

Social Background of Jesus' Parables in Lk 15.

Does the Theology of God's Mercy is the Main Topic and the Main Purpose of Lk 15?

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1. Introduction

Without doubt Lk 15 is one of the most commented and frequently analyzed, from many different theological perspective, chapter of the Luke's Gospel. The chapter almost entirely consists of three corelate parables (the lost sheep - Lk 15, 4-7; the lost coin - Lk 15, 8-10; the lost son - Lk 15, 11-32), where the most influential one is the parable about the "lost son". This parable interpreted from theological perspective is a sample of the most wonderful exposition of the main theological topic that considers the God's mercy. However, from the strict biblical perspective, the parable seems to be conclusive part of *paranesis* that is the main purpose of Lk 15.

In this study, we will argue for thesis that Lk 15 has particular social background, which determined exposition of the same topic within the three parables, where the first parable (Lk 15, 1-7) introduces the problem of the "lost ones", that is develop in the second parable where term "lost ones" is significantly expended, in order to point out in the third parable the main problem that caused the opposition against Jesus' attitude toward the sinners. In order to achieve the aim of the study, we will use the critical narrative method that hopefully able us to distinct theological interpretation of the parable in the

Church tradition from primal Luke's message addressed to the readers.

Comparing to already existing studies on this topic, in this paper we will present the alternative interpretation of the second parable (Lk 15, 8-10), with assumption that the parable of the "lost coin" is not merely the variant of the first parable (Lk 15, 4-7).

We hope that this study helps to recognize the problem regarding relationship between Jesus, on the one side, and the Pharisees and scribes, on the other side, that in our opinion is not strange to ours times, where unity of the congregation sometimes is challenged by comparative attitude of one particular group.

2. The parable about the lost sheep (Lk 15, 4-7)

The parable about lost sheep is the first one in set of three parables in Lk 15 that created one coherent unite, where the one and the same topic is developed in each of the next parables¹. The exposition of tis parable seems to be rather theoretical, even the topic is practical because loosing of a sheep is one of most common cases in labor of a shepherd. It starts with rhetorical question addressed to the Pharisees and the Scribes, who themselves most probably never have done such a work (Lk 15, 4)². The question assumes positive and unequivocal answer of the hearers, even if it is not natural to leave 99 sheep in order to find one lost sheep. In case of only one shepherd it would be rather sign of irresponsibility that comes from the desperation caused by probable penalization of such lost. In case of the group of the shepherds it seems rather natural that one or two of them would search for the lost one, in order to avoid potential consequences.

¹ J. R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, Eerdmans, Apollos 2015, Nottingham, p. 431.

² This parable is addressed directly to Pharisees and the scribes, who are called by Jesus to identify themselves with the shepherd from the parable. J. B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, Eerdmans 1997, Grand Rapids, pp. 573-574.

However, the main point does not concern reliability to the real situation, rather it heads to expose that good shepherd does not easily abandon the lost sheep³. The very next verse (Lk 15, 5) contains the narrative of happy end, where the shepherd found the lost sheep, and this was reason for his rejoicing connecting to real help given to the lost sheep. There is not even one harsh word, one evil feeling, no reproach, no self-pity on side of the shepherd, just understanding of current situation of the sheep, (it could manage to walk back) compassion toward lost sheep that was lost but now it is no more. However, the shepherd was not content with his own joy, he would like the others to share his joy (Lk 15, 6). In the story, there is not information concerning the fact that his wish was grounded. This information is included in kind of theological statement based on the story (Lk 15, 7). The statement itself seems to be quite controversial if it would be approached from the comparative perspective, that is strongly suggested by the narrative. The statement that it will be more joy for one sinner who repented, than for 99 just ones that do not need to repent, seems to put the sinner ahead the just ones, however, the main point does not concern the sinner or the just ones, it concerns the salvation. The heaven rejoices each time when the lost one is saved by God. The salvation of the just ones is something expected, but salvation of the sinner is something unexpected. We joy more than something good comes to ours way unexpected.

The theological statement that ending the parable makes it to be kind of Jesus' answer to his opponents complain (Lk 15, 2)⁴. It seems that the sinners are not

³ The phrase "*and go after the lost one until he has found it*" indicates considerable effort from side of the shepherd, which means that finding the lost one is not easy task and it takes time. J.F. Fitzmyer, *Gospel According to Luke (X-XXIV)*, Doubleday 1985, Garden City, p. 1077.

