus, the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. It is well worth investing the nine hours or so it takes to read all four of them once. In fact, speaking from experience, I can say that it is rewarding to study them for an entire lifetime. If you have doubts about whether they can be

3 Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (London: William Collins, 1998), 1.

taken as serious historical sources, I invite you to read my short book *Can We Trust the Gospels?*[4]

To follow my argument here, you do not need to believe that Jesus said all the things credited to him in the Gospels. All you need to believe is that the sayings attributed to Jesus come from within living memory of him, remembering that even leading skeptical scholars date the Gospels to the first century.[5] Jesus Christ was executed while Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea (AD 26–36),[6] and if the Gospels were all written by AD 100 (personally, I think they were much earlier), the gap between Jesus and the Gospels is both short enough for them to be thoroughly reliable and long enough for them to be thoroughly unreliable. The length of time alone does not therefore tell us about the degree of their reliability. Only an examination of the Gospels themselves can answer this question.

In the pages that follow, I intend both to show the genius of the words attributed to Jesus in the Gospels and to explore the best explanation for where these clever ideas originated. Was Jesus a rather ordinary teacher with brilliant students who selflessly

4 Peter J. Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).

5 Leading scholar and skeptic Bart D. Ehrman says, "Most historians think that Mark was the first of our Gospels to be written, sometime between the mid 60s to early 70s. Matthew and Luke were probably produced some ten or fifteen years later, perhaps around 80 to 85. John was written perhaps ten years after that, in 90 or 95." Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 43.

6 See Roman historian Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, for evidence that Christ's execution occurred while Pilate was governor of Judea. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.89, gives Pilate's tenure in Judea as ten years and his departure shortly before Tiberius died on March 16, AD 37. Thus, whereas Pilate may have governed until the beginning of AD 37, since Jesus was executed at Passover time, which fell in late March or April, the crucifixion must have taken place between AD 26 and AD 36.

credited him with their great ideas?[7] Or was Jesus a very smart teacher with, coincidentally, smart disciples, and therefore the credit should be shared? Or was Jesus himself the genius, and to the extent that his disciples showed themselves intelligent, they were simply reflecting the greatness of their teacher?

I find the last explanation best, and I want to consider as my central evidence of Jesus's genius the longest story attributed to him, commonly known as the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). As we will see, despite its name, the story involving the prodigal son is about *two* sons, not one. It is set after two related stories about a lost sheep and a lost coin. By focusing on one story, I do not want to suggest that this is the only example of Jesus's genius—or even the most important one. His creativity and wisdom can be seen in all his teaching, closely examined. But to keep this book short, we examine just one major story in depth while considering other stories more briefly. We will be analyzing only Jesus's stories and will not even touch on his sermons or dialogues.

The first chapter looks at the cleverness on the surface of the longest story attributed to Jesus. The second examines the cleverness of this story through the way it echoes multiple Old Testament stories. The third investigates other stories attributed to Jesus and shows that they too contain the same sort of use of the Old Testament. The fourth highlights reasons for thinking that the cleverness of all the stories in Luke 15–16 must go back to Jesus himself. The final chapter connects what we have learned with Jesus's mission as a whole and considers how this challenges us all.

7 Jesus was early seen as a philosopher. See Jonathan T. Pennington, *Jesus the Great Philosopher: Rediscovering the Wisdom Needed for the Good Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2020), 3–8.

1

A Brilliant Story

WE BEGIN OUR TREASURE HUNT by collecting a few of the many nuggets of gold on the uppermost surface of the longest story attributed to Jesus, found in Luke 15:11–32. It is just 388 words long in the Greek original,[1] but despite its brevity, it combines beguiling simplicity on the surface with several coherent layers of deeper meaning for a student of the Old Testament.

Though it is usually called the parable of the prodigal son, I call it the story of the two sons, since it is about *two* sons, not one. I call it a story, not a parable, not to deny that it is a parable but to respect the fact that Luke 15:3 seems to refer to all three stories found in Luke 15 as a single parable. Here is the chapter as a whole:

> Now all the tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." And he told

1 According to the *Tyndale House Greek New Testament*.

them this parable, saying, "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he puts it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he has come home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' I tell you that thus there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who have no need of repentance.

