



FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION IN LUKE 15:11–32 AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIANS IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY

Abdulazeez Olalekan OTUNAYA

Department of Religious Studies,
Tai Solarin Federal University of Education, Ogun-State, Nigeria
Email: otunayao@tasued.edu.ng
Tel: +234-8166688443

and

Prof. Olatundun Abosede ODERINDE

Department of Religious Studies,
Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State, Nigeria
Email: olatundun.oderinde@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng
Tel: +234-8150919694

Abstract

This study explores forgiveness and reconciliation in Luke 15:11–32 and their implications for Christians in contemporary Nigerian society. Forgiveness and reconciliation remain vital topics in Christian theology; yet their lack has contributed to conflicts within families, churches, and Christian denominations in Nigeria. The study employs the historical-critical method to analyze the parable, and implications are inferred using an African cultural hermeneutical approach. Findings show that forgiveness comes with intentionality since it begins with receptivity and repentance. Reconciliation, on the other hand, initiates the restoration process of broken relationships. In Luke 15:11-32, the younger son's willingness to confess his sin and the father's empathy demonstrate the powerful role of forgiveness. Meanwhile, the elder brother's attitude reveals the outcome of reconciliation. The study also demonstrates that reconciliation cannot be fully realized without forgiveness, as both are important for peacekeeping within the Christian community. In conclusion, the parable serves as a principle of forgiveness and reconciliation that can be used to address interpersonal and communal conflicts in Nigerian society. It recommends that Christians adopt these principles to foster peace, unity, and social cohesion.

Keywords: Forgiveness, Reconciliation, Luke 15:11-32, Nigerian Christians

Introduction

There is no gainsaying that the Bible is replete with messages about forgiveness and reconciliation. Teachings on *aphesis* (forgiveness) and *katallagé* (reconciliation) hold a central position in Christianity because they are widely discussed within the church (Eade, 2012; McDonald, 1984). Both forgiveness and reconciliation are significant themes in Old and New Testament scriptures, even though the Old Testament does not speak much about interpersonal forgiveness (Eade, 2012). The most striking example is Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers who had sold him into slavery (Gen. 45:1-15); this is arguably a story about reconciliation, genuine repentance, and forgiveness. It is rare to find interpersonal forgiveness elsewhere in the Old Testament except for the passage mentioned above (Eade, 2012). The most common type of forgiveness found in the Old Testament is the one that has to do with petitionary prayers to God for the forgiveness of wayward individuals or groups, especially through sacrifice accompanied

by a covenant. Examples include animal atonement offerings (Leviticus 5:14-16, 6:67; Numbers 28), Job's prayer for pardon (Job 7:21) and Moses' plea for the restoration of Israel (Exodus 32:32).

Unlike the Old Testament, the New Testament continually speaks about forgiveness for the entire people with special focus on Jesus as the 'perfect sacrifice' who came to replace the system of forgiveness and reconciliation with God, which is through the sacrificial system (Hebrews 10:8-10). This is evident at the Last Supper, where Jesus declares, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (Matthew 26:28). Furthermore, Jesus offers direct teachings on forgiveness and reconciliation on several occasions. This resonates with Eade's statement that interpersonal forgiveness is an important concern for all Christians. Another profound example is the teaching of Jesus on *aphesis* to his disciples to forgive '70 times seven times' in the Gospel of Matthew (18:21-22) and in Luke when Jesus says 'If there is repentance, you must forgive' (Luke 17:3). Both Matthew and Luke Gospels record the Lord's Prayer, 'Forgive us as we forgive others', but where Matthew's version talks about forgiving debts, Luke's prayer asks for forgiveness of sins (Matthew 6:12; Luke 11:4).

The inability to forgive one another has often led to increased unresolved disputes among pastors. For instance, unforgiveness could lead to broken homes among Christian couples, schism across various Christian denominations and caucus within the church. The resentments among some Christian denominations in Nigeria have become a major threat to the Christian faith, which calls for serious attention. In light of this, the study examines the theological significance of Luke 15:11-32 and its implications for Christians. The study adopts the historical-critical method in analysing Luke 15:11-32 and interprets it using an African cultural hermeneutical approach. African cultural hermeneutics involves the integration of African religious elements into biblical interpretation (Manus, 2003, p.3).