⁴ The end of the parable serves to justify Jesus' attitude toward the sinner, which was greatly challenging by the Pharisees and the scribes. Jesus' approach to the lost ones will cause the joy in heaven, but right now, it causes discontent of those who count themselves to be just. J. Noland, *Luke 9, 21-18, 34*, Thomas Nelson 1993, Mexico City, p. 772.

just the “lost ones”, they are in the eyes of the Pharisees and the scribes the condemned ones, who do not deserve to hear the good news proclaimed by Jesus. *De facto*, the Jesus’ opponents are not interesting in condition of the “lost ones”, rather they use the Jesus association with the sinner to accuse and depreciate Jesus’ credibility as the Rabbi. The main aim of Lucan Jesus’ parable concerns the fact that God cares about everyone who belongs to him, even if some of them temporary departure from Him. Their wrongdoing does change nothing in God’s attitude toward them, and this statement is proofed by constant action of God to find “those who are lost”. Jesus’s attitude toward the sinners is just a manifestation of Gods cares about weaker ones. In this context, Jesus’ words “*What man among you*” which are addressed to the Pharisees and the scribes are indirect message for them, that they also should looking for the “lost ones” as Jesus himself is doing. Their tusk as the servant of the Law, the servant of God, in society’s structure, is not restricted to teach and lead those “who are not lost” and condemned those “who are lost”, they are obligated to preserve everyone who belongs to God, that means that they should approach also the “lost ones” in order to bring them back on the way of right conduct. Luke precisely indicates that the sinners were coming to Jesus (Lk 15, 1), but not *vice-versa*, which directly exposes that Jesus is the one who brings back the “lost ones” to God. The last words of Jesus in this parable “*I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance*” are direct suggestion addressed to the Pharisees and the scribes that the most important deed is to be in service for the “lost ones”.

This interpretation makes the parable to be kind of rebuke toward the Pharisees and scribes, however, considering the next parable (Lk 15,8-10), Jesus teaching in parables heads rather for *paranesis* then for redirecting of the complaining.

1. The parable about lost coin (Lk 15, 8-10)

This parable instantly follows the parable of the “lost son”, which almost naturally forces the interpretation of the parable as another variant of the story presented in the previous parable (Lk 15, 4-7)⁵. During the work on the book regarding the function of the speeches in the Acts, where many similar speeches are included, I came to conclusion that Luke never repeated himself, and all parts of his narrative that seems to be kind of duplication or variant, are *de facto* development of the idea presented in previous section. To me, it seems that the same pattern, Luke used writing Lk 15, where the first parable is introductory (Lk 15, 4-7), the second is progressive (Lk 15, 8-11) and the third is conclusive (Lk 15, 11-32)⁶. If it is so, the idea presented in the parable of the “lost coin” should develop the idea that have been presented in the parable of the “lost son”⁷.

The parable concerns the woman that lost one coin in her own house, which is a direct reason for searching for the lost coin till it is founded. The success of the search is worthy of whole neighborhood’s celebration, which is compared

⁵ In both parables there are things that became lost; in both cases the owner takes considerable effort to search for the lost things; in both parable the owner after finding the lost thing celebrate with neighborhood. However, then in the parable about the lost sheep the strong focus is put on the searching for the lost sheep, in the parable about lost coin the focus is put on celebration after finding the coin. J. B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, Eerdmans 1997, Grand Rapids, p. 576.

⁶ In this context, it is worthy to notice that this parable is found only in the Gospel of Luke.

⁷ The most scholars recognize the Luke’s pattern concerning the double parables (Lk 13, 18-21; Lk 14, 28-32) that was also used in the previous chapters of the Gospel. J. R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, p. 436.

to the joy in heaven then just one sinner repents⁸. The exposition of the parable is similar to the parable of the lost sheep, with exception to few details (instant of man, the woman is the protagonist; instant of sheep, the coin is the subject)⁹. However, the main difference between these two parable concerns directions of actions, when in the first parable (Lk 15, 4-7) the action is directed outside the base ground (the shepherd goes out of the place to search for the sheep), in the second, the action is directed inside the base ground (the woman is searching inside her house). To me, it's hardly possible that this small change is unwitting coincident, rather Luke consciously redirected the action of the protagonist (the woman) in order to expose that the lost ones are not only those who go outside the base ground (the type of those people is the sheep in the first parable) but also those who stay on the base ground but they are lost (the type of those people is coin in the second parable). When the lost sheep in the first parable represents the sinners, the coin in the second parable may not concerns the sinners but it may regard to the Pharisees and the scribes. The lost ones are not only those who departure from the "house of God" and literally disobey the will of God, but also those who stay in the "house of God" without doing the will of God. It makes the first parable (Lk 15, 4-7) to be necessary preparation for exposition of the "lost son" in the conclusive parable (Lk 15, 11-32), and the second parable (Lk 15, 9-10) is the necessary preparation for the exposition of the "dutiful son" in the third and conclusive parable of Lk 15. Summing up, the parable of the "lost coin" expends the group of the "lost ones", which includes not only sinners but also dutiful believers.

