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THREE PARABLES OF JESUS THROUGH THE SHAME-HONOR LENS

by Marlene Yu Yap

Introduction

A Muslim father kills his daughter for the sake of family honor when she marries outside the faith. A Japanese leader steps down in shame over the mistakes of his subordinates. They both live in shame-honor societies in which shame is generally to be avoided and despised while honor is to be upheld and sought.

According to Muller, approximately 70-75% of the world is basically shame-based in culture. That would include nearly all of North Africa, South America, the Middle East, and Asia. The Western nations including Northern Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand are primarily guilt-based. The primal cultures such as tribal Africa and some parts of Asia and South America are mostly fear-based.¹ As Mediterranean society is basically shame-based, the New Testament people, its authors and readers were also culturally shame-based. Reading the New Testament through the lens of the 1st century shame-based culture will increase our understanding of the message of Jesus' parables. It is my contention that since Mediterranean culture was based on a shame-honor system, then it is appropriate to view the Scriptures, specifically the parables of Jesus, in that light.

I will limit this research to three parables found in the Gospel of Luke: The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), The Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1-8) and The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). These three parables are considered by some scholars to be a trilogy with a common theme of salvation and stewardship.² Bailey claims that

¹Roland Miller, "Summary of Honor and Shame," <http://kingschurchlondon.org/downloads/Honorandshame.pdf>. (Accessed January 12, 2015).

²Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2008), 380.

these three parables are linked together to depict the wasteful use of resources. The prodigal son wastes his father's resources, the dishonest manager wastes his master's resources, and the rich man wastes his own resources. However, I believe that there are other overarching themes that unite these three parables. I contend that this trilogy centers on the common themes of justice, grace and love. Understanding these parables through the shame-honor lens will enable us to fully grasp and appreciate the meaning and essence of the teachings of Jesus. I will first give a brief background of the nature of shame-honor cultures. I will then discuss the three aforementioned parables in the light of this cultural lens.

Shame and Honor Culture

Social anthropology focuses on different concepts of worldview in identifying cultures. Western culture is primarily guilt-based, which centers on right and wrong and is predominantly concerned with guilt and innocence.³ Fear-based cultures deal with the need to appease the supernatural powers and to live in peace with these spirits.⁴

The concept of honor and shame is the key to understanding the social and cultural aspects of the Mediterranean world. According to Moxnes, honor is basically the public recognition of one's social standing. Shame is simply social insensitivity and results from the lack of concern for one's honor. The two types of honor are ascribed honor and acquired honor. Ascribed honor is inherited from the family at birth, depending on one's gender and rank. Acquired honor is conferred on the basis of virtuous deeds. It is obtained through social advancement and public accomplishments.⁵ Social interaction, religious life, and group loyalties are affected by values of honor and shame. The identities of individuals depend on their belonging to and being accepted by their family. Their success depends on the favorable ties they have with the community.⁶

It is important to recognize that one's honor status affects the identity of a Mediterranean person in a society. One's honor is not limited to one's value in his or her own eyes, but ultimately depends on the recognition of and judgment from the people in the community.⁷

³Müller, "Summary of Honor and Shame," 1.

⁴Ibid., 2.

⁵Halvor Moxnes, "Honor and Shame," In *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation*, edited by Richard Rohrbaugh (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1996), 19-40.

⁶Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 30.

⁷Moxnes, 20.

This is in contrast to guilt, which is basically an emotion experienced by an individual internally. A shameful act by an individual will result in a loss of honor for the family and be viewed with disdain and even hostility from the community.⁸

Bruce J. Malina discusses the dynamics of how honor and shame work.⁹ In the Mediterranean world, all goods, including honor, are seen to exist in limited amounts. Individuals who want to improve their social position have to do it at the expense of others. One's claim to honor will be perceived as a threat to the honor of another; thus it needs to be challenged. Honor is attained through the social competition of challenge and response. The Gospels record a number of challenge-response dialogues mostly between Jesus on one side and Pharisees and scribes on the other. The three parables to be examined below are all responses of Jesus to the challenges of the Pharisees. The Pharisees, upon hearing the parables, recognized their defeat and loss of honor. Their disgrace caused an increase in honor for Jesus. This resulted in the increase of their hatred against him and their envy of him, which also explained their desire to have Jesus killed.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)