Literature Review

Forgiveness

Christian authors have studied the concept of forgiveness, often describing it from a particular Christian theological lens, such as Reformed (Volf 2005; Worthington 2018, 2019a), Wesleyan (Jones 1995), Pentecostal (Mittlestadt and Geoffrey 2010), Roman Catholic (Guerra and Barkman 2018), Orthodox (Pahman 2019), Anabaptist (Kraybill, 2018), or relational spirituality (Shults and Sandage 2003). These writings have provided helpful explorations of how distinct Christian traditions perceive forgiveness. However, Christians need to understand forgiveness from a more biblical standpoint. Forgiveness is defined as an internal process of individual courage that transforms a traumatic incident into a joyful one in order to restore a cooperative relationship (Hunter, 2007). This definition is from a psychological standpoint. Although the authors linked forgiveness to religion through spiritual transformation, it is different from what this study intends to investigate. However, it provides background information about the concept of forgiveness since forgiveness cannot be confined to the study of religion. To Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015), forgiveness is conceived as an unfolding event, which involves substituting negative thoughts and behaviours toward an offender for positive ones.

In the New Testament, two verbs, "*χαρίζομαι* and *ἀφεσις*" were used to explain the act of forgiveness. The word *χαρίζομαι* means to deal graciously with someone, while *ἀφεσις* means "to send away, to loose." The New Testament speaks often about forgiveness; one of its teachings is "that the forgiven sinner must forgive others" (Morris, 1996, p. 382). Besides, forgiveness is to be wholehearted. It springs from Christ's forgiveness. 'A' the Lord has forgiven you, so you also

must forgive” (Col 3:13). God desires to forgive everyone and restore the lost relationship fully without remembering our past (Domeris, 1985). The example of the prodigal son, which is the focus of this work, is an assurance to all who have sinned or offended that they will be given another chance. Our pattern is Jesus Christ, who recommends that we should forgive each other because Christ has done it freely for us. If repentance is not sought for, Longman states, when "forgiveness of others remains absent it questions, or even jeopardises, their own relationship with God" (Longman, 2013, p. 611).

Reconciliation

Yarn and Jones (2009) describe reconciliation as the formation of cooperative relations between two or more persons who have been at odds, regardless of whether they previously had a cooperative relationship. According to Kelman (2008), reconciliation is a "process of creating a mutual peacemaking relationship between persons who are formerly antagonistic." For Palanski (2012), reconciliation is ‘an effort by the victim to extend acts of goodwill towards the offender in the hope of restoring the relationship’. Worth noting is that the process of forgiveness cannot be completed without reconciliation, and reconciliation cannot be properly achieved without forgiveness. Moellendorf (2007) views reconciliation as a way of reconnecting with the past and reimagining the future, which improves the relationship. It is not just about rebuilding the relationship, but about creating a stronger bond that previously lacked harmony (p. 210-211).

The Greek word *καταλλάσσω* is translated as ‘reconciliation’ as used in 2 Cor 5:18-20. Reconciliation has the root meaning of change. It means ‘change of attitude from hostility to amity, of God toward humanity, of humanity toward God, and of individuals toward each other’ (Odonovan, 1986, p. 528). Morris buttresses Odonovan’s statement regarding his treatment of reconciliation; he argues that only beings forgiven by the accomplished work of Jesus Christ make reconciliation possible (Morris, 1996). In the Lord’s prayer, Jesus warned His followers that failing to reconcile with one another breaks their relationship with God. The prayer has provision for every individual to reconcile with one another. We cannot harbour ill feelings and keep using the Lord’s Prayer every day, while repeating the Lord’s warning about those who have offended us: ‘And forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone indebted to us’ (Luke 11:4; Longman, 2013, p. 1401). Odonovan (1986) used 2 Cor. 5:18-20 to peruse the concept of reconciliation. However, this study desires to use the teachings of Christ in Luke 15:11-32 to demonstrate forgiveness and reconciliation.

Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the New Testament: Paul and John Mark

Since forgiveness and reconciliation are significant themes in the New Testament, some incidents involving these themes between two individuals are highlighted. Guto (2014) provides an example of forgiveness and reconciliation using ‘Paul and John Mark’ as a case study from Acts 15:36-41. John Mark, a resident of Jerusalem and cousin of Barnabas, accompanied Barnabas and Paul on their first missionary journey as far as Perga (13:13). However, he refused to follow them when they intended to go to Asia Minor, and he returned to Jerusalem (v. 13). Later, Paul and Barnabas believed it was best for them to revisit the churches they had planted. Barnabas wanted John Mark to accompany them on this journey, but Paul disapproved because he had abandoned them during the first journey (Acts 15:38-39). Consequently, tensions arose between Paul and Barnabas over this issue, leading to their parting ways (v. 38). While Paul chose to travel with Silas, Barnabas went with John Mark. Meanwhile, this disagreement did not last forever. Later, in

Rome, Paul ultimately recommended John Mark to the Colossian Church (Col 4:10). Paul also commended John Mark for his usefulness in the ministry (2 Tim 4:11; Longman, 2013, p. 1106). This illustrates how forgiveness and reconciliation played out among Barnabas, Paul, John, and Mark. Initially, Barnabas and Paul had a misunderstanding because of John Mark. As a result, Paul's anger extended to John Mark when he chose Silas, but ultimately, they resolved their differences.

