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The Logic of Unconditional Love: A Structural and Theological Analysis of the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the social value of understanding unconditional love, forgiveness, and repentance as depicted in the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32 and the scientific value of bridging the knowledge gap regarding the logical analysis of its narrative structure. While previous studies have emphasized theological and moral aspects, a logical approach to examining the narrative, character relationships, and cultural symbolism has been limited. This research analyzes the narrative logic structure within the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32. It seeks to uncover the relationship between Jewish cultural symbolism and the theological message and to explain the implications of the father-younger son-older son dynamic for understanding the human-God relationship. The study focuses on the biblical text of Luke 15:11-32 within the cultural and historical context of first-century Judaism. A qualitative research approach employed narrative text analysis and literature study. Data analysis involves structural breakdown, semiotic analysis, and theoretical triangulation, referencing narrative theory and the concept of paradoxical logic. The study reveals that the parable's narrative structure is logically constructed to challenge conventional understandings of justice, love, and the divine-human relationship. It identifies key elements such as the disruption of initial equilibrium through the younger son's request for inheritance, the climax of his degradation, and the resolution in the father's welcoming response. The analysis also highlights the theological paradoxes of humility versus divine honor, justice versus forgiveness, and repentance versus grace.

Keywords: Logic of love; structural analysis; theological analysis; parable of the prodigal son; Luke 15:11-32.

INTRODUCTION

Jesus' parable in Luke 15:11-32 constitutes a theological narrative abundant with social, spiritual, and philosophical meanings. As one of the most famous parables, this story reflects the context of first-century Jewish culture and conveys a universal message of love, forgiveness, and repentance. Previous studies have emphasized the theological and moral aspects of this parable, such as Purwantara's work (2018), which associates the dynamics of the younger and older sons with the covenant relationship between humans and God. However, logical approaches to analyzing narrative structure, inter-character relationships, and cultural symbolism are still limited. This study aims to fill this gap by revealing how narrative logic and emotional conflict in this parable strengthen the theological message about the nature of God as a loving Father.

Although many studies have discussed this parable from a literary or theological perspective (Babtista, 2024; Ratu et al., 2021), structural logic analysis of the interactions of its characters is still rarely explored. This study uses a narrative theory framework to identify logical patterns in the storyline, such as 1) the Logic of conflict. The premature request for inheritance (Luke 15:12) is a violation of Jewish cultural norms (Deuteronomy 21:17); 2) The Logic of resolution. The father's welcoming of the younger son (Luke 15:20) contradicts cultural expectations; 3) The Logic of paradox. The older son's attitude (Luke 15:28-30) represents the tension between retributive justice and grace.

This study aims to analyze the narrative logic structure in the parable of Luke 15:11-32, then reveal the relationship between Jewish cultural symbolism and theological messages, and explain the implications of the father-youngest-eldest son dynamics for understanding the relationship between humans and God.

RESEARCH METHOD

It is qualitative research with a narrative text analysis approach and literature study. This study focuses on the text of Luke 15:11-32. Secondary literature on the Jewish cultural context, inheritance law, and theology of forgiveness (Manurung, 2023; Scheler, 1985). Data analysis was carried out by 1) Structural breakdown. Mapping the storyline into elements of conflict, climax, and resolution; 2) Semiotic analysis. Identifying key symbols (inheritance, ring, feast) based on Jewish cultural meaning; 3) Theory triangulation. Relating findings to narrative theory and paradoxical logic (justice vs. grace). This study is a text analysis that does not involve human subjects. All sources are cited according to academic standards.

NARRATIVE LOGIC STRUCTURE

Jesus' parable in Luke 15:11-32 conveys a theological message and is constructed through a logical narrative structure designed to challenge conventional understandings of justice, love, and divine-human relations. This study analyzes the narrative logic of the parable by referring to Todorov's narrative theory framework and the concept of theological paradox while integrating findings from related theological journals. The text of Luke 15:11-32 is divided into three structures: Initial Conflict. The premature request for inheritance (v. 12) violates cultural norms (Leviticus 11:7). Second, Climax. The youngest son's awareness of his working conditions as a swineherd (v. 17) is a symbol of humiliation in Jewish culture. Third, Resolution. The father runs to greet the son (v. 20), an unusual act for a Jewish patriarch.