Luke 15:11-32 is commonly referred to as "The Parable of the Prodigal Son" or "The Parable of the Lost Son." However, some posit that "The Parable of the Father's Love" or "The Parable of the Waiting Father" is a better title.¹⁰ I prefer the title, "The Parable of the Gracious Father and His Two Lost Sons."¹¹ This is in line with the context and message of the parable as seen below.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is part of a chapter that includes the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin. Luke 15 begins with narration that says that the tax collectors and sinners were coming to hear Jesus. Also, the Pharisees and the scribes were murmuring that Jesus received sinners and ate with them. In Mediterranean culture, meals were considered an important social event that affirmed the role and status of a person in the community.¹² It was important to preserve one's honor by eating with people of similar rank and social status.

⁸Ibid., 21-22.

⁹Malina, *New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 95-100.

¹⁰Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 72.

¹¹So also Snodgrass: The Parable of the Compassionate Father and His Two Lost Sons in Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 132.

¹²Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 367.

Thus, the Pharisees and the scribes considered Jesus' dining with sinners as scandalous and dishonorable. It was in this context that Jesus delivered three related parables as a challenge to their complaints. Although the first two parables are equally important, because of space limitations I will skip these and discuss the third one.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son can be divided into two sections, the first about what happened to the younger son and the second about the older son and his anger toward his younger brother and toward his father for throwing a party for him. There are arguments for viewing these two sections as either one or two parables. I will view it as one in order to better see the whole picture of what Jesus intends to portray. The shame-honor theme is also depicted in the latter half of the parable which makes the message even more significant.

At the beginning of the parable, the younger son asks for his share of the property that is going to be his inheritance (15:12). In both ancient as well as present times, inheritances are transferred to heirs only upon death.¹³ In the original audience's worldview, this request would be quite shocking in that the son would be seen as desiring the father's death.¹⁴ He is also seen as reneging on his obligation to care for him in his old age which is tantamount to breaking one of the most important commandments—that of honoring one's father and mother.¹⁵

Moreover, the older son was expected to object to such requests and do his part in reconciling the brother to their father but he failed to do so.¹⁶ Likewise, the father was expected to refuse the request, become angry and discipline the younger son for his actions.¹⁷

Instead, he reacted in love by granting the request. Consistent with the nature of the shame-based society, the actions of the younger son affected his relationship not only with his father and older brother, but the whole village community as well. This is in line with the view that honor is valued by the whole community.

The younger son then takes all his belongings, including his inheritance, and goes to a far country (15:13). The far country implies a place outside Palestine and a place populated by Gentiles.¹⁸ He squandered all his property in "αἰσῶτω" living. Bauer translates the adverb αἰσῶτω' as wasteful and related to madness that knows no

¹³Hultgren, 73.

¹⁴Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, combined ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), 161.

¹⁵Hultgren, 73.

¹⁶Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, 169.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁸Hultgren, 75.

bounds.¹⁹ It is interesting to note that the older brother referred to the younger brother's wasteful living as spending his possessions on harlots (15:30), although the word ἀρσώτω' does not necessarily imply it.²⁰

The parable goes on to paint an even more shameful and degrading picture of the younger son. When he had spent everything, a famine occurred and he began to be in dire need. He resorted to a job of feeding pigs. He longed to eat the pig's feed but no one gave him anything (15:14-16). Some argue that he was not able to eat because a supervisor was standing over him.²¹ But a more probable reason is that the pig's pods were a wild species that was bitter and without nourishment.²² Thus, a person could not fill himself nor benefit from eating it. The 1st century Jewish audience surely regarded the association with unclean animals such as pigs as downright detestable. One scholar, Jeremias, posits that the younger son abandoned the Jewish custom of keeping the Sabbath and any regular practice of his religion.²³ The next verse (15:17a) says "he came to himself" which may just refer to his "coming to his senses" rather than repentance.²⁴ He realized that his father's hired servants had more than enough to eat while he suffered in hunger (15:17b).