⁸ Contrary to the previous parable where the found sheep is most important than other 99 sheep, in the parable about the lost coin there is not comparative exposition of the theological reason for the celebration.

⁹ L. T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville 1991, p. 236.

1. The parable about the lost son and the dutiful son (Lk 15, 11-32)

The parable of the lost son and the dutiful son is the last part of a section containing the three parables concerning the topic of God's mercy (Lk 15)¹⁰. The traditional interpretation of the parable considers God's mercy toward the lost son, who recognized his wrong-doing, repented and returned to the father in order to be accepted again as a beloved son. This parable obviously shows God's love and, related to it, God's mercy¹¹. Putting the focus, however, mostly on the lost son results in the omission of the second part of the story which concerns the dutiful son. In the eyes of the reader the dutiful son lost favor when he refused to accept his younger brother, despite the fact that his father accepted him. I have always found the end of the parable to be somewhat enigmatic, and hardly suited to a parable concerning God's mercy. Having had the privilege of hearing the lecture on the "*Happiness of Abraham*" at the meeting of ESBS in Warsaw, in which the author approached the story of Abraham from the emotional point of view, I started to explore the possibility of using this approach to solve the problem of this part of the parable that considers the dutiful son. In this part of the study, I will interpret the parable of the lost son and the dutiful son by putting the focus on the importance of emotion, which in my opinion will show more coherently the message included in the parable.

3.1. Structure and meaning of the parable

¹⁰ The parable of the lost son and dutiful son together with the parable of lost coin are unique to Luke. However, the parable of lost seep is also included in the Gospel of Mathew (Mt 18, 10-14).

¹¹ P.T. Gadenz, *The Gospel of Luke*, Baker Academic 2018, Grand Rapids, p. 275.

Concerning the structure of the parable: it consists of four units: Lk 15, 11-20 (A) concerns the story of the younger son after his departure from home; Lk 15, 21-24 (B) gives the history of the reunion between the father and his younger son; Lk 15, 25-30 (A¹) presents the anger of the elder brother; and finally, Lk 15, 31-32 (B¹) concerns the arguing of the elder brother with his father¹². This structural analysis itself shows the presence of two stories in the parable, where the protagonist of the first story is the younger brother, and that of the second story is the elder brother. However, both stories are built around one and the same narrative protagonist, which is the father¹³. In the story of the younger son, the father allows the younger son to leave the house, and then the younger son's life turned into the disaster, the father is a very first one who accepted him despite the obvious offence of the son. In story of the elder brother, the father again is the one who first takes the action in order to solve the problem, despite the obvious evil will of the elder son.

The story of the lost son (Lk 15, 11-21) begins with a conclusion that is the result of some events that are not explained directly by the narrative¹⁴. The younger son simply asked the father for his share of the family wealth, and the justification of his request was given (Lk 15, 12)¹⁵. In praxis, it means that the

¹² Concerning a basic discussion regarding the redactional issue of this parable, cf. J.F. Fitzmyer, *Gospel According to Luke (X-XXIV)*, pp. 1083-108.

¹³ Noland is sceptic about possibility to straightforward determination of a main focus of the parable. J. Noland, *Luke 9, 21-18, 34*, pp. 780-781. However, the fact that two part of the parable (story of the younger son and the story of the elder son) have one and the same connecting element, whom is the father, makes him to be center point of the story, but not necessary the main aim of the story.

¹⁴ Despite the fact that the readers are not provided with reason for the younger son's action, however, his attitude, with considerable confidence, may be evaluated as a kind of rejection the family or at least some member of the family. J. B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 580.

