

Scripture Reading for Sunday March 27th, 2022

Isaiah 25:6-8 (NIV)

On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. ⁷ On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; ⁸ he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people’s disgrace from all the earth. The LORD has spoken.

Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32 (NIV)

¹⁵ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ Then Jesus told them this parable: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³ “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

Sermon: The Prodigal's Older Brother

This parable of the prodigal son,¹ along with the story the good Samaritan,² are among many people's favorites, and they're both unique to Luke's Gospel. Our familiarity with this parable tends to rob us of its shock-value and so it's good to be reminded of those surprises once again. The parable is one of several told within a context of a conversation between Jesus and his religious critics who are scandalized by whom he had chosen to associate. He is accused of socializing with those who the pharisees saw as "sinners,"³ including tax collectors who were generally known for their profiteering and dishonesty.⁴ And as we were all taught growing up, your character will be demonstrated by the company you keep. Jesus was therefore being judged for hanging out with the wrong kind of people! Jesus does not fear being tainted or negatively influenced by these so-called "sinners," rather he engages people where they are at and introduces them to the *transformative* nature of his kingdom message. In telling these parables, then, Jesus turns the discussion on its head.

In the first story, the shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep in the secure fold and searches for the lost sheep until he finds it.⁵ In the second, a woman loses one of her ten silver coins and hunts high and low throughout the house until she discovers it.⁶ In both cases, *the searcher*, who represents *God*, takes the *initiative* to seek what was lost. And in both cases the punchline speaks of *God's* joy when even *one* sinner repents.⁷ Now, the Pharisees would have no problem with Jesus calling "sinners" to repent; the offence was that Jesus was demonstrating God's grace by not requiring a change in behaviour *before* eating with them. One can therefore imagine Jesus today sitting in a pub, eating, and drinking with anyone present, to the annoyance of those who think that's not an appropriate place for him to be! Earlier in Luke, when Jesus was challenged in similar circumstances, he said "It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."⁸

¹ Luke 15:11-32. See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Parable-of-the-Man-with-Two-Sons.pdf> . "Prodigal" means wasteful or recklessly excessive.

² Luke 10:25-37.

³ What this word means here is debatable, but likely *doesn't* mean that these people were morally bankrupt or were persistent in bad deeds. Rather, they were unable to keep the high religious standards that Pharisees expected of them either because of the kind of work they did (e.g., a tanner), or because of their poverty, or because they didn't know the law well enough to properly keep it, or because they were deemed to be hopelessly irreligious.

⁴ (NET) The Roman system of taxation was frequently characterized by "tax farming" where an individual would bid to collect taxes for the Roman government throughout an entire district and then add a surcharge or commission (often exorbitant) which they kept for themselves as their profit. Since these "tax collectors" worked for Rome (even indirectly), they were viewed as traitors to their own people and were not well liked. In addition, the system offered many opportunities for dishonesty and greed, both of which were often associated with local tax collectors. (Luke 3:12 reveals that even such tax collectors were moved to repent by John the Baptist's call.)

⁵ Luke 15:3-7. See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Lost-and-Found.pdf> .

⁶ Luke 15:8-10.

⁷ Luke 15:7, 10.

⁸ Luke 5:30-31.

The third parable is much longer, as you know, and it has two parts in that the man has *two* sons. The first surprise in the story is the younger son's request for his share of the father's inheritance *before* he died! The second shock is that the father agreed. As is often pointed out, in doing this, the young man is declaring his father *dead*. He is effectively cutting himself off from his family. In theological terms, the younger son is a sinner, if by "sin" we think in terms of turning our backs on God and God's ways.

And so the independent young man goes off to see the world where, we are told, he squandered his wealth with a wild lifestyle.⁹ He doesn't save any money for a rainy day and so when hardship arises in the form of a famine, he experiences poverty and is apparently friendless. He ends up feeding pigs, unclean animals to Jews and that action symbolizes the extent of his lostness. Not only that, he envies the pigs for what they're eating and that implies the non-Jewish pig farmer is less than generous to the farmhands. It's at this moment that the humiliated young man comes to his senses. He remembers that his father is a kind and generous employer. If he goes home *not* as a son, but as a hired hand, life will at least be bearable. With that, he leaves behind the pigsty and heads toward his father's home rehearsing a speech of contrition.

