

Because Biblical Context Matters

Those PRODIGAL Sons

Two Lost Sons and Their Father's Heart



Restoration Insights for Individuals and Groups

Doug Greenwold

Author of Making Disciples Jesus' Way



A Digging Deeper Faith Study

The authors of the Gospels have given us the parables of Jesus in first-century settings.
To strip away those settings is to substitute our own.

—**Kenneth Bailey**

The Gospel writers assumed their readers lived when, where and how they do. They have no
need to explain what everyone knows. They just thought you knew.

—**Randall Smith**

We have forgotten that we read the Bible as foreigners, as visitors who
have traveled not only to a new geography, but to a new century.
We are literary tourists who are deeply in need of a guide.

—**Gary Burge**

The Bible is an Eastern book. We see it through the colored glasses of Western culture. Much
is lost. We miss the subtleties of humor and many of the underlying assumptions. We do not
understand the ingrained attitudes that illuminate a story or illustration. Christ spoke to a
Middle Eastern peasant people. Even most of the educated would have had their roots in that
peasantry. What lies between the lines, what is felt and not spoken, is of deepest significance.

—**Kenneth Bailey**

Village life was so deeply ingrained and so clearly understood at every level of that society
that the customs reflected in biblical narratives did not usually have to be explained with
the narrative. Widely known attitudes did not need to be articulated. Longstanding
social customs required no explanation. Nevertheless, these unspoken but culturally
understood ideas gave color and meaning to Jesus' stories.

—**John MacArthur**

Any interpretation (of the parables) that does not breathe the air of the first century
cannot be correct. That requires listening in a context not our own and presumes
some familiarity with that context.

—**Klyne R. Snodgrass**

The NT (New Testament), after all, does not come in the form of timeless aphorisms; every
text was written in a given first century time/space framework. Indeed the NT authors felt no
need to explain what were for them and their readers common cultural assumptions.

—**Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis, Revised Edition (added)***

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Author of

Zechariah and Elizabeth: Persistent Faith in a Faithful God

The Rest of the Story: A Closer Look at Familiar Passages

Making Disciples Jesus' Way: Wisdom We have Missed

Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Their Stories

Becoming a Judean Shepherd

That Good Samaritan

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A Digging Deeper Faith Study

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An Invitation

A Digging Deeper Faith Study

It is known as the story of “The Prodigal Son;” yet Jesus never used that term. Who came up with that title, and why? I suspect no one knows. But one thing does seem to be self-evident. It had to have been a Westerner who came up with that title. No one conversant with first-century Middle Eastern village culture would ever have characterized this parable in that way. This story is about a father and two sons; and as it contextually unfolds, we begin to see that the narrative is really a story about a father’s heart towards his two lost sons. Hence the more expansive title of this digging deeper into Jesus’ parable.

Depending on your Bible translation, the story Jesus unfolds in Luke 15:11-32 is only about 500 words long. It can be read in a matter of minutes, yet pondered for a lifetime. It tells a remarkable story that has made a lasting impression on our language. When someone comments that a person is “the family prodigal,” they are most likely drawing upon this story as the basis for their use of that word. Another cultural idiom “hidden” in this story but readily recognized by a Middle Easterner could be coined the “elder-brother syndrome.” But that gets ahead of our story.

Context matters in everything we do. Always has and always will. We know that to be true in our professions, in our families and in our relationships. Yet despite knowing this universal truth, we still seem to have this amazing ability to disconnect ourselves from that reality when we

enter the Scriptures. The words in the Bible were chosen because of their precise meaning and that meaning is drawn from the passage’s context. Thus, if we are to more fully connect with the original meaning of a passage today, we need to know what its verbs, phrases, idioms, events, names and places meant to those who first heard them.

While contextual restoring a biblical passage is exciting and comes with its *Aha* moments, that is not the reason why context is crucial in studying the Scriptures. The real reason is that it gets us closer to the Holy Spirit’s original meaning. The closer we get to that intended meaning, the closer we get to the epicenter of the Holy Spirit’s intended transformation. That’s why context matters.

As we all know, new information and insights, no matter how intriguing, are insufficient for meaningful change to occur. Those insights need to be pondered and processed if they are ever going to penetrate us, let alone marinate our hearts and minds. It is in the midst of that meditative process that the Holy Spirit teaches us, touches us, and transforms us, both individually and corporately.

I invite you to revisit the greatest short story ever told as it is put back into its original context. It is my prayer that God’s Spirit will touch you in a transforming way as you rediscover how much there is still to absorb from this “familiar” story.

Doug Greenwold
Columbia, Maryland
January 2014

1

Getting Ready

The Bible is an Eastern book. We see it through the colored glasses of Western culture. Much is lost. We miss the subtleties of humor and many of the underlying assumptions. We do not understand the ingrained attitudes that illuminate a story or illustration. Christ spoke to a Middle Eastern peasant people.

Even most of the educated would have had their roots in that peasantry. What lies between the lines, what is felt and not spoken, is of deepest significance.

– Kenneth Bailey¹

Why Another Revisiting?

A revisiting of this challenging parable of Jesus has been the subject of some remarkable work in recent years. Examples include Tim Keller's book *The Prodigal God: Rediscovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*² (2009) as well as John MacArthur's book *A Tale of Two Sons*³ (2008). Fifteen years before that, there was Henri Nouwen's rediscovery of this parable in his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*.⁴ So with these excellent works available, you may wonder why should we invest time trying to discover more Kingdom jewels where others have already effectively mined. At least two reasons come to mind.



First, can we ever get our arms entirely around Jesus' teachings? Can we ever say we have plumbed the depths of a passage and therefore there is nothing more to be learned from it? As has been frequently observed, God's Word is so simple a child can understand it and so profound a theologian can't fully grasp it. Periodically I revisit the three verses in Luke 5 where Jesus touches a leper.⁵ A few weeks ago, I returned again and found yet another new insight in that passage that I had not previously seen. And I strongly suspect that is not the last time such discovery will happen! If new insights can be continually gleaned from just three verses, imagine what there is still left to discover in the twenty-two verses that comprise Jesus' longest parable.

Don't Be in a Hurry

Because there are depths of understanding in Jesus' teaching, we should never be in a hurry to leave a passage. The worst kind of reader to be is a

hit-and-run driver when it comes to engaging the Scriptures. Not only does it take time to discover all of the spiritual realities resident in (deep) passages, but time is also needed for that Truth to seep into the interior of our lives where it can marinate our soul. In our microwave manner of living fast-paced, often frenetic lives, we can easily end up spending (just) two minutes on power ten scratching the surface of one of Jesus' teaching masterpieces when a slow bake is required. But there is an even more compelling reason to dig deeper into this TPS parable.

A Balanced and Integrated Perspective

If you ask those proficient in digging deeply into the depths of Scripture: How do you best discern what a passage is all about, you get a variety of answers. Listening to those responses suggest that a good paradigm for approaching God's Word is a "recipe" with at least the following (perspective) ingredients:

- **Prompting and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.** Probing the depths of God's Word begins and ends by inviting the Holy Spirit into the process. God's Spirit inspired each and every word in the Scriptures. He perfectly knows the original, intended meaning of every passage. And He is not trying to obscure that meaning from us, but longs to communicate it robustly to God's people.
- **An integrated contextual perspective.** What does the passage say in its original setting beyond the original Greek or Hebrew word meanings? We need someone to guide us out of our typical Western, 21st-century, urban, industrialized, post-modern way of thinking and into the 1st-century, Middle Eastern, village, agrarian world of the Bible. Jesus' parables are pearls of heavenly wisdom encased in a culture that is alien to us. That requires "diggers" with the gift of knowl-

edge who are not only conversant in, but also able to weave back together in an integrated manner the historical, cultural, geographical and literary context of a passage as if they were the Middle Eastern peasants who first heard those words.

Each of these four major aspects of context (historical, cultural, geographic and literary) have multiple sub-categories. For example, to be conversant in the cultural context of a passage requires a familiarity with the nature of first-century Middle Eastern village customs, such as issues of honor and shame, community first, obligations of the first born, mandatory hospitality, social reciprocity, significance of the land.⁶ Granted, no one person can be totally knowledgeable in all the areas of context. That's why we need to be able to access proven (re)sources who are familiar with the "Land" and who specialize in each of these contextual areas. Long ago I learned that whatever contextual question I might have concerning a passage, someone else had that same question long before I did (*nothing new under the sun* said the writer of Ecclesiastes). I just have to find out who they are, and discover what they have already learned.

- **A theological perspective.** Another ingredient is someone who can help us take what the passage says in its original contextual setting and aid us in what it means. Thus, it is necessary to enlist someone to help us accurately discern the biblical truth resident in the narrative to prevent us from projecting onto the text what we would like that truth to mean or what the Western perspective on that text has "traditionally" been.
- **A pastoral perspective.** This requires someone with the (complimentary) gift of wisdom who can lend a hand to help us see the implications and applications of that biblical truth in the shades-of-gray reality of our lives today.

- **A story teller's perspective.** Someone with the gift of teaching who is also skilled in retelling the biblical story (more on that later) with all of the exegesis, theological implications, and insights and implications intact to help us to 1) personally identify with the characters and their issues, 2) become engrossed by the story (it ought to be a “transgression” to take a biblical narrative brimming with drama, suspense, intrigue, surprise and human emotion, and retell it is such a way that it becomes a one-dimensional, ho-hum story!), and 3) easily remember the story so we can pass it along to others.

If this is a proven approach for “digging deeper” into God’s Word, then there remains more new ground to break with regard to this parable of “Two Lost Sons and Their Father’s Heart.” There are still more contextual observations to be made, still more theological insights to be gleaned, and still more pastoral insights to be shared.

With this backdrop, we each need to see ourselves as an Indiana Jones of the Scriptures. We need to be enthusiastic explorers filled with a sense of excitement and expectation of finding more pearls and diamonds of God’s Truth lying just below the surface of our Western understanding. That will certainly be true with this remarkable (short) story Jesus gives in Luke 15.

Thank You Kenneth Bailey

Dr. Kenneth Bailey has made an enormous contribution in helping us further expand our contextual understanding of Jesus’ parables. While a seminary professor in Beirut, Lebanon, Bailey devoted many of his vacations and sabbaticals to spending time with Middle Eastern Bedouin nomads and Coptic Egyptian villagers whom he felt had been untouched by centuries of

modernity. Taking his Arabic Bible with him, Bailey would read Luke’s parables to these remote peoples and then listen to their often-stunning reactions. From those experiences, Bailey was able to piece together much of the original Middle Eastern village cultural understandings that were most likely part of the implicit backdrop of Jesus’ parables. In so doing, Bailey opened up a new window for seeing and understanding the parables of Jesus more expansively (and often times, more accurately).

I began to discover how much village culture matters in interpreting Gospel passages during my first visit to Israel in 1988. As part of that trip, I learned about Bailey’s seminal work on TPS in *The Cross and the Prodigal*.⁷ When that book was first published in 1973, it transformed our traditional black and white “home movie” view of TPS into a full-color IMAX perspective. In so doing, Bailey showed us the (often) one-dimensional nature of our Western way of approaching Jesus’ parables. Thanks to Bailey, it soon became evident that we were only seeing the tip of the iceberg of this profound parable since much of its wisdom and challenge were to be found below the waterline of our Western way of thinking. Much of the cultural contextual setting we will be using to dig into Luke 15 will come from Bailey’s landmark work.

Caution and Critics

Like any one who does groundbreaking work to further open up the Scriptures, Bailey has/had his critics. When a paradigm gets changed, tradition always dies hard for some, so skeptics remain. That just seems to come with the territory. Thus to be fair to the reader, it should be pointed out that there are those who argue that just because Bailey sees a certain cultural reality today from a

Middle Eastern village perspective, it does not necessarily mean that aspect of village life was operative during the First Century.

While this is a reasonable thesis to advance, it is also true that the majority of the manner of Middle Eastern village life today remains essentially unchanged from the customs of first-century village life, e.g. “keeping the customs” is always the first priority for a Middle Eastern villager. Thus, how does one discern what cultural aspects do or don’t belong in a first-century Gospel setting; and therefore, what’s appropriate (and what’s not) for inclusion in the process of contextually restoring a parable? A good answer to that question lies in the very nature of integrated context.

One of the beauties I’ve discovered in trying to contextually restore Gospel passages is that the very process of approaching God’s Word this way tends to serve as a helpful safety net when it comes to biblical interpretation. The very process of weaving all the contextual pieces back together makes discerning and evaluating each individual piece of context (for its appropriateness) easier. Said another way, when all of the contextual pieces of the historical, cultural, geographical and literary context of a passage are reassembled, if they are all appropriate, they will fit together cohesively like pieces of a puzzle to reconstruct an integrated picture. Thus, if one of the elements of context doesn’t fit (belong), it often becomes apparent because that particular contextual element disturbs the overall unity of the story. This is yet another reason why approaching a passage from an integrated contextual perspective is so helpful.

Remember when our mothers used to caution us as teenagers, “There is safety in

numbers?” The same holds true when it comes to contextually restoring a passage. There is interpretive safety by the very nature of having all the various pieces of context coming together in a harmonic way to recreate the whole. It’s like an orchestra playing a great symphony. All the various instruments are different in how they create their notes, but they all contribute to the beauty of the overall sound in complimentary ways. It is that harmonic approach that we will be drawing upon as we progressively dig deeper into the cultural context of this remarkable story of “Two Lost Sons and Their Father’s Heart.” Is taking an integrated contextual approach to a passage an infallible methodology? No. But it certainly is useful as a compass helping us stay pointed in the right direction.

A Personal Favorite

Since Bailey’s book *The Cross and the Prodigal* was my first introduction to TPS in context in the 1980’s, and was likewise my first significant exposure to the importance of cultural context in understanding Jesus’ parables, this Luke 15 narrative has long been one of my favorites. Later in the 1990’s, I started using contextual material on TPS from Bailey (and others) in men’s retreat settings. There I discovered how powerful this parable can be when the Holy Spirit anoints it. For me this parable continues to be “Exhibit A” for the proposition that context always matters when engaging the Scriptures in a transformational way.

Getting Ready

As we get ready to start digging more deeply into this “familiar” story, I invite you to read and reread Luke 15:11-32 in as many translations as you can. Then after pondering those twenty-two verses for a while, ask yourself—

- Are you typically a water skier skimming the surface of the Scriptures or a scuba diver who can't wait to get below the surface? Which do you prefer? And why?
- Do you agree or disagree that we should never ask what a Bible passage means to us today until we know what it meant to those who first heard it? What are some of the implications of your answer?
- Which of the three characters in this story have you most identified with (over time), and why?
 - In your youth? In your middle years (for those of you who have been there)
 - In your later years (for those of you who are now there)
- As you currently understand this story, how would you describe each son's "view" of his father?
- As you continue to reread and ponder this story,
 - What jumps out at you? What surprises you?
 - What perplexes you? What comforts you? What challenges you?
 - Can you put yourself in the story? When and where?

Sources and Notes

1 Kenneth Bailey, *The Cross and the Prodigal* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1973), pp. 9 & 10.

2 Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Rediscovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Dutton, 2008).

3 John MacArthur, *A Tale of Two Sons* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008).

4 Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

5 Doug Greenwold, *Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Their Stories*, Chapter 5, “He Touched Me” (Columbia, MD: Bible-in-Context Ministries, 2008), pp. 43-50.

6 For more on these first-century cultural themes, see Doug Greenwold’s 2009 Reflection Series on “Two Very Different Worlds: Western Evangelicalism and the Gospels,” Part I-V (Gaithersburg, MD: Preserving Bible Times, 2009).

2

Jesus Sets the Teaching Stage

The NT (New Testament), after all, does not come in the form of timeless aphorisms; every text was written in a given first century time/space framework. Indeed, the NT authors felt no need to explain what for them and their readers were common cultural assumptions

—Gordon Fee¹

It's A Scroll

Luke's Gospel was originally written on a scroll. Luke assumed his readers would always start at the beginning of his narrative and read through to the end. Thus, in recording what we now know as Luke 15, Luke's readers would have been well versed in what was written in the preceding 14 "chapters." However, since the Gospel is often read in a random fashion, a brief review will be helpful to set Luke's stage for digging into this parable.



Jesus' Nazareth "Rescue Manifesto"

First of all, we need to remember what Jesus said He was going to do. Luke 4 says that when Jesus returned to Nazareth one weekend, the head of the local synagogue (a Pharisee) honored Him by asking Jesus to read from one of the prophetic scrolls. As indicated below in what some have called His "Rescue Manifesto,"² Jesus began by restating the first two verses of Isaiah 61 in a slightly different way from what the audience had memorized in their youth.

- 61:1a *The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,*
- 61:1b *because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.*
- 61:1c **omitted** *(to bind up the brokenhearted)*
- 61:1d *He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight for the blind,*
- 58:6c *to set free those who are oppressed, (imported)*
- 61:2a *to proclaim the favorable year of our Lord.*
- 61:2b **omitted** *(proclaim the day of vengeance of our God)*

Words Have Meaning

To understand what Jesus intentionally communicated through His deliberate rearrangement of this Isaiah passage, let's focus on some of the key words in these phrases. J. Green contends that the word *poor* needs to be contextually understood as not just the economically *poor* but also those who are of "low status," those who have been "relegated to positions outside of the boundaries of God's people"³ (like the "prodigal" we are going to meet who forfeited his family position and status). In making reference to *the favorable year of our Lord*, Jesus is harkening back to the year of Jubilee when all debts will be forgiven, i.e., the year of total forgiveness⁴ (the nature and character of forgiveness is another theme we will encounter in Luke 15). Jesus is declaring that He has come to proclaim the good news that God is willing to forgive all sin and to bring into being a new spiritual community which will include those who have been deprived of or forfeited it. This was not "good news" to observant Jewish ears, because extending mercy and compassion to "people who are not like us" was not part of their paradigm. In fact it ignited their rage (Luke 4:28) to such an extent that they tried to kill Jesus.