"Or what woman, having ten drachmas, if she loses one drachma, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the drachma that I had lost.' Thus, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

And he said, "A certain man had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of possessions that is coming to me.' And he divided his livelihood between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his possessions living dissolutely. And when he had spent everything, there arose a severe famine in that country, and he began to be in need. And he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be filled with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one was giving him anything. But coming to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I am perishing here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have

sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants."' And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring out the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to celebrate. Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the lads and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back in good health.' But he was angry and was not willing to go in. And his father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Look, all these years I have slaved for you, and I never disobeyed your command, and you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' And he said to him, 'Child, you are always with me, and all my things are yours. But it was necessary to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead and is alive again, and he was lost and is found.'"

After the introductory sentence, "A certain man had two sons" (5 Greek words), the story divides between the account of the younger

son (239 words) and the older son (144 words).[2] As the younger son takes up about 62 percent of the story and the older son a mere 38 percent, it is natural that the whole is often named after the younger son alone.[3] The story is a single paragraph in our earliest copy, which reflects the fact that when the storyteller told this story, he did not pause between the sections about the two contrasting sons.[4] Yet the content may be read in two sections, each ending with the father saying that the younger son "was dead and is alive again, and he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:24, 32).[5] Even though the storyteller does not pause, there is still a clear literary structure.

The story is one of several parables that occur in Luke's Gospel alone and is part of a series of three stories in Luke 15:

1. The first story tells of one hundred sheep, with one lost and then found.
2. The second tells of ten coins, with one lost and then found.
3. The third tells of two sons, of whom only one is explicitly said to be lost and then found.

Not only are the three stories connected by being about things lost and found, they all contain celebrations and parallel

2 The story never calls them the "younger brother" or "older brother." I therefore generally call them "younger son" and "older son," though, of course, it is not wrong to note their brotherhood, which is an important aspect of the story.

3 This already occurred in the running head of the King James Version (1611 original), which named this section "The lost sheepe and prodigall sonne."

4 The earliest manuscript of this passage is Hanna Papyrus 1 (Mater Verbi) in the Vatican Library, also known as Papyrus 75, usually dated to the third century. Images of Hanna Papyrus 1 are available at https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Pap.Hanna.1(Mater.Verbi). It divides the whole of Luke 15 into just three paragraphs, as reflected in my translation above.

5 The Greek wording of the two verses varies slightly.

each other, with the first two seeming to be a "warm-up act" for the third. It is not just that the first two stories are much shorter than the third; they also prepare for it since in the first story the sheep gets lost by *going away* and in the second the coin gets lost *at home*. The third and final story then tells of the younger son who, like the sheep, gets lost by *going away* but then of the older son who, like the coin, has not left home. So we have artistry in the three individual stories and also artistry in the way they hang together and enrich each other. The implication of the three stories together is that the older son too is lost.

As the numbers in the stories become smaller, moving from one hundred to ten to two, the focus increases. The stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin, which were probably equivalent in value, are preparing us for the longest story, which is about the most valuable lost entity, namely, humans. In the first story, 1 percent of the flock is lost and found; in the second, 10 percent of the wealth is lost and found; and in the third story, 100 percent of the sons are lost, although we have often thought of only the younger son as lost. At least one, 50 percent, is found, but the question is left open about whether the other one will be found too.[6]

The Audiences

Luke's Gospel portrays the story of the two sons as being told in a particular historical setting. This is described in the first two verses of Luke 15:

6 I am grateful to my friend and fellow Tyndale House researcher James Bejon for insights underlying this paragraph.

> Now all the tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." (15:1–2)

According to Luke, besides Jesus's disciples, four sets of people were present, described in two groups:

1. Tax collectors and sinners: Tax collectors were typically Jews who collaborated with the occupying Romans or their puppet rulers in collecting money and were therefore unpopular.[7] People were probably called "sinners" because they consistently flouted rules—both rules from the Mosaic law and rules from later traditions.
2. Pharisees and scribes: Pharisees, whose name means "separated ones," were the largest religiously defined subgroup within Judaism and were characterized by their knowledge of the Jewish law and by their strong desire to maintain ritual purity through observing rules.[8] The scribes were particularly tasked with the meticulous copying of the Jewish Scriptures and therefore would have known those texts intimately.[9] This last point is important, for we will see that Jesus's challenge would have pushed their wits to the limit.