In the conflict between Paul and John Mark, White offers his remarks on 2 Timothy 4:11 and reveals that, in the end, Paul "was reconciled to Mark and received him as a fellow labourer" (White, 2005, p. 348). Furthermore, White adds that John Mark was able to serve humanity better once he understood the sacrifice of Christ for the lost. Mark did not hesitate to reconcile with Paul (p. 349). Writing about the end of Paul's life, White admits that Paul not only endorsed Mark but also spoke well of him before his death, saying he was "resourceful" and "a comfort unto me". At this point in history, we need more wisdom from the Bible about how to extend forgiveness to every human being, since each has committed offences against others and needs forgiveness. White affirms this, saying: The sorrow and penitence of the guilty, and the wailing of the sin-sick soul, come to us from the past, telling us that man was then, as now, in need of the pardoning mercy of God. It teaches us that while He punishes crime, He also pities and forgives the repentant sinner. (White, 2005, p. 12).

Historical Background of Luke's Gospel

Luke affirms in the beginning of his gospel (1:1-4) that he was not an eyewitness to the stories he told about Jesus' ministry. The gospel according to Luke covers the infancy narratives of Jesus, including his earthly ministry and mission in Galilee and Judea, Jerusalem, culminating in the passion narrative of Jesus. The Gospel has been traced to Luke because it forms the first volume of a two-part work, with Acts of the Apostles being the second. This is premised on the fact that both books were addressed to one person: Theophilus (Luke 1:1-4). While Luke tells the gospel about Jesus, Acts of the Apostles chronicles the early history and growth of the church during the post-resurrection period (Bovon, 2002).

In the late 2nd century, its authorship was attributed to Luke, a companion of Paul (Philem. 24; Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11). Modern scholars also assigned the authorship of the book to Luke, even though he was not identified as the actual author in Paul's epistles. There is internal and external evidence in support of the authorship of Luke. The internal evidence refers to evidence found within the Gospel itself, while the external evidence refers to early church fathers' testimonies, such as the writings of historians and theologians. Archaeological findings such as the Muratorian list (ca A.D. 170-180) and St. Irenaeus assigned the authorship of the Gospel of Luke to Luke, who was identified with St. Paul (Freedman, 1992). Patristic tradition assumed that Luke the Physician mentioned in Col. 4:14 was the author of Luke's gospel. However, modern scholars have not been conclusive about Lucan's authorship (Jeffrey, 1992).

The date of the Gospel according to Luke has generated a lot of controversy among New Testament scholars, with some dating the book before the destruction of Jerusalem, while others date it after AD 70, when Jerusalem had been destroyed. Radical scholars assign AD 80-85 to Luke's Gospel, which precedes the collation and circulation of Paul's epistles (ca. 90). This aligns with the fact that he himself did not witness the events he told in this Gospel (Luke 1:2). However, conservative scholars like E. P. Sanders, Michael Grant, Richard Baukman, among others, suggest a date around AD 70 because predictions about the destruction of Jerusalem can be best understood

in terms of supernatural prophecies before the actual event. There is a consensus among scholars that Luke must have been written before Mark's Gospel since Mark was the primary source of Luke. Consequently, scholars date Luke between AD 63 and 80. However, Luke's account is fuller, longer and complete than any of the synoptic gospels (Brown, 1997).

Luke's theology focuses on God, Jesus, the idea of salvation, the Holy Spirit, angels, and prophecies that will come true (Martin, 1996, p. 167). It was only in Luke that nouns like *soteria* ('Σωτηρία') and saviour were used. Luke also frequently used the verb 'save' σώζω more than any other New Testament author (Reece, 2019). Additionally, Luke used the word 'God' more often than all other evangelists in the New Testament combined. Much emphasis was placed on God's glory, prayer, miracles, forgiveness, discipleship, and most importantly, the master plan God devised for Israel through Jesus. There are about 20 parables recorded in Luke that are unique to only Luke; these parables are not found elsewhere in the New Testament. Luke also emphasised how Jesus showed concern for the people, including the Jews and Gentiles, particularly His concern for the poor, women, children, and sinners. Luke did not discriminate; he wrote for all. This is evident in his use of some Greek terms. For example, Luke νομικός (lawyer) rather than using the Hebrew term γραμματεύς (scribe) (Bainton, 1989, p. 176). Most New Testament writers often use 'scribe' more than the layman's term 'lawyer', which could be substituted for the term 'scribe'. Additionally, Luke highlighted Jesus' teachings on the usefulness of money (Luke 12 and 16).