¹⁵ There is not exposition of reason for the father's decision, which must be considered as peculiar because usually during the lifetime of the father such a request could not be made

family's estate was divided at least into the two parts, which sufficiently decreased the power of the family¹⁶. The younger son then left the family house, traveled to foreign countries where he spent all the money he possessed, which forced him in a time of economic crisis to accept work that was shameful, as well, he suffered a great humiliation (Lk 15, 15-19). In one single sentence, Luke skillfully exposes the story of young son's ruin, where the first step was his departure from family, the second, was his immigration to the distant foreign country, the third, was his lifestyle described as ζῶν ἀσώτως – *wild living* which here means “wasteful and dissolute pleasure”¹⁷. Luke precise exposes the reason for the younger son's problems *writing that “he squandered his money on a life of debauchery”*, in order to show directly that the younger son is responsibility for the situation, in which he found himself. The humiliation was the immediate reason for his decision to return to his father's house, with hope for a life better than his present situation (Lk 15, 17-19)¹⁸. The reason for his humiliation were facts that he departure from the family, then he was living in the foreign country, where he spent in foolish way his portion of estate, and in time of crisis he found

by his sons. J. Noland, *Luke 9, 21-18, 34*, pp. 782-783. However, the lack of accuracy is here not the issue if considering that it is the parable.

¹⁶ This is the first exposition of “the kingship issue” that is, in our opinion, the main aim not only of this parable but also for the whole Lk 15. This issue is exposed in partial manner (relation between the father and the younger son; relation between the father and the elder son; relation between the elder son and the younger son), however, it is designed to presents emotional tensions within the family.

¹⁷ J. R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, p. 439. Johnson things that the term ἀσώτως by itself does not suggests sexual affairs, and the interpretation of this term in this way is influenced by the elder son's accusation presented in Lk 15, 30. L. T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 236.

¹⁸ The changing of irresponsible lifestyle under the presser of unfavorable circumstances seems to be quit comment in antient world, and the Lukan Jesus parable, despite its religious and allegorical purposes, seems to have its source in society practice. This supposition is attested by the letter of certain Antonius Longus, whose life-story is very similar to that of the younger son from the Luke's parable. D. E. Garland, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Luke*, Zondervan 2011, Grand Rapids, pp. 624-625.

no helpful hand from side of the foreigners. If the younger son left the father's home in order to be free, this dream turn in to disaster, and he became the salve, about whom no one cares and whom no one respect¹⁹. The fact that he thought about became the servant in the house of his own father, exposes his recognition of his wrongdoing on the one hand, and his readiness to accept the consequences of his own actions, on the other hand. Namely, he recognized and confessed that he sinned against God and the father (note a lack of mention about sin against the elder brother), which led him to conclusion that because of these sines he lost privileges and favors related to status of the father's son or God's son. Surprisingly, his return to home was warmly welcomed by the father in a manner that far exceeded his expectation (Lk 20-24). Luke exposes that father was looking for the return of the younger son, and even the son was "*still a long way off*" he ran to him exposing his affection and pity toward the son. This description of the father's action correlates with message exposed in the parable about the lost sheep (Lk 15, 4-7), where the shepherd acts in order to find the lost sheep. Although, the son did only part of his plan (go back to the father), the rest was done by the father (after the son confessed his wrong doing), in measure showing full forgiveness of the son's evil deeds (full restoration of his privileges and favors). There are not harsh words, punishment or hard filling on the side of the father, contrary the return of the younger son was a sufficient reason for celebration (Ac 15, 23-24). This exposition of the father's joy correlates with the parable of the lost coin (Lk 15, 8-10), where the found of the lost coin is the reason for celebration of all neighbors. If the parable (Lk 15, 11-32) ended at this point in the narrative, the more common name for this parable, "*the parable of the lost son*", would be justified. However, the narrative continues with a consideration of the dutiful son (Lk 15, 25-32), which makes the interpretation

¹⁹ N. Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, Eerdmans 1956, Grand Rapids, p. 407.

of the parable as referring only to God's mercy toward "the lost ones" to be questionable²⁰.

The story of the dutiful son (Lk 15, 25-32) begins with a presentation of the protagonist as a man returning home after finishing his daily duty (Lk 15, 25). This exposes the elder son as the one faithful to the father, responsible and hardworking man, which makes this first general evaluation of him to be positive²¹. The unusual situation that he found there was the direct reason for his refusing to enter the house (Lk 15, 26-28), and this forced the father to argue with the elder son's complaints (Lk 15, 28-30). The return of the younger brother to the house, seems to be something he did not expect or even supposable he did not wish²². This exposes the elder son's prejudice toward the younger brother, which directly corresponds to the Pharisees' attitude toward the social outcast Jews (Lk 15, 1-2). The direct reason for the elder son's complaints was the way in which the father accepted the younger son into the house, after all evil deeds that he had done to the family. Probably, more than the act of the father's acceptance of the younger brother into the house, the celebration for his return was something improper in the opinion of the elder son. This, unacceptable for the elder son, the action of the father was considered to be unjust toward him (though not to the younger brother). In his argumentation the elder brother displays his bitter feelings towards the father, which suggests an accusation toward the

²⁰ Concerning the discussion about proper name for this parable, confirm little bit old but very useful exposition of Fitzmyer. J.F. Fitzmyer, *Gospel According to Luke (X-XXIV)*, pp. 1083-1086.