The logical structure of the narrative in Luke 15:11-32: First, the Initial Equilibrium Stage. The narrative begins by depicting a traditional Jewish family where a father has two sons (Luke 15:11). In the context of first-century Jewish culture, this patriarchal family structure represents a stable social and religious order. According to Purwantara (2018), the father-son relationship in this parable reflects the dynamics of the covenant between God and His people, where obedience and respect are the main pillars. However, this stability is immediately disrupted by the radical request of the youngest son. Second, Disruption. The request of the youngest son to receive an inheritance before his father's death (Luke 15:12) is a double violation: 1) Cultural violation. Asking for a premature inheritance is considered an insult to the father's authority (Deuteronomy 21:17) and an implicit desire for his death; 2) Theological violation. This action symbolizes the human rejection of God's authority, as Manurung (2023) stated in his analysis of the symbolism of rebellion in this narrative. The narrative logic uses “irrational action” to expose the central conflict of relational separation between humans and God.

Third, Climax and awareness (Recognition). The devastation of the younger son after spending the inheritance (Luke 15:14-16) reaches its peak when he works as a swineherd—an unclean job in Jewish law (Leviticus 11:7). According to Batista (2024), this condition depicts not only social humiliation but also a “spiritual emptiness” that triggers self-awareness. The younger son's internal dialogue (“I will arise and go to my father”, Luke 15:18) shows a logical shift from rebellion to repentance (*μετάνοια*), a concept emphasized by Ratu et al. (2021) as the heart of the theology of repentance in the Gospel of Luke.

Fourth, Resolution (*Reparation*). The father's response of running to greet his son (Luke 15:20) is a theological turning point. In ancient Middle Eastern culture, this act violates the norm of honor, where a patriarch is not supposed to show physical humility. However, Jesus uses this paradox to convey the nature of God that transcends human logic: 1) Restoration of dignity. The giving of the robe, ring, and sandals (Luke 15:22) is not only a symbol of social reintegration but also of the restoration of sonship—a picture of unconditional grace (Manurung, 2023); 2) Community celebration. The welcoming feast (Luke 15:23-24) represents the heavenly joy of one person's conversion (Luke 15:7), a theme consistent with the earlier parables of the sheep and the lost coin.

Fifth, Secondary Conflict and New Equilibrium. The older son's reaction (Luke 15:25-30) introduces the second narrative layer. His refusal to join the party reflects: 1) Legalism vs. Grace. The older son argues based on “retributive justice” (“having served for many years”, v. 29), while the father emphasizes “restorative justice” (“my son was dead and is alive again”, v. 32); 2) The paradox of inclusivity. According to Scheler (1985), this dialogue exposes the tension between religious exclusivity (held by the Pharisees) and the inclusivity of the Kingdom of God brought by Jesus.

This parable uses at least three interrelated theological paradoxes: 1) The Paradox of Humility vs. Divine Honor. The father's running—an act that would have lowered his dignity in Jewish culture becomes the ultimate symbol of the glory of God willing to humble himself to save humanity (Philippians 2:6-8). Chandra (2021) notes that this act changes the concept of “honor” from something to be maintained to something to be sacrificed for love; 2) The Paradox of Justice vs. Forgiveness. While the older son demands justice based on performance (“never disobey your commandments,” Luke 15:29), the father offers relationship-based justice (“all that I have is yours,” verse 31). According to Purwantara (2018), this reformulates the Jewish concept of justice from “an eye for an eye” to “a heart for a heart”; 3) The Paradox of Repentance vs. Grace. Although the younger son composes a confession of sin (Luke 15:18-19), the father interrupts him before he finishes (verses 20-22), indicating that God's forgiveness precedes human

repentance. This finding aligns with Ratu et al. (2021) on the priority of grace in Luke’s theology.

The theological implications of the narrative logic structure are: First is the reinterpretation of sin as relational separation. The parable defines sin not simply as a violation of the law but as a “relational rebellion” against God. The departure of the younger son to the “far country” (Luke 15:13) symbolizes separation from the source of life, a concept emphasized in Scheler's study (2024) of spiritual geography in the Gospels. Second is the subversion of social hierarchy. By restoring the younger son—a man who has dishonored the family name—to a position of honor, Jesus challenges the Jewish social hierarchy that associates holiness with lineage or legal obedience. Manurung (2023) notes that this reflects Jesus's vision of the Kingdom of God that overturns worldly structures (Luke 1:52-53). Third, the theology of inclusivity. This parable ends the conflict between the elder son and the father openly (Luke 15:31-32), inviting the listeners to reflect on their position: whether as the “younger son” who needs to repent or the “older son” who needs to embrace grace. According to Chandra (2021), this cliffhanger ending is a rhetorical strategy to trigger spiritual transformation in the listeners.