What Did Jesus Really Say?

To further appreciate the emphasis of Jesus' brief cut-and-paste rearrangement of Isaiah 61:1&2, it is helpful to understand that Hebrew thought and expression is frequently arranged in parallelism constructs, a common form being that of an inverted parallelism. Categorizing the verb of emphasis in each statement of Jesus yields an inverted parallelism as follows:⁵

Proclamation *He anointed me to **preach** the Gospel to the poor* (marginalized)

Justice Advocacy *to bring **release** to the captives* (refugees)

Compassion/Mercy ***recovery of sight** to the blind* (those you think God doesn't like)

Justice Advocacy *to **set free** those who are oppressed* (crushed)

Proclamation *To **proclaim** the favorable year of our Lord*

When the parallelism genre is used, the Hebrew listener is always looking for the symmetrical "center." There will be found the core of the thoughts being developed, what the rabbi/teacher/prophet most wants to emphasize as foundational to his overall message. In this observant Jewish culture, where mercy to "outsiders" is often conspicuous by its absence, Jesus declares that the epicenter of His ministry will be bringing God's mercy and compassion to *the blind*, i.e., those who are physically or spiritually blind. Likewise, He will be proclaiming "Good News" and will be an advocate for social justice for those deprived of it. This "in-your-face" challenge to His observant Jewish hometown audience contradicted their view of what Messiah will do when He comes! This compassion challenge is part of the soil for the seeds that Jesus will plant in Luke 15.

Now, all the tax collectors and those sinners stained with certain vices and crimes were continually crowding close to Him for the purpose of hearing Him. And the Pharisees and those learned in the sacred scriptures went to grumbling in a low undertone muttering, conferring secretly with one another and discontentedly complaining, saying, This fellow is giving

sinner's access to Himself and his companionship and is eating with them. Luke 15:1&2 Wuest⁶ (added)

Who Are These Pharisees?

Since the focal point of Luke 15 is going to be the way in which these Pharisees “see” things, we need some context for who these Pharisees are, i.e. the party of “scrupulous exactness.”⁷ In 332 BC, Alexander the Great conquered the Middle East and brought Greek culture and philosophy into this “land of milk and honey.” By 200 BC Greek philosophy and its companion worldview were significantly impacting Jewish young men. Thus, as the Second Century BC unfolded, more and more of them were abandoning the Hebrew “faith” and embracing the perceived superiority of Greek thought and ways. This created a crisis in Judaism. Would the “faith” and its attendant covenant responsibilities survive in the generations to come? The Pharisee movement was born out of this alarming Hellenistic trend. Its two-fold purpose was to call young Jewish men back to the tenants of the historical Hebrew faith and to protest the corruption of the Priesthood by living a priest-like life.

In the Beginning

In their formative years, these early-generation Pharisees (the spiritual fathers of the Pharisees we meet in Luke 15) had their heads, hands and hearts in the right place. They were the true evangelicals of their day. They had a passion for evangelism – proselytizing Jewish young men back to the historical faith as well as bringing Gentiles into Judaism. They prayed prayers of blessing dozens of times each day. Most of them knew God’s word very well having memorized great portions of the OT Scriptures by the age of thirteen. Central to their “faith” was a passion to scrupulously honor God in everything they did. Remember, this was a “doing” culture where

“truth” and “belief” were understood as action verbs.⁸ These early Pharisees would have put today’s evangelicals to shame with their personal piety. But as is true with many movements, including Western evangelicalism, factions within the movement slowly began to revise their “theology” as they hardened their hearts towards those dissimilar to them.

Diversity in Phariseism

Even though there may have been no more than 6,000 Pharisees in the First Century, there was considerable “theological” diversity amongst them. So beware of any one-size-fits-all categorization of Pharisees and their rabbis. Just because certain rabbis can be cited from the Mishnah regarding issues related to God’s compassion for those who sought forgiveness and reconciliation, the real issue lies in how that was understood. Which Pharisee factions subscribed to any particular forgiveness “theological” perspective? How and when (in time) did they subscribe to it? And what “hedges” (conditions, restrictions) did they require before forgiveness and reconciliation could be extended? As an Israeli friend consistently reminds me, “Whenever three Jews get together, there are at least four opinions!”

In Phariseism there were differences between the northern and southern Pharisees. In addition, even amongst the northern Pharisees, there were the beloved *Hasidim*⁹ miracle-working Pharisees (the Mother Theresa’s of their day) as well as non-miracle working Pharisees. However, when we get to those Pharisees who increasingly stood in opposition to Jesus, we are primarily talking about southern Pharisees, particularly those Jerusalem Pharisees aligned with the Sadducees who were controlling the Temple. Together they constituted the Sanhedrin, the Jewish “Supreme Court” ruling over religious matters.

This Sanhedrin bunch is the relatively small group of Jewish leaders who are running the religious “system” (John refers to them as “the Jews.”) Collectively, they took great pride in their impeccable behavior as they concurrently exhibited hard hearts and harsh attitudes toward the “outsiders.” They were into **orthopraxy** (their version of right doing) in a big way as well as **orthodoxy** (their particular version of right thinking), but not **orthopathy** (right feeling). Jesus likened them to “white-washed sepulchers,”¹⁰ clean looking on the outside while dead bones on the inside. After Jesus touches a leper to heal him,¹¹ these Jerusalem Pharisees and their proxies (scout teams) start shadowing Jesus. They are on the scene in Capernaum (5:17) when Jesus forgives and heals the paralytic. From that point on, their growing opposition is noted by Luke (11:54) and comprises part of the backdrop for Jesus’ Luke 15 invitation (and reprimand) to change their attitudes toward “outsiders” who repent.

Misplaced Zeal

By the time of Jesus, some of the Pharisees and their rabbis had taken observant Judaism to a place that did not honor God in much of what they did. In their zeal for God, they gradually evolved an Insider-Outsider “theology.” They created a category of people called “sinners” (a technical term) as a means of making distinctions about who was on the “inside” of God’s favor and who was on the “outside”. These were people (the Pharisees began to reason) that God did not like, e.g. lepers, tanners, paralytics, tax collectors, prostitutes. Therefore these kinds of people could not easily (or sometimes ever) be forgiven. This resulting “theological drift” legitimized the withholding of compassion, mercy and forgiveness from those whom God always intended to be recipients of it.

Mercy is Missing

Other rabbis subscribed to a “theology” of forgiveness that required repentance and restitution. This Catch-22 requirement essentially functioned to keep certain categories of people from being forgiven, e.g., shepherds who could never restore the grass their wandering flocks ate (“robbed”) on land belonging to others, as well as tax collectors who would never again see the caravan merchants they cheated. Such a notion of restitution will factor into our consideration of the younger son. In returning, he has no immediate (if ever) hope of being able to provide restitution for the family land (and flocks?) that he prematurely “sold.” He has no financial or legal means to recover them. But that gets ahead of our story. As we saw in Jesus’ Luke 4 “Rescue Manifesto,” restoring God’s mercy, compassion and forgiveness to the “unfortunate” is one of the reasons He came. And in Luke 5, 6, 7, & 8, Jesus does exactly that as He implements and lives out His Nazareth “Rescue Manifesto.”¹²

Jesus’ Teaching Cluster

Part of discerning the intended meaning of a passage is to recognize the group of teachings that accompanies it. Luke 15:12-32 is part of a cluster of three parables that progressively focus on a lost sheep, a lost coin, and two lost sons. So to adequately set the stage for the third parable, we first have to reacquaint ourselves with the themes of the first two parables in this teaching cluster.

And He gave them this illustration, saying, What man of you having one hundred sheep and having lost one of them, does not leave behind the ninety-nine in the pasture and go after the one which has been lost until he find it? And having found it, he lays it upon his shoulders rejoicing and having come to his home he calls

together the friends and neighbors, saying to them, Rejoice with me, because I found my sheep, the one that was lost. I am saying to you, Thus there shall be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents rather than over the ninety-nine righteous persons who are of such a nature that they do not have a need of repentance. Luke 15: 3-7
Wuest New Testament

The Context of Shepherding

While the OT notion of a shepherd was a noble symbol, it was not so in the First Century where shepherds were scorned, despised, and viewed as being an “unclean” profession. To the Pharisees, shepherds were “sinners.” It is difficult to reconcile how the rabbis managed to revere the shepherd of the OT and despise the shepherd who herded family/village sheep in the First Century. Welcome to the creative and sometimes enigmatic world of the rabbis!

As Jesus starts His implied reprimand of these Jerusalem Pharisees (shepherds without a passion for the lost who have failed Israel),¹³ and defends His joyous dining with “sinners,” Jesus quickly gets their attention when confronting their attitudes by addressing them with “which one of you.” Any Pharisee who viewed shepherds as unclean would be offended to be addressed as “one of them.” But that is what Jesus does as He starts to unfold His trilogy of “lost and found” parables.

Kenneth Bailey estimates that in Palestine the average peasant family might have 5-15 sheep.¹⁴ Thus someone responsible for 100 sheep would not be the sole owner of the sheep. It is also most likely that with 100 sheep there are multiple shepherds. Therefore, having one of the shepherds leave to find the lost sheep does not mean the other ninety-nine are left to their own devices. It also suggests that “having one hundred sheep” most likely means “having responsibility for one hundred sheep.”

Rejoicing in Restoration

This parable underscores the theme of rejoicing. There is the initial rejoicing at the moment when the lost sheep is found. As Bailey points out, to Middle Eastern ears this is somewhat amazing because of the implied burden involved in rescuing a lost sheep, i.e., the resultant hard work for the shepherd. Sheep are gregarious. They need the flock. When they are lost they lie down and refuse to move.¹⁵ Any shepherd finding a lost sheep will have to carry that sheep back to the main flock. What is surprising in Jesus’ story is that the shepherd rejoices in the *burden* that comes with restoring a lost sheep to the community.

There is a second phase of rejoicing in the way Jesus unfolds this parable. The theme of restoration is not over when the sheep is found. The sheep must now be restored to the community before the final refrain of the joy of restoration is complete. This notion is the climax of the parable. The Shepherd rejoices in a community setting because it is a joy that must be shared. The herd was most likely collectively owned by the extended family clan. Hence the collective potential loss of the community leads to collective community rejoicing.

Interrelated Themes

K. Snodgrass characterizes this parable as one that “mirrors the actions and attitudes of God.”¹⁶ Bailey shows how Jesus weaves together multiple themes in this brief parable.¹⁷

- **The joy of the shepherd is evident.** We need to celebrate and share in the joy of the conversion of sinners.
- **There is joy to be found in the task of restoration.** Searching comes with its own set of risks and rewards. The shepherd’s joy at finding the lost sheep underscores Jesus’ passion for restoration.

- **Jesus evidences the gracious, initiating love that seeks out the lost.** It is a divine invasion of unconditional, seeking love that goes out with limitless grace and rescues the sinner while lost.

The Rabbis and Contingency “Grace”

Many rabbis held to the view that repentance (and for some, retribution) was a precondition to receive forgiveness. In their understanding of things, the sinner, or lost person, had to do something first, e.g. repent, return what was taken and so forth. Note, though, how Jesus inverts this understanding (as He inverts our understanding of just about everything!) when he squashes that notion of repentance requiring retribution. In His parable, Jesus carefully constructs the narrative in such a way that the sheep does nothing to warrant (deserve) being “rescued” except to get lost!

Or, what woman having ten silver coins, if she lose one, does not light a lamp and sweep the house with a broom and seek carefully until she finds it? And having found it, she calls together her women friends and her women neighbors, saying, Rejoice with me because I found the silver coin which I lost. Thus, I am saying to you, joy arises in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. Luke 15:8-10

The Lost Coin

As Jesus continues with another moral parable, He puts a woman at the center of His focus as He again rejects Pharisaic attitudes towards certain groups of people in first-century Judaism. Some of the cultural issues that need to be factored into this narrative would include

- The scarcity of money. In a country where 90% of the people are poor peasants living on the edge of poverty,¹⁸ many burdened

with perennial debt, the loss of a single coin (most likely representing a day’s wages) is a big deal.

- If this is a northern house, basalt rock was often used as a building material for both floors and walls. This volcanic rock is dark gray/black in color. Couple that with the fact that many of these modest first-century homes had no windows, or very small windows at best, and the need for a lamp is self-evident to find the coin that has been lost in a dark room.
- The movement of women in a typical first-century setting was very limited. Thus, the woman would have a high degree of confidence that the lost coin was to be found somewhere in her house. Much of her determination and perseverance to find it is rooted in this knowledge. If she will just keep on sweeping, she is confident the coin will eventually be found.¹⁹

Again, Jesus underscores the seeking after the lost and the joy and community celebration of finding that which was lost (not prominent themes in Pharisaic thought).²⁰ The additional theme of diligent persistence is added in this parable to characterize the one doing the seeking. Both parables “reason” from the lesser to the greater, i.e., if a shepherd would put forth such effort to restore one lost sheep, how much more would God do for His own. The implied invitation that Jesus extends to his Pharisaic critics with these first two parables is “Repent” (fundamentally change the way you see and understand God’s forgiveness and restoration) and join God’s party. Celebrate with Me that sinners are being forgiven and welcomed into God’s community of profound grace!”

Reflections

- To what extent do we truly rejoice when a sinner is found and repents? Or are we often out of sync with heaven's joy? Might it be that our luke-warmness regarding newly found sheep is due to the fact that we don't invest much of our time and effort in engaging, pursuing and finding lost sheep?
- The lost coin can be found if the one doing the seeking is willing to put forth persistent effort. From the perspective of "go and make disciples," do we have sufficient passion to go out and search for the sheep and sweep for the coins that are there to be found?
- How does your community of faith express joy over the restoration of those who were "lost?"
- Were you ever a "lost" sheep? How did other "seeking" shepherds best interact with you?
- What if that same sheep wanders away again next month? Would the shepherd repeat the rescue? What are some of the implications of that?
- From a time management perspective, how much time do you devote to bringing God's love and compassion to the "lost" versus hanging out with the ninety-nine in our "Holy Huddles?"
- A joyless faith has inevitable consequences. What might some of them be? As part of your ponderings, consider Snodgrass' quote, "Where joy is absent, the Kingdom is absent."²¹ How joyful are your worship experiences?
- When you seek the lost, do you mostly badger and/or confront and/or reproach them, or do you shower them with "grace upon grace?" (John 1:16)

- Might it be possible that there are modern-day evangelical Pharisees, e.g., those who elevate **orthodoxy** (right thinking) over **orthopraxy** (right doing) and **orthopathy** (right feeling) rather than embracing all three in a balanced and integrated way? How might they be recognized, e.g. grumbling, and uncompassionate? What could be missing in their “religious” life? Have you ever observed any of these attributes in yourself? Which ones?
- For a first-century Jew, the Hebrew understanding of repent was to “fundamentally change the way you see and understand things.”²² To put it into our 21st-century vocabulary, first-century “repentance” meant to “change your worldview and all the paradigms that come with it.” It embodies a “turning from” your way of understanding things and “turning to” a new, very different way of seeing and understanding things. After over-viewing the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, does anything come to mind that might deepen your repentance, i.e., prompt you to start to see some Kingdom realities differently?

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3

A Shocking Start

Village life was so deeply ingrained and so clearly understood at every level of that society that the customs reflected in biblical narratives did not usually have to be explained with the narrative.

Widely known attitudes did not need to be articulated.

Longstanding social customs required no explanation. Nevertheless, these unspoken but culturally understood ideas gave color and meaning to Jesus' stories.

—John MacArthur¹

If our view of God is different from or smaller than the Bible's, we shall be astray in all our thinking and living. —Robert M. Horn

THE Question

Let's start by asking a foundational question: **What is the most important thing about you?** Sometimes during retreat weekends, I ask people to share what each thinks is the most important thing about him or her. Many will respond that their salvation is the most important thing about them. To get everyone's attention, I grade that as a C- answer. Invariably, no one offers A. W. Tozer's perspective: *What comes into our mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us.*² Our view of God is indeed the most important thing about who we are. It matters whether we see Him as a cosmic Santa Claus, a 911 Rescue Squad, a benign grandfather, a stern parent, a demanding taskmaster, or the lover of my soul who wants to rescue and restore me so He can have an intimate relationship with me. Each person's view of God will shape whether he or she will even have a desire to want to draw near to Him, let alone to be saved.



First-Century Religious Paradigms

In first-century Palestine, there were many different views of God including those held by the Sadducees, Zealots, Essenes, Pharisees, observant Jews and Hellenistic Jews. What each of these groups shared in common was a flawed view of God. (And if your view of God is distorted, so then is your resultant "theology.") These Jerusalem Pharisees whom Jesus is addressing had a narrow understanding of God's grace, mercy, compassion and forgiveness which led them to a flawed understanding of His Heart.

When Jesus came, He glorified God, which to the Hebrew mindset means He accurately revealed and portrayed “who God is, what God cares about, and how God does things.”³ Jesus put a face on God allowing us to get new glimpses and understandings of Jehovah. That’s why Jesus could say, *if you know me, you know my Father*.⁴ Time and again He would teach about His Father and His Father’s Kingdom to those gathered about Him. While it is vitally important to understand God’s attributes of Holiness, Sovereignty, Justice, Righteousness, etc., it is equally important to understand His heart and to fuse all of those understandings together into a unitized whole.

Luke continues his narrative with Jesus teaching more about the heart of God and, in the process, pulverizing yet another flawed paradigm of these Pharisees. In the parable of the Two Lost Sons, His focus is on the “outsiders” who repent for having royally “messed up” in life, and confronts the non-Kingdom attitudes toward repentance of those who see themselves as never having “messed up.” With this paradigm-shattering teaching, Jesus again holds up a heavenly mirror for these Pharisees (and us) to see the hardened areas in their own hearts (and ours) because of their (our) flawed view(s) of God.