²¹ Especially if consider Lk 15, 12 which indicates that he, after the younger's brother decision, had to work for the family only on the two-third of the family estate. Despite this disadvantage, he stays in the house of the father and serves the family. In contrast to the younger brother (Lk 15, 13-16), the elder brother seems to be simple good man. Concerning the inheritance in Jewish society, cf. J. R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, p. 438-439.

²² This supposition is based on Lu 15, 30 that suggests the elder brother's knowledge about the younger brother's attitude in the foreign country.

father that, despite his faithful service, he (the elder brother) is being underrated by his father. The anger caused by the younger brother return and the father's very generously acceptance of the lost son, was directly and openly addressed to the father, which may suggest explosion of long hidden negative emotion toward the father, which finally went to the surface during the unexpected circumstances. This anger exposes the elder brothers feeling and thoughts. First at all, he counts himself as the faithful servant of his own father²³. Second, he feels not to be rewarded by the father in way satisfied to him²⁴. Third, he does not recognize the younger brother as his brother²⁵. The forth, he puts the father and the younger brother on the same level, namely the kind of enemy of him²⁶. The father's answer to the son's accusation contains two declarations: the first concerns the father's love toward the elder son, and the second, indirectly, regards the father's love towards the younger son (Ac 15, 31-32). The narrative does not give answers to questions regarding a possible reconciliation of the elder son with the father, or about reconciliation between the two brothers. This kind of ending to the story shows the author's narrative strategy that is aimed at presenting the problem rather than offering a simple solution. The real problem in this story is not the lost son, but the relation between the brothers – a relation that is toxic, despite the fact that the father shows equal love towards both of them.

In order to justify this conclusion, I will examine the emotions of each of the three figures as presented in the parable.

²³ However, contrary to his own words, he disobeys the father's request to enter the house.

²⁴ Indirectly, he does not recognize the fact of living in the father's house as the true reward.

²⁵ In fact, he separated himself from his younger brother, which suggests the rejection of him.

²⁶ The elder brother blames the father for accepting the evil-deeds of the younger brother, which is sign of misunderstanding of the father's feelings (Lk 15, 31) and his argumentation for accepting the younger son and the celebration of his return (Lk 15, 33).

3.2. The emotional characteristic of the persons in the parable.

As all god stories also, this parable contains considerable portion of emotions, which in this particular case not only serves to earn the attention of the readers, but *de facto* emotions are the main concern of the parable²⁷. In Luke's narrative each of heroes exposes different kind of emotions, which directly influence their evaluation by the reader, on the one hand, and the most important conclusion of the parable exposes the negative emotion as the direct reason for the problem, on the other hand²⁸. Among the three heroes of the parable, only one of them exposes the direct negative emotion, and according to Luke's narrative aim, this person is the real problem in relationship between family members.

3.2.1. The emotions of the younger son.

There is no direct presentation of the reason for the younger son's decision to leave home, despite the fact that it is highly unusual for Jewish social context that the younger son is doing such a claim²⁹. The basis for this decision, however, may lie in some kind of negative feeling related to the elder brother rather than to the father (Lk 15, 30), because at the end of the parable the elder brother refers to "this son of yours" instead of "my younger brother". Even though the author of the narrative sees in the younger son's decision some kind of offence towards the father (as the head of the whole family), the father himself does not show any hard feelings towards the younger son, who acted according to his free

²⁷ The parable definitely refers to the problem indicated at the begging of the parable (Lk 15, 1-2), which without doubt concerns negative feelings of the Pharisees against Jesus, because of his attitude toward socially outcasted.

²⁸ In this parable, the person of younger son related to the tax collectors and sinners; the person of the elder son relates to the Pharisees, and the person of the father relates to Jesus.