KEY SYMBOLISM

The symbolism in Jesus' parables serves as a bridge between human narrative and divine truth. In Luke 15:11-32, every action, object, and dialogue is designed to convey a theological message through a structured narrative logic.

Analysis of Key Symbol

An in-depth analysis of key symbols referenced from theological literature and first-century Jewish cultural context follows.

Symbol	Cultural Meaning	Theological Meaning
Inheritance (verse 12)	Insult to the father	Rejection of Divine Authority
Ring (verse 22)	Restoration of the status of the child	Restoration of Relationship with God
Feast (verse 23)	The joy of the community	Celebration of Repentance in Heaven

Table 1. Symbolism and Cultural-Theological Meaning

1. Premature Inheritance Request (Luke 15:12)

The youngest son's request to receive an inheritance before the father's death is a major symbol of spiritual rebellion. In Jewish culture, inheritance is given only after the death of the parents (Deuteronomy 21:17), so this request is equivalent to wanting the father's death. According to Manurung (2023), this action symbolizes the human rejection of God's authority, where inheritance represents material wealth and a covenant relationship. Logically, this request creates a narrative conflict that violates social and religious norms. Jesus uses this symbol to describe sin not as a mere moral violation but as a severance of the relationship with the Source of Life. In Scheler's study (1985), premature inheritance also becomes a metaphor for abusing human free will to fight against the divine plan.

2. Distant Country and Extravagant Life (Luke 15:13)

The location of the “distant country” (χώραν μακρὰν) symbolizes spiritual separation from God. In the Jewish tradition, the “country” is often contrasted with the Promised

Land, so the younger son's journey reflects a deviation from his identity as the chosen people. The extravagant life (ἀσώτως) in the country refers not only to material waste but also to the destruction of identity, where the younger son loses his status as a son and becomes a slave (Luke 15:15) (Babtista, 2024). The squandering of wealth (οὐσίαν) logically follows the rejection of the father's authority. According to Purwantara (2018), wealth in this context symbolizes God's blessings that are misused for self-satisfaction, leading to moral degradation ("living with prostitutes", Luke 15:30).

3. Pigs and Humiliation (Luke 15:15-16)

The work of tending pigs was the height of humiliation in Jewish culture. Pigs were considered unclean (Leviticus 11:7), and working in a pig field symbolized total destruction—spiritual, social, and moral. The younger son's hunger to the point of wanting to eat pigs' food (κέραιον) signifies the absence of alternatives to repentance. Jesus chose this symbol to expose the paradox of sin, bringing humans to the lowest point, which is precisely the prerequisite for repentance. Ratu et al. (2021) note that this condition reflects the concept of a "contrite spirit" (Psalm 51:19) that is necessary for divine forgiveness (Babtista, 2024).

4. The Father Runs to Greet (Luke 15:20)

The father's running (δραμὼν) constitutes the most revolutionary symbol in this parable. In ancient Middle Eastern culture, a patriarch would not run because it was considered degrading. However, Jesus uses this paradoxical logic to illustrate God's humility to save humanity. According to Scheler (1985), the running action contains three theological meanings: 1) Divine initiative. God's love precedes human repentance; 2) The abolition of hierarchy. God puts aside self-respect to restore relationships; 3) Unconditional forgiveness. The cessation of punishment despite real guilt (Babtista, 2024).

5. Robe, Ring, and Sandals (Luke 15:22)

The best robe (στολὴν τὴν πρώτην) represents a symbol of the restoration of sonship. In Jewish culture, a luxurious robe is worn on important occasions, signifying reintegration into the family. Then, the Ring (δακτύλιον) symbolizes a sign of authority and trust. In ancient contexts, rings were used as official seals, indicating the restoration of the inheritance rights of the younger son. The Sandal (ὕποδήματα) is the differentiator between slaves (unsandaled) and free children. Manurung (2023) emphasizes that this triad of symbols indicates a holistic restoration—status, authority, and freedom—that is only possible through grace, not human effort.