General and Immediate Contexts of Luke 15:11-32

The importance of context in biblical interpretation cannot be overemphasized. Context is to meaning what soil is to seed (Oderinde, 2013). This suggests that we cannot diligently unravel the hidden meaning behind biblical texts without considering the context in which they were given. Both Dodd and Jeremias emphasise this in their works, as Dodd posits that parables cannot be interpreted in isolation from their context. Thus, examining the context of a parable is crucial to determine its true message. To determine the setting and dating of Luke's Gospel, we must examine its historical context, without neglecting questions of Luke's authorship and date. Although determining the actual author of Luke is quite difficult, scholars have focused on internal and external evidence to propose plausible explanations (O'Neil, 1961, p.1-5). Scholars place Luke's Gospel between AD 63 and 80 based on its source and the original recipient. Lucan authorship has been linked with the we-sections in Paul's letters.

Having considered questions of date and authorship, we can now situate the parable of the prodigal son within the context of Jesus's ministry (Cullmann, 1956, p.723). The use of parables in Jesus' ministry fits into the general context of the Gospels, as Jesus was found using parables to proclaim the kingdom of God while he was rebuking the people of Nazareth and Bethsaida (Matthew 11:20-24; Luke 9:51-56). Richard argues that the parable of the prodigal son and the elder brother provides a framework for teachings on forgiveness, fatherly wisdom, and reconciliation (Richard, 1992, p. 89).

The immediate context of the passage, which is the parable of the "prodigal son" as seen in Luke's gospel, is 15:3-10 as the parable itself commences in verse 11. It is very important to note the significant verse, which is verse 3, which reads thus: "εἶπελ δὲ πρὸς αὐτοὺς πῆλ παραβοιήλ ηαύηελ ιέγωλ" - so he told them this parable, saying: from the above, two things are obvious from the passage; the first is the primary recipient of the parable, and the second is the introduction to the parable. The direct use of the third-person personal masculine plural pronoun

“αὐτοῦς” indicates that it is to be identified with an earlier-mentioned noun. And the only noun that was mentioned directly before the pronoun could be seen in verse 2, "the Pharisees and the scribes", as grumbling at Jesus's action. Therefore, one can affirm that the parable is Jesus' response or clarification on his action (Olubiyi, 2015). The study notes that many scholars have doubted the literary use of the term 'parable' to describe three parables in Luke's gospel. The main issue, however, arose from the use of πῆλ παραβοιῆλ ηαύηελ [feminine singular accusative noun] (this parable) to describe the whole parables in this chapter (15).

When the structure of this chapter is examined, one would find out that verses 4-7 contain the parable of the Lost Sheep; verses 8-10 contain the parable of the Lost Coin and verses 11-32 contain the parable of the Prodigal Son. Astonishingly, the reason why Luke used the singular demonstrative pronoun (this parable) when he knew quite well that three parables would follow the introductory statement of verse 3 becomes a puzzle in the mind of the reader. As such, this implies that for Luke, the three parables unite together to form what would be called a "parabolic discourse". This is why Hultgren, as cited in Olubiyi (2015:61), says that "the three parables have a thematic unity". This thematic unity is reinforced by the use of common language in the three parables. Consequently, the parables of the Lost Sheep (15:4-7) and the parable of the Lost Coin (15:8-10) are the immediate context for the parable of the Prodigal Son as far as Luke is concerned. The parable can then be divided into two sections. The first section of the parable focuses on the prodigal son in verses 11-24, and the second one on the elder brother in verses 25-32. In both parts of the story, the focus is on the son and the father (Olubiyi, 2015). Historically and literarily viewing the pericope of what is commonly known as the “Prodigal Son and the Elder Brother”, it is imperative to find out the intended message in the text through an exegetical description of Luke 15:11-32.

Exegetical Analysis of Luke 15:11-32

Part 1: Younger Son's Actions (15:12-13)

The parable describes the choices of the younger son. The younger son, whose age probably did not exceed twenty years—the age of marriage, asked for his share of the father's property. This was his first choice. Geldenhuys explained that this is where the prodigal sinned. Not in his dissipation, though the waste of assets is a sinful act, for this may be attributed to youth and inexperience (Geldenhuys, 1951, p. 406). The son asked for the portion of the inheritance that he would receive upon his father's death, while his father was still alive and healthy (Geldenhuys, 1951, p.407). The son inadvertently wished for his father's death. The division of the estate reveals clearly that the father had both sons in mind: “ὁ δὲ διεῖλεν αὐτοῖς τὸν βίον” (So he divided his property between them). Shortly after the younger son received his share, he may have converted it to some form of cash or merchandise—εἰς χώραν μακράν, καὶ ἐκεῖ διεσκόρπισεν τὴν οὐσίαν αὐτοῦ ζῶν ἀσώτως (set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living v.13).