7 Tax collectors were not always viewed as apostate from Judaism. One of them was chosen as part of an important delegation of Jewish leaders to negotiate peace with the Romans. Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.287, 292. See Fritz Herrenbrück, *Jesus und die Zöllner: Historische und neutestamentlich-exegetische Untersuchungen*, WUNT 2nd ser., vol. 41 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1990), 211–13.

8 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 17.41–42.

9 From Mark 12:38–40 we see that Jewish scribes could also be cultural leaders.

According to Luke's Gospel, itself a work of skill, the group of religious outcasts was "drawing near" to Jesus to "hear" him. "Hear" is the final word of the preceding chapter, which ends with Jesus's saying "Let the one who has ears to hear, *hear*" (14:35). Devout Jewish men back then would recite the most famous Jewish prayer, the Shema, every day, as many still do in our time. The Shema is named after its first word, "hear," from Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." So we have a picture of the nondevout group being the ones who are devoutly *listening* to Jesus. They are also said to be "drawing near" to Jesus and thus are far closer to the teacher God has sent than are those who claim to be pious.

Meanwhile, the supposedly devout group of Pharisees and scribes are "grumbling," a term loaded with the memory that Israel repeatedly grumbled while they wandered for forty years in the wilderness (Ex. 15:24; 16:2; 17:3; Num. 14:2; 16:11, 41). "Hearing" and "grumbling" are opposite reactions, showing us the piety of the impious and the impiety of the pious. Everything is reversed.

The Pharisees and scribes are grumbling about the company Jesus keeps. Their complaint in Luke 15:2 is "This man receives sinners and eats with them." They were scrupulous not to eat with the religiously impure. It is in response to their charge that Jesus is eating with the wrong people that he reportedly tells the three stories of what was lost and then found.

As we have our first run through the story of the two sons, even on the surface it should be apparent that the storyteller has skillfully expressed a lot with an economy of words.

Scene 1 (Luke 15:11–24)

The story begins,

> A certain man had two sons. (Luke 15:11)

Already in these opening words, we have hallmarks of Jesus's speech since another parable attributed to Jesus in Matthew 21:28–32 begins the same way: "What do you think? A man had two sons." In that other parable, two sons are sent by their father to work in the vineyard. One refuses at first and later goes; the other agrees at first but then does not go. That story, like the one here, was told to show that sometimes tax collectors and those known for their sins were closer to God than the apparently righteous (Matt. 21:32). So we have two different stories with the same opening in two different Gospels, but both make the same point. That is naturally explained if they came from the same person.

As soon as we hear this opening to Jesus's story, we expect the two sons to be rather different, which is just how they turn out to be. The tale continues:

> And the younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of possessions that is coming to me." And he divided his livelihood between them. (Luke 15:12)

This verse is one of the most important to grasp. I have taught this story on many occasions and asked the audience what the father did when the younger son demanded his inheritance. The

usual reply is "He gave it to him." But it says he divided his possessions "between *them*."

This is a fair-minded father, who will not give the younger son his inheritance without also giving the older son his share. So the older son does rather well. The storyteller leaves to our imagination where this story takes place. Nevertheless, the story is addressed to Jews, and in Jewish law the firstborn son received a special inheritance, which was double that of his brothers (Deut. 21:17). Since they appear to be on a farm estate and the younger son goes away only with possessions that can be moved, we might even assume that all the real estate goes to the older son and that the younger son gets only a share of the movable possessions. Whether or not that is so, Jewish hearers of this story would have imagined the older son receiving most of the father's wealth. This sets the background to the reaction of the older son later in the story.

And now we have a single verse, which could easily be made into an entire film:

> And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his possessions living dissolutely. (Luke 15:13)

Later in the story we see that the family must be reasonably wealthy since they have both hired and domestic servants, fine clothes, and a calf already fattened for a feast. Now this younger son has plenty of wealth and wastes it in reckless living.