6. The Welcoming Feast (Luke 15:23-24)

The feast with the fatted calf (μόσχον τὸν σιτευτόν) symbolizes the divine joy of repentance. In Jewish tradition, the fatted calf is sacrificed at a special feast (1 Kings 1:9), so this feast represents God's sacrifice of love to restore relationships. The narrative logic here suggests that the repentance of a sinner is worth more in heaven than the "99 righteous" (Luke 15:7). According to Chandra (2021), the feast also serves as a critique of the exclusive attitude of the firstborn (and the Pharisees) who refused to join in the inclusive celebration of the Kingdom of God (Babtista, 2024).

7. Response of the Older Son (Luke 15:25-30)

The older son's refusal of the feast symbolizes religious legalism. His argument—"having served for many years" (Luke 15:29)—reflects a transactional view of the relationship with God, where love must be "exercised" through obedience. This symbolism reveals two theological errors: 1) Obedience without love. The older son's service is mechanical, not

relational; 2) Exclusivity. The rejection of the father's love for his younger brother reflects the Pharisaic attitude of claiming a monopoly on truth. Purwantara (2018) notes that the father's response to the older son ("all that I have is yours," Luke 15:31) demonstrates God's undivided but expansive love, challenging the listener to abandon the "us vs. them" mentality.

8. Ring and Sandals: Symbols of Heavenly Citizenship

In the analysis of Ratu et al. (2021), the giving of the ring and sandals not only restores the status of the youngest child but also confirms a new identity as a citizen of the Kingdom of God. The ring (authority) and sandals (freedom) represent a restored human being free to serve and authorized to represent the Father in the world.

Theological Implications

The symbols in this parable function as a narrative logic system designed by Jesus to 1) Evoke emotions. The story of the younger son's destruction and the father's mercy provokes an affective response in the listener; 2) Challenge assumptions. The paradox of the running father disrupts the logic of Jewish retributive justice; 3) Invite transformation. The symbol of the feast becomes an invitation to join in the divine joy of repentance. According to Scheler (1985), the symbolism in this parable not only reflects the first-century context but is also transcultural, touching on universal issues such as forgiveness, acceptance, and inclusivity (Babtista, 2024).

RELATIONAL DYNAMICS

The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) presents a portrait of God's boundless love and the complex relational dynamics between its characters. The interactions of the younger and older sons with the father reflect the spectrum of human responses to divine grace and forgiveness.

Analysis of Relational Dynamics

The following in-depth analysis of these relational dynamics concerning relevant theological sources.

a. The Youngest Son: Radical Conversion (μετάνοια)

Three things that indicate radical repentance. First, Repentance is a turning point. The younger son represents radical repentance (μετάνοια) through a series of events that change his life. His fall to the lowest point—losing his property, working as a swineherd, and starving—becomes a catalyst for introspection and confessing sin (Luke 15:17-19). This awareness reflects the "change of heart" essential in the theology of repentance. Second, Confession of guilt (Luke 15:18-19). The younger son's internal dialogue—"I will arise and go to my father"—shows a sincere confession of sin. The phrase "I have sinned against heaven and against you" reflects the recognition that his sin is not only a moral violation but also a rebellion against God and his parents. Purwantara (2018) Third, the father's response is unconditional acceptance. The father's response to running to greet his son (Luke 15:20) is unusual and violates cultural norms. This symbolizes God's love that precedes human conversion. The giving of the robe, ring, and sandals (Luke 15:22) is not only a symbol of social reintegration but also the restoration of sonship, which is only possible through grace, not human effort. Manurung (2023) emphasizes that this is a "holistic restoration" that includes status, authority, and freedom.

The younger son teaches true repentance, which involves: 1) Awareness of sin. Acknowledging guilt and rebellion against God, and 2) expressing humility. Realizing

one's unworthiness before God; 3) A decision to return. Changing one's life direction and seeking reconciliation with God.

b. The Older Son: Legalism and the Rejection of Grace

The older son symbolizes legalism—the belief that salvation is attained through strict adherence to the law. His angry demeanor and dismissal of celebrations (Luke 15:28-30) illustrate a transactional outlook on his relationship with God. He felt entitled to love and appreciation for having “served so many years” without breaking the rules. The older son's rejection of grace mirrors the attitude of the Pharisees in Jesus's time. They contend that God's love is reserved for those who live righteously according to the laws of the Torah. The father's response—”All that is mine is yours” (Luke 15:31)—indicates that God's love is not confined to any group and surpasses human logic regarding justice.