Story Continues (15: v14b-16)

The choices of the younger son led to unexpected circumstances. The phrase in vs 14b "ἐγένετο λιμὸς ἰσχυρὰ κατὰ τὴν χώραν ἐκείνην, καὶ αὐτὸς ἤρξατο ὑστερεῖσθαι" (there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need), reveals that the famine was a severe one. Such a famine may lead to people's migration since it belongs to one of the push factors that can lead to mass departure. When resources are scarce, the common man suffers first and most. The younger son, as a commoner and foreigner in that land, experienced great need. The younger

son is forced to work for a citizen of the country to which he had journeyed. His job is to feed swine. To make matters worse, the pigs' diet appeared better to this Jewish young man. It is not likely that a Jewish audience could have a more severe picture drawn of the crisis circumstances that now surrounded this young man's life. As E. Schweizer rightly points out that hunger is not the only thing involved in the circumstances of the young man: "He suffers loss of religious identity. Swine have been unclean since Leviticus 11:7; only Gentiles eat their flesh (Isa. 65:4; 66:17)" (Schweizer, 1998, p.132).

“καὶ ἐπεθύμει γεμίσαι τὴν κοιλίαν αὐτοῦ ἐκ τῶν κερατίων ὧν ἤσθιον οἱ χοῖροι, καλοῦδεις ἐδίδου αὐτῷ” - (He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything vs. 16). The circumstances, which followed his earlier poor choices, now brought the younger son into a hunger for pig's food: "The food supply of the pigs, which he desired to eat, was composed of the hornlike bean pods of the carob tree, which contained not only seeds but a sweet gelatinous substance adding to the food value" (Duncan & Derrett, 1996, p.200).
Younger's Change of Choices (15: v17-20a)

Marshall pointed out the important fact that the phrase “εἰς ἑαυτὸν δὲ ἐλθὼν,” which may be translated literally as “to come to one's senses,” represents a Semitic phrase “to repent.” Jones identifies the monologue of the younger son as “interior monologue” (Jones, 1998, p.123). On this note, the message of the young man is known: "ἔφη Πόσοι μίσθιοι τοῦ πατρός μου περισσεύονται ἄρτων, ἐγὼ δὲ λιμῶ ὥδε ἀπόλλυμι αὐτὸν" (he said, 'how many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!') vs 17). The father's hired servants are “feasting,” while he is in “famine”. The μίσθιοι are hired workers, as opposed to slaves. The father's household apparently included both classes of workers (vs. 22). At this junction, the son does not mind becoming his father's servant, as he was shown preparing the speech he will present before his father. This speech of repentance contained four points:

1. ἤμαρτον εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ (I have sinned against heaven)
2. (ἤμαρτον) ἐνώπιόν σου, (I have sinned against you, father)
3. οὐκέτι εἰμὶ ἄξιος κληθῆναι υἱός σου. (I am no longer worthy to be called your son)
4. ποίησόν με ὡς ἓνα τῶν μισθίων σου (Make me like one of your hired servants)

The distinction mentioned earlier that is maintained between God and the Father must not be forgotten. As Schweizer says in part, "The father is not simply the allegorical equivalent of God" (Schweizer, 1998, p.143). The speech of the son indicates this. The recognition of sin is made before heaven and before the Father. Meanwhile, ἀναστὰς πορεύσομαι (I will set out and go back v. 18a) does represent an Aramaic phrase meaning "I will go at once," then the younger son may have rehearsed his four-point speech repeatedly on his way (Jones, 1998, p.124).

Father's Contact with the Lost Son

The parable takes on another dimension in explaining the father's contact with his lost son. While the returning son is far away, just a speck on the horizon, the father sees him, is filled with compassion toward him, and runs to greet him. The waiting father is replaced by the running father. Schweizer, among many others, points out that the race to the son "is contrary to all custom; in the Ancient Near East, a mature man loses all his dignity when he runs" (Schweizer, 1998, p.147). Upon meeting the son, the father embraced him and kissed him, which is inherently a sign of a warm welcome. After meeting his father, the younger son begins to deliver his well-rehearsed speech, which becomes a rhetorical question, as was earlier seen. Did the son deliver it? No, the

father interrupted when his son, for whom he had longed, indicated that he was no longer worthy to be called his son. The father's response is swift and immediate. He orders the servants to bring the signs of sonship: the best robe, the signet ring, and the shoes of a freeman or household master. Not only are the visible signs of sonship restored, but the celebration of great joy is planned. While verse 6 of the parable of the lost sheep and verse 9 of the parable of the lost coin both speak of a party for friends, it is only in this last parable that the party preparations and the party sounds are given full detail.