²⁹ J. R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, p. 438.

decision, even if things go wrong for the son later. However, it does not change the fact that the reason for his decision to some extensions was built on the negative emotion related to the within family relationship, which made him think that outside the family, his life will be better. The information concerning the life-style of the younger son in the foreign country (Lk 15, 13) suggests considerable freedom in action, which allowed an uncontrolled explosion of emotions and desires that probably were held back during his time with the family. This exposition suggests that the younger son had good time with lots of worldly happiness. This excitement was drastically changed when the economic conditions turned into disaster, and resulted directly in his humiliation (Lk 15, 14-16). The younger son was not only forced to do manual work, but also the kind of work that was prohibited for him, and even not sufficiently rewarded. At this stage of the narrative, he was still determined to provide on his own, even if it costs his humiliation. It may in indirect way expose his hard feeling toward the family, and his determination to stay far away from the home. However, hopeless of the new situation forced him to look for a solution, which in this particular case lays in only one possible option, namely his returning home. Unfavorable situation led him to self-evaluation, which exposes that his present situation is worse than situation of his father's servants³⁰. His decision to become his own father's servant, was result of his honest recognition of all undertaken actions after leaving the father's house³¹. He recognized not only the obvious fact that his actions were offensive toward the law of the Jewish nation, and against his own father, but also, his deeds deprived

³⁰ There are discussions among scholars regarding recognition of the younger son's action as the real repentance or rather as the clever move that save his life. Then Lk 15, 17 suggests the second possibilities, the following context of the verse and the theological purpose of Lk 15 strongly supported the first possibility. Concerning this problem, cf. D. E. Garland, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Luke*, pp. 626-627.

³¹ J. R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, pp. 440-441.

him of the rights to consider himself his father's son. Despite the fact that desperation was the strongest reason for his awaking, the younger son puts his hope in his father's good will, which shows on his part a positive evaluation of the father. The narrative proves his hope in the father's good will be rational, and it brought for him a result that highly exceeds his expectations³². Recognition of his own wrong-doing towards the father, and consequently towards God's commandments, completes this process of his self-evaluation, because other things were done to him by his father, with no effort on side of him. The part of story concerning the life and emotion of the younger son ends with happy-end and it has been completed.

3.2.2. The emotions of the father.

Although, in the narrative, the father appears at the beginning of the parable (Lk 15, 12), nothing certain can be said about his emotions, because the information that is presented merely concerns his agreeing to the younger son's request³³. Consideration of the younger son's request may suggest that the father recognized the needs of the younger son, and possible he was aware also about some tensions between his two sons, which is the factor that may influence his decision. Luke, for the very first time exposes emotions of the father in the

³² Humiliation that he suffered from hands of the foreigners, and his self-humiliation by degraded his social statues to the servant, probably were a direct reason for his respect toward the father rights and the Law of the nation. J. B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, pp. 580-581.

³³ In the parable, although, the father is the central figure directly connected the two parts of the story, however, he acts in very passive way, almost allowing his sons to act at will, without executing his father's power. He is passive then the younger son asked for his share, even it was against social costume. He also compromised then the elder brother refused to enter the house, although the behavior of the elder son was a direct disobedience to the father. L. T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 236.

narrative regarding the return of his younger son. In this case, the father's several actions contain high level of emotions (Lk 15, 22-23)³⁴. For instance, Luke expose that the father was waiting for the return of his younger son, which is information suggesting considerable level of hope that indirectly exposes the father's interest in the son's fate, as well as father's unchanged love toward the son. When the father's hope finally was fulfilled, he instead of waiting for the son and his apology, goes out to meet the son despite the fact that he was still far from the house. The father's action was caused by the pity toward the son, which exposes the father's interests in the lost son rather than in wrongdoing of the younger son. This is attested by Luke description of their meeting, which informed that the father "*clasped him in his arms and kiss him tenderly*". This very expressive narrative indicates father's love to the younger son, and his unconditional acceptance, which however is most probably based on the knowledge about the son's "conversion" understand here as "changing of his own mind". The son finally recognized his wrongdoing that made him not worthy to be anymore the son of his father, and this recognition was a base for another request addressing to father, which consider to be accepted as his own father's servant. This time the younger son apology, confession was accepted without even one word of rebuke, or one moment of hesitation, however, the younger son request was not grounded by the father, who has no intention to lower the social statues of his own son, even if it seems to be justified by the son's deeds³⁵. Instead, the father restored all privileges of his son, and in his opinion the son's return is worthy of celebration. The only reason for such

³⁴ Contrary to the departure of the younger son, during the return of the younger the father acts very actively, de facto he dominates the whole section becoming the main protagonist. N. Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, pp. 408-409.

³⁵ Not that in Lk 15, 21 the request of the younger son is not directly explicated. A. Plumer, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke*, T&T Clark 1981, Edinburgh, p.376.

generous attitude of the father is the fact that his son “*was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found*”³⁶. This argumentation of the father again exposes that the main focus of the father concerns his son, and even the shadow of selfishness has no place in his attitude. Extremely emotional actions of the father are excused by the radical change of the family fortune, where the younger son counted as the lost or dead for the family, again became the joy for the family³⁷.