There are discussions as to what constituted the nature of hired servants. The 1st century Jewish household typically had three kinds of servants: bondsmen, δούλοι' who were slaves that were part of the family; slaves, παιδε' who were subordinates of the bondsmen; and hired servants, μισθοί' who were usually day laborers.²⁵ There are differences of opinion regarding the status of hired servants. Some say that the hired servants, though free, were considered lower in class than the other two types of servants. Others say that they were held in high esteem and were not in the least inferior to their employer.²⁶ Still, if they were free, it seems that the younger son opted to request a less painful condition and a better face-saving plan. He could pay his father back with the income he earned and still maintain his pride and honor.²⁷

¹⁹Walter Bauer, "ἀρσώτω'" in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition, (BADG) (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 148.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, 172.

²²Ibid., 173.

²³Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), 129.

²⁴Hultgren, 76.

²⁵Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, 176.

²⁶Ibid., 176-77.

²⁷Ibid., 177.

With regard to his relationship with his older brother, his plan meant he did not have to rely on his brother nor did it necessitate any reconciliation with him. His strained relationship with the village people, however, would still have to be faced.²⁸

The younger son rehearsed his confession which included addressing his father and acknowledging his sin against heaven and his father (15:18). He also planned to say that he was no longer worthy to be called his son and that he should be treated as one of the hired servants (15:19). Knowing the 1st century worldview is helpful in determining what specific sin the son was referring to. Some may think he was referring to his profligate way of life in the far country. However, looking at the situation through the shame-based lens of 1st century Jewish culture would lead one to conclude that his greatest sin was his dishonoring of his father by asking for his share of the inheritance.²⁹

The father knew that the village would mock and possibly physically abuse his son upon his return.³⁰ So in his love and compassion, the father broke some rules to protect his son. It was considered undignified for an elderly man to run in public but the father did so. It brought dishonor to even expose one's legs, but the father ran not only to welcome his son, but to protect his son from hostile villagers.³¹ A few scholars, such as Snodgrass, disagree with this.³² The son must have been in awe to see his father's willingness to be disgraced in order to protect him. The father embraced and kissed the son to publicly show his acceptance of him.

As he had practiced, the son proceeded to say his lines but he did not continue with the last line asking to be treated as one of the hired servants. It could have been that he recognized his father's grace and love.³³ The father asked the servants to put the best robe on his son, a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet (15:22). This act signified that

²⁸Ibid., 178.

²⁹Hultgren, 77.

³⁰Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, 181.

³¹Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 372.

³²Snodgrass points out the mistake of Rohrbaugh and Bailey in misapplying cultural information. He emphasizes the danger of focusing too much on the cultural aspect and thus reading into the parable aspects that are not there. Ironically, throughout his discussions of the parables, he often alludes to cultural aspects of the 1st century in explaining his position, 132.

³³Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, 184.

the father accepted him as a son instead of a hired servant.³⁴ It also signified a removal of shame and a restoration of honor to the son.³⁵

Another act of the father that bestowed honor to the son was the killing of the fattened calf (15:23). A fattened calf was kept for a special occasion and would feed over a hundred guests.³⁶ Since the meat would spoil quickly, it is most probable that the villagers were invited. It would be taken as an insult to kill a calf and not invite the community. It would also be a waste of resources because the family could not eat it all and the rest would go to waste.³⁷ The feast would also serve to reconcile the younger son to the whole community.³⁸ With such honor bestowed on him, his pride could have kept him from accepting such favor. He could have preferred being free and independent from his father or considered himself unfit to accept his father's sonship. However, grace triumphed and he chose to accept pure grace.³⁹ In parallel to the first two parables in Luke 15, where the shepherd and the woman rejoiced at finding what was lost, the father in this parable also declared his joy that his son was lost and now was found (15:24).