The third surprise is as he approaches his father's home, but while he's still some way off, his father, who is moved by compassion, *runs* out to greet him. Jesus' audience would have been shocked at the undignified notion of a grown man running, let alone his hugging and kissing of a son who had disowned him. You see, the father has been watching and waiting for his wayward son, hoping that his son would decide to return home. The young man begins the speech he had rehearsed, but the father didn't let him finish. The father quickly and publicly restores sonship to him; the robe stands for honor, the ring, authority, and the sandals mean he wasn't a slave.¹⁰ And then the lavish celebrations begin.¹¹ The forgiving father says one of the key lines in the parable, "For this *son of mine* was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."¹² All is wonderful; the family is back together.

There's just one problem—there's *another* son, the compliant older son, and this son is *angry* with the father's actions and *refuses* to join in the party. That in itself wasn't a private act; other guests and servants would have regarded it as an insulting vote of no confidence in this father's decision. Nevertheless, the older brother felt justified, after all, he had been dutiful while the younger son took off. This isn't fair. It isn't right. There are rules and rules to be obeyed!¹³ The younger son reaped the reward of his licentious behavior, and the old man shouldn't have bailed him out. The father in the story, however, isn't constrained by those conventions. He's more concerned about reconciling and reuniting the family. For the second time in the story, the father leaves the house to meet a wayward son, in this case to plead with him. The eldest son goes on an indignant and disrespectful rant and

⁹ Luke 15:13.

¹⁰ Luke 15:22.

¹¹ Meat was not part of the daily diet and was normally reserved for special festivals. This was an occasion to celebrate!

¹² Luke 15:24.

¹³ The old brother sees his father as behaving inappropriately, even immorally.

speaks of “this son of *yours*,” rather than “*my* brother.”¹⁴ The father replies, “My *son*, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we *had* to celebrate and be glad, because *this brother of yours* was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”¹⁵

As with many parables, the story ends and there remains lots of unanswered questions. What happens next? Does the reluctant older son eventually accept his younger brother?¹⁶ We obviously don’t know. But the father’s patience, forgiveness, generosity, and joy are important - and shocking - features of the story. It’s all too common to perceive God a mean-spirited or as distant and uncaring. This story emphasizes the loving kindness and grace of God toward *two* ungrateful children. He genuinely delights and welcomes *all* who seek him, and he gives us far more than we deserve. Sometimes, in our darkest moments, we forget that this is what God is like. I will come back to that in a moment.

Let’s zoom back to the context and reflect further. Remember, the pharisees and other religious leaders were initially grumbling over the company Jesus kept, represented by the younger brother in the parable, so how would they have reacted to Jesus’ story? There is little doubt they would have been infuriated for two good reasons. First, they would have recognized the implication that they are behaving like the pouting, self-righteous older brother. They were proud of their dutiful moral record yet were, in their own way, just as alienated from God, or the father-figure in the parable, as was the younger son. They also wanted God’s blessing, represented by the father’s wealth¹⁷ in the story, but not God himself.¹⁸ Passive aggression is still rebellion.

Second, the religious leaders would have also been annoyed with Jesus’ portrayal of God, the father-figure. Their judgmental and ungracious attitude is the opposite of that of the father. They wanted rules not relationship. They didn’t understand the *reconciling spirit and intent* of the law. Moreover, they refused to recognize that God was at work in Jesus the Messiah, who was practically demonstrating God’s love by associating with the very people they rejected. This brilliant story is open-ended, and everyone draws the obvious conclusion concerning the joyless older brother. In the story, the resentful older brother excluded himself from the party; Jesus implies that the pharisees are equally welcome to participate in the kingdom of God, but if they don’t repent and change their ways then they will have *excluded themselves* for no good reason. A self-righteousness person rejects grace because they don’t think they need saving.¹⁹

¹⁴ Luke 15:30.

¹⁵ Luke 15:31-32. The father (God) doesn’t want to disown either son; he respects their freedom.

¹⁶ There is, perhaps, a suggestive theme of Jewish Christians accepting Gentile Christians; Luke addresses this issue in Acts.

¹⁷ Or “blessing” (inheritance).

¹⁸ To be fair, *both* sons were self-centered and in it for themselves rather than engaging in a loving relationship with their generous father. It’s just that the younger son repented.

¹⁹ Are we offended by this parable? Do we feel God owes us because we have been good, decent people all these years? This is merit-based religion not a relationship, and it quickly becomes frustrating and burdensome. (We want grace for ourselves and justice for others!)

What about the tax collectors and the so-called “sinners”? In sharing holy fellowship with them, Jesus was *not* minimizing the seriousness of their sin, as his contemporaries and some modern critics have said. The language used is that of being “lost,” even “dead.” That means the father is *not* a permissive parent that says, “anything goes.”²⁰ What the story illustrates, however, is that God’s revolutionary remedy for lostness has two aspects. First, the young man must come to his senses and return to his father; this involves a *choice*.²¹ Second, the father has been actively *looking* for the son and runs to meet him and overwhelms him with generous love and undeserved forgiveness. This is how Jesus understood his ministry, as God’s Son who opens his arms to embrace the lost in acceptance.