The word "waste" or "squander"—in Greek, *diaskorpizō* (διασκορπίζω)—is significant. It is not a particularly common word

but occurs again in the immediately following context, namely, the first verse of the next chapter, where we read,

> He [Jesus] also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was *wasting* his possessions." (16:1)

So we have two adjacent stories about people *wasting possessions*. What is more, we are told that the Pharisees did not like what they heard:

> The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. (16:14)

If you are a hard worker, then you probably hate wastefulness. The Pharisees were generally hardworking in their business and donated with relative generosity to various causes. Jesus, of course, does not criticize conscientious work, but he does criticize an attitude common among those who work most diligently. Hard workers know that serious work pays and that reward follows effort, and in their mind there is often a law: work leads to reward, but sin and waste have disastrous consequences.[10] Very readily, a working person concludes that he or she is reaping the rewards of his or her own goodness and that those who do not work as much are reaping the rewards of their own badness. Self-righteousness can come easily to a hard worker.

These two stories about wasters are thus rather provocative since their central characters waste money and yet are supposed

10 Many verses in Proverbs support this idea, such as Prov. 10:4; 12:24, 27; 13:4; 21:5.

to depict something about God's kingdom. The experience of the wasteful son shows clearly that people who have wasted all that God has given them are welcome to return to him and to be accepted fully as his children.

The story of the two sons hits the mark because hard workers can easily feel indignant at the actions of those who work less hard. In a religious context, hard workers may consider themselves closer to God. This story raises the possibility that those who have more obviously failed in religious matters may have a clearer grasp of God's free grace and forgiveness. Jesus even says elsewhere that the person forgiven the greater debt may love more (7:41–50).

A whole lifestyle is encapsulated in the single word I have translated "dissolutely" (15:13).[11] We wish the storyteller would say more, but our wish is denied. Unlike subsequent retellings, the story has nothing to say about any wild parties this man may or may not have thrown. Details of his wasteful life are left entirely to the imagination, which is the most powerful place for them to be. It takes a good storyteller to know what to omit. By omitting such details, the storyteller avoids restricting our thoughts to one particular vice and steers clear of any glorification of such a lifestyle.

But just when the younger son runs out of money, disaster strikes:

> And when he had spent everything, there arose a severe famine in that country, and he began to be in need. (15:14)

11 For a papyrus using similar phraseology to describe the financially wasteful living of a young man in Egypt, see G. Milligan, *Selections from the Greek Papyri* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910), 71–72.

It seems quite coincidental, at least on the surface level of the story, that a severe famine hits at this moment. A *severe famine* might be distinguished from a mere *famine* by occurring over multiple years. Anyway, this significant famine is a clever part of the story. One scholar has shown that it tends to be forgotten when people from contexts untouched by hunger think of this account. Those who forget this part of the story attribute all the blame for the younger son's wretchedness to his own actions.[12] But with perfect balance, this story shows that it is a combination of bad choices plus bad "luck" that leads to the son's misery. He is unlucky enough to choose the one country hit by the famine: "There arose a severe famine *in that country*" (15:14). His bad luck is rather important later (in 15:30), when the older son attributes the younger son's ruin *entirely* to his own actions.

The story continues, recounting the man's wretchedness:

> And he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be filled with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one was giving him anything. (15:15–16)

Now in a tight spot, he next moves to get what could loosely be called a "job." The phrase I have translated "attached himself to" (ESV: "hired himself out to") does not say that someone hires him; it makes clear that he receives no pay. A more literal rendering of the key verb *ekollēthē* (ἐκολλήθη) would be "he stuck to." We

12 Mark Allan Powell, "The Forgotten Famine: Personal Responsibility in Luke's Parable of 'the Prodigal Son,'" in *Literary Encounters with the Reign of God*, ed. Sharon H. Ringe and H. C. Paul Kim (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 265–87.

might imagine the younger son so desperate that he hangs around a citizen, who is prepared to take advantage of his desperate offer of free labor but gives him no pay. Note also the skillful choice of the word "citizen" here, poignantly emphasizing that whereas this local has status and a country, the younger son does not.

