

STORIES THAT PACK A PUNCH

Study 1

A Sting in the Tale

Roy Clements entitled his book on the Parables, *A Sting in the Tale*. That's because the parables do pack a punch. To quote Clements:

Jesus is not merely seeking to tantalize or educate his hearers; he is wanting to challenge them at a fundamental level. On the surface, such stories seem innocuous; charming little narratives full of familiar images that easily capture your attention. In reality they're a kind of Stealth bomber, specially designed to evade our psychological defences, insinuating themselves inside our mind in spite of every barricade we may seek to erect, and then dropping a highly explosive charge targeted at the most vulnerable point in our spiritual complacency.

One feature that is often characteristic of these story parables is that they have a sting in the tail (tale); a punch-line that creeps up on you and then kicks you in the stomach when you're not expecting it.¹

This is particularly true of the parable we generally call "The Prodigal Son". Actually, this is one of three parables Jesus told in response to a complaint.

WHAT?

1. The Setting

Jesus was doing the unthinkable (15:1-2). No self-respecting religious teacher would associate with such people. To share a meal implied acceptance and even close friendship.

2. The Three Parables

¹ Roy Clements, *Sting in the Tale* (Leicester: IVP, 1995), 7, 8.

The Lost Sheep

- One of the a hundred (4).
- Its "lostness" invests it with special importance (4).
- Note the emphasis on joy at its recovery in contrast to the 'misery' of the Pharisees (5 - 7).

The Lost Coin

- One of ten.
- Again, its lostness invests it with special importance (8).
- Once again there is joy at its recovery.

The Lost Son

- One of two.
- The parable contains a number of elements that would have shocked the hearers. The son's behaviour in asking for his inheritance while his father was alive; the father's accession to that request; the depths to which the son sank - pigs of all things; the fact that the father ran to meet him.
- Note the added detail: a dumb sheep and a 'dead' coin were lost. This is a wilful human being. He lives it up, falls on hard times, ends up wanting to eat pigs' food! The joy experienced at the recovery of the sheep and the coin is exceeded.
- The parable could have ended right there. It is a wonderful picture of God's grace and forgiveness (note the contrast between the wayward son's realistic expectations and the father's gracious attitude). But there is an important sting in the tale - the resentful older brother.
- We could defend his actions. It is important to note that he was acting in line with convention; it was his father who was breaking with convention. But look at the miserable so-and-so! He doesn't

seem any more concerned about his father than his younger brother was. He whines and complains. He is a son but he has the mentality of a slave. He assumes the worst of his brother. Of course, his behaviour corresponds to that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. But all self-righteousness makes us prone to such an attitude. Judgmentalism has its roots in a failure to recognize *God's* grace to us. Later Paul spelled out this teaching (Eph 2:8-9), but it is implicit in so much of what Jesus taught. Indeed it is present in the Old Testament (Deut 6:10-12; 7:7-8).

SO WHAT?

We tend to think of the tax collectors as the "good guys" and the Pharisees as the "bad guys". That's not how a first century Jewish audience would have thought.

1. Who, in today's world, would be equivalent to the tax collectors with whom Jesus associated?
2. What does the parable tell us about *God*?
3. What was the prodigal son's biggest mistake?
4. What makes you think he was repentant?
5. What are the main points of the parable?

NOW WHAT?

1. Is there any situation that is "so far gone" that one cannot come to *God*?
2. What can you do to ensure that you don't become like the older brother?
3. What can we do as small groups to ensure that we don't become like the older brother?