The elder son is depicted as working in the field, which implies that he was industrious and loyal (15:25).⁴⁰ As he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. He found out from a young boy the reason for the celebration (15:26). He further found out that his brother had returned and was received and restored (15:27). He became angry and refused to enter the house (15:28). It was customary for the older son to welcome guests, offer compliments, and make sure that the feast went well.⁴¹ He was also expected to honor the guest, which meant, in this case, was his younger brother. He was to go in, embrace the brother and honor him.⁴² If he wanted to complain to his father regarding this favorable treatment, he should have waited until all the guests left. However, the elder brother chose to shame his father by getting furious while the guests were still around.⁴³ His anger may also be due to the shame he felt because of the father's gift of a fatted calf for the worthless brother, while he was not even given a goat to celebrate.

³⁴Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 372.

³⁵Hultgren, 75.

³⁶Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, 187.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 186.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 187.

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰Hultgren, 80.

⁴¹Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, 194.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 195.

⁴³*Ibid.*

People would have expected the father to react to such an act of public insult with anger, but he does not do so. He could have chosen to totally ignore the elder son during the feast, or punish him, or show displeasure, but instead, he left his guests to go outside to plead with him (15:28). He risked humiliation and shame by doing so.⁴⁴ The elder son replied insolently in many ways. He did not address his father as “father” and referred to his younger brother as “this son of yours.” In contrast, the father addressed him as “son” and referred to his younger brother as his “brother.” The word “son” used here is τέκνον, which is more endearing and less neutral than the other Greek word for “son,” υἱός.⁴⁵

The father was trying to restore the broken father-son relationship with these words.⁴⁶ The elder son referred to himself as a slave and demonstrated the spirit and attitude of a slave and not a son.⁴⁷ The father however referred to him as the heir to all that he owned. The son argued that he had never disobeyed the father’s commands despite just having insulted him by refusing to join the party.⁴⁸ He claimed that he never had a goat to feast on with his friends while the younger brother was given the fattened calf. There is a hint of envy in this statement. Scholars suggest that his attitude was one of false humility and sarcasm, but it is more likely that he was accusing his father of playing favorites.⁴⁹

The elder brother’s idea of joy was to have a goat to celebrate with his friends whereas the father, like the shepherd and the woman in the preceding two parables, considered finding what was lost to be the source of his joy. The elder brother attempted to insult the younger brother further by accusing him of devouring the father’s living with harlots (15:30). As mentioned earlier, the description of the younger brother’s loose and wasteful living made no mention of squandering his money on harlots (15:13).

Again, contrary to the expected reaction of one who had been greatly scorned and deeply humiliated, the father overlooked all the offenses and responded in grace and love by calling him “son” (15:31). This reminded the elder brother of his status as a son instead of a slave.⁵⁰ He reaffirmed the right of his son to the inheritance despite the return of the younger son (15:31). He pled with his son to rejoice at his brother’s return (15:32). In line with the shame-honor culture, the

⁴⁴Hultgren, 80.

⁴⁵Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 390.

⁴⁶Snodgrass, 140.

⁴⁷Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, 196.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 197.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 198.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 201.

father's speech is not to be taken as an apology or a defense for what he has done since a Mediterranean father never defended himself or apologized to a son.⁵¹ Instead, his speech is to be taken as an extension of the grace and compassion which he showed by leaving his guests during the feast to plead with the elder son.⁵² The parable ends without telling us how the older son responded.

Through the lens of shame and honor, we can appreciate more the depth of the drama being played out in this parable. The emotions felt and expressed by each character become more pronounced by recognizing the interplay of shame and honor through their actions and words. We know better how the original audience might have reacted upon hearing this parable. Jesus used this parable to reply to his critics regarding his fellowship with sinners. The Pharisees and the scribes might have seen themselves in the older son, in that they insulted Jesus and refused to extend forgiveness to sinners and include them in their circle much like the older son insulted his father and refused to extend forgiveness and acceptance to his brother. The Pharisees and the scribes who questioned Jesus sought to shame him; however, through the challenge-response dialogue that took place, Jesus successfully refuted their complaints. Thus, Jesus was honored while the Pharisees were disgraced.

In support of my contention that this is more a parable of two lost sons instead of one, the younger son is depicted as lost and is now found. Likewise, the older son is portrayed as lost but whether he is later found is unknown. Moreover, I included the gracious father in the title of this parable because he is actually the main character in the story. With regards to the key theological themes of this parable, the loving, compassionate and gracious characteristics of the father take precedence. He seems to be playing favorites, but he is fair and just. Likewise, God extends his love and grace to us even before we repent and even apart from repentance. The value and meaning of sonship is also shown in this parable. The celebration of joy by the community over one who responds to the grace of God through repentance is valued in this parable as well.