The storyteller's choice of pig herding as the man's job is powerful. It was one of the worst jobs he could do. For Jews, shepherding was not a prestigious job, but pig herding was far worse since it combined the low status of herding with the ritual uncleanness of pigs.[13] If this really were told to the audience described in Luke's Gospel, it would work well psychologically. We could imagine that a Pharisee listening to the story at this point would be pleased that things were working out badly for this waster. Any member of the audience who liked to see sinners get what they deserve would have been on board—before the story turned and pointed at them.[14]

The pigs eat pods, which are scarcely digestible for humans, but the man is not even able to obtain these. So the story has brought us to a point at which the man is utterly desperate and at risk of dying of hunger. The storyteller has portrayed hunger, loneliness, shame, and uncleanness as the man reaches rock bottom.

Then something changes. But rather than describing how he comes to his senses, our narrator cleverly gives us a view into the man's mind, as we hear his self-address:

13 In the family King David grew up in, it was the job that could be left to the youngest brother when older brothers were called to something more important (see 1 Sam. 16:11). The Greek historian Herodotus (ca. 484–ca. 425 BC) also tells of how in Egypt swineherds were viewed as especially unclean. Herodotus, *Histories* 2.47. One rabbinic saying was "Cursed is the one who raises pigs and cursed is the one who teaches his son Greek wisdom." Babylonian Talmud Menahot 64b.

14 See Kenneth E. Bailey, *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1992), 127.

> But coming to himself, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I am perishing here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.'" (15:17–19)

Thus the younger son returns to sanity, recognizing that even the father's temporary paid laborers, without job security, are far better off than him. He acknowledges his sin and is prepared to ask to be accepted simply as a servant rather than as a son.

Then the journey from the pigsty to the father's kiss takes just a single verse:

> And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. (15:20)

The father's response, while unsurprising to any who have heard the story before, is deeply counter to what first-time hearers expect in multiple ways. Whereas by his actions the younger son has renounced his family, publicly shamed his father, and squandered much of his estate, we see various surprises:

1. The father saw him a long way off, which suggests that he had been regularly scanning the horizon, yearning for the younger son to return.
2. The father runs. He is a man with adult children, and the younger son has been away for a considerable time (15:29).

It is reasonable to imagine him as quite old and of a dignity such that running would be rather beneath him.[15]

3. The father's first reaction is "compassion," not anger.
4. The younger son is welcomed back publicly and unconditionally to his former status.

Next, the younger son begins his speech:

> And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." (15:21)

If we compare this speech with the soliloquy of Luke 15:18–19, we see that he gets only halfway through what he had planned to say. He does not get to the part about being a servant. The storyteller makes us wonder why, and most who hear the story conclude that the father has interrupted him.[16] The skillfulness of the story is in implying this without saying it explicitly.

Next, the father speaks, but surprisingly, he does not address his son. In fact, he never addresses the younger son, though later he addresses the older son. There is literally no need for him to say anything to the younger son. Positive speech such as "Welcome" or "I love you" is not necessary since the father's actions—his run, his embrace, and his kiss—have spoken clearly. The father has no

15 See Bailey, *Finding the Lost*, 144.

16 In some significant manuscripts (Vaticanus, fourth century; Sinaiticus, fourth century; Bezae, fifth century), he does get to complete the speech and says, "Make me as one of your hired servants," in Luke 15:21. Many different manuscripts, however, line up to support the omission of these words, and it seems likely that these words were simply added by copyists based on 15:19.

thought of reprimand or even of asking questions. Strikingly, the father's first words are to the servants, whose presence the able storyteller knew he did not need to announce.

> But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring out the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." And they began to celebrate. (15:22–24)

Although the ESV ("Bring quickly the best robe . . .") does not bring this out, the very first word to come out of the father's mouth is the Greek word *tachy* (ταχύ), "quick(ly)." Literally, he says, "Quick! Bring the first [i.e., best] robe, and put it on him." The first word is significant. For many years the father must have felt that time was moving incredibly slowly. Now, however, there is not a moment to lose. Wasted time in the past is now irrelevant, and the father intends to make up for lost time with speed. He gives commands that publicly transform his son's status—the robe and the ring demonstrating to everyone that the younger son has been restored to his former status.[17] Note that he is given the *highest-ranking* robe. Obviously, if he is wearing it, no one else can wear it, including the older son, who no doubt seems to have a better claim to it.