Here’s today’s key question: When we imagine God, do we see him as *primarily* as an authoritative rule-keeper who we must please or one who prioritizes forgiveness and friendship over rules? The answer to that question is important because our view of God also shapes *us*. That claim might surprise you, but I suggest it’s profoundly true if you think carefully about it. We are subconsciously *formed* by our predominant mental image of God, either *authoritative* or *nurturing*, and those two have very different core values.²² And how we relate with our particular view of God influences our own relationships, our marriage and parenting-style, our ethics and decision making, and even our political choices and mental health.²³ Our being predominantly authoritative or nurturing also influences our theological views on church leadership, the meaning of the cross, who’s welcome at Holy Communion, etc.²⁴ If we think that God is a disciplinarian who’s “tough in crime,” then someone must pay for sin. Alternatively, if we see God as fundamentally loving, then God sees us as lost and who need to be found and restored. Because rule-keeping older-brother types are so focused on *their* understanding of authority and justice, they just don’t “get” grace. As I mentioned last week,²⁵ they think people get what they deserve and, in their minds, justice is more important than compassion. Moreover, they are so convinced they’re right that, like the older brother, they are not even prepared to *engage* with the nurturing father. This shocking parable therefore shines a spotlight on our attitudes and relationships too. Our behavior towards others - and ourselves - may well be reflecting our view of God.²⁶

I have a further observation. The message of Jesus cannot be categorized in binary terms like conservative or liberal, nor is it something halfway between those opposites. The gospel states

²⁰ See also John Sanders’ *Embracing Prodigals: Overcoming Authoritative Religion by Embodying Jesus’ Nurturing Grace* (Cascade, 2020). This book’s analysis and conclusions help to explain the present social polarization in US society.

²¹ Or freewill – clearly, he is not “totally depraved” (Calvinistic language).

²² Sanders (see [20]) points out that these two contrasting views of God also shape how we see and read the Bible itself. “Bible-believing” Christians favor the authoritative view of God - and hence the (‘inerrant’) Bible - because it ties in with their quest for simplicity (clear boundaries, no nuance) and certainty (no debate/ambiguities). Biblical cases can be made for *both* authoritative and nurturant views of God, so other factors on *how* we read and interpret scripture need to be considered too. Our *dominant* image of God is important here – even if we don’t claim to believe in God.

²³ Authoritatives favor personal responsibility over interdependence and fair systems, nurturants value both because they recognize the playing-field isn’t level for everybody.

²⁴ Including people of other faiths or none, and hell.

²⁵ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Where-is-God-in-Lifes-Tragedies.pdf> .

²⁶ Or vice versa, given the danger of “making ‘God’ in our own image.”

everyone is a sinner, everyone is loved, and everyone is called to recognize this and change. Older-brother types divide the world into two: good people - like them - are “in” and bad people, who are the *real* problem in the world, are “out.” And the younger brothers, and even if they don’t believe in God, do the same thing, saying: open-minded, tolerant people are “in” and the bigoted, narrow-minded people, who are the *real* problem in the world, are “out.” Jesus responds: the *humble* are “in” and the *proud* are “out.”²⁷ God welcomes *everyone*, but some are too proud to kneel at the foot of the cross.

In summary, recall that in the first two parables, the shepherd and the woman take the initiative and do the searching until what is lost is found. In the last parable, however, the father *doesn’t* go and search for the younger son. We therefore need to be careful in how we interpret such short stories because they certainly make a point,²⁸ but they don’t represent a comprehensive theology. On the one hand, there is an emphasis on God taking the initiative and the sheep and the coin are passive beneficiaries. On the other hand, the two brother have freewill and know the character of the father; the question is will they come to their senses and recognize he has their best interests at heart? Taken together, there is room for *both* divine initiative and human freewill; *both are necessary*. God acts and we respond. God is *gracious* if we repent and change our ways and return to a relationship with our loving God. What unites all three stories is God’s joy when even *one* person repents. The story also tells us *not* to think of ourselves as so unworthy that we are unforgiveable, or as so righteous that we don’t need forgiveness. What is scandalous is God’s amazing grace! Let’s come to *our* senses and return to the waiting father in this season of Lent and join in the party. Amen. Let us pray.

²⁷ Luke 18:14.

²⁸ And not necessarily just *one* point.