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1-8)

Jesus told this parable to the disciples (16:1); however, in 16:14, it says that the Pharisees heard all these things. The Parable of the Dishonest Manager is probably the strangest and most baffling of all the parables of Jesus. In my life, I haven't heard even one sermon on

⁵¹Ibid., 201.

⁵²Ibid.

this parable. The parable praises a dishonest person which causes us to wonder if he is a model that we should emulate. However, by looking at the parable through the shame and honor paradigm, we can better understand its main thrust.

Before we look at shame and honor in this passage, it is necessary to establish the limits of the parable in order to come up with a proper interpretation. There are discussions on which verse the parable actually ends. Arland J. Hultgren made a summary of the various suggestions.⁵³ If it ends in 16:7, the word κύριος in 16:8a would refer to Jesus instead of the master of the estate as the one who commended the dishonest manager. However, it is more likely that the master, rather than Jesus, would be the one to commend the manager. Moreover, there would be no conclusion as to how the master of the dishonest manager reacted if Jesus was the master or lord referred to. Verse 16:9 is already an application of the parable, so it is no longer part of the story. Thus, it is most probable and logical that the parable ends with 16:8a, while Jesus made an observation on the parable in 16:8b.

There are two main characters in the parable, the master and the manager. The master was most likely the owner of a land estate as opposed to a bank money lender while the manager was authorized to carry out the business of the estate.⁵⁴ Some issues arise regarding these two figures. Some suggest that these two characters had been conniving together to defraud the debtors by considerably padding the amounts due. This may be the reason why the master commended the dishonesty of the manager. However, this does not explain why the master had to fire him in the first place. As with the father of the two sons in the previous parable, the master in this parable must be of noble character. Just as the father of the two lost sons was depicted as loving and gracious, the master in this parable is likewise shown as compassionate and merciful.⁵⁵

Another issue concerns the possibility that the reduction of the debt is equivalent to the padded amount added by the manager at the beginning of the transaction. This is not possible because the master would know the contract amount when it was agreed upon in the beginning. The amount written on the contract would also be known by the public.⁵⁶

The parable starts out with the master calling on a manager who had charges brought against him that he was wasting his goods (16:1).

⁵³Hultgren, 147-48.

⁵⁴Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, 93-4.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 87.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 89.

The opening question, “What is this I hear about you?” has a Semitic word order that is idiomatic and forceful.⁵⁷ This kind of question is used in confrontation and usually does not expect an answer.⁵⁸ It is not as shameful as a direct confrontation. The manager does not reply. This silence may mean admission on his part and replying to the master would possibly aggravate the situation and cause more shame.

The master then asked him to turn in the account books and simultaneously fired him (16:2). At this point, he still kept quiet. The audience would expect him to declare his innocence, to protest and defend himself even if he’s guilty, but he didn’t.⁵⁹ Instead, he began to plan for his future. Another thing he may have realized is that the master did not scold him nor jail him. Neither did he demand that he pay back what he dishonestly gained.⁶⁰ Jesus’ audience must have noticed not only the justice executed by the master on his employee leading to his firing, but also the mercy and generosity shown by the master.⁶¹

The manager’s assessment of himself reveals his shame-based worldview. He admitted his weakness in manual labor and his shame in having to beg (16:3). He made a decision that would sustain his future with a considerable amount of honor. He called his master’s debtors to come in one at a time. He had to appear to be acting on his master’s behalf; otherwise, the debtors would not agree. He might have also made it appear that he was the one who convinced the master in the first place to reduce the debt to their advantage.⁶² He gained favor and honor in their eyes by reducing the amount due. He had to do this privately and quickly.