The younger son imagined he might be given bread (15:17), but in fact, the fattened calf is killed. Just one calf at a time is

17 Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jacob and the Prodigal: How Jesus Retold Israel's Story* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 174.

fattened for slaughter, and it is kept for a special occasion. Thus the wastrel gets the best robe and the finest feast because the father commands it.

Within the story, of course, both the best robe and the fattened calf legally belong to the older son since the father had given away all his possessions without remainder to his two sons. But the father's position as head of the family as well as legal convention would give him authority to use all the wealth of the farm during his lifetime, with the restriction that he could not dispose of the capital.[18] This gives him continued say over things that he has given away. Hearers may well feel uncomfortable at the father's generosity, but that discomfort is a deliberate feature of the story. The father's generosity *is* uncomfortable.

Having commanded the celebration, the father explains why they must celebrate: "This my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (15:24). Being lost and found is a theme that runs right through this chapter (15:6, 9, 32). The storyteller says they *began* to celebrate, thus concisely hinting that the celebrations were likely to last long.

Scene 2 (Luke 15:25–32)

We now have a second scene. The older son, who has been entirely in the background in the first scene, now takes center stage.

> Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the lads and asked what these things meant. And

18 This understanding is based on the Jewish rules written down around AD 200 in Mishnah, Bava Batra 8.7. See also Bailey, *Finding the Lost*, 116–17.

> he said to him, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back in good health." (Luke 15:25–27)

The older son is said to have been in the field. Listeners naturally infer that he was working late at a time when others were back at the house. He "drew near" to the house (15:25). The verb "drew near" is *ēngisen* (ἤγγισεν), from *engizō* (ἐγγίζω). Attentive listeners to Luke's Gospel remember that the sinners were "drawing near," *engizontes* (ἐγγίζοντες), also from *engizō* (ἐγγίζω), to Jesus (15:1), and the younger son went to a country that was "far," *makran* (μακράν, 15:13), and was seen "far off," also *makran* (μακράν, 15:20). Proximity and distance are key ideas, both for this story and for the wider setting in Luke. The younger son has been *far*, and the older son is now *close*. Even with these spatial words, the storyteller is doing a lot of work—deftly showing that physical distance is sometimes the opposite of the closeness of the relationship.

Next, the older son asks a servant for the reason for the music and dancing. He is given a prosaically factual reply: "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back in good health" (15:27). The servant reports bare facts, and we cannot tell what, if any, emotions he has about the matter. But the older son's reaction that follows is highly emotional:

> But he was angry and was not willing to go in. And his father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, "Look, all these years I have slaved for you, and I never

> disobeyed your command, and you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!" And he said to him, "Child, you are always with me, and all my things are yours. But it was necessary to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead and is alive again, and he was lost and is found." (15:28–32)

Now we have the older son's response to the situation—anger, which contrasts with the compassion of the father. We might have expected a brother to have more understanding or even to be closer to his own sibling. The older son has done well financially from receiving his inheritance early. But he refuses to go in, so the father has to go out. In this case the older son is first to speak and is uninterrupted. It is worth weighing his words carefully.

He opens his speech with the word "Look." This alerts us to something we may have overlooked in the story: on three occasions the younger son addresses his father as "Father." Two of these occasions are in real life, and the other is as he rehearses his speech in his mind (15:12, 18, 21). The younger son always acknowledges the father *as his father*, even though his early actions in demanding his share and leaving home look like a public rejection of him. This highlights the absence of the word "father" at the beginning of the older son's angry outburst. He is supposedly the model son, but the absence of this word shows that, though physically closer to the father, he is relationally more distant than the younger son ever was. The storyteller conveys all this through just one missing word.

The older son's complaint continues:

> All these years I have slaved for you. (15:29)

If any person had the right to use the phrase "all these years," it was surely the father. He could have complained to the younger son about "all these years" he had been away. Here, however, the older son sees his service as having lasted many years.