Theological Implications

The older son teaches that legalism: 1) Hinders grace. Overly focused on rules and ignoring the relationship with God; 2) Create exclusivity. Feeling more righteous than others and refusing to accept sinners; 3) Take away joy. Losing the ability to celebrate God's love and forgiveness.

The father invited the older son to join the feast (Luke 15:32), indicating that God's grace is available to all. This message challenges listeners to consider their attitudes toward sinners and understand that repentance is worth celebrating. This invitation “opens the door” for the firstborns (and the listeners) to abandon legalism and embrace grace.

Aspect	The younger son	The older son
Motivation	Repentance, seeking forgiveness	Legalism, feeling entitled
Response to Love	Receiving grace with joy	Rejecting grace, envy, and anger
Relationship with Father	Being restored through confession	Tension, feeling unappreciated
Emphasized Values	Grace, forgiveness	Justice, obedience

Table 2. Relational Dynamics

The relational dynamics in this parable reveal two extreme responses to God’s love. Through his radical repentance, the younger son received grace and was restored. In contrast, with his legalism, the older son rejects grace and remains alienated. The main message of this parable is that God’s love is always available to anyone who sincerely wants to return to Him. It serves as a call for everyone to open their hearts to God’s forgiveness and grace and to remember that everyone has a second chance to find their way back to the Father’s house.

DISCUSSION

Research on Jesus' parables, especially about the father running to pick up his son, represents that the paradoxical aspect of this action was chosen to challenge the dominant legalistic norms in Jewish society at that time. The father's actions reflect God's love that goes beyond the retributive justice often applied in interpreting the law at that time (Kartika & Stevanus, 2023; Sandangan et al., 2024). In this context, the variation in understanding God's love in the Christian tradition becomes significant. Sandangan et

al. (2024), who address the inclusiveness of the Kingdom of God, support this view by adding that the narratives constructed have a deep structure to convey messages of love and acceptance that transcend legal boundaries.

Furthermore, the narrative that Jesus used serves as a tool to introduce a new model in understanding the concept of justice and love in religious teachings, in contrast to the narrow retributive understanding. This is relevant to the theological views expressed in various studies, where the emphasis on the relationship between God and humans is often illustrated through love beyond punishment (Kartika & Stevanus, 2023; Manurung, 2021). This study focuses on analyzing the text of Luke without comparing it with similar parables in the Synoptic Gospels, providing a focused approach that can still be applied to a broader context in interreligious dialogue and theological education (Kenanga et al., 2023).

Consequently, the narrative logic approach proposed in this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of Jesus' parables. This adds an academic dimension to theological studies and has practical implications in theological pedagogy and interfaith dialogue (Adon, 2022; Effendi, 2023; Pranoto, 2022). By prioritizing love as a bridge in various religious discussions, this study presents an educational model that can enrich society's religious and social experiences (Kristianto, 2023).

The analysis is limited to the text of Luke without comparing it with similar parables in the Synoptic Gospels. This study offers a new model for understanding Jesus' parables through a narrative logic approach, which can be applied in theological pedagogy and interreligious dialogue.

CONCLUSION

The parable of Luke 15:11-32 uses a logical narrative structure to convey a revolutionary message of God's unconditional love. This analysis enriches theological understanding and provides a methodological framework for systematically interpreting other parables. The logical narrative structure of Luke 15:11-32 is designed to expose theological paradoxes through a dynamic storyline. From the younger son's rebellion to the older son's resistance, each narrative element catalyzes, reconstructing an understanding of God's love that transcends human logic. This analysis enriches the text's interpretation and provides a methodological framework for interpreting other parables in the Christian tradition more holistically.

Through the analysis of key symbolism, it is evident that Jesus strategically uses elements of Jewish culture to construct a logical and emotional narrative. Each symbol—from the inheritance to the feast—functions as a “theological code” communicating God's nature that transcends human logic. This symbolism enriches theological understanding and challenges readers to reflect on their position, whether as the younger son who needs to repent or the older son who needs to embrace grace.

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