

LUKE 15 – PRODIGAL SON STORY MISLABELED

If you stick the wrong title on a story, you can guarantee that everybody will miss the point. And if the misnomer reflects a biased ideology, you've got about as much chance as the proverbial snowball in Hades of setting the record straight.

Take Jesus' story about the prodigal son for example. You'll only find it one place in the Christian scriptures, at Luke 15:11-32. When Jesus first told the story it packed a lot of clout.

But over the years it has lost much of its punch. Not because it has suffered in translation, but simply because it has been tagged with a misleading title.

It's called the story of the "prodigal son," and that's a problem on two counts. First, you'd guess from the title that Jesus' anecdote was about one son. Actually, it's about two boys.

Second, you'd think the moral of the story was to discourage wasteful spending. For the word "prodigal" refers to a reckless spendthrift. But in this case the boy's prodigality was not really the point.

As Jesus told it, the story centered on an atypical father and the way he treated his two sons. The younger was something of a snott-nosed punk. Years before his old man died, he demanded his share of the inheritance.

The elder son as just as bad, but in a rather priggish way. He never did learn to appreciate his dad's forgiving attitude.

In fact, the number one son resented his father for accepting his kid brother back into their home. After all, the younger son had conned his dad out of the family jewels, skipped town, and crossed the border.

In some foreign port he wasted his entire bankroll and found himself down on his luck in a depressed economy. The young man ended up feeding swine and wishing he could stomach pig food.

Then he got smart. He figured he would hike on home, apologize to his father, and ask to be taken on as one of the hired hands. At least he'd have enough to eat. So he set out for the family farm.

Then came the surprise. While the runaway was still miles from town, his father (who must have been watching every day) saw him coming. He ignored the conventions of oriental protocol, hiked up his robes and ran down the

road to greet his long-lost son. He interrupted the boy's apology, presented him with a new wardrobe, and set the table for a welcome-home barbeque.

Meanwhile the stay-at-home son was hoeing barley on the back forty. When he came home and found the party in full swing, he was so mad he refused to go inside. He called his dad outside and berated him with catty remarks about "this son of yours" who has "eaten up your assets with whores."

So the father reminded him that they were obligated to rejoice, "for this your brother was dead and he has come back to life."

With that the story ends. As Jesus told it, it must have been powerful and poignant. It not only suggests something about the surprisingly forgiving way God treats repentant sinners.

It also jolts some self-righteous types into revisiting their holier-than-thou attitudes. In fact, that was its main thrust, to undercut the supercilious way religious people have of putting down honest penitents.

So how come that point is all but forgotten? Nine times out of ten when you hear this story in Sunday School it ends when the fugitive son is welcomed home.

Most of the time the scene with the big brother is ignored. Perhaps that's because people still like the idea that they can chalk up brownie points with God through long and faithful service. Nobody likes to have their cherished beliefs challenged.

No wonder Jesus' story has been watered down in the process. Like many of his anecdotes, it could prove too embarrassing to the religious establishment.

So what started out as a cutting indictment of popular piety has been twisted into a trite moralism against running away from home and wasting your money. In short, the story about the "unforgiving brother" has been turned into a tale about a "prodigal son."

It's a classic case of deceptive labeling. What's needed is a good truth-in-packaging program to promote more honest titles for biblical stories. But in this instance the damage may be all but irreparable. For everyone covets the solace of sins forgiven. But who really wants to discard the credit presumably due for faithful service?