With these assumptions based on a Semitic cultural background, the reasons for this parable and its teachings will fall easily into place. By the time the master received the book of accounts, the village was already praising and honoring both the master and the manager. They were praising the master for his supposed generosity in reducing the debt and the manager for enabling this to occur. The master, upon knowing this, had a decision to make with at least two options.⁶³ If he opted to retract the reduced debt, the debtors would be angry and despise his stinginess and he would fall into dishonor.⁶⁴ If, however, he just kept silent, which he was more likely to do in this case, he would

⁵⁷Ibid., 96.

⁵⁸Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 335.

⁵⁹Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, 97.

⁶⁰Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 374.

⁶¹Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, 98.

⁶²Ibid., 99.

⁶³Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 375.

⁶⁴Hultgren, 152.

be highly honored as a generous man. He then commended the manager, not for being dishonest, but for being clever. Jesus then made a statement (16:8b) saying that the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than the people of the light.

A shame-based lens helps us understand the logic of how this parable plays out. Those who have a Western worldview, which is mainly guilt-based, may expect the master to adjudicate the guilt of the manager. However, the actions and reactions of the characters in the parable are in line with the shame-based culture of the 1st century. As with the previous parable, the key theological themes are the judgment and mercy of God.⁶⁵ God has to judge evil but also offers grace. The master is depicted as a just but gracious man. The manager recognizes this generosity and relies on this grace to secure his future. The manager is praised for his cleverness in knowing where his salvation lies and trusting on that grace to achieve his security.⁶⁶

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)

As with the other two parables discussed above, The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is found only in the Gospel of Luke. This parable has been misunderstood as advocating a reversal of roles in which if one is living a good life on earth, then they will live a bad life after death. Likewise, if one's condition is bad now, heaven awaits them.⁶⁷ This interpretation, however, is erroneous and goes against the teachings of Jesus and Scripture.

Jesus said that those who have not been faithful in handling worldly wealth should not expect anyone to trust them with true riches (16:11). He also said that those who had not been trustworthy with someone else's property should not expect anyone to give them property of their own (16:12). He further said that no servant can serve two masters; he either serves God or mammon (16:13). This teaching is then illustrated by Jesus in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The context of the parable relates to the stewardship of God-given resources (16:9-13). The overarching themes, however, are still the justice and grace of God. The interpretation of this parable is best seen through the shame-honor lens.

The parable starts with the description of the rich man who dressed himself in purple and fine linen everyday (16:19). Purple clothing signified extreme wealth and wearing it every day ensured that

⁶⁵Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, 107.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*

⁶⁷Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 379.

everyone knew about his wealth.⁶⁸ Feasting every day meant he did not observe the Sabbath and neither could his servants.⁶⁹ He indulged in self-honor and selfish pleasures without a thought for others.

Another character named Lazarus would lie down at the gate of the rich man. This is the only parable of Jesus in which a name is given to a character. Lazarus means “the one whom God helps.”⁷⁰ The verb ἐμβέβλητό which is the pluperfect of βάλλω implies that friends or family would have to carry him to the gate daily because he was too sick to walk.⁷¹

He desired to be fed with what fell off the rich man’s table (16:21). His body was full of sores and dogs came to lick the sores. This is a picture of extreme disgrace and shame: being sick, having to rely on friends to be carried, seeing the rich man in fine clothes and abundant provision, longing to be relieved from hunger, and feeling the utmost degradation of having dogs lick at his sores which may keep them from healing.

The succeeding events unfold through an interplay of honor and shame as well as a dramatic portrayal of honor reversal. Honor reversal refers to the process in which the one who is honored is disgraced, while the one who is shamed is eventually honored. Lazarus died and was carried into Abraham’s bosom, which signifies a place of honor (16:22). Although there is no internal evidence for this, some scholars suggest that the language used for “reclining in the bosom” signifies a feast that took place by reclining on a U-shaped couch called “triclinium” in a place of honor which is situated at Abraham’s right.⁷² If this is so, it follows then that Lazarus was the guest of honor in this feast. The rich man also died, was buried, and was brought to Hades where he was tormented. The emotional tension that ensues continues to build up.

The rich man looked up and saw Lazarus with Abraham. The original audience might have noticed that he knew Lazarus by name after all. It follows that he was also aware that Lazarus had been at his gate and had suffered from sickness and hunger. Those hearing the

⁶⁸Ibid., 382.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Snodgrass, 424-25.