The second time when the father’s emotions are exposed concerns the narrative regarding the reaction of the elder son to the attitude of the father towards his younger son (Lk 15, 25-31). The elder son was absent when his younger brother returned to the father, which makes all situation to be great surprise for him. The simple information that the reason for celebration of the family is his younger brother returner, was sufficient plaintiff for refusing to enter the father’s house. The basic emotion for his decision was anger, which although was addressed toward his father, however, was caused by unmerciful judgment of his younger brother, who according to him was treated better by the father than him³⁸. The elder son finds the father’s attitude to be offensive towards himself, because according to him the father never showed, expected by him, gratitude towards his long and faithful service that was marked with unconditional obedience. However, this complaining seems to be only emotional outcome, which does not expose the really problem between the

³⁶ Concerning the argumentation of the father, it is worthy to consider similar Paul’s exposition in Eph 2, 1.4-5. P.B. Gadenz, *The Gospel of Luke*, Baker Academic 2018, Grand Rapids, p. 277.

³⁷ J.F. Fitzmyer, *Gospel According to Luke (X-XXIV)*, p. 1090.

³⁸ Note, that the elder brother does not refer to his father by term “father” as well as to his younger brother by the term “brother”. J. Noland, *Luke 9, 21-18, 34*, p. 787.

father and the elder son³⁹. This problem, *de facto*, does not exist⁴⁰. The real problem is the fact that father forgive the younger son, which is something that the elder brother never will be capable to do, or maybe never will want to do⁴¹. The elder brother is not capable to understand the father's delight in the return of his younger son, because he had already judged his younger brother⁴². To this attitude of the elder son, the father answered with reconciliation attitude, where the fact of sheering by the elder son all things that belongs to the father is strongly exposed. In this way, the father exposes his affection toward the elder son, however, this exposition is more rational than emotional. The father assures the elder brother (as the type of the Pharisees) that he always belongs to his house, and there was not time of his separation from the father, which makes him to be faithful son always bellowed and always respected (Lk 15, 31) ⁴³. Based on this assurance, the father makes another step, attempting to redirect the elder son's focus from his negative feeling toward the younger son, and puts it on the fathers rejoin because he has his two bellowed sons again under the one and the same roof (Lk 15, 32). The aim that the father wants to achieve is entering by the elder son the father's house and joying the celebration, which means recognition of the father's will, on the one hand, and reconciliation with his

³⁹ Green thinks that the conversation of the elder son with the father exposes his alienation from the father. However, the reason for the elder brother's anger is not the father (and he never was), but the presence of the younger brother in the house of the father. J. B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, pp. 585.

⁴⁰ Note, that the elder brother does not complain to the father to be treated bad, but he complains that father treats the younger brother in way he (the elder son) recognized as unjustified. The same problem is a reason for Pharisees complaining to Jesus, who seems to approach the sinners in way not acceptable for the Pharisees.

⁴¹ Edwards rightly points to the fact that the language used by the elder brother then talking about the younger brother "this son of yours" exposes the elder brother's judgment upon the younger brother but not upon the father. J. R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, pp. 445-446.

⁴² L. T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 241.

⁴³ A. Plumer, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke*, p. 377.

younger brother, on the other hand. Unfortunately, the narrative does not provide the information if the father's attempt was successful or not, which left the problem of the elder brother to stay unsolved. Concerning the fathers' attitude toward both sons, despite some differences in both cases, the father's basic attitude towards them is equal: he is always going out to meet each of them.

3.2.3. The emotions of the elder son.

The elder brother is the protagonist of the last part of the parable's narrative, and from the very beginning till the end he is presented in a somewhat negative light. First, he refuses to enter the father's house because of the presence there of the younger brother (Lk 15, 27). Considering that the house was also a place where he was living, his action is indirect way to indicate that the presence of the younger brother in the house is not accepted by him. This attitude exposes his uncompromised prejudice toward his younger brother, which deeply influenced his interpretation of the celebration event (Lk 15, 27). The situation made him angry, and the anger made him suburb and unkind toward his family, which resulted in putting the case on the edge of the knife, when he puts presser on his father by refusing to enter the house only because the younger brother was there. *De facto*, the elder brother indirectly forced the father to make a chose between the younger brother and himself. Probably, for this reason, the conciliar attempt of his father (Lk 15, 28) was used by him as the occasion to expose his negative emotion toward his father, whom he accuses about unjust attitude toward himself (Lk 15, 29). It is possible that his accusation toward the father was an outcome of long suppressed hard feeling toward the father, however, his harsh word toward the father are rather rooted in deep antipathy toward the younger brother, then in a real state of facts related to relationship between him and his father. It seems, that he was less disappointed by the fact that his father