The fatted calf was not the meal of common celebration, but of special celebration, often associated with a special guest. The father celebrates with the younger son, the restored sonship, the restored life, and the restored relationship. The joy found in the parable of the lost sheep (v. 6) and in the lost coin parable (vs. 9) over the recovery of one sheep and one coin now comes to the parable of the lost sons (vs. 23-24). One son, the younger one, is at the centre of the father's joy and celebration. As pointed out, there are several scholars who want to end the parable with the celebration of the father and his lost younger son. But the story is not finished here. The original audiences might well have thought that the story was over, too. But a surprising direction to the story is shortly to be taken.

Part II

The Story Now Shifts Its Attention to the Older Son (15:25-30)

The older son was absent from the house when the father began the celebration. He was working. As he returned home, he heard loud music coming from the house. A servant gave the older brother news of joy, but the older brother would not accept it. The servant identified the one who had returned as "your brother," not as "your father's son." The response was one of anger and rejection. Once again, the father is pictured as leaving the house to meet with his son. The father pleads with the older son to join the celebration. Again, the father hears the speech of his son. This speech sounds just as rehearsed as that of the younger son. However, the speech was different. In view of this, David Tiede describes it as follows:

And it is a bitter speech, "I have slaved for you all these years and never disobeyed, a resentful speech: "Yet you never gave me even a kid so I could have my own party with my friends," and a self-justifying speech: "but when this so of yours came, you killed the fatted calf." He not only refuses to join the joyful celebration, but he also cuts himself off from his brother and his father (Tiede, 2008, p.134). The older brother did not accept his brother. He only labeled his brother as *ὁ υἱός σου οὗτος* (this son of yours). He would not acknowledge his relationship with his brother. The one who would be made a hired hand had been restored to sonship; the one who should be a son declared himself as a slave.

The story concludes with the father's unfulfilled plea (15:31-32), where the term used to refer to the older brother by the father is one of affection. The father reminds the son that he has always been in his presence. If the elder brother was concerned about possessions, the father reminds him that his sonship includes the father's possessions. However, there is also a reaffirmation of the need for celebration. The father repeats nearly the same words as in verse 24, but this time he changes the phrases, "my son" (*αὐτῷ Τέκνον*) to "your brother" (*ὁ ἀδελφός σου οὗτος*). The story ends with the father's special plea to the one who has always been at home to come and join him at the celebration table. The outcome of that plea remains untold. The elder son represents the tragedy of someone who is at risk of shutting out the father by shutting out the brother. He is unwilling to celebrate with the kind of father who rejoices with a sinner. He does

not acknowledge the repentance of the younger brother and stands in danger of excluding himself from the father's feast.

Implications of Luke 15:11-32 for Christians Today

This parable and the two preceding it tell us something beautiful about God, our Father. That is, God is full of compassion, grace, love, and mercy. The most prominent themes of this passage are mercy, compassion, and reconciliation. This parable is the continuation of Jesus' response to the scribes and Pharisees' criticism of His keeping company with sinners. He began by telling the twin parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, both of which express the joy of finding what has been lost. This parable is considered the longest parable in the Gospels (Arnold, 1963, p.62). The implications of this passage could be seen from two different angles. The story treats the motif of forgiveness among fellow humans and that of God, thereby leading to reconciliation. As Naseri (2018, p.71) rightly pointed out, reconciliation emphasizes change, exchange, and 'the other', and depicts the re-establishment of an interrupted relationship with God and neighbor.

The opening verse, "a certain man had two sons" (Luke 15:11), shows the existing relationship between God and humanity. Moreover, the parable does not end with the younger son alone, as the title of the parable implies, 'the Prodigal Son' and not 'the Prodigal Son and His Elder Brother'. This serves as a reminder to Christians today that there has been a kind of cordial relationship between humanity and God. Therefore, we cannot detach ourselves from God; He is our Father. Furthermore, the act of making choice(s) was instituted by God. This is evident in the story when the younger son was allowed to make such a horrible request. Consequently, the benefit of making choices that God instituted has been mishandled by some Christians today. Like the younger son in the story, after he had collected his inheritance, he squandered it. This is not far from being the case among Christians today. Although this liberty to make choices has led to two things—self-repentance and self-destruction—however, the wrong choice made by the younger son led him to his father. Here, it should be noted that Christians today must be careful and take due diligence when making choices for themselves. Self-repentance is presented as a prerequisite to forgiveness and reconciliation.

The repentance demonstrated in the prodigal son is as real and decided as the fall (Plummer 1896, p.375). He prepares a full confession, but no excuse; and, having made a good resolution, he acts upon it without delay. Here, the narrative respecting the younger son practically ends. What follows (20-24) is mainly his father's treatment of him, and it is here that this parable comes into closest contact with the two others. Every word in what follows is full of gracious meaning. First, the younger son acknowledged himself as a sinner, as he decides his faith. This implies that for God to forgive us, there must be repentance by taking full responsibility for our actions.