⁷¹I. Howard Marshall, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), 635.; F. Hauck, “βάλλω” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in One Volume*, edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 92.

⁷²Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 387.

parable would have expected the rich man to apologize to Lazarus.⁷³ However, he made three requests for his own benefit instead.

First, he called on Abraham to have mercy on him (16:24). In his pride, he considered it degrading to speak to men of lower status such as Lazarus. Instead, he addressed Abraham and called him “Father Abraham.” The rich man was banking, as a Jew, on his relationship to his patriarch. In Mediterranean culture, family was a priority and family members were expected to honor and watch out for each other.⁷⁴ His cry of “have mercy on me” was a typical phrase used by beggars.⁷⁵ Not only did he avoid speaking to Lazarus directly, but he even asked Abraham to send Lazarus to ease his comfort. Lazarus remained silent throughout the exchange.

Such a demonstration of pride amid suffering seems quite incredible but that is what Jesus wanted the original audience to notice. Abraham addressed the rich man as τέκνον (my dear boy) which is similar to the address of the loving father to his elder son in The Parable of the Prodigal Son discussed above. Abraham still acknowledged him as part of the family despite his insult to his guest of honor, Lazarus, which was also an insult to Abraham himself.⁷⁶ Abraham reminded him of the good things and the comfort he had on earth. He also reminded him of the pitiful condition of Lazarus then and his comfort in heaven now. Abraham further reminded him that it is impossible to pass from where the rich man was to where Abraham was. Why did Abraham have to say this? As suggested by Bailey, it could have been that Lazarus, in his kindness and compassion, was willing to cross over.⁷⁷

The next request is even more incredulous. The rich man begged him to ask Lazarus to go warn his five brothers about Hades (16:27-28). Lazarus was not able to serve him with water in Hades, but how about sending him to warn his brothers?⁷⁸ Abraham replied that they had the law and the prophets (16:29). There was still no humbling and repentance on the rich man’s part. He was not used to having his requests denied, so he tried again. He refuted Abraham’s answer which defied Abraham’s honor status. He argued that if someone from the dead would warn them, they would repent. The logic behind his third request is very ironic. If someone, like himself, who was already suffering in hell did not repent, how much less would the ones who

⁷³Ibid., 389.

⁷⁴Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 378.

⁷⁵Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 388.

⁷⁶Ibid., 390.

⁷⁷Ibid., 392.

⁷⁸Ibid.

were still enjoying life, even if they should see and hear someone from the dead?⁷⁹

This parable is not meant to give a description of what heaven and hell look like, and neither is Hades a place where the good and the bad await judgment.⁸⁰ The description just provides necessary imagery while the main point of the parable is again the justice and mercy of God. The rich man is depicted as indifferent to the social conditions of his community. He prided himself on his wealth and luxury and overlooked the hardships of the poor. He exalted himself in honor but shamed the ones lower in class status. On the other hand, Lazarus, despite his suffering and humiliation, kept silent during the dialogue between Abraham and the rich man. He did not taunt, protest, or complain about the requests of the rich man. He acted in humility amid the subtle degradations of his person. Honor reversal occurs in this parable, where the one who was shamed on earth is now honored in heaven. God's justice condemns the rich man while His grace and love reward Lazarus.

Conclusion

The New Testament was written in the 1st century and thus must be read through its cultural perspective. Mediterranean society is and was basically shame-based, so it is appropriate to view the Scriptures, including the parables of Jesus, through the lens of the shame-honor worldview. I discussed three parables found in the Gospel of Luke: The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), The Parable of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1-8) and The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31).

By recognizing the interplay of shame and honor through the parables' plot and character, actions and words, we are able to grasp the underlying themes Jesus wants to convey. Although some claim that these three parables are linked together to depict the wasteful use of resources, the overarching themes that unite these parables are the themes of God's justice, grace and love. Understanding these parables through the shame-honor lens enabled us to fully grasp and appreciate the meaning and essence of the teachings of Jesus.

⁷⁹Ibid, 193.

⁸⁰Hultgren, 113.

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