The word I have translated "I have slaved" comes from the verb *douleuō* (δουλεύω). English translations often tamely render the word as "I have served." It conveys the idea that though the older son has the status of son, he thinks of himself as a mere *slave*. There is, of course, a problem with the claim that he has been working for the father because at the beginning of the story we learned that the father divided all his possessions between the two sons. This means that the older son has been working on a farm that he himself owns. Every time that he has worked late, he has been building up his own wealth since the estate is already his. He speaks as if he has been a slave, but all along he has been a son. We get the impression that this is the first time that the older son has complained, but it is clearly not the first time he has *felt* like complaining. This phrase reveals the long-cherished resentment in his heart.

He continues:

> I never disobeyed your command. (15:29)

This has a ring of truth to it. We can imagine that the older son was a model of outward obedience. But his words also depict the father as parenting through imperatives, which again probably

reflects the older son's distorted perspective on the relationship. His obedience is purely negative: he did not break rules, but there is no evidence that he loved or respected his father.

It is similar to the narrative in Luke 18:18–27, in which Jesus is approached by a rich ruler wanting to inherit eternal life who claims to have kept all the commandments from his youth, yet he cannot face Jesus's command to sell all he has and give to the poor and thus receive treasure in heaven. Here too we have someone in the grip of materialism who thinks he has not broken the rules.

The older son continues:

> You never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends. (15:29)

The storyteller knows that it is hard for us to imagine that for all those years the older son has had no meat. He is complaining that he has not even been given a young goat, an animal a mere fraction of the size of the fattened calf that has just been killed.[19] He specifically complains that he was not given a young goat "that I might celebrate with my friends." Again, in line with the storyteller's skill, the significance of the phrase comes from *what is unstated*.

Who is on the older son's ideal guest list? Answer: himself and his friends. But the more penetrating question is this: Who is *not* on his guest list? Since he has presumably been regularly eating with the father and has usual social interaction with friends, including the ability to invite them to eat at the farm he himself

19 Note to townsfolk: young goats are preferred over old ones, since their meat is more tender.

owns, only one answer makes sense: *the older son does not want the father on the guest list*. All those times he has eaten meat with his father have not satisfied him. He wants the party with just his friends and himself. His words imply that he has no relationship with his father.

The older son also uses the word *celebrate*, a theme word in the three stories in Luke 15. The shepherd, the woman, and the father all *celebrate* when they find what was lost, just as heaven celebrates over finding a lost sinner. The older son, however, wants a completely different sort of celebration. His celebration with his friends and a mere young goat to eat is obviously inferior to the father's party with the fattened calf, which also implies an invitation wide enough to consume such a beast.[20]

The older son, however, would still prefer to remain outside the superior celebration. The shepherd, the woman, and the father all have *inclusive* celebrations: everyone is welcome, and they are celebrating the finding of what was lost. The shepherd and the woman invite both friends and neighbors. The father even explicitly invites the servants to enjoy meat and celebrate ("Let us eat and celebrate," 15:23). By contrast, the older son wants an *exclusive* celebration, with his select friends but not with his neighbors—and especially not with his father.

The older son continues his tirade:

> But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him! (15:30)

20 Even a modest-size fattened calf yielding 450 lb. of beef would supply hundreds of portions of meat.

The older son concludes his complaint by referring to "this son of yours." As elsewhere in the story, the force of the phrase is in its implicit denial. By not saying "my brother," he is in effect denying the reality of his relationship with his brother.

Next, he complains about how his nonbrother has devoured their father's livelihood "with prostitutes." Obviously, the younger son has not devoured *all* the father's livelihood since there they are on the farm. Besides which the older son has received at least half the father's possessions for himself—and quite probably more. So the older son is exaggerating the damage to the father, and there is no reason to think that he cares about his father's welfare and every reason to think that he cares about his own.

What about the reference to prostitutes? How can the older son know what his brother did in a distant country? He has not seen him since his return and is himself only just back from the field. The natural way to hear the story is that there has been no communication of any kind from the younger son. Alternative scenarios are, of course, imaginable, but the story gives us no hint that they are likely. As for the father, the younger son has been effectively "dead." Therefore, the most probable source of the older son's "information" that his younger brother frequented prostitutes is his own imagination.[21] The storyteller wisely does not give us the unedifying details of the younger son's misdemeanors. So the older son's conviction that his brother's most significant expense has been with prostitutes could indicate that prostitutes may have occupied his own imagination.