With this third parable, Jesus gives us a lens through which to view deep into His Father’s heart. His purpose is to enlarge our understanding of God’s mercy and grace and thus to challenge our paradigm of repentance and the often unholy attitudes that can come with it. If disciples are called to emulate their rabbi, then followers of Jesus Christ need to be in tune with God’s heart to properly mirror His grace and mercy. In short, Jesus’ main focus of this parable

is to contrast the attitudes toward those who repent.

And He said, a certain man had two sons.
(15:11) Wuest New Testament

An Unremarkable Start

That’s a short opening sentence to Jesus’ longest parable, but those nine short words are packed full of meaning. This is the Middle East, the world of the Bible. Therefore, there are some implicitly assumed cultural realities that we already know from these few introductory words.

- **It’s a family story.** Therefore issues of family honor and shame are always present. No “good” son will ever do anything to shame the family and bring dishonor to its name which would be understood by all as the “unforgivable” cultural sin. Furthermore, maintaining the honorable reputation of the family in the eyes of the village is “job one.”
- **There is a birthright involved.** We first see the birthright in Genesis with Jacob and Esau and it is part of the story line of Joseph and his brothers. The birthright is specified in Deut. 21:17 where the firstborn son has the birthright (unless he forfeits it which is what caused Jacob to remove it from Rueben and place it upon Joseph.)⁵ The birthright son is entitled to twice the inheritance of the other siblings. Thus, with only two sons, this elder son is entitled to twice the inheritance (2/3 of the estate) as the younger son (who would get 1/3) upon their father’s death. Having the birthright bestowed upon you also means that you have certain family responsibilities. One of those responsibilities is to mediate all disputes that arise between the father and any of your brothers.

- **The village (community) is an unspoken part of this story.** Unlike our Western mindset, in a Middle Eastern village personal rights are always subordinated for the betterment of the village. Therefore, the community is always more important than the individual. Remember that the community was an explicit participant in Jesus' two prologue parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin.

The first time I flew from the Midwest to the West Coast, I was struck by the scattered nature of farm homes in Iowa and Kansas. From the air, the county road systems seemed to be laid out in square-mile grids creating a huge checkerboard of farmlands, usually with no more than one house per square mile. Middle Eastern villages are not like that. Homes are closely bunched together like a grape cluster with the fields radiating out from the village. This close proximity has a number of implications including that there are no secrets in a Middle Eastern village. Everyone in the village knows if a family has a problem which in turn causes the village to have a problem, and vice versa.

In setting the scene for His story, note that Jesus uses no adjectives to describe either the father or his two sons. He does not refer to the father as a wonderful person or to the two sons as dysfunctional (however you might say that in the First Century!) But we soon discover that this is in fact a dysfunctional, mixed "faith" family. The father is spiritual, the elder son is "religious," and the younger son wants nothing to do with either; because like many non-spiritual people, he cannot discern the difference between the two. If Jesus did not capture everyone's rapt attention with this nine-word opener, that is about to change.

And the younger of them said to the father, Father, give me directly the share of the estate that falls to me. (15:12)

An Extraordinary Demand!

While the opening sentence of this story is unremarkable, the second sentence is extraordinary to Middle Eastern ears. For a son to make such a demand while his father is still alive was to essentially declare *I wish you were dead*. Kenneth Bailey records that he never ran across any Middle Eastern villager who had ever heard of such a thing.⁶ What a shameful insult to the father and, by implication, to the community! What insubordination! Unheard of! Unthinkable! Something is terribly wrong here! For shaming the family in such a way, Jesus' listeners would have surmised that surely this father will severely punish this insubordinate son (remember those family "honor" killings we read about from time to time in Pakistan). In a culture where most men had memorized their Hebrew Scriptures in their youth, they would have been aware of Deuteronomy 21:18-21 which reads ... *if a man has a stubborn and rebellious son...bring him to the elders at the gate of his town...then all the men of his town shall stone him to death*. At a minimum, the community would expect this father to most likely ban this son from the family (and therefore the community) and consider him to be legally dead (not unlike what many orthodox Jewish families still do today to a child who becomes a "Christian"). Surely this father is not going to take this unfathomable rebellion "lying down."

Parenthetically, it should be noted that some commentators are willing to understate the seriousness of the younger son's offence in its first-century cultural setting. For them the outrageousness of his request needs to be lessened from a maximum of 10 on the Richter Scale of

Insubordination to maybe a 6 or 7 (still quite severe!). What they seem to miss with this discounting is that it appears Jesus is constructing a three-part symmetry of extravagantly outrageous behavior. The first part shows up with the younger son's beyond-the-pale request of his father. We do no injustice to Jesus' story by maximizing the degree of cultural outrageousness of this younger son's demanding request. Now the second part of this troika of outrageous behavior presents itself with the elder brother's contemptible non-responsiveness.

The Elder Brother's Silence is Deafening!

Equally amazing to Middle Eastern ears is the silence of the elder brother when hearing of his younger brother's demand of his father. Birthright responsibilities mandated that the elder son intercede and mediate all disputes between the father and the other siblings. With this leadership position in the family, he is therefore obligated to intervene and work out a resolution in this situation. Consequently, his silence is profound and further adds to his father's shame in the eyes of the community. This too is scandalous behavior. In its own way, the elder brother's non-responsiveness is a 10 on the Richter Scale of Shirked Family Responsibilities. What is wrong here? Why doesn't the elder brother intervene? What possible explanation can there be for avoiding his responsibility for resolving this father-younger son issue?

Why the Younger Son's Demand?

Ever wonder what in the world caused this younger son to go beyond the pale and make this contemptible request of his father? The younger son certainly knows how unthinkable such a request would be and how humiliating and shameful it would reflect on him, his family and his father within the community. While this

"why" question is not essential to the parable, pondering what might have been the causative reason(s) for the younger son's desire/need to leave home in this way may help us to better identify with him.

- Might it be that the younger brother has a relational problem with his father because of something the father did or didn't do in the past, e.g., prior "sins of the fathers?" Later we will find out this could not possibly be the case as this is one extraordinary father.
- Or could his compelling need to leave home be rooted in a problem he has (and has had for some time) with the disingenuous "religiosity" of his older brother?
- Or might it be that he has long been aware of those pleasure-seeking cities of the Decapolis on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps the time has now come where he can no longer wait to leave this button-down, ultra-conservative world of observant Judaism in the NW corner of the Sea of Galilee and *finally* have some fun. (time to leave my "Christian" setting and indulge myself on a far beach during Spring Break!).
- Or he may have reasoned, "If I wait for my father to die to inherit my 1/3 of his estate, that 1/3 is not going to be enough to support me (and my family?). So I might as well generate some capital, leave home now, and start up a business somewhere far away from this oppressive "religious" atmosphere."

From a historical perspective, with each generation the family land in Palestine was carved up into smaller and smaller pieces as more and more sons from more and more generations inherited their portion until what remains to be divided up is no longer large enough to support a family. Thus it could be that the

younger brother's future 1/3 share really wasn't going to be all that much after all. So it might be reasonable for him to think, "Now that I am of age, it's time to get out of Capernaum with a new life plan where I can be the captain of my own ship and the master of my own destiny." Like many others, full of self-absorption and easily seduced by the allure of money, freedom and independence!

There is a Clue

The only contextual clue that Jesus gives us at this point in the story is the surprising silence of the elder brother and his unwillingness to involve himself in resolving this issue. Thus, the causative spotlight falls upon him. Might the younger brother feel that he has to get away from the hypocrisy of his elder brother? "Religious" (but not spiritual) elder brothers can easily push people away from the Father (and the church) with their joyless façade of "obligatory obedience."⁸ We'll develop that theme later in the story.

How Old?

Parenthetically, have you ever wondered about the age of these two brothers? We might surmise that the younger brother could be at least 30 years old. Remember that Jesus left home at age 30 to start his ministry, the time that some consider the full male coming of age. Similarly, the younger brother may have recently come of age and can now leave home. With an average life expectancy of 41 years in first-century Palestine,⁹ this younger brother might well be into "middle age" in his culture. This age perspective helps us realize that these brothers may have had three decades of exposure to their father. They know him very well. And yet they still choose to behave in their respective disrespectful ways. That should remind us that being around God's family for a

long time does not necessarily make one immune from mutinous thoughts and subsequent rebellious actions.

Premeditated Behavior

One thing should seem obvious to us. This younger brother just didn't wake up one morning and say, "Hey, I've got a great new idea! Why don't I go down the hall right now and ask father for my share of the inheritance." Most likely he has been ruminating on this plan, perhaps even obsessing over it for quite some time. James informs us that this type of sin does not suddenly occur as if it were spontaneous combustion. In James 1:14-15, we are reminded that this kind of sin is formed over time. It is first conceived, then developed and nurtured, and finally gives birth – much like the birth of a child. And when that sin comes to maturity, it *leads unto death*.

It Matters What You Think About!

This parable is a sobering reminder that it is life-altering what we allow ourselves to think about. That's why Paul exhorts us in Philippians 4:8 to think on... *Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable... think about such things*. It matters what we think about because over time we tend to become what we ponder. Think mutinous thoughts; and before long, discretion gets thrown to the wind and we end up giving birth to rebellious acts. Think hedonistically; and, unabated, you will become a hedonist. Focus on adoring, grateful, praiseworthy thoughts; and you will inevitably become a vibrant worshiper of our Lord.

The Master Teacher

This story is already fascinating from a teaching perspective. After only two sentences, Jesus has his audience on the edge of their seats. They have never heard of such a family dynamic. The

conduct of both brothers is truly beyond the pale, even the pale of Jewish chutzpah! How in the world is their father going to deal with this? How severely will this younger son get punished? What will be the nature of the elder son's rebuke? To Jesus' listeners, the only issue is how harsh will the sons' respective punishments be? That's where we will pick up this compelling narrative next. But before we do that, let's look more closely at some of the teaching implications of what Jesus is doing as He starts to unfold the parable.

Jesus: The Imaginative Story Teller

Jesus is both *The* Story and the Master Story Teller. His parables are consummate narratives, rich with imaginative treatments of everyday images, situations and occurrences. When contextually understood, His parables were often incredulous stories (like this one) or outrageous situations of village life, e.g., the "Friend at Midnight" parable,¹⁰ which allowed His hearers to easily remember His teachings and their meaning.

Missing Imagination

Two millennia later, we Westerners seem to have forgotten much about how Jesus taught. In today's Western Evangelicalism, the use of imagination in retelling the Bible's stories to bring them alive is often conspicuously absent. In fact in some "orthodox" circles, if you do use imagination in a Sunday message or lesson like Jesus did, you run the risk of being labeled "inappropriate." How did we drift so far from Jesus' effective teaching pedagogy?

A Wonderful Gift

One Christmas day, Dr. Art Lindsley, a good friend and the author of *The Case for Christ* and *True Truth*, gifted me with a quote from one of C. S. Lewis' selected essays. A light went on as soon as I heard:

*Reason is the natural organ of truth;
but imagination is the organ of meaning.*

Wow! There it was: both a diagnosis and a remedy. Western Evangelicalism, with its Greek oriented thought processes, primarily focuses on the first line of Lewis' quote. We've been preoccupied with using reason to present truth to believers, yet seldom do we use appropriate imagination to underscore the meaning of that truth in memorable ways. We've been preaching and teaching truth (via reason only) on AM monaural to people designed by God to best hear His Word in FM stereo (fusing reason and imagination together).

Reason and Imagination

In the Gospels, Jesus was certainly proficient presenting reason and truth to His listeners while at the same time wonderfully creative in using imagination to capture the meaning of that truth. From Jesus' example, we can see that reason *and* imagination need to travel together in our teaching and preaching if truth and meaning are to be fused together in an integrated way in the lives of our listeners. If that's what Jesus did, shouldn't we be trying our best to do the same? After all that's part of what being a disciple is about – having a passion to emulate your rabbi.

Appropriate Imagination

There are certainly some issues and concerns when it comes to the appropriate use of imagination in bringing the meaning of God's truth alive for today's hearts and minds. It is a given that there will always be differing plumb lines regarding what constitutes appropriate imagination. Unfortunately, the fear of being judged "inappropriate" has caused too many preachers and teachers to deliberately avoid the creative use

of imagination in their teaching and preaching of the Scriptures. That has been to our collective detriment. But as Dr. Lindsley reminded his seminary classes: *the potential for abuse is never an argument for disuse.*

Context is a Safety Net

I have always found context to be a helpful safety net for the appropriate use of imagination in opening up the Scriptures. Contextually reconstructing a passage not only suggests appropriate ways to bring a passage alive, but paradoxically also sets limits on 1) where that imaginative treatment can be taken in the retelling of the

biblical story and 2) where speculation beyond the context cannot. I realize that this thesis needs an essay of its own to more fully flesh out and demonstrate this principle.

Looking Ahead

Getting back to Jesus' story, in the very next verse He lets us in on how this father chooses to respond to the mutinous spirit he finds in both of his sons: *And he distributed to them his wealth.* In the way Jesus is developing this story, the pattern of outrageous responses continues. Now it's time for the father to show outrageous mercy and grace.

Reflections from the Mirror that Jesus Holds Up

- Can you relate to the pain and sorrow that must have cut to the core of the father's heart when he hears the younger son's demand, sees the abdication of his elder son's responsibilities, and realizes the humiliation he is now carrying in the eyes of the community? Have you ever been similarly humiliated?
- What would you characterize sin? Is sin simply a "mistake" to you, or is it more like cosmic mutiny? To the degree that we minimize our sin, we discount the outrageous extravagance of God's mercy. Generally speaking, the more we fathom God's holiness, the more we have a sober and realistic assessment of our sin which then shapes our expressions of profound gratitude for His mercy. R.C. Sproul once observed that when the yardstick is the holiness of God, the difference between you and me and Adolph Hitler gets lost in the rounding.¹¹ Now that's a sobering perspective!

- If you were the younger son, how might you have justified your outrageous behavior in your own mind? Why would the cultural norms not apply to you? If you were the elder son, how might you have justified your non-responsive behavior? Why are you above the “rules?” Sometimes our best creativity is expended in foolishly trying to justify those actions for which no justification exists!
- From the perspective of Paul’s exhortation in Phil. 4:8 to *think on these things*, what would an honest audit of your last 100 thoughts reveal? If it’s true that we inevitably tend to become that which we think about, just like the muddy Mississippi River inevitably takes upon itself the color of the ground over which it flows, what are you in the process of becoming as a result of what you have been pondering? Some good clues can be obtained from examining your waking thoughts.
- Dr. David Allen, a teaching colleague and Christian psychiatrist, would often say, “The opposite of gratitude is not ingratitude, but destruction.” That begs the question: How’s your gratitude index doing these days? If it’s low or non-existent, what relationships might you be in the process of destroying? Lack of gratitude by both sons not only fueled their defiance but inevitably led to rupturing their relationship with their father.

- In their youth, these brothers seemed to have been absent from synagogue school the day that their teachers taught on the Fifth Commandment about *honoring your father and your mother*. How have you honored that commandment as an adult? Has it been a struggle?

- Helmut Thielicke once observed that it is very easy to get so mesmerized by the pennies in the hand of God that we no longer even see His hand. In a similar manner, the younger son became so transfixed by the wealth resident in his father's estate that he could no longer even care about a relationship with his father. Have you been in situations where you became so mesmerized by the pennies of blessing in the hand of God that you failed to acknowledge His hand, or even Him?

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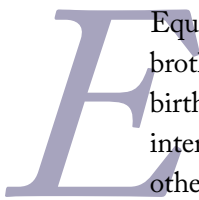
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Getting Ready to Leave Home

Any interpretation (of the parables) that does not breathe the air of the first century context cannot be correct. That requires listening in a context not our own and presumes some familiarity with that context.

—Klyne R. Snodgrass¹

Two Concurrent Rebellions

Equally amazing to Middle Eastern ears is the silence of the elder brother when hearing of his younger brother's demand. As part of his birthright (family leadership) responsibilities, the elder son is mandated to intercede and mediate any and all disputes between the father and the other siblings. Thus, his silence is profound and further adds to his father's shame in the eyes of the community. What is wrong here? Why won't the elder brother intervene? The obvious question that gets begged here is: How is this father going to reprimand/rebuke his elder son for this scandalous behavior? Surely this father is not going to take both of these culturally unconscionable rebellions without retaliation. As Jesus, the Master Storyteller, continues to build the drama and tension in this story, He now lets us in on how this father intentionally chooses to respond to the double mutiny he is confronted with in his sons.



And he distributed to them his wealth. (15:13 added)

The Outrageousness Continues

This response by the father is unthinkable to Middle Eastern ears, and with it this symmetrical pattern (previously observed) of outrageous responses continues. Now it's time for outrageous mercy and grace. In the way Jesus carefully constructs this story, rebellion and mutiny on the part of the younger son, and outrageously non-responsive leadership from the elder son, gets responded to with outrageously extravagant mercy and grace from their father. While it may be hard for these brothers to fathom, they are both equally loved by their father at this moment in time and, since this father is representative of our Heavenly Father, we can also say that both of these sons will never be loved more by their father than they

are right now! It truly is an amazing love that begets amazing grace that both sons, amazingly, readily ignore.

What Kind of Father is This?

The initial gut reaction from the Jerusalem Pharisees listening to the first three sentences of Jesus' story had to have been: What kind of father is this? Theirs would have been an instinctive reaction full of scorn and derision. What is wrong with this father? Is he weak, spineless, a completely indulgent marshmallow? Quite the contrary. What they fail to understand is that this father is not operating from within their Pharisaic paradigm. He is wise enough to know that he needs to carefully consider his responses to these two rebellions with the end in view – future (possible) reconciliation. So he chooses to respond with “grace upon grace” (John 1:16) and not with “rebuke upon rebuke.” Unlike the Pharisees, this father in Jesus' story brings fresh mercy to each new day.² He is operating from an entirely different perspective than does his culture. This father might actually refer to his way of doing things as a “Kingdom” paradigm – a whole new way of heavenly thinking, feeling and doing that has relational restoration in view.

Note What the Father Does Not Do

This wise father in Jesus' story knows that any cascade of rebukes, chastisements and retaliation in response to his humiliation will only make future reconciliation that much more difficult. He knows that once words are spoken they cannot be re-swallowed as they take upon themselves an uncontrollable life of their own. He knows it does not take much discipline to heap scorn and derision on someone else, even when they fully deserve it. But it does require great courage and inner strength to respond mercifully with “grace

upon grace” when so obviously wrongfully treated by others. Note that this father does not burn any bridges with either of his sons – no threats, no rebukes. He does not berate; nor does he draw any lines in the sand. How different from our human instincts (and practices)!

Being Misunderstood

As this father responds in this “grace upon grace” manner, he knows he will be completely misunderstood by his sons as well as by the community. His inner strength of restraint will be perceived by his culture as weakness. A friend once observed, *there is no greater burden in life than to be misunderstood by others and realize there is nothing you can do about it*. In his passion for possible future restoration, this father is willing to be misunderstood. I sometimes think that one of the most damaging things we do to others happens when we project our own misunderstanding upon them.

Can You Believe This?

As Jesus skillfully continues to unfold this story, amazingly the elder brother also accepts his (2/3ds) share of his father's estate. Doing so underscores how profoundly he (too!) is out of sorts with both his brother **and** his father. This elder son should have immediately refused his share and insisted that his younger brother do the same while concurrently asking for forgiveness from his father. Yet the elder brother did no such thing. Instead he readily accepted his share of the estate and said nothing, which just adds yet another layer of outrageousness in how Jesus is unfolding this story.

A Righteous Act

Sometime ago I was reading (and reflecting) on Luther's commentary on Romans³ One day it dawned on me that what Luther was saying was

that a “good act,” that is one pleasing to God, had at least four components to it:

- Doing the **right thing** – just what the Holy Spirit wants done.
- Doing it at just the **right time** – just when the Holy Spirit wants it done.
- Doing it in the **right spirit** – with a genuine, loving concern for the other person.
- And doing it for the **right reason(s)** – with the long-term spiritual maturity of the other person in view. (Not just because I want to make myself look good, or feel good, retaliate or elevate myself at the expense of someone else.)

It is sobering to realize that getting it “right” in even three out of these four “righteous act” essentials still does not fully honor God. It does not meet His threshold of “be perfect as I am perfect.”⁴ It is still sin in God’s eyes. When I take a cursory look through the rearview mirror at my own history, I realize I have a Master’s degree in doing the right thing at the wrong time, and probably a Ph.D. in doing the reverse – doing the wrong thing at the right time! Relationships are hard – they are so much harder than we started out thinking they would be! That is why we all need to be led by God’s Spirit, every moment of every day.

With Luther’s “scorecard” as a yardstick, we find in Jesus’ story that the 0 for 4 score card of the two son’s responses are in juxtaposition to the father’s perfect 4 for 4 responses in return. The contrast is between totally “bad” acts by the sons which get responded to in a totally “righteous” way by the father. What a model to try and emulate!

And not many days afterward the younger son, having put all his resources into one lump sum, Luke 15:13a.

Estate Inheritance Issues

The legal implications of the first-century laws pertaining to Jewish inheritance have been well researched. J. Jeremias in *Parables of Jesus*⁵ concludes that according to the Mishnah, it was possible for a father to take the initiative and dispose of his wealth before his death. However, as Jesus unfolds this story the father did not initiate the disposition; rather the younger son demanded it. Were such a “premature” disposition to occur, the father still would retain a reasonable amount of control over the property during his remaining life, e.g., like we see in verses 22-24 where he still gives direction to the servants.

As B. Young develops,⁶ while the younger son would have gained possession of his share of the estate, he has no right of disposal while his father is alive. Thus to generate cash, the younger son can only sell the *future rights* to his part of the estate when his father dies. From a prospective buyer’s perspective, waiting for the father’s death significantly reduces the value of such a transaction. Therefore, whatever “purchase price” the potential buyer is willing to pay now while the father is still alive would be considerably less than it would be if the father were deceased. Thus to quickly raise cash (note the emphasis Jesus puts on the haste of the younger son), the younger son would have had to significantly discount (lower) the purchase price of his portion of the land to “move it” quickly. As so often happens when the momentum of sin gains the upper hand, one bad decision often begets another one.

When you factor into this scenario the inherent value of the land, and the centuries-long tradition of keeping it within the family, a “quickie” sale of the rights to future possession of the land to a third party just pours salt on an

already profoundly open wound. And when you consider that the buyer was most probably a Gentile, or a representative for Herod's extended family (who already control 68% of the land),⁷ this transaction becomes unfathomable to the Middle Eastern way of doing things. In doing so, the younger son breaches his relationship with the community while at the same time enraging the village. All of this just adds to the outrageousness of the story as Jesus continues to unfold it.

Note that the father lets both brothers make their respective bad choices. In our journeys, we all have made bad choices. The only issue is what kind of bad choices do we choose to make: younger brother choices or elder brother choices.

...left his own country to go to a far away place.
Luke 15:13b.

How Far Away?

In our use of language, we in the West would probably surmise that this prodigal younger son must have gone a thousand miles away from home. That would be how we would implicitly approach the phrase *a far away place*, e.g. like leaving Cleveland to go to Las Vegas. But to a first-century observant Jew, any reference to *a far away place* in this context would not so much mean a journey to a physically distant *far place* as it would to a morally distant *far place*. In a geographical setting where a reasonable day's journey was an 18-mile walk, there were a number of morally distant places this younger son could have quickly gotten to in less than a day's walk from Capernaum. Those would be the alluring cities of the Decapolis where no one would know who you are, let alone who your father is, and no one would care how you choose to behave or indulge yourself.

History and the Decapolis

Going back in intertestamental history, we know that Alexander the Great conquered this part of the Middle East in 332 BC. As part of his subjugation strategy, he imported Macedonian city-states into this country with a concentration of them lying in an area to the east and southeast of the Sea of Galilee. Along with these city-states came the Greek language, Greek philosophy and a Hellenistic worldview.

Hedonism Personified

Two and one-half centuries later in 63 BC, the Roman Tenth Legion under Pompeii conquered this land and brought with them a Roman worldview. By the time of Jesus, ten of these "imported" cities remained and were organized into a confederation known as the Decapolis. These cities were magnificent architectural venues. A grand main street (the *cardo*) was lined with columns and flanked on either side with temples to various gods, including those offering ritual prostitution. Also lining these main streets were all the pleasures of Greco-Roman life – theatres, arenas, gymnasiums, baths. These cities were populated mostly by Gentiles (and some Hellenistic Jewish business people) who participated in all the hedonistic pleasures of first-century Greco-Roman life: *if it tastes good, eat it; if it feels good, do it; if it looks good, by all means touch it.*⁸ If you wanted to immerse yourself in hedonism, the Decapolis is where you wanted to be!

A Short Walk to Pleasure

Having walked the land of Israel, my own guess is that this younger son may have journeyed about ten miles south from Capernaum along the western edge of the Sea of Galilee, and then walked another five miles or so southeast to the only decapoliian city lying west of the Jordan

River, the beautiful Greco-Roman city of Scythopolis (site of OT Beth Shean). If you would like to get a feel for the size and scope of this magnificent city, you can fly over its extensively excavated ruins in a helicopter via one of Preserving Bible Times “Above Israel” DVDs.⁹

Not surprisingly, the Decapolis represented the land of evil to the observant Jewish worldview of Jesus’ day. Everything about that culture was “unclean” and therefore forbidden. God’s Adversary was viewed as the Chief Operating Officer of the Decapolis (Rome was viewed as Satan’s empire).¹⁰ Thus observant Jews were forbidden from setting foot in Gentile houses or on their land, something Peter acknowledges in

Acts 10:28. So if you were an observant Jew in Capernaum and wanted to get away from it all, you could easily do that in less than a day’s journey. If you were willing to throw away everything to pursue your pleasure “dream,” naively not realizing it could shortly become your nightmare, it is a very short journey to Scythopolis.

Looking Ahead

Next we’ll take a look at what happens to this younger brother when he finally gets to the pleasure-seeking environment that he has long been anticipating. We get a sneak peak in Jesus’ next phrase:

And there he squandered his resources, living an abandoned, dissolute life. Luke 15:13c

Reflections

- At this point in Jesus’ story, do you most identify with the younger son or the elder son? What influences your choice?
- Have you ever had to deal with something approaching the kind of rebellion that this father in Jesus’ parable had to deal with either as the instigator or the recipient? How did that affect you? What did that draw out of you? How did you handle it?
- Which is usually your first tendency to being publically humiliated: responding with “grace upon grace” or “rebuke upon rebuke?”
- Sometimes a father’s love is so great that he has to let (one of) his children go so that they can discover for themselves the reality of who they really are. It would have been easy for this father to forcefully say “no” and make the younger son stay at home. But had he done that, the younger son would never have to face who he really is and the relationship might possibly never be restored. Have you ever been there, either as the child or the parent?

- What might you guess to be the younger son's naïve expectations for what awaits him in this "far country." Contrast that with what you think will be the dark realities that he will most likely encounter.
- Did you find Luther's definition of a "righteous act" intimidating, humbling, impossible? What do you see as the implications of that for you, and others?
- Would you agree or disagree that we are all still "prodigals" from time to time? Looking back over your journey, can you identify some of the "far countries" you have sought out in our life, e.g., your office where you are trying to "make it" in the world; your need for approval, love and acceptance; bouts of anxiety; inappropriate friends; spiritual narcissism tendencies, Tozer's self-hyphenated sins - self-absorption, self-importance, self-aggrandizement, etc.? Before answering that question, consider the "far countries" that can so easily exist within us by pondering Henri Nouwen's perspective that *anger, resentment, jealousy, desire for revenge, lust, greed, antagonisms, and rivalries are the obvious signs I have left home.*¹¹ In your experience, is leaving home and heading for a "far country" a one-time event, an infrequent occurrence, or a regular occurrence?

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8 A favorite phrase of Dr. James C. Martin, Preserving Bible Times Co-Founder

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10 Dr. James C. Martin, et. al., *Exploring Bible Times: The Gospels in Context* (Bible World Seminars, Amarillo, Texas, 2003) 124.

11 Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal* (Doubleday, New York, NY, 1992) 37.

5

The Pursuit of Pleasure

Most of us have never encountered some of the most common first-century social institutions, for example, patronage/clientage, household slavery, a resident foreign army. And conversely, first-century Palestinians would not share some of our most common institutional experiences, for example: voting, public education, free choice of spouses and careers. The challenge, then, is to imagine ourselves “into” the world of the people we encounter in the New Testament. This requires conceptualizing scenarios – ways of acting, thinking, valuing, perceiving, and structuring the world – appropriate to their life-world.

—K. C. Hanson and Douglass E. Oakman¹

Amazing Grace

As we saw in the previous chapter, this remarkable father in Jesus’ story responds to the shameful (and outrageous) insubordination of both of his sons with amazing grace and mercy. Instead of banishing the younger son from the family, and severely reprimanding the elder son, he amazingly grants the younger son’s request and divides his estate between both sons. Incredulously, the elder brother does not protest receiving his share. In great haste to leave, the younger son deeply discounts the value of his inheritance portion (including the land), which breaches his relationship with the community. This allows him to quickly liquidate his inheritance so he can head off to a morally (but not necessarily geographically) far place with cash in hand. With the next sentence in this masterful short story, Jesus lets us in on the outcome of this younger son’s pursuit of pleasure:



And there he squandered his resources, living an abandoned, dissolute life.
Luke 15:13c Wuest

A New Start

One might wonder if in the beginning, the younger son did intentionally have an undisciplined, irresponsible lifestyle as his objective as he headed off to his Greco-Roman destination? With the ultra-conservative, button-down nature of observant Judaism as a backdrop, perhaps this younger son just wanted to have a little fun, something that can be so easily rationalized in our own minds. I remember the convoluted thinking of my college days when I easily reasoned: I know I need to follow Jesus someday, but not right now because I haven’t had the time or the opportunity to have

any fun yet. Well, the notion of having a little fun can easily expose a person to some seemingly small, momentary, and innocuous pleasures. And being exposed to pleasures of that ilk can easily lead to dabbling in somewhat greater pleasures; likewise not seemingly dangerous at first glance, until you partake. And so, before you know it, the accelerator for greater and greater pleasure gets pressed closer and closer to the floor board.

New Friends

When the younger son got to his destination, he quickly found some pleasure seeking Greco-Roman (and maybe even some Hellenistic Jewish) companions who were willing to help him spend his resources and immerse himself in pleasures at the Roman baths, gymnasiums, circuses and amphitheaters. In fact, those around him appeared to actually like him, or so this younger son thought, and seemed to enjoy being with him. The multi-day banquets he hosted for his new “friends” were certainly enjoyable and soon became “the talk of the town.” So different from austere Capernaum where their idea of having “fun” was to spend hours discussing Torah and reciting the Oral Tradition from memory.

A Dulled Conscience

In the beginning, this younger son probably thought he had actually found some new “good” friends, but in the end they turned out to be pleasure parasites (discernment is one of the first things to go when pleasure becomes a priority). Like that proverbial frog being slowly heated up in a kettle of water, this younger son could not sense what was happening to him, until the water was boiling and it was too late. The dulling of his discernment, the suppression of his conscience, and the amnesia of his memory were all conse-

quences of his narcissistic lifestyle that allowed him to (mostly) forget his past. The pursuit of pleasure serves as an anesthetic to our conscience deadening our notions of right and wrong which cause us to forget who we are and where we came from. Pleasure also heightens our sense of narcissism, a sense that other people (and things) exist to give us pleasure and thus make us “oblivious to our own shame or totally unconcerned about it.”²

Traveling Alone

Did you notice that this younger son appears to have left home alone? Thus, he had no one alongside him to serve as his conscience or reality check when needed. As a result, no one was there who lovingly cared enough about him to confront his priorities and decisions and bring him back to his senses when he began to drift. Left to his own devices, and absent any accountability, he fell victim to the “pleasure principle.” Like many a professional athlete who has the funds to afford the pursuit of pleasure (at least for awhile), it didn’t take him long to become caught in the vortex of his pleasure seeking. If we could have asked him, “How much pleasure will it take to satisfy you,” he most likely would have replied, “Just a little bit more.” Such is the progressive allure and the narcotic grip of the “pleasure principle.”

Parenthetically here, we should stop and observe yet another aspect of the wisdom of Jesus. Remember when He intentionally sent out His disciples in pairs (Mark 6:7)? Dispatching them in that way creates built-in accountability, encouragement and support. For “iron to sharpen iron,”³ someone else needs to be nearby for metal-to-metal contact to occur!

What Really Happened?

What kind of a lifestyle did the younger son

embrace in his new found home away from home? Let's take a look at how different translators have handled this phrase:

There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. (The Message)

There he squandered his estate with loose living. (NAS)

And there he squandered his wealth with a wild lifestyle. (NET)

There wasted his substance with riotous living. (KJV)

Where he squandered his wealth in the wildest extravagance. (J.B. Phillips)

There are two key words in this sentence that shape our understanding. The first is the Greek word *dieskorpisen* which has typically been translated as *squandered* or *wasted*. K. Bailey suggests it is best understood as *scattering*; e.g., the scattering of grain in the winnowing process or the scattering of sheep in a field.⁴ J. MacArthur concurs with the root meaning of *scattering* but gives it an emphasis of "spending his inheritance in the pursuit of wickedness" by indulging in "gross immorality."⁵ The basis for MacArthur's emphasis seems to be the accusation made later in the story by the elder brother in verse 30 that his younger brother had *wasted his father's money on harlots*.

The second key word in this sentence is *zon asotos* which has typically been translated as *loose living* and which is probably best understood as *spendthrift* or *carefree living*.⁶ It is a word that does not necessarily connote debauchery. Bailey contends that *zon asotos* can reference a wasting away of resources on personal pleasure⁷ as distinct from debauchery.

Bailey and MacArthur frame two different ways of characterizing the lifestyle of the younger son in this far place he has chosen for himself. In terms of the story Jesus is unfolding, does it matter whether the younger son's lifestyle was 1) an irresponsible and undisciplined one, or 2) a lifestyle rooted in gross immorality? And if one characterization needs to be chosen, which emphasis is most appropriate for the overall contextual development of Jesus' story? For now, let's consider Eugene Petersen's characterization in *The Message* as best encapsulating Jesus' original meaning:

There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had.

How Bad Was It? – The Debauchery Issue

I sometimes think we fail to identify (enough) with the younger son in this story (at least at this point) because of the extreme debauchery we Westerners have assumed (rightly or wrongly) regarding his lifestyle in this far place. Perhaps because we think we have not exhibited those particular kinds of excesses in our lives, we fail to sufficiently identify with this younger son and thus miss some of the implications waiting for us here.

When the elder brother made his *he wasted your money with harlots* accusation, we need to ask: Is his statement factual, or is it hyperbole rooted in his own compassionless, legalistic morality that exaggerates the shortcomings of others while defining his own flaws as virtues? Is his assertion true, or is it an unfair characterization that flows from the anger and resentment he has toward his younger brother? One might wonder: How would he even know whether or not his younger brother cavorted with prosti-

tutes? After all, he wasn't there. And how might his (unwarranted?) accusation have implicitly shaped the traditional approach of Western translators/commentators in describing his younger brother's lifestyle?

What Can We Surmise?

It is fairly easy to surmise (whether justified or not) that the younger son did indulge himself in sexual debauchery. After all, back then the number of pleasures available to a young man was more limited than the array of pleasures available today. And in the Decapolis, prostitution was common and was even institutionalized in some pagan temple rituals. Furthermore, he was a young man of means without any moral or social constraints. So it seems like an obvious conclusion, right? But what if that surmised outcome is flawed? Would it change in any way what this parable confronts us with? To test that, let's take a brief look at this question from another viewpoint.

Another Perspective

K. Bailey suggests our traditional understanding that the younger son "spent it (money) in immoral ways is built on his older brother's slanderous remarks." Bailey contends that the "parable itself is silent" as to how much immorality of behavior was actually involved. As previously stated, he suggests another way to view the younger son's lifestyle, namely that the younger son was just "carefree and a spendthrift" with a "sense of wasting money on personal pleasure." Bailey goes on to observe that "generosity is a supreme virtue, coveted by all" in the Middle East. By giving gifts and hosting extravagant banquets, this younger son would have been demonstrating his generosity, which Bailey suggests is the "highest kind of pleasure for such an individual" in that culture.⁹

Hitting Closer to Home

This different (non-debauchery) view of the nature of the extravagance and wastefulness of the younger son is actually more challenging for us today. It reminds us that one does not have to be given to extreme pursuits of immoral pleasure to be "lost." Being self-absorbed will eventually get you to the same place. Or maybe it helps to look at it from the other (spiritual) side of the coin: being self-absorbed in your own thing is as bad as if you have lived an immoral, dissipating life. Common to both of these lifestyle options is a failure to invest one iota in the Kingdom of God.

Remember Jesus' parable of the Talents¹⁰ and the parable of the Ten Minas?¹¹ In both, the servant who did absolutely nothing with his master's endowment was severely rebuked when his master returned. In burying/hiding his talent/minas, both servants exhibited none of the extravagant dissipation of the younger brother's lifestyle in Jesus' Luke 15 story. These servants didn't do anything "immoral" per se, at least to our traditional way of thinking. What both servants did do (because of their flawed view of their Master and his priorities and objectives) was absolutely nothing to advance their master's interests with the resources he had entrusted to them during his absence! Thus, the end result was the same – the Kingdom of God was not advanced.

From this perspective, the existence of debauchery as a lifestyle does not need to be resident in Jesus' story for the parable to either "work" or "speak." There are enough contextual excesses already in the story such as asking for your inheritance while your father is still alive, selling the land, breaching the implied "covenant" with the community, for this parable to be suffi-

ciently full of outrageous excesses. Whether the younger son did or did not cavort with prostitutes is not central to the story Jesus is weaving, even though the elder son may think so!

Where to Put the Emphasis?

Well then, which younger son lifestyle perspective should we embrace in this parable? The traditional immoral living perspective as suggested by MacArthur, or Bailey's suggestion that the younger son may just have been pursuing a life dedicated to typical hedonistic pleasures?

Sometime ago, a friend suggested to me that when you have two (or more) interpretive options in the Scripture that seem to equally "fit" the passage, always embrace the one that requires more of you rather than the one that requires less of you (better to be safe than sorry).

If we take that advice, it is not essential to the story whether this son engaged in a self-absorbed lifestyle or an immoral lifestyle. Both are wasteful. Both are narcissistic. Both are sinful. Both lifestyles do nothing to advance God's Kingdom. Neither has an Eternal perspective in view. Neither approach "redeems the time" as Paul would put it.¹² And therein resides the challenge for you and me. What are we doing with our time and resources that God has loaned us for a season? Because of these kinds of implications, I have personally chosen to see the younger son's (sinful) lifestyle as one of being more self-absorbed with what gives him pleasure and satisfaction in life than the pursuit of debauchery per se. For me, looking at it that way hits much closer to home and therefore asks much more of me.

Implications for Today

Being self-absorbed in your own pursuits is not unique to the First Century, and narcissistic behavior is not just confined to our 21st-century

secular culture. The world has indeed been successful in squeezing the church into its self-absorbed, narcissistic mold. Ever listen closely to the conversations in our church hallways? There you hear the word "my" being disproportionately used, e.g., my gifts, my call, my blessings, my ministry, even my Jesus. We seem to have missed the Baptist's realization that *He must increase and I must decrease*.¹³ I sometimes think in our church life we should ban the use of the word "my" for six months substituting "His" or "Him" instead.

These increasingly self-centered tendencies in "believers" has given rise to "spiritual narcissism," what some feel may become the malignant condition of the Western evangelical church. This notion of the pew consistently looking for "what's in it for **me**?" has pulled many a church into therapeutic consumerism with its emphasis on how to be a good parent, have a successful marriage, recover from divorce, manage your finances, etc. This implicitly fosters the notion that being a disciple of Jesus is much more about my personal self-development and self-fulfillment (Dr. Phil takes Jesus' rightful place!) than it is about picking up our crosses daily and following Him, no matter what. Nothing wrong with any of these "how to" programs so long as in the aggregate they don't take all of our time and energy away from nurturing a passion for biblical literacy (where God reveals Himself) and studying/pondering/ meditating on "who God is, what God cares about, and how God does things"¹⁴ so we can be transforming, glorifying disciples of Jesus.

No More Money

Suddenly one day the party was over. The money was suddenly gone. No more lavish banquets. No more extravagant gifts for his "friends." And soon thereafter, the "friends" became conspicu-

ously absent. He was indeed the captain of his own ship and wrecked his vessel (life) upon the rocks of pleasure. He left home to be free and paradoxically ended up becoming a prisoner to the “pleasure principle.” Another one of those spiritual “laws of gravity” that you cannot avoid was now manifesting itself:

For whatever a man is in the habit of sowing, this also will he reap; because the one who sows

*with a view to his own evil nature, from his evil nature as a source shall reap corruption.*¹⁵

In the next sentence, Jesus lets us in on the beginning of the inevitable consequences:

And having squandered all, there came a mighty famine in that country and he himself began to be in want.

And that is where we will continue next with this “greatest short story ever told.”

Reflections

- Can you relate to the “pleasure principle?” What observations from your experience would you add to describe its narcotic effect over time?
- How has your notion of what constitutes “having fun” changed over time? What wisdom would you now pass along to others who are just starting to “live life?”
- Have you had the experience of having “friends” drawn to you for what you could give or do for them rather than for who you are? Might you have also done that to others? What relational wisdom have you gained from those experiences?
- Have you ever traveled alone for a season? Conversely, have you ever traveled with another person (or two) into new situations, e.g., moving to a city, starting a new job? Contrast those two very different experiences and outcomes?

- Has accountability been, or is it a part of your life? What impact has that had on you?
- How did you react to the discussion about whether the younger son pursued a debauchery lifestyle as opposed to a self-absorbed, narcissistic lifestyle? From your perspective, are those significantly different lifestyles or essentially a distinction without a meaningful difference? How about when you consider that question from God's perspective?
- How did you react to the discussion about "spiritual narcissism" and "what's in it for me?" Would you agree or disagree with that characterization, and to what extent? Can you recognize any of those tendencies in yourself? In your church?
- Paul in Ephesians 5:15 exhorts us to be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but wise, making the most out of every opportunity. If you take a personal audit of your life in the last few months, are you mostly "redeeming the time" for God's Kingdom, or mostly wasting the time by focusing on yourself? Are you investing in God's Kingdom or in your kingdom? What does it mean to always see your life and everything around you from an Eternal perspective?
- If you suddenly received \$10,000,000, how do you think that would affect you? What might you end up doing with it? What might those future actions and decisions reveal about you?
- What takeaways are there for you from reflecting on this particular verse?

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3 Proverbs 27:17

4 Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Cross and the Prodigal* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1973) 41.

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10 Matthew 25:14

11 Luke 19:11

12 Ephesians 5:15

13 John 3:30

14 A Favorite phrase of Dr. James C. Martin, Co-Founder of Preserving Bible Times

15 Galatians 6:7-8

6

Desperation and Debasement

*All literature is born from within a cultural landscape.
It will pick up themes and images from within that cultural landscape,
use them generously, and build a framework from which stories can be told.
This is no less true for the Bible. The land and its culture, not merely the history
that happened there, are an indispensable aspect of the biblical story.*

—Gary M. Burge¹

Becoming Desperate

The remarkable father in Jesus' story responds to the shameful (and outrageous) insubordination of his sons with amazing grace and mercy as he grants the younger son's request and divides his estate between them. In great haste to leave, the younger son liquidates his inheritance so he can head off to an immorally (but not necessarily geographically) far place with cash in hand. There he dissipates himself and his inheritance in a self-absorbed pursuit of pleasure which dulls his discernment, suppresses his conscience and causes him to (almost) forget home. With the next sentence in this masterful story, Jesus shows us the consequences of the narcissistic lifestyle this younger son has deliberately pursued:



Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. – Luke 15:14 (NASB)

A Severe Famine

At this point in the story, Jesus' listeners would not have been surprised at the impoverished outcome of this younger son's pursuit of pleasure. In their worldview, living that way is supposed to be a "road to ruin."² They expected (as we often do) that he got just what he deserved

What would have taken aback Jesus' listeners is His insertion of a famine in the narrative. In that first-century Middle Eastern culture and for many still today, famine is a word that evokes starvation, terror and a cascade of dire consequences. In the West, we know "famine" mostly as a word we periodically read in our newspapers about seemingly remote regions in sub-Saharan Africa. Famine is not a reality with catastrophic consequences that many of us can identify with. Not so in the Middle East during biblical times where drought or insect causing famine was

always a possibility. With the vast majority of the first-century population of Israel being agrarian in nature chronically living on the edge of economic poverty,³ famine is an emotionally laden word that evokes the worst of all possible outcomes.

Note the Adjective

As if just using the word *famine* alone is insufficient to describe the extreme reality the younger son now faces, Jesus adds the adjective *severe* to place this famine way up on the Richter Scale of disasters! Wuest translates it as a *mighty famine*.⁴ In Jesus' storytelling, He portrays a desperate state of affairs! That categorization also typifies the spiritual famine that has ravaged the soul of this younger son.

Now What?

So what do you do when you are at the end of your rope in a famine? When there are no more coins in your pocket? When there are no "Help Wanted" signs to be seen and none of your old "friends" wants to lend a helping hand because they are not sure they will have enough resources to survive? As Robert Frost once observed, *home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in*.⁵ So time to go home, right?

Go Home?

It does seem rather obvious, doesn't it? You are at rock bottom. You are out of resources and options. Your naïve dream has turned into a living nightmare. But in the midst of all this, you can still remember home and your father's grace, mercy and compassion. As bad as this younger son has blown it, he still knows his father will receive him back.

But there is this issue with his elder brother and the corrosive hypocrisy (and judgment) that

oozes from the pores of his legalistic morality. This younger son knows how his older brother will respond to him – not with grace and a welcoming sense of compassion, but with scorn, derision and plenty of "I told you so's." Furthermore, going home would now obligate him to live off his brother's inheritance share.⁶ And he would never hear the end of that!

Then there is the very real issue of his estrangement from the community. As previously developed in chapter 5, by selling his share of the land, he breached his relationship with the village. Because of that he will forever be *persona nongrata* on every street corner in town, and he has no way to ever right that wrong. In fact he might even be physically harmed by the village's wrath⁷ within minutes of his return. Who needs that! As grim as things are, he still has a little pride left! And so going home is not (yet) an option. Thus, he needs to come up with a plan that might work in this desperate famine environment.

Contemporary Implications

I sometimes wonder if we in the church realize how easy it is to slip into an elder-brother, legalistic morality. And how the resultant hypocrisy becomes an effective barrier keeping desperate, younger-brother type people from wanting (or daring) to come "home" to our fellowships. For these hurting younger sons, it's not so much a problem with the Father as it is with those elder sons, particularly when they end up in prominent church leadership positions. When elder-brother hypocrisy manifests itself, the first thing that usually goes is compassion for those who are not like us, or who don't behave like we do, or who have made serious "mistakes."

Jesus was very clear in His Luke 4 “Rescue Manifesto” that He came in a spirit of compassion to set the prisoners free.⁸ He didn’t come to criticize or berate them, or to create barriers to their coming “home.” In fact He came to seek out those prisoners, not shun them. All of which raises the question: What’s the best way to deal with periodic outbreaks of elder brotheritis in the church (and in ministry) without compromising God’s Truth?

An Ideal!

Jesus dramatically sets the stage for the ultimate debasement of this younger son in the next few sentences as he describes the younger son’s attempt to deal with his new famine reality.

And having proceeded, he forced himself upon one of the citizens of that country who was unwilling to hire him and only took him after persistent entreaty. And he sent him into the fields to be feeding hogs. And he was longing to fill his stomach with some of the carob-pods which the hogs were eating. And no one was giving to him. – Wuest 15:15&16

Can You Believe This?

Desperate times evoke desperate measures in desperate people. Rather than go home where he knows his Father will more than meet his needs, and where he is convinced his elder brother will always be “on his case,” this younger son decides it’s better to try and find a menial job in this famine setting (where I suspect no one is hiring!) than to go home. Not very realistic, but being realistic is not yet part of how he sees things. So he decides to target a (Gentile) *citizen* of this country who has a herd of pigs. K. Bailey suggests that the use of the word *citizen* conveys a “man of some means and position,” presumably

a reasonably wealthy man.⁹ Jesus also uses the Greek word *kollaō* in the story to describe the younger son’s desperate approach. Bailey contends the word’s root meaning suggests he *glued* himself to this citizen, trying his best to force this Gentile to hire him.¹⁰

It would seem obvious that in a famine setting this unnamed *citizen* has no interest in adding anyone to his payroll. Yet this young Jewish man keeps trying to force himself upon him. So the Gentile devises a culturally acceptable way to get rid of this down-on-his-luck Jew who is constantly beseeching him. In typical Middle Eastern fashion, rather than dismissing the foreigner outright, He assigns him a job for which no Jew in his right mind would ever accept – feeding pigs! That, he feels, is guaranteed to drive this young man away.

But what this pig-owning citizen failed to understand was just how desperate the Jewish foreigner is. And so the younger son accepts that ultimate debasement in exchange for a place to be (with the pigs). Apparently he gets no food as part of his “hiring” because he is reduced to being a beggar. But even begging doesn’t work for Jesus says *no one was giving to him*. How bad can it possibly get?! To keep from going home, this younger son is willing to utterly debase himself which just exasperates his sense of loneliness and despair. Once again Jesus uses additional extremes in developing the story line to set the stage for the overwhelming (yes, extreme) grace and compassion that is about to be manifested in His story.

Nothing to Eat

The younger son’s find-a-job-to-feed-my-stomach strategy is not working. He is still starving, physically and spiritually. Even the pigs

are eating better than he is. And no one is offering him even the smallest morsel of bread. Furthermore, he has no means to buy anything to eat even if somehow someone was willing to sell him some food. Now what? Will he starve to death or finally go back to “face the music” while he still has a small measure of strength left to walk home? (As we will see, a very different kind

of music will be a part of his homecoming.) Jesus lets us in on what happens next as reality finally starts to sink into the younger son’s way of seeing things:

That brought him to his senses – Luke 15:17a
(Message)

And that is where we will continue with this “greatest short story ever told.”

Reflections

- What’s the closest thing to a physical, spiritual, emotional, or economic famine (desperate situation) you’ve experienced in your journey? What did that do to you? Does that experience help you to relate to this younger son’s desperate situation and mindset?
- Have you ever struggled with the notion of “going home” even though you knew that would ultimately be in your best interest? What were some of the barriers you had to deal with? Did that experience help you to relate to this younger son’s state of mind?

- How would you answer the question: What's the best way to deal with periodic outbreaks of elder brotheritis in the church (and in ministry) without compromising God's Truth? Are you able to recognize Pharisaic tendencies in yourself? Might you have attitudes towards some people that would keep them from wanting to come "home" to the Father? What is the role of others in our lives to help us see, and then change those elder-brother tendencies?
- What are some proven approaches that keep the soil of our compassion gardens well tilled so that we are receptive to (quickly) extending compassion to people who are not like us? Would you say it's easier to extend compassion to friends and acquaintances outside our families or to those within our own families? Why?
- Isn't it amazing how stubborn and resistant that a little bit of pride can make us and keep us from doing the "obvious"? Have you learned how to effectively deal with that? How?

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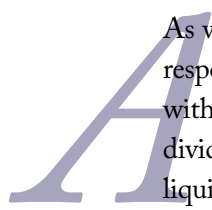
7

Remembering and Repenting

*There is no substitute for reading the Bible (in context).
It throws a great deal of light on the commentaries!*

—Unknown (added)

Tending Pigs

As we saw in previous chapters, the remarkable father in Jesus' story responds to the shameful and outrageous insubordination of his two sons with amazing grace and mercy as he grants the younger son's request and divides his estate between them. In great haste to leave, the younger son liquidates his inheritance so he can head off to an immoral place with cash in hand. There he dissipates himself and his inheritance in a self-absorbed pursuit of pleasure until there is nothing left. Void of resources, and now facing a severe famine in the land, he starves while tending pigs. With that as a backdrop, Jesus describes what happens next to the younger son's way of seeing and understanding things:



That brought him to his senses. – Luke 15:17a (Message)

And having come to his senses – Wuest

But when he came to himself – ESV

But when he came to his senses – NASB

Then it came over him – Schonfield (*The Original New Testament*)¹

What Does it Mean?

What's contained in this phrase *but when he came to his senses* or (my preference) *then it came over him*? The best understanding seems to be that this younger son began to comprehend his true condition and the reality of his situation. He began to see that he now needs to get outside of himself to be rescued from his dying condition. He knows only too well that he tried to rescue himself with his own pig-tending game plan, but that failed miserably. As J. MacArthur puts it, "we lack the ability to repair our own broken lives."² That reality is starting to dawn on this younger son (and all of the "self-help" books at Barnes & Noble are of no use!).

This begs the question: How does one come to those kinds of realizations?

Hebrew Repentance

To properly consider this key verse, we first need some context for the first-century Hebrew understanding of “repentance.” So let’s take a slight detour and revisit John the Baptist (really John the Immerser) and his call to “Repent.”³

John’s primary message to observant Judaism and to the Pharisees in particular was their need to “repent.” To Western evangelicals, the word repent usually means something akin to “fall on your knees, tell God (and perhaps someone else as well) you deeply regret what you have done, and that you will now head in a different direction.” But there is more to the first-century Hebrew understanding of *repent* than that.

For a first-century Jew, repent meant to “fundamentally change the way you see and understand everything.”⁴ Using our 21st-century vocabulary, first-century “repentance” brings a change to your worldview and all the paradigms that come with it. It embodies a “turning from” one way of seeing and understanding things and “turning to” a new, very different way of seeing and understanding things. This kind of repentance involves “a transformation of the entire person.”⁵

In its Hebrew roots, *repent* also carries with it the understanding of being restored as in “*He restores my soul* (Psalm 23:3).⁶ It encompasses being brought back, suggestive of a lost lamb being put back on the right path. A Hebrew would fuse these various aspects of repentance together and understand it to mean that your faulty (spiritual) eyesight is restored back to 20/20 vision so you can see things clearly and realistically. In other words, it is to have various

forms (cultural, religious, narcissistic) of glaucoma removed from your eyes so you can spiritually “see.” In John’s context, *repent* meant to see the reality of (and to prepare for) the moral righteousness of the inbreaking Kingdom of God that Jesus would be inaugurating.

But even with that understanding, the same question remains: How does one suddenly change the way one sees and understands things? What is (or are) the causative agents that prompt this kind of repentance?

Cause and Effect

For me this may be the most intriguing verse of all in this “greatest short story ever told.” When people are (spiritually) starving and thrashing about in their lostness, what brings them to their senses? What causes them to suddenly start to see things differently? This parable seems to suggest that acute adversity is a causative force. Yet we all know of people who, when they hit rock bottom, just continued to flail about in their lostness. So it can’t be adversity per se that brings people back to their senses.

Clues in the Passage

Some clues as to what causes this younger son to come to his senses appears in Jesus’ next sentence:

He said, “How many hired servants of my father have more bread than they can eat, and, as for myself, I am perishing here of hunger! (15:17) – Wuest (emphasis added)

The apparent causative reasons for this wayward younger son coming to his senses are 1) remembering that he has a *father*, 2) remembering that he has a *home* (where the servants eat well), and 3) realizing that he is dying (*perishing*). Implicit in this is that he remembers not only that he has a father, but what kind of a father (character, attributes) he is and what kind of home (values) he came from.

The Importance of Remembering

I once read an article that claimed that “remembering” was the predominate theme of the Scriptures. Whether or not that is actually the case, it certainly is true that a central theme of God throughout Scripture is *remember Me*. Remember who *I AM* and what I do because of who *I AM*. These two facets of God are fused together for a Redeemer redeems and a Lover loves. God not only continually exhorts His people to remember who He is and how He does things, but He also gives them very tangible signs to remind them of some aspect of Himself, such as rainbows, Passover, unleavened bread, festivals, Sabbath, manna, Scripture, the Cross, communion, and more.

Remembering is Crucial

The question is: Why this steady stream of remembering reminders from God? Because God, knowing human kind perfectly, is acutely aware of how easily we can forget. Three days after God parted the waters and drowned their Egyptian oppressors; the Israelites are not only doubting, but bitterly complaining in the wilderness. Within 24 hours after standing alone for God on Mt. Carmel in the midst of incredible triumph, Elijah is seen running for his life from an angry Queen Jezebel. How easily and quickly we can shift our gaze from the “hills from whence cometh our help” (Psalm 121:1) and refocus them self-centeredly in the valleys (and ditches) of our own lives.

Remembering and Faith

Strong faith is built on constantly remembering God’s nature and deeds. Those revealed truths are crucial, for without faith rooted in retrospective fact, there is little prospective hope. Consequently, we need to become ever better

historians of our own lives so as to see God continually and faithfully at work within us. As contemporary Israelites, we need to repeatedly recount how God has delivered, sustained, redeemed, protected and cared for us not only in our tough times but in the trials of daily living as well. In God’s Plan, He gave us the gift of His own Spirit to remind and prompt us of His nature and deeds (John 14:26).

Since God has not and will not change His nature or His covenant with His people, what we see in our past, when we take the time to remember, is the same God who will lead us into the future. Therein rests our hope. While our circumstances continually change, the underlying issues of our lives remain the same. For that reason we need to be inspired and empowered people who daily remember never to forget Him.

That’s what happened to this younger son in an alien land dying of starvation while tending pigs during a famine. He finally remembered. He remembered his father (and who is father is), and that he had a home where he belongs. I have no doubt that as part of that remembering he also began to realize the extent of his alienation from his father and, at the same time, had a renewed sense of sonship. While the text is silent as to what caused him to remember, we do no injustice to this passage in suggesting that remembering those things about his father and his home was (using Scripture to interpret Scripture) God’s gift to him as yet another facet of His amazing diamond of Grace.

Drifting Away and Remembering

Periodically, we are all contemporary prodigals. Our wandering ways are simply manifested in us differently. Usually we don’t physically go away, as much as we spiritually and/or emotionally just drift away for a day, a time, or a season. We can

so easily become enamored and then preoccupied with the “good” things in our lives. And as enjoyable and satisfying as they may be, they can easily take us to a “foreign land” where we are no longer “home” in a spiritual sense with our Father.

Helmut Thielicke, a German theologian and pastor in post-war Hamburg, Germany, once said that we can easily become so preoccupied with the “pennies in the Hand of God” that we no longer even see his hand, despite our closeness to it. And having missed His Hand, we obviously miss His Arm, and therefore miss His embrace as well. So easily we become seduced by the world’s activity addictions. As a result we forget we “belong,” and our sense of “belonging” gets switched off (again). The circuitry is still operable, but there is no power flowing through it. That’s when we again need to make a conscious decision to “remember.” To realize afresh that not only do I “belong” to Him, but that I am loved incredibly by Him. And out of that “belonging” comes our sense of identity, purpose and hope. We not only have a destiny, but a Heavenly Father who will lead us by the hand (Psalm 32:8) to it and through it. We need to be a people who constantly remember these “essential” things.

Remembering, Confession and Repentance

From this parable, it appears that one of the first steps in repentance is the process of remembering. Note carefully the sequence of events in Jesus’ story that we just reviewed. First the younger son remembers that he has a father and a home. Then he realistically evaluates the hopeless state of his current condition. And that then leads him to acknowledge his sinfulness:

I will get up and go to my father and tell him, “Father, I have sinned against Heaven and in your sight, and no longer deserve to be called your son (15:18-19a) Shoenfield (emphasis added)

This sequence of remembering brings this younger son to not only acknowledge his sinfulness, but to be specific in who he has sinned against. He is beginning to see things from a very different perspective. His repentance is now underway. As they say at Cape Kennedy for the first stage of liftoff – “We have ignition.”

General and Specific Sense of Sin

John R. DeWitt points out in his book on this parable that “there is a difference which is necessary for us to understand between a general sense of sin and a conviction of sin.”⁷ There is a difference between admitting “I am a sinner in the (general) sense and that, after all, we are all sinners and no one’s perfect (and in fact I am better than most)” and a personal conviction and declaration of my own sin; e.g., when Isaiah sees God in all His glory and realizes *Woe is me, I am ruined. Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips* (6:5).

We see in this parable that when this younger son becomes personally convicted of his own sinfulness in a vertical sense (*sinned against God*), he starts to confront his own unworthiness as well (*I am not worthy to be called your son*). Truer words were never spoken. As a result, rescue and restoration are now likewise underway! Is it a perfect repentance? No. It has the aroma of a “self-serving repentance that offers the possibility of survival.”⁸ But at least his moral compass is beginning to move in the right direction.

Whatever Became of Sin

It may not be fashionable to teach and preach about sin in our entertainment oriented, seeker friendly forms of spiritual narcissism (what’s in it for me) that comprise many of our contemporary worship paradigms, but Jesus doesn’t duck the reality of sin; it is the core issue. When we are

personally convicted (like this younger son) of our sin and acknowledge our sinfulness (and the extent of it) as well as who we have sinned against (vertical and horizontal), biblical repentance is underway. It is our sin – our “irrational rebellion against a loving heavenly Father” that is “a calculated, deliberate violation of the relationship we have with our Creator”⁹ – that is the core issue we need to be convicted of. It is so easy to minimize the weight and degree of our sinfulness by obliquely referring to our “mistakes” and “bad decisions.” This allows us to excuse the inexcusable and avoid taking ownership of our deliberate cosmic mutiny that led to those outcomes. Only when we see, acknowledge, and deeply regret the degree of our rebellion against God, will the Gospel of Grace overwhelm our souls.

Parenthetically, I like the nautical understanding of mutiny where the crew of the ship throws the Captain overboard and puts their hands on the wheel to steer the ship where they want it to go. That is the operative reality of sin – mutiny indeed!

Another Game Plan

In deciding to go home, this younger son is uncertain how he will be received by his father, and is particularly not sure how his older brother will react. Therefore, he concludes it may be better to live “off campus” for awhile and have an arms-length relationship with both of them until he can assess the true temperature of the water. So he comes up with another game plan:

Treat me like one of your employees. Luke 15:18

And that is where we will continue with this “greatest short story ever told.”

Biblical Literacy and Remembering

Can you make a strong case for why biblical literacy and remembering who God is and how

He does things must go hand-in-hand? Given the wide-spread biblical illiteracy rampant in Western Evangelicalism (where many are now suggesting that even characterizing it as “a mile wide and one inch deep” is generous), what might you conclude? That’s one reason why we do what we do at PBT – give people a vision (and frameworks, tools, and resources) for what it means to (contextually) feast on God’s Word, not just snack on it, as well as expand their paradigm about how to go about that feeding.

A Final Thought on Remembering

If someone asked you what are two things about God we should never, ever forget, what would be your response? For me, I would nominate the Holiness and Sovereignty of God as they are the two overarching attributes that give weight and definition to all of God’s other attributes. It is, after all, a Holy Love and a Sovereign Love that God exercises when and where He wills. It is likewise a Holy Grace and a Sovereign Grace that He exercises when and where He pleases. While we can all agree that God is indeed Holy and Sovereign, the real issue is: What does that mean for my daily life? Answering that question is why we need to be students of the Bible and regular practitioners of the spiritual disciplines.

When we lose sight of God’s Sovereignty (and His daily Providence) over all things, we quickly lapse into worry and anxiety. These are the signs that we have indeed forgotten that He is Sovereign and have fallen into idolatry – because something in our lives has become more important than Him. And when we forget His Holiness, we soon become cavalier about our sin and too easily reach an accommodation with it. If you would like a couple of classic books to ponder, consider “*The Holiness of God*” by R.C. Sproul and “*The Sovereignty of God*” by A. W. Pink as good reminder reads.

Reflections

- How many times have you had to *come to your senses*? What were the causative factors?
- It takes time to remember even if you are a historian by nature. How and when do you make/take time to remember and to recount God's deeds in your life? How have you cultivated the discipline of remembering in your life? What is required for you to become a better historian of God's faithfulness in your life?
- When it comes to remembering "who God is, what God cares about, and how God does things,"¹⁰ how do you continually remind yourself that our Heavenly Father is Holy and Sovereign over all things? What does that mean for your life today?

- Are you asking the Holy Spirit to remind you and convict you of the sin that still remains in your life?
- What is your strategy for increasing your biblical literacy and understanding of who God is and how He does things?
- Because the Adversary is constantly trying to get us to forget God's many blessings, and to focus only on unanswered prayer, a journal (a written record authored by you and God's Spirit) of all significant blessings and answered prayers is one way to help you remember God's work and presence in your life. It is one way that you can minister to yourself like no one else can.
- Remembering that part of the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to "remind," make it a practice to ask the Spirit to work in you to become a better rememberer.
- What speaks to you in this chapter? Where does the rubber hit the road in your life today?

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8

A Paradigm Changing Welcome Home

Reading the Bible through fresh eyes constantly reminds us of the depths that still remain to be discovered there.

—Philip Jenkins

Continuity

As we saw in previous Chapters, this remarkable father in Jesus' parable responds to the shameful and outrageous insubordination of his two sons with amazing grace and mercy as he grants the younger son's request and divides his estate between them. In great haste to leave, the younger son liquidates his inheritance so he can leave for an immorally "far" place with cash in hand. There he dissipates himself and his inheritance in a self-absorbed pursuit of pleasure until there is nothing left. Void of resources, and now facing a severe famine in the land, he starves while tending pigs. That brings him to his senses and causes him to remember his father, which causes him to decide to go back home.



With that backdrop, Jesus lets us in on this younger son's thinking. Not knowing what his father's terms and conditions for returning home will be, he comes up with his own culturally appropriate (sub-sonship) scenario of how he feels he now needs to relate to his father going forward:

...make me at once as one of your employees. – Wuest

...take me on as a hired hand. – Message

Hired Hands

According to K. Bailey, "hired hands" were free people in this Middle Eastern village culture who would live off their own income and had their own dwelling place in the village, what we would call day laborers today. Such a role would permit the younger son to return "home" and work for his father, yet not have to live with his father. But as Bailey observes, this is not necessarily a workable solution as this younger son would still need to find some way to reconcile himself with the village if he is to reside there with any sense of safety, belonging and involvement.¹

Another Game Plan

In going home, this younger son is uncertain how his father will receive him, and is particularly not sure how his older brother will react. He remembers times past and how kind, gracious and merciful his father was. But that was all before he made the worst decision of his life – asking for his inheritance while his father was still living, selling his part of the estate to (most likely) Gentiles, and then blowing it all in this morally corrupt place.² That was before he humiliated his father personally and in the eyes of the community (where he is now *persona nongrata*).

Might this younger son have reasoned, “There are some things you do, that once you’ve done them you can never go back to the way things were. What father would ever take such a scandalous son back? Grace and mercy like that simply do not exist. Furthermore, I don’t deserve it. Whatever punishment my father hands out to me would be entirely justified.” And so he began to wonder, just how would his father receive him upon his return? How much trust could he put in his father’s prior love? How much had his father’s love toward him changed? In fact, would there even be any love left for him at all?” Ever had such thoughts on your journey?

The Elder Brother

Then there is his older brother who seems to have a Ph.D. in legalistic morality that he so easily projects onto others, and then finds them woefully deficient. In this observant Jewish world, compassion was withheld from anyone who does not behave like we (the village) do. Thus, this younger son might have felt, “My brother is going to have an I-told-you-so field day when I return. I will never hear the end of it! He will always be reminding me of my guilt and

shame, failures and shortcomings, and my ‘unforgiveable sin.’ I need to find a way to avoid his spiteful religiosity at all costs!”

Thus, this about-to-go-home younger son concludes he needs to live “off campus” at least for a while. That way he can have a controlled, hopefully non-confrontational, arms-length relationship with both his father and brother until he can assess the current nature of each of them. So he comes up with his hired hand game plan which offers him little pay, no benefits (precluded from eating at his father’s table like the servants do), and no job security. But at least he will be able to control his involvements with the family.

Paying Back

There may be another reason why this younger son conjures up this *hired hand* strategy. Most rabbinical paradigms (ways of thinking and understanding) of repentance included both atonement and reparation. That made repentance an act of work to reestablish (obtain) God’s favor. Furthermore, reparation/restitution needed to be in place before repentance was granted and forgiveness was permissible.

With that as a backdrop, the younger son’s *hired hand* approach might slowly enable him to earn enough money to buy some livestock to give back to his father as partial restitution for his past liquidation of those assets. Yet at the same time, he knows he has no hope of ever being able to achieve complete restitution. Case in point: He would never be able to re-acquire the land he sold quickly at a discount. But over time he might be able to make some amends for his egregious behavior by replacing a portion of the sheep and cattle he so quickly sold during his exit strategy. It seems to be part of our self-help DNA to want to do something to (partially) earn

or justify our forgiveness. Can you relate to that kind of thinking? Ever been there?

What If?

As the younger son gets ready to go home, we need to stop and ponder this father for a moment. From the contextual perspective of the Scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' audience, they would not have been surprised at all if this father chose to respond to his returning wayward son in their culturally appropriate, "religious" way. Consistent with their view (paradigm) of how God does things, they would have expected this father to respond to his returning son with no compassion whatsoever, e.g.

- *There are limits to my grace and you've exceeded them. There are boundaries to my mercy and you've crossed them. Please leave now and don't ever darken my doorway again.*
- *For religious and cultural reasons, I've decided to "shun" you for the way you humiliated and disgraced me. You have forfeited your sonship forever. Get out of my sight!*
- *Maintaining my reputation in the community and in the clan is more important to me than being reconciled with such a wayward son. Be gone by sundown or I will have the village stone you.*
- *I waited, and waited, and waited for you to come home; and I've waited long enough. I'm sorry you took so long to come to your senses, but it's too late. I have run out of patience with you.*

Or

- *You can stay here for awhile, but only on my terms. Therefore, you are to stay in your room for 90 days with one meal a day because I want you to stew in your own juices and think about the scandalous things you have done. Furthermore,*

you will be on probation for the next five years which will give you ample time to prove to me you are still worthy of my love. After that we'll re-evaluate your future. After what you've done to me, I'm in no hurry to accept you back, let alone restore you to sonship.

- Add your own conditional acceptance scenarios. Ever been a part of devising or receiving one?

With any of the preceding scenarios, this story would have a very different outcome. Fortunately, this father in Jesus' story represents our heavenly Father. And thus He is unlike any human father we have ever known or heard of. And therein rests our hope for unconditional reconciliation and total restoration of sonship (and daughter-ship) when we've blown it.

Practice Makes Perfect

Walking home afforded this younger son plenty of time to practice and refine his make-me-a-hired-hand pitch. His whole future could hang in the balance depending on just how well his proposal is received by his father. While he indeed knew his father's gracious and merciful heart from his youth, still it might have been hard for him to imagine that his father's compassion could extend to embrace his recent past and present circumstances. Thus in his wildest dreams, this younger son could never have imagined the reception he was about to receive from his amazing father and how irrelevant his *hired hand* proposal would be.

Second Thoughts

Slowly walking/staggering home (remember he is close to starving to death), this younger son had plenty of time for second (and third) thoughts – to wonder again if going home was the right decision. In our humanity, we can so easily

second guess the important decisions and commitments we make. As part of that waffling process, we begin to entertain counterproductive fleeting thoughts and fears that cause us to consider reversing our prior decision(s).

Those second-guessing voices have three sources. As Luther reminds us, there are three enemies of the Christian – the world (its narcissistic culture and the idols it presents to us), our own flesh (fallen humanity), and God's Adversary (deception, deceit and distortion). From these sources comes the misleading promptings that suggest maybe we didn't make such a "good" decision after all. In the case of this younger son, I wonder if he began to think/reason... "Why would I ever think that my father would take me back? I know the village will never forgive me! And my brother will rebuke me for the rest of my days. Why am I doing this? Where did I ever get the notion that going home could possibly work? The more I think about it, the more I'm convinced this will never work – I can never go home again. There is absolutely no hope of my ever being restored to sonship." We've all been there at one time or another. We all know how easily we can talk ourselves out of not doing what we previously thought was the "right" thing to do. And we all know the temptation to flinch at the last moment and turn back from going home and facing the Father.

Fortunately, this father (who is our heavenly Father in Jesus' story) knows our weaknesses and tendencies perfectly. In addition to being gracious, merciful, longsuffering and compassionate (only a partial list!), he is also wise. He knows perfectly well that the last mile home can be the longest and the hardest, when our apprehensions and ambivalences peak, and when we are the most scared. He knows the debates we

have within ourselves and our tendency to flinch at the very last moment. So he has a surprising, self-initiating way to nip those last-minute human tendencies in the bud – He runs to greet us, then hugs us and kisses us profusely!

Remember...Mercy is Missing³

It might be helpful here to remember that by the time of Jesus, many of the Pharisees and their rabbis had taken observant Judaism to a place that did not honor God. In their zeal to honor God in all that they did, they gradually evolved an Insider-Outsider "theology." They created a category of people called "sinners" (a technical term) as a means of making distinctions about who was on the "inside" of God's favor and who was on the "outside." These "outsiders" were people (the Pharisees began to reason) that God did not like, e.g. lepers, tanners, paralytics, tax collectors, prostitutes, and in our Luke 15 context, those sons who had shamed their families and went off to a morally corrupt (Gentile) place. In their paradigm, these kinds of people could not easily (or sometimes never) be forgiven. This resulting insider/outsider thinking legitimized the withholding of compassion, mercy and forgiveness from those whom God always intended to be recipients of it. As we saw in Jesus' handling of those Isaiah 61 & 58 verses in Luke 4, bringing God's mercy, compassion and forgiveness to the unfortunate was going to be a foundational paradigm of His ministry. And in Luke 5, 6, 7, & 8, Jesus does exactly that as He implements and lives out His Nazareth "Rescue Manifesto." In Luke 15, Jesus elaborates on just how radical His Father's compassion is, on how far it will go, and therefore how radical His disciple's paradigms will need to be so as to emulate that heavenly compassion.

Can You Imagine This!

As Jesus, the master story teller, continues to unfold His story, He stuns the Scribes and Pharisees' in His audience (and I suspect His listening disciples as well) with the next sentence in this greatest of short stories ever told:

And while he was yet a long distance away, his father saw him and was moved with compassion, and having run, he fell on his neck and tenderly kissed him again and again. – Wuest

But while he was still a good way off his father saw him, and yearning with pity, ran and threw himself on his neck and kissed him. – Schonfield

Jesus now presents us with a stunning, visual picture of the immensity of God's love. As J R. DeWitt observes, "it is an *antecedent* love; it is prior to and before any love on our part for him."⁵ It is also an anticipatory love as well as a love that springs into action. This is a story "that speaks about a love that existed before any rejection was possible and that will still be there after all rejections have taken place."⁶ From this vast reservoir of love, this father *sees* from a distance, he *pities* (has compassion), he *runs*, he *hugs*, and he *kisses*. On this culture's Richter Scale of Inconceivable Compassion, this is off the charts; it is unfathomable! Is this manifestation of compassionate love amazing, or what? What Jesus gives us here is a living portrait of *grace upon grace* (John 1:16). It brings to mind Paul's great benediction at the end of Ephesians 3: *For He can do far more abundantly than anything we might ever think or imagine.*

Let's briefly reflect on each one of these welcome-home actions and, as we do, ask ourselves: Is this our understanding of God's compassion that we are called to emulate? Is this really our view of God when we mess up? Or do we need to revise/expand our understanding of

"who God is, what God cares about, and how God does things."

He Sees!

There is something extraordinary contained in that phrase, and *while he was yet a long distance away, his father saw him*. You don't just inadvertently see someone while they are a long way off. Doing that requires one to be intentional, deliberate, and even methodical. This conjures up a picture of a father who not only yearns for, but is seemingly impatient for his wayward son to come home; a father who (daily?) scans the horizons of his local terrain looking for the silhouette of any person who just might be his son.

He Pities and Runs!

It would seem that the underlying Greek word here typically translated as run can equally be translated as *raced*.⁸ K. Bailey observes that an Oriental nobleman in flowing robes never runs anywhere. The greater your stature in the Middle East, the slower you walk.⁹ Running forces a man to pick up his long, flowing outer garment and raise it above his knees to keep from tripping, thus showing his bare legs, a shameful act in this culture.

Why Does This Father Run?

Three reasons for running might be suggested as flowing out of his father's compassionate love.

First, running reflects his intense yearning, an ache in his heart for reconciliation. It harkens back to the first parable in Luke 15 where the shepherd in Jesus' parable leaves the other sheep and goes out to bring the lost sheep back home. **Secondly**, running pre-empts the possibility that this younger son will change his mind at the very last moment. At the same time, it sends an affirming message to his son that he doesn't need to regret his decision to come home. **Thirdly**, this

father is sending an intentional message to the village of the still overflowing love in his heart for his son and how he expects the village to emulate his acceptance. This father wants his son's relationship with the community fully restored because it's a holistic restoration he has in view. By running, he diverts the rightful shame due his son and brings shame upon himself (hint of the Cross). Running also protects this younger son. J. MacArthur is convinced "that what moved the father to run was a deep sense of empathy in anticipation of the contempt that was sure to be poured on the son as he walked through the village."¹⁰ Were the villagers to see this wayward son first, who knows what physical harm they might inflict on him, e.g. stoning.

Bailey suggests that in this Middle Eastern village setting, this father's running would be so surprising that many in the village would follow this father out of the village to see for themselves why he is running.¹¹ Assuming this to be true, some of the villagers and the servants in the father's household are now in an intimate position to closely observe what happens next.

He Hugs and Kisses

A father's kiss in this Middle Eastern cultural setting is a public (family) sign of reconciliation and forgiveness. This father doesn't want the compassionate intent of his welcome and his intent to restore his younger son to be missed by his servants or by the community. So he communicates his intent in triplicate by running, hugging and kissing. As Wuest renders in his translation of the New Testament, the underlying Greek word translated by many as kissed can just

as easily be translated as *kissed again and again*.¹² This profuseness of kissing poignantly conveys the father's intense passion for reconciliation and forgiveness. Despite the pigs-sty stench that permeates his younger son's wretched clothes and unwashed skin, he *kisses him again and again*. As MacArthur observes: "Such an embrace with repeated kisses was a gesture that signified not only the father's delirious joy but also his full acceptance, friendship, love, restoration, and total reconciliation."¹³ Is this an integral part of our view of God? As emulating disciples of Jesus, are we prepared to manifest His "delirious joy" in those ways as well! Remember Ephesians 5:1 – *be imitators of God ...*

Our View of God

Is what we have just seen the father doing in Jesus' story consistent with our view of God when we mess up (or mess up again)? That is the paradigm with which Jesus is challenging the Pharisees, His disciples, and you and me with in this story. Does our view of God (and His heart) include a Father who can't wait to run toward us, hug us and smother us with compassionate kisses when we decide to come home (again?) That's the compelling portrait of His Father's heart than Jesus is painting for us in this parable.

The Impact

I believe it is an understatement to say that the welcome home this younger son receives by his father is not what he expected! So what is the impact on this returning son of this father's "grace upon grace" welcome? How did it affect him and how did he then respond to it? That's where we will continue next with this greatest of short stories ever told.

Reflections

- Like this younger son, have you ever made a decision to go “home” after really blowing it? How hard was it? What can you add to this story?
- Is what we have just seen consistent with your paradigm of compassion (and love) when a prodigal (finally) returns home? Where might your view of God (and His compassion) need to change?
- What strikes you in this parable about how his father welcomes this wayward child home? If (first-century) disciples are those who have a passion to emulate everything their rabbi (Jesus) does, what are some of the implications for us as His followers today?
- Would you be willing to publically shame yourself in the eyes of your community/church by unconventionally “running” to welcoming a prodigal back “home” to your fellowship? Why or why not?
- Like the father in Jesus’ story, do you have a passion to be reconciled with, and to forgive those who have wronged you? Or might you be better described as a fickle forgiver and a reluctant restorer with your conditional compassion? If so, what the best way to receive a Kingdom heart transplant?
- Assuming that you just might have a prodigal history, can you relate to wanting to do something to earn/deserve/warrant part of your forgiveness and restoration? Works theology dies hard doesn’t it!
- In your view of God, do you see yourself as one who is always His “beloved” and one who is always welcome home with “delirious joy” no matter what?

- Have you ever devised your own hired hand plans (terms and conditions) for God in your prayers to justify/explain what you now want to do (or have done)?
- Ever thought of God's love as being a cascade of action verbs, e.g. run, hug, kiss, directed toward you?
- Do these two Lukan verses put back into context give you a more expansive understanding on how much you are loved, valued, and just how much you have been forgiven?
- Do these verses give you have an added appreciation of why A. W. Tozer said, "*What come into our mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us.*"
- Where/how does this parable speak to you, challenge you, and/or comfort you today?

Sources and Notes

1 Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Cross and the Prodigal* (Concordia, St. Louis, MO, 1973) 49.

2 For a fuller development of just how badly this younger son blew it, revisit Chapter 3.

3 For more on this "Mercy is Missing" theme, revisit Chapter 2.

4 For more on Jesus' "Rescue Manifesto" in Luke 4, see Chapter 3, "Mutiny on the Sabbath," in Doug Greenwold, *Encounters with Jesus* (Bible-in-Context Ministries: Columbia, MD, 2008) 29-36.

5 John R. DeWitt, *Amazing Love* (The Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, PA, 1981) 101.

6 Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 102.

7 A favorite phrase of Dr. James C. Martin, co-founder of Preserving Bible Times.

8 Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Cross and the Prodigal* 54.

9 Ibid.

10 John MacArthur, *A Tale of Two Sons* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008) 115.

11 Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Cross and the Prodigal* 55.

12 Kenneth S. Wuest, *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1994)

13 John MacArthur, *A Tale of Two Sons* 117.

9

An Extravagant Restoration

At some point in ecclesiastical history, someone snatched away the inceptive Hebrew blueprint by which Jesus' movement was being constructed and replaced it with a non-Hebraic one.

As a result, what has been built since is at best a caricature of what was intended. In many respects, it is downright contrary and antagonistic to the spirit of the original believing community.

—Brian Knowles¹

Continuity

As we learned in prior chapters, this remarkable father in Jesus' parable responds to the shameful and outrageous insubordination of his two sons with amazing grace and mercy as he grants the younger son's request and divides his estate between them. In great haste, the younger son liquidates his inheritance so he can leave for an immorally "far" place with cash in hand. There he dissipates himself and his inheritance in a self-absorbed pursuit of pleasure until there is nothing left. Void of resources, and now facing a severe famine in the land, he starves while tending pigs. That brings him to his senses and causes him to remember his father, prompting a decision to go back home and become a hired hand. As he returns, his father sees him afar off and, shocking the village and his son, runs to meet him, then hugs and kisses him.



With that as the prologue, Jesus now unfolds how this father's paradigm-shattering "welcome home" actions impact his returning younger son and what this amazing father does next:

Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against Heaven and in your sight, and no longer deserve to be called your son..." But the father called to his servants, "Hurry! Fetch my best robe and put it on him, and give him a ring for his hand and shoes for his feet." — Schonfield²

And the son said to him, Father, I have sinned against Heaven and in your sight. No longer am I worthy to be called your son. But the father said to the slaves, Quick. Bring out at once the festive stately robe, one of the best quality, and put it on him. And put at once a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. — Wuest³

Practicing the Game Plan

As observed in the prior chapter, walking home afforded this younger son plenty of time to practice and refine his two-part confession and “solution” pitch:

The Confession: *Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. No longer am I worthy to be called your son.*

His (Best) Solution: *Make me at once a hired hand.*

The son assumed his future depended on how well his proposal would be received by his father. While he indeed knew his father’s past gracious and merciful heart from his youth, it may have still been difficult for him to imagine that his father’s compassion could extend to include his present circumstances. Thus in his wildest dreams, this younger son could never have imagined the reception he was about to receive from his amazingly compassionate and loving father, and how irrelevant his *hired hand* solution was about to become. What this returning son did not know was that his father had a very different “solution” in view – complete restoration to all the privileges of sonship.

New Information

As this younger son approaches the outskirts of the village, he suddenly sees a person running toward him. No one of importance would ever run in that culture. Who could this obviously insignificant person be? Then there had to be a moment in time when it dawns on him that it is his father, perhaps the most important person in the village, who is running toward him! Before he can even begin to process the meaning and significance of his father’s shocking run, he is engulfed in his arms that hug him while being

profusely kissed. This new behavioral reality is totally at odds with how he knew that observant Jewish religious culture was expected to greet his return. Might he have wondered, “Now what do I do? Should I stick with my game plan, devise a new one, or just do nothing and let this totally unexpected welcome sink in?”

Sticking with a Now Obsolete Game Plan

Confronted with new run/hug/kiss data which renders all of his return-home presuppositions obsolete, what does this younger son now do? He sticks with his original game plan! See any similarities? Been there, done that? We can so easily become focused on doing things a certain way because of our entrenched presuppositions, that when we are presented with new facts that render our approach obsolete, we forge ahead anyway as if our (now fallacious) game plan is still the right thing to do. That’s how we so easily become people who do the right thing at the wrong time and vice versa!

So this younger son responds to his father’s triplicate expression of welcome home by immediately launching into his well-rehearsed, *hired hand* plan. And just as he gets to the end of the penitent “confession” part, his father interrupts him with some “quick” instructions to the servants forestalling his younger son’s now irrelevant “hired hand” solution.

A Troika of Restoration Acts

After clearly signaling his intentions with the “welcome home” trio of run/hug/kiss, this father “quickly” sets into motion another trio of restorative acts. As Henri Nouwen observes, “The father does not even give his son a chance to apologize. He pre-empts his son’s begging by ‘spontaneous forgiveness’ and puts aside his pleas as completely

irrelevant in light of the joy of return. Not only does the father forgive without asking questions and joyfully welcome his lost son home, but he cannot wait to give him new life, life in abundance.”⁷⁴ Taking this scene in, it is as if this father cannot wait to fully restore his son as he quickly instructs the servants to hurry and get his best robe, signet ring and sandals for his son’s shoeless feet. This time it is a trio of family (and community) restoration symbols. Let’s take them one at a time.

Restoring Honor with His Robe

John MacArthur observes that in this Near-Eastern culture, “Every nobleman had a choice robe – an expensive, ornate, embroidered, one-of-a-kind, floor-length outer garment of the highest quality fabric and craftsmanship. It was a garment so special that he wouldn’t even think of wearing it as a guest to someone else’s wedding.”⁷⁵ That would not be special enough to warrant wearing his best robe. About the only analogy that comes to mind is what you and I (and our spouses) might decide to wear were we ever invited to a State Dinner at the White House to honor Queen Elizabeth. Only our best would do.

The father instructs his servants to quickly get his finest robe and put it on his returning son. This finest of robes signifies the father’s honor, honor He intends to now bestow upon this son. Again, note the impatience of the father to accomplish that restoration. He won’t even wait for his son to shed his filthy rags that are masquerading as clothes. Nor is he willing to wait for his son to go through the ritual cleansing protocol of the purification baths. He wants to drape that exquisite robe of honor around him ASAP! Here we have a hint of what Jesus does

for us because of His atoning work on the Cross. He comes to us in our penitent posture and surrounds us with the cloak of His Righteousness which serves to cover the filth and stench of our sinful condition. Thus when the Father now looks at us, all He sees is the Righteousness of His own Son.

No Self-Help Here

A long time ago, my first mentor in the faith (“Bill”) observed that the prodigal son cannot put the robe on himself. It had to be placed upon him by others – the servants. That seems so obvious, and yet I am not aware of any commentator who has made that observation. The more I thought about Bill’s insight, the more profound I have come to believe it is. Parenthetically, it brings to mind Hebrews 5:4-6 where even Jesus did not take upon Himself the high priestly role; it was conveyed to Him by His Father, God.

The Ring of Authority

In this culture, authority can be communicated in legal and mercantile ways by the impression a person’s signet ring makes when pressed on a wax seal. The document or shipping container carrying that seal attests to its ownership, legality and authenticity. What this father is doing by giving his returning penitent son the signet ring is empowering him to make legal decisions in his father’s place. To stand in his father’s shoes, if you will, with the full weight, power and authority of the father as regards binding transactions and agreements. Such a ring is a father’s public statement of his ultimate trust in the maturity and judgment of his son to represent him. That had to be utterly shocking to those listening to Jesus unfold this story, especially as they remembered how the son squandered the last family transac-

tion he took part in! As with the robe, we again need to observe that the son cannot place the signet ring upon his own finger. It has to be placed there by someone else.

The Sandals of Sonship

There is an intentional progression at work in the way Jesus has constructed this sequence of robe, ring and sandals. If every word of Scripture is inspired, it has to follow that the sequence of the words, thoughts and phrases in Scripture are equally inspired. So in Jesus' story, He leads with the robe (honor), then with the ring (authority), and then culminates this progression by having sandals placed on this returning son's shoeless feet. In an abstract sense, a pair of sandals would seem rather trivial compared to the elegance of the father's best robe and the powerful authority of his signet ring; but in a symbolic sense the sandals trump the robe and the ring. As Kenneth Bailey describes it, in this first-century, Middle Eastern culture, slaves and servants go barefoot in the master's house while the sons wear sandals.⁶ With a simple pair of sandals, the father is declaring the full restoration of his sonship. The robe and the ring point to sonship, the sandals complete it.

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

There is something else so obviously at work in this Middle Eastern cultural parable that we in the West can easily miss it. This father does not use words to communicate his welcome home, nor his restoration to sonship. What his father does do is demonstrates that welcome and restoration with trios of actions. We in the West love words and are too easily seduced by them. In comparison, the Hebrews we meet in the Bible are influenced much more by actions. Let's explore that further.

Words or Behavior

If a Greek were to ask a man, "Do you love your neighbor?" he would most likely accept the man's response at face value as a truthful statement. Thus, if the man being asked this question declares, "Yes, I really do love my neighbor," the Greek will consider the issue closed. Obviously this man loves his neighbor(s). He just said so.

A Bible-times Hebrew would approach this very differently. First, he would not even ask the man if he loved his neighbor. To a Hebrew, what a person says is not as important as what he does. A Hebrew knows everyone has two sets of beliefs: the one he or she espouses, and the one he or she lives out. Thus, how a person acts is the litmus test that truly reveals what he or she truly thinks, feels and values. As a result, a Hebrew would never even ask, "Do you love your neighbor?" Rather, he would follow that man around for a while, and observe dozens of interactions between the man and his neighbor(s); then he would know the true answer to that question. He would also learn much more, e.g., who this man considers his neighbor(s) to be.

The early Quakers had a saying that captures the essence of this perspective: "It matters not what a man says; simply watch how he treats his dog." Greeks tend to love words; whereas, Jews of the first century tend to value consistent behavior. Greeks have no problem with a dichotomy between words and actions. First-century Jews would have no problem either, but for different reasons. They put little stock in what people say, and give much more credence to what they do. I find it intriguing that both the Sermon on the Mount and the book of James have roughly 110 verses. What they also share is 50-55 action verbs. Faith, trust and submission are usually expressed as action verbs in the

Scriptures. Thus it should be no surprise that Jesus uses plenty of action verbs in this “prodigal sons” parable to communicate welcome home, conveyance of honor, and restoration to sonship (and daughtership). Jesus might say to us today, “Go and do likewise!” The father in Jesus’ story knows that actions do indeed speak louder than words. And he doesn’t seem content with exhibiting just one welcoming act, or one restoration act. He does it in triplicate, and repeatedly.

Too many years ago, I was in college learning to become an engineer. One of the trite sayings we had back then was that a single data point has no meaning. However, with two points you can draw a line, and with three data points you now have a trend. This father seems to be making sure that all those around him clearly see his intentions with his deliberate trios of communicating acts. Doing things in triplicate minimizes the possibility that any singular action might be misinterpreted. There is no ambiguity as to a person’s intentions when you see the same expression of it repeated three different ways. Have you ever thought about deliberately expressing your “welcome home” and “restoration” intentions by using triplicate actions, not words?

A “Ceremony of Restoration”

I sometimes wish that the Evangelical Church had a “Ceremony of Restoration” to officially welcome truly penitent prodigals “home.” In my musings such a liturgy would commence with the returning person walking barefoot down the

center aisle of the sanctuary/fellowship hall/house church. The first part of the liturgy would feature the elders placing an elegant, flowing, royal blue robe around the shoulders of a shoeless prodigal son or daughter who has indeed come “home” to be with the Father. That would then be followed by the placing of the ceremonial ring upon one of his or her fingers. Lastly, a pair of sandals would be placed upon his or her shoeless feet. Appropriate Scripture would infuse and undergird each part of the liturgy.

Such a ceremony would be a tangible, visual, memorable expression to the community that the prodigal has been restored to full fellowship within the believing community. It would also serve as a tangible expression and memory to the prodigal that he or she has been fully restored. The liturgy would end with a celebration of the Eucharist. Having such a ceremony might well 1) hasten the acceptance and integration of the returning, penitent prodigal into our fellowship, 2) serve as a tangible reminder that all has indeed been forgiven, and 3) seal the restoration of that brother or sister into our institutional memory – three things that do not always happen in the usual way we go (or don’t go) about restoration today.

The Banquet of Village Restoration

As Jesus continues to unfold this story, it’s now time for the father to joyously celebrate the return of this prodigal son in a more public way. That is where we will continue in the next chapter in this greatest of short stories ever told.

Reflections

- Assuming that you just might have had a prodigal phase in your past, can you relate to what it might have been like to receive the father's welcome home and restoration messages in triplicate? How would you have responded to a "Ceremony of Restoration?"
- Did you notice in Jesus' parable that this father did not ask any questions of his returning son? Like where did you go, what did you do and how did you do it? No embarrassing interrogations. Sometimes our curiosity causes us to (unproductively) want to know too much, to pry too deeply (learning things that we then can't seem to get out of our mind), rather than to be content with the pure joy of the return.
- Is what we have just seen the father in Jesus' story do consistent with your paradigm(s) of compassion and restoration when a penitent prodigal (finally) returns home? Where might your view of God (and His Ways) need to change? If first-century disciples are those who have a passion to emulate everything their rabbi (Jesus) does, what are some of the implications for His followers today?

- Were you struck by the father's sending his welcome-home and restoration messages by triplicate actions? Do you communicate your welcome home and restoration messages just with words or with actions as well? Do you send those messages singularly or in triplicate? What might this suggest about more effective ways of achieving full restoration of relationships?
- Ever thought of faith, submission and trust as being best expressed in action verbs? Do you mostly talk the walk, or walk the talk, or do both in a balanced way?
- Do these two verses add even more to your appreciation of why A. W. Tozer said, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us?"⁷ In what ways?
- Where/how do these two verses speak to you, challenge you, and/or comfort you today?

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10

A Joyous Community Celebration

*An individualistic Christianity leads inevitably to an individualistic god.
Those who have been suckled at the breast of American culture will not
easily be weaned from the milk of individualism
(and thus can miss much of the Gospel's community emphasis).*

—DonMcCullough¹ (added)

Continuity

As we have learned, this remarkable father in Jesus' parable responds to the shameful and outrageous insubordination of his two sons with amazing grace and mercy as he grants the younger son's request and divides his estate between them. In great haste to leave, the younger son liquidates his inheritance so he can leave for an immorally "far" place with cash in hand. There he dissipates himself and his inheritance in a self-absorbed pursuit of pleasure until there is nothing left.



Void of resources, and now facing a severe famine, he starves while tending pigs. That brings him to his senses. Remembering his father, he decides to go back home and become a hired hand. As he returns, his father sees him afar off and, shockingly to the village and his son, runs to meet him, hugging and kissing him. Then this amazingly compassionate father quickly places his robe of honor upon this returning son and a signet ring of authority on his finger. To complete the symbols of restoration, he then calls for sandals (of sonship) to be placed upon his returning son's shoeless feet.

With these welcome and restorative acts in place, Jesus unfolds what happens next as this father now calls for a joyous celebration:

Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We're going to feast! We're going to have a wonderful time! My son is here – given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found! And they began to have a wonderful time. – The Message²

And be bringing the calf, that one which we have been fattening for just such an occasion of rejoicing as this. Slaughter it at once, and, having eaten, let us be merry, because this son of mine was dead and has been restored to a correct life. He was lost and has been found. And they began to be merry. – Wuest³

Community First

In the world of the Bible, the community is more important than the individual. Today's self-absorbed Western world makes that difficult for us to grasp. In the Gospel narratives, the primary concern always is: What is best for the village? (Don't you wish our Congress and American political system operated that way?) Contrast that with the Western world today where our first concern usually is: What's best for me? Let take a brief look at one implication of this self-centered tendency in our churches.

Spiritual Narcissism and the Scriptures

In the West, we too easily approach the Scriptures as if it is mostly about me. Our church conversations are overly populated with the word "my" as we make reference to "my gifts, my call, my mission, my ministry, my blessings, and even my Jesus" (as if they are our entitlement earmarks!). We seem to have forgotten John the Baptist's mandate that *He must increase and I must decrease*.⁴ Yes, we are to be found on the stage in God's drama of Redemption, but the spotlight is always on Him. It is, after all, His Story (History). Sadly, spiritual narcissism is fast becoming the malignant condition of the Western evangelical church. Without realizing it, we are gradually de-emphasizing a biblically literate Christ-and-Cross-centered Christianity in favor of therapeutic, consumerism churchianity – a focus on self-improvement tips and programs. You cannot accurately read and understand God's Word with self-centered cataracts in your eyes.

Jesus' Emphasis on Community

Look closely at Jesus' construction of "The Lord's Prayer" (really "The Disciple's Prayer") in Luke 11. It is a community prayer, not an individual-

istic prayer He gives His disciples. Note how He frames that community context with *our* Father... *our* daily bread... *our* debts... *deliver us...* *lead us*.⁵ The world has indeed been very successful in squeezing us into its mold. We have been culturally conditioned to implicitly put "me" in place of "our." We've been trained to (automatically) ask "what's in it for me?" as if being a disciple of Jesus is a personal journey in self-discovery and self-improvement. A Middle Eastern villager, on the other hand, would instinctively ask "what does this mean for us." Missing this one community essential when reading the Gospels can make a significant difference in what we "see" in the Gospel narrative and how we then choose to respond to it. In Jesus' story of these "Two Lost Sons," the community is an assumed and important participant in the story.

The "Fatted Calf"

Some context is helpful for the reference to a *fatted calf* in Jesus' story. The fact that this calf is immediately available for slaughter tells us that this father is a very wealthy landowner. As Kenneth Bailey points out "The 'fatted calf' that is killed for the banquet is really a 'prime beef.'" The word *fatted* comes from the underlying word for *grain*. Thus "the 'fatted calf' is a grain-fed animal with high-quality meat. In this culture, meat is a rare delicacy in the village. Thus the highest honor that can be shown to any guest is to kill and roast a calf."⁶

John MacArthur goes on to observe, "That calf would provide the choicest grain-fed veal." In Jesus' day, "where any kind of meat was consumed only on special occasions and range-fed meat from full-grown cattle was an expensive

commodity, no one but the wealthiest landowner would even think of feeding precious grain to an animal.... Such a calf would be fattened only for an extraordinary occasion, such as the wedding of a firstborn son or an once-in-a-lifetime banquet held to celebrate the arrival of an important dignitary.”⁷ This calf would typically be a five month-old, corn-fed, veal calf weighing some 500 pounds that could feed hundreds of people.⁹ Furthermore, it would not be unusual for a gala such as this to last three days or more. Everyone in the village would be invited. It would probably be the biggest affair the village had ever seen.

No Secrets

The first time I flew from the Midwest to the West Coast, I was struck by the scattered nature of farm homes in Iowa and Kansas. From the air, the county road systems seemed to be laid out in square-mile grids creating a huge checkerboard of farmlands, usually with no more than one house per square mile. Not so in Middle Eastern villages. Homes are closely bunched together like a grape cluster with the fields radiating out from the village. This tight housing density has a number of implications; e.g., there are no secrets in a Middle Eastern village. Everyone in the village knows if a family has a problem, the village has a problem, and vice versa. In this “Prodigal Sons” parable, the village would be very much aware of the rupture of the father/son relationship(s) when the younger son first asks for his inheritance and the elder son refuses to intercede. If a family in the village is shamed, then the whole village is shamed. Consequently, when the younger son in Jesus’ parable liquidates part of his father’s estate (his inheritance), he has ruptured (broken) his relationship with the community.

Total Restoration

The father’s objective in Jesus’ story is total restoration. That means restoration with

- **him** (accomplished by running/hugging/kissing and with robe/ring/sandals)
- **family** (at this point in the story, restoration with the elder brother is yet to be addressed)
- **household** (servants likewise got the message from the running/ hugging/kissing of the returning son as well as the robe/ ring/sandals)
- **village** and the **village elders** (only partially accomplished by the message the father sent to the village by running to greet his son).

To achieve this restoration, the father will invite the village to a “fatted calf” banquet celebration. Since village culture mandates the elder son (the one with the *birth right*) co-host any community-wide banquet with his father, it would appear that the father intends to accomplish these remaining restoration steps with the village elders and his elder son with one grand banqueting event. Thus, it is now time to celebrate the return of his younger son in a more public way with what Tim Keller calls a “feast of homecoming.”¹⁰

It’s About Joy!

The way John MacArthur puts it, this father now “calls for a party to end all parties.”¹¹ As Henri Nouwen observes, “Celebration belongs to God’s Kingdom. God not only offers forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing, but wants to lift up these gifts as a source of joy for all who witness them.”¹² Furthermore he goes on to observe, “God does not want to keep his joy to himself. He wants everyone to share it. God’s joy is the

joy of his angels and his saints; it is the joy of all who belong to the Kingdom.”¹³

Nouwen, in his typical honesty continues, “I realize that I am not used to the image of God throwing a big party. It seems to contradict the solemnity and seriousness I have always attached to God. But when I think about the ways in which Jesus describes God’s Kingdom, a joyful banquet is often at its center.”¹⁴

It strikes me that part of our ambivalence to fully participating in and celebrating the joyful return of a prodigal is rooted in our own humanity. As John R. DeWitt observes, “This is where spiritual reality taught in this parable wholly diverges from human experience. His (the father’s) joy seems to have no tinges of regret for those wasted years.”¹⁵ In our humanity, this can be hard to relate to. Per DeWitt, “the ‘sad truth’ is that there is often something irreparable about damage done to human lives through disruptive, willful waywardness” that inhibits our joy from being total “simply because the past cannot entirely be undone.... Regrets can remain, scars and shame can remain, and recollections may arise which retain the power of causing anguish.”¹⁶

A Joy Unlike Any Other

What we encounter in this greatest of short stories ever told is nothing less than heaven’s great joy at the return of one wayward son or daughter. As MacArthur observes, “This celebration was not about the son’s behavior.” Rather its basis was the “sheer joy of redemption...the celebration was in honor of the father’s goodness to his undeserving son.... He now had the long-awaited opportunity to forgive and restore the son who had so badly dishonored him and

brought him so much grief.... In other words, the celebration here is for the father’s sake, not the son’s...that kind of joy is infectious, exhilarating, refreshing, and full of glory. It is a superbly suitable picture of heaven’s joy.”¹⁷ Why? *Because this son of mine was dead and has been restored to a correct life. He was lost and has been found.* This Hebrew parallelism (same thing said two slightly different ways) captures it. “His father clearly reckoned the boy dead. He had a very frail hope but no real expectation that he would ever see the boy again.”¹⁸ Wouldn’t you rejoice if a dear one of yours, long dead was brought back to life? Don’t you think that Mary and Martha rejoiced when their brother Lazarus suddenly emerged from the tomb?¹⁹ That restoration of life is the source of the rejoicing. That is the dramatic reversal that heaven sees and rejoices in when a prodigal returns home.

Forgiveness and Joy

Helmut Thielicke, a contemporary of Bonhoeffer who survived the Nazi camps and went on to preach in post-war Hamburg at St. Mary’s church, has long been a favorite writer of mine. I like what he says about this restoration gala in Jesus’ parable: “Whenever forgiveness is proclaimed, there is joy and festive garments.... We must read and hear this gospel story as it was meant to be: good news! News so good that we should never have imagined it. News that would stagger us if we were able to hear it for the first time as a message that everything about God is so completely different from what we thought or feared,... news that he has sent his Son to us and is inviting us to share in an unspeakable joy.”²⁰ DeWitt echoes this theme when he observes, “The emphasis of the joy of God is the

repentance of sinners.”²¹ Have you thought of God in these terms? Or do we tend to have an “altogether too passive picture of God in our minds?”²²

DeWitt goes on to observe, “How, it must be asked again, shall we grasp that God should delight to draw sinners to himself? Calvin could not comprehend it, nor could Luther, nor could Augustine, nor could Paul. We are not required to penetrate into the mystery of it. Eternity itself will be too short for that. We are only asked to accept it and to believe it, and to cast ourselves in the confidence of it upon the goodness of God”²³

The Challenge

There is a profound and timeless challenge in all this. The same challenge that Jesus puts in front of those listening Pharisees, He is presenting (again) to us today. As Nouwen writes, “What I am called to do is to enter into that joy...; somehow I...have lost the eyes to see the joy and the ears to hear the gladness that belongs to God.”²⁴ Why is this important? Because “the reward of choosing joy is joy itself.”²⁵

Other Observations

Those who are familiar with starvation in Africa observe that after a starving person has been rescued, the one thing he or she cannot do is partake of any significant amount of food. The body is not physiologically prepared to accept that level of feeding. In the same way, it strikes me that this returning prodigal, who is center stage at this banquet, cannot partake of the feast spread before him. While he is a participant at one level, he is an observer at another level. It is also doubtful that he will have enough energy to dance at all, or for very long. Starvation does

come with physiological consequences. Also, any diseases this younger son may have acquired on his wayward journey, or any internal injury to his organs from starvation or riotous living, will not (quickly, if ever) go away just because he has come home. Journeying to a far country can have long term consequences even when spiritual restoration is complete. Those realities are not impediments to Heaven’s joy.

