

Park, Rohun. "Revisiting the Parable of the Prodigal Son for Decolonization: Luke's Reconfiguration of *Oikos* in 15:11-32." *Biblical Interpretation* 17 (2009): 507-520.

Rohun Park's postcolonial reading of the parable of the prodigal son comes from his experience as a resident alien studying the New Testament in the United States. Park argues that the driving force of the Roman Empire is *oikos* calling households of middle class to be loyal to Roman colonial authority. In the gospel of Luke, in the story of the rich ruler in particular, Jesus sets possessions and *oikos* side by side to choose, as disciples were once asked in their calling. Though readers of Luke's gospel fail to see the rich ruler joining the new *oikos* which is made possible through new kinship with Jesus rather than wealth, they later encounter the story of Zacchaeus who joins a new model of *oikos* though he is a tax collector, a colonial associate, by sharing his possessions with people outside the boundary of the *oikos* that the Empire imposes. Crossing the boundary of cultural norm of *oikos* also takes place in the parable of the prodigal son. Most fathers in the Greco-Roman world wielded enormous power (*partria potestas*) over his household in order to maintain the household, educate and discipline their children as it appears in comedy, mime, farce, etc. and as a result to sustain status quo. That is why the older son works and calls himself "like a slave" for his father. However, rather than using his power to punish his younger son, father reserves it and persuades his older son to understand him. That is blurring the boundary of *oikos*, its norm and power structure in Roman Empire, which Park thinks the first feature of the parable. Therefore, as he puts it, "Luke's narrator betrays a colonial construction of *oikos*." The second feature is that an honor and shame code is dissipated in this story. The younger son who brought shame on his father's *oikos* by wasting his father's possession and the older son by accusing his father, both are invited to the banquet rather than being punished by their father. Third, wealth is reciprocated. Unlike typical colonial *oikos* seeking its self-interest by exploiting subordinates, "he wastes riches for his younger son and puts himself in subjection to his older son's portion of the estate" (Luke 15:31). In short, through the parable of the prodigal son, Luke is presenting a new model of *oikos* "driven by real needs and real (comm)-unity under the mercy and grace of God, who levels all boundaries."

### **Reflection:**

In this article, Rohun Park presents a new way of reading the parable of the prodigal son. Unlike dominant reading of this parable focusing mainly on the love of father, he reads the parable as a means by which Jesus presents a new model of household, *Oikos*. Knowing that *oikos* had been misused to justify the oppression of the weak to sustain status quo, Park shows how the father gives up his right to punish his sons, breaks the code of honor and shame, and reciprocates his wealth with others by accepting his sons and opening a welcoming banquet for his lost but found son.

There are three applicable points worth from this article. First, in the Christian household authority is given not to maintain the status quo but to change the norm of society. As Park shows, the new *oikos* is possible when the father gives up his privilege such as punishing his sons and seeking his own interest. It means that the church has a calling to change the politics of society, the structure of economy, and the culture and philosophy of family. It would be possible, when authorities do not exercise their power to punish but encourage people to understand others, embrace the failures and mistakes of people, and share their possessions.

Second, the church is called to be a hybridized haven where “human-animal” and “son-slave” are accepted and receive new identity as sons and daughters of the heavenly Father. If Luke equates the father with God in the story of the Prodigal Son, it is quite obvious that the new *oikos* that he envisions is possible in the church where God is its head. In other words, the church has a calling to be the new *oikos* that this story presents. The church, especially the immigrant church, needs to know that there are many despised people like the younger son and at the same time that there are also many working hard in church to gain acknowledgment which they can barely attain in society like the older son. For those people, the church needs to remind them of the fact that the heavenly Father will accept them despite their failures and shame, and even open a banquet for them.

Third, the church is called to be a place where salvation of the soul is more highly regarded than self interest of the community unlike corporation. One of the problems of Korean-American churches is that they waste their resources in building church buildings. In many cases, the building project is driven by senior pastor’s ambition to have a bigger congregation and imposes a burden on the shoulders of the congregation. Membership, therefore, is often seen as resources, not as children of God who need to be taken care of. Though outside salvation of soul and commitment to God is preached, inside pastors seek their self interest. But, the *oikos* that Jesus tried to build through the story of the Prodigal Son is neither a visible church building nor a group seeking self-interest but a community seeking and embracing lost souls to save and to build the kingdom of God.

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