21 "The accusation of immorality stems from the imagination of the older brother, not from the narrator of the story." Bailey, *Finding the Lost*, 123.

We see the warped perspective further reflected in the older son's claim "You killed the fattened calf *for him*." Of course, it is not just "for him"; everyone can enjoy the meat.

Then we have the father's final word, with which the story ends:

> And he said to him, "Child, you are always with me, and all my things are yours. But it was necessary to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead and is alive again, and he was lost and is found." (15:31–32)

He addresses him as "child," which is what he truly is. The older son has twice used the word "never," *oudepote* (οὐδέποτε), saying, "I *never* disobeyed your command," and, "You *never* gave me a young goat" (15:29). The father here replies with the related word "always," *pantote* (πάντοτε), saying, "You are always with me." He says that all that he has belongs to his older son, which is quite literally true. But he explains that there is no choice about celebrating. The father responds to the phrase "this son of yours," *ho huios sou houtos* (ὁ υἱός σου οὗτος), with the related phrase "this brother of yours," *ho adelphos sou houtos* (ὁ ἀδελφός σου οὗτος). The return of his brother from death to life, from being lost to being found, is so dramatic that celebration is obligatory.

The story stops here, not telling us whether the older son softened in response to the father's final words. The open-ended nature of the story serves to invite people like him not to stay outside the celebration. Since the preceding stories of a sheep *lost away from home* and of a coin *lost at home* both ended in celebration, it follows that there would be celebration for the

spiritual restoration of the older son *lost at home*, as there is of the younger son *lost away from home*. This is not stated on the surface. Rather, like in a sudoku, the storyteller leaves gaps that have to be filled in by the audience while giving enough clues for them to fill those gaps in correctly. But the story also ends without any positive sign from the older son. This detail highlights the fact that without a radical change of attitude, the older son, like the Pharisees and scribes, will remain outside the celebration.

Short and Strong

The story of the two sons is short and can be read at a leisurely pace in English in just two and a half minutes. It is a powerful story in any setting for what it conveys about some of the closest human family relationships, about money, and about authority and our desire for independence. It deals with anger, greed, love, resentment, and shame—even before we consider its wider scope in handling human relationships with God. For these reasons alone, the story ought to stand out in any talent show.

Yet it is even *more* powerful when considered in the context in which it is reported, with tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and scribes all present. It would have been rhetorically forceful because tax collectors and sinners seem to align with the younger son, and Pharisees and scribes with the older son, and yet the younger son was the one clearly reconciled to his father, who is rather analogous to God. Originating from that context, it retains its power also across many subsequent cultural contexts, in which established groups have assumed that they have a greater share of God's favor.

There is another feature of the story's power: the text in Luke 15 often conveys significantly more than is on the surface of its words.

1. "Citizens" in 15:15 highlights the younger son's non-citizen status.
2. "Pigs" in 15:15 highlights his ritual uncleanness.
3. "Look" in 15:29 highlights the older son's failure to use the word "father."
4. "That I might celebrate with my friends" in 15:29 implies not celebrating with his father.
5. "This son of yours" in 15:30 implies a disowning of his brother.
6. The older son's conviction about what his brother has been doing reveals his own sinful imagination.
7. Ending the story without giving the response of the older son highlights the need for those who align with him to respond the right way.

To convey all this in under four hundred words is a work of great artistry of the kind that, I hope you will agree, displays *genius*. In the following pages, however, we see that beneath the surface are layers of deeper meaning in the story, which show it to be cleverer still. These layers support the idea that the story genuinely comes from Jesus himself and was told to the very people mentioned in Luke. I argue not only that the story has been transmitted with integrity from Jesus but also that the historical setting of the story has been well transmitted too.

Jesus's audience consisted of tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and scribes. Pharisees were supposed to be enthusiasts for the

law of Moses, and scribes spent much of their time copying out scriptures, especially the Torah, also known as the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible, from Genesis to Deuteronomy. In what follows we see that the story has layers of meaning that are unlocked only when one considers the story of God's people as told in the first book of the Bible, Genesis.