did not show him appreciation for his service, rather, he was greatly disappointed, because the father shows the appreciation for the younger brother's return. This action of the father was a direct reason for the elder brother arguing with the father, which headed to convince the father that his action (acceptance and celebration) is inappropriate, if considering the wrongdoing of the younger brother. The arguing with the father sharply exposes that the elder brother radically distinguishes himself from his younger brother (Lk 15, 30) by calling him "the son of yours" but not "the brother of my". This distinguish strongly suggest the condemnation of the younger brother (directly) and potential self-separation from the family if the younger brother is accepted (indirectly). Although, Luke almost nothing about the conflict between the brothers, the hard feeling on the side of the elder brother toward the younger brother can be easily detected. The elder brother has strong reasons for negative attitude toward the younger brother, who lost half of the family estate, left the elder brother to work for the family alone, and return to the father only in order to save his life. The younger son lost his rights to be called "his father son" which is the statement directly explicated twice by him (Lk 15, 19. 21), which indirectly may mean that he has not also rights to call himself "the brother" of the elder son of his father⁴⁴. In this context, it is clear the in contrast to his father, who restored the privilege of this younger son, the elder brother has no intention to do the same.

The elder son's reason for critical approach toward the father is his good attitude shown towards his younger son (Lk 15, 30), which expose the elder brother's egocentric approach to the issue, on the one hand, and little respect toward the father's will, on the other hand. The elder son seems to expose his disappointment for merciful attitude of the father toward those who did wrong

⁴⁴ It is strongly suggested by Lk 15, 30.

but finally repentance and change for good. *De facto*, the elder son judges not only his younger brother but also his father's decision. All these show that the elder brother is not united with his younger brother, and he sees him not as the younger brother. The elder son is not also entirely united with his father, because his concentration on himself, makes him blind to the father's rights and feelings, as well as to the younger brother's reconciliation. The ambivalent ending of the narrative, that does not present the result of the father's consolation mission, suggests that the elder brother shows no good will either in forgiving to the younger brother's offence, or even in accepting the father's forgiveness to the younger brother. It makes him *de facto* to be the main problem within the family.

Conclusion

The fact that Lk 15 contains three parables regarding "lost" (the lost sheep - Lk 15, 4-7; the lost drachma - Lk 15, 8-10; the lost son - Lk 15, 11-32), and that the introduction to the parables contains the information that the Pharisees complained about Jesus's attitude toward "the lost" (Lk 15, 1-2), makes clear that Luke in his presentation of the elder son refers to the attitude of the Pharisees and their rejection of the "lost ones" or those who were outside the covenant⁴⁵. Luke makes each of person in the parable referring to each of the sides involved in real social conflict. The father of the parable is type of Jesus rather than God if the particular context of the parables is taken to consideration⁴⁶. He is the father, who loves both of his sons, despite the fact if they do good or wrong, he always looks for the unity with them. The dutiful son is the type of the Pharisees, who always following the Mosaic Law and condemning those who do not follow the Law. They count themselves to be just, with no reflection that they

⁴⁵ L. T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 239.

⁴⁶ H. M. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, Eerdmans 1978, Grand Rapids, p. 605.

are also can be “lost ones” even they did not departure from father (however, they may departure from the father’s will), because they departure from their brothers. The younger son is the type of those who do not follow the Mosaic Law or the tradition of Judaism, and for this they are marginalized by those, who do it. The way in which Luke ends the parable, clearly indicates his purpose that concerns exposition of the elder son as the real problem within the family, which refers to the Pharisees opposing Jesus’ attitude toward “the lost ones”. Reading Lk 15, the reader is convinced that the “lost son” is found and reunion with the family, however, the case of the elder son still stays ambivalent, which may be taken as kind of warring.

Reading this parable with this historical background may help contemporary readers to recognize existence of this problem in today’s Christian communities. If the lost son is a type of those believers who do not fit exactly into the regulations of the particular congregation, and the elder son is a type of faithful believers who follow the congregation’s regulation but do not find joy in realizing their faith, the message of the parable is not something that relates merely to some past historical issue. God accepts both the “lost son” and the “dutiful son”, He accepted then in the past, and He accepts them also now. However, the real problem that is presented by the parables in Lk 15 concerns whether the “dutiful son” accepts or he does not accept his lost younger brother.