Going further, the passage reveals the magnanimous spirit demonstrated by God to overlook human error. The father's reaction upon seeing his son from afar was most likely a surprise. Arland (1998, p.76) explains that the son had shamed his father before the whole village. It would only be just and right for the father to let the son come to him, walking through the village and facing the disapproving stares of the community; instead, the father, full of compassion, runs to him. The father's first action is to embrace and kiss his son before he even hears what his son has to say: "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, "Bring the best robe quickly, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet."



Now, the second part of reconciliation came through the father's action to reconcile the younger son with his elder brother. The older brother accuses his father of nepotism because he has honoured the younger son with a fattened calf, while he has never given his firstborn even a baby goat to eat with his friends. He goes on to refuse any relationship with his brother when he says, "this son of yours." He accuses his brother of wasting his father's wealth on prostitutes to further degrade him in his father's eyes. The older son, like the younger, has a broken relationship with his father. Now the father seeks to restore the relationship with his older son in the same manner. Apparently, both sons need reconciliation with their father. Both sons receive the same love from the father, love given in humility. The father's last statement expresses his joy that the younger son, who was lost, is now found: "It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found. What is left now is to know whether the older brother, who was also lost, would be found and reconciled, as we are not told the older son's response. In all, the sole implication of this passage for Christians today is to continue to reconcile themselves with fellow humans because this gladdens the heart of God." As God has forgiven us and reconciled with us, we must also forgive our fellow humans and reconcile with them.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In the Christian religion, forgiveness and reconciliation are two central phenomena that form the basis for human interactions. This study examined forgiveness and reconciliation in Luke 15:11-32, and their implications for Nigerian Christians. In the Old Testament, teachings on interpersonal forgiveness are limited to communal repentance, unlike in the New Testament, where much emphasis is placed on interpersonal forgiveness. Using a historical-critical and African cultural hermeneutical approach, the study analysed the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32. This analysis reveals themes such as repentance, undiluted love, and the importance of reconciliation. The intentions behind the younger son's repentance and the father's compassion demonstrate the transformative role of forgiveness, while the elder brother's reaction reveals the challenge of accepting reconciliation. Based on the outcome of this study, forgiveness and reconciliation are not only theological concepts but also requirements for sustaining strong relationships within the Christian community. It was established that genuine reconciliation is rooted in genuine repentance and unconditional love. Just as the father in the parable of the prodigal son embodies the divine model of forgiveness and the younger son is willing to restore the broken relationship, Christians must also exemplify the biblical model of forgiveness and reconciliation portrayed in Luke 15:11-32. These dynamics of reconciliation are evident in contemporary Nigerian society, where unresolved conflicts remain a challenge within the church, family, and Christian denominations. The study concludes that the inability to forgive and reconcile with one another remains a major challenge to Christian unity and social cohesion in Nigeria. To maintain peace and order, Christians must exemplify the practice of forgiveness and reconciliation. Finally, the application of the principles of forgiveness and reconciliation will foster unity within the church and promote peaceful coexistence in the wider society.

References

- Arland, H. (1998). *The Prodigal Son and his Foolishness*. Illinois: Queen Books.
Arnold, P. (1963). *The Parables of Jesus*. London: SCM.
Bainton, R. H. (1989). *Here I stand: A Life of Martin Luther*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.



- Bovon, F. (2002). *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1-9:50*. Hermenia Series. Edited by Helmut Koester. Translated by Christine M. Thomas. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Brown, S. (1969). *Apostasy and Perseverance in the Theology of Luke*. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute.
- Cullmann, O. (1956). *The Early Church: Studies in Early Christian History and Theology*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
- Domeris, W. (1985). Biblical perspective on forgiveness. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 54, 48-50.
- Duncan, J. & Derrett, M. (1996). *Law in the New Testament: The Parable of the Prodigal Son: New Testament Studies*. Illinois: Queen Books.
- Eade, P. (2012). *Biblical Forgiveness: Exploring the Differences between Biblical and Secular Interpersonal Forgiveness* (n.p.: Christian Growth Network).
- Enright, R. D. and Fitzgibbons, R. P. (2015), *Forgiveness Therapy: An Empirical Guide for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope*, 2nd ed. Washington: American Psychological Association.
- Freedman, D. (1992). *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday.
- Geldenhuis, N. (1951). *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, The New International Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Guerra, E. and Barkman, A. (2018). Aristotle, Avicenna and Aquinas on Forgiveness. In *The Philosophy of Forgiveness, Vol III: Forgiveness in World Religions*. Edited by Gregor L. Bock. Wilmington: Vernon Press.
- Guto, T. O. (2014). "A Forgiveness and Reconciliation Strategy to Bring Ethnic Harmony in the Nairobi East Seventh-day Adventist Church". Dissertation Projects DMin.
- Hunter, A. (2007). Forgiveness: Hindu and Western Perspectives. *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*, 20(11), 35-42.
- Jeffrey, D. L. (1992). *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans.
- Jones, L. G. (1995). *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Kelman, H. C. (2008). Reconciliation from a social-psychological perspective. *The social psychology of intergroup reconciliation*, 15-32.
- Kraybill, D. (2018). Anabaptist Forgiveness in Cultural Context: An Amish Example. In *The Philosophy of Forgiveness, III: Forgiveness in World Religions*. Edited by Gregory L. Bock. Wilmington: Vernon Press.
- Longman, T. (2013). Forgiveness. In *The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (pp. 1401-1402). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
- Manus, C. U. (2003). *Intercultural Hermeneutics in Africa: Methods and Approaches*. Nairobi: Acton Press.
- Martin, R. P. (1996). *Colossians: The Church's Lord and the Christian's Liberty*. Illinois: Queen Books.
- McDonald, H. (1984). *Forgiveness and Atonement*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House
- Mejudhon, U. (2005). The ritual of reconciliation in Thai culture: Discipling new converts. *Global Missiology English*, (4).
- Mittlestadt, M. W. & Geoffrey, W. S. (2010). *Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Restoration: Multidisciplinary Studies from a Pentecostal Perspective*. Eugene: Pickwick Publications.



- Moellendorf, D. (2007) "Reconciliation as a Political Value". *Journal of Social Philosophy* 38(2):205-221.
- Morris, L. (1996). *Forgiveness*. In *New Bible dictionary*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Morris, L. (1996). *Reconciliation*. In *New Bible dictionary*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity press.
- Naseri, C. (2018). Christian Perspective on Reconciliation in Luke 15:25-32. *European Scientific Journal* 14 (35): 67-83.
- O'Neil, J. C. (1961). *The Theology of Luke and Acts in Its Historical Setting*. London: SPCK Publishing Company.
- Oderinde, O. A. (2013). *The Basics of Contextual Theology*. Ibadan: Korem Prints.
- Odonovan, O. (1986). *Reconciliation in the Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*. Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press.
- Olubiyi A. A. (2015). Re-Examining the Message of the Parable of the Prodigal Son in the Light of Its Context. *Horin Journal of Religious Studies, (IJOURELS)*, 5(1), 53-72.
- Pahman, D. (2019). How Is Forgiveness Possible? Toward an Orthodox and Ascetic Answer. In *The Philosophy of Forgiveness*, Vol IV: Christian Perspectives on Forgiveness. Edited by Gregory L. Bock. Wilmington: Vernon Press.
- Palanski, M. E. (2012). Forgiveness and reconciliation in the workplace: A multi-level perspective and research agenda. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 109, 275-287.
- Plummer, A. (1896). *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke*. London: T&T Clark International.
- Pope, M. H. (1977). *Song of Songs: The Anchor Yale Bible*. New Heaven: Yale University Press.
- Reece, S. (2019). Jesus as healer: etymologizing of proper names in Luke-Acts. *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 110(2), 186-201.
- Richard, D. (1992). *Previewing Luke's Project from His Prologue*. Miami Springs, Fl: Schoettle Publishing.
- Schweizer, E. (1998). *The Goodnews According to Luke*. Illinois: Queen Publishing Company.
- Shults, F. L. and Sandage, S. J. (2003). *The Faces of Forgiveness: Searching for Wholeness and Salvation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Tiede, D. (2008). *The Implication of a Prodigal Sons and Daughters in the Fold*. New York: Princeton Books.
- Volf, M. (2005). *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- White, E. G. (2005). *Conflict & courage: Compiled from the writings of Ellen G. White*. Washington, DC: Review and Herald.
- Wortham, J. (2018). *Letter to the Pope: My Journey of Forgiveness, Faith & Love* (with. L. Worthington, Paths to REACH Forgiveness Guide). Los Angeles: New Insights Press.
- Worthington, E. L. Jr. (2019a). Christian Formation in Humility, Forgiveness, and Justice: What Psychology Can Say to Philosophy and Theology. In *The Philosophy of Forgiveness, IV: Christian Perspectives on Forgiveness*. Edited by Gregory L. Bock. Wilmington: Vernon Press.
- Yarn, D. H., & Jones, G. T. (2009). A biological approach to understanding resistance to apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation in group conflict. *Law & Contemp. Probs.*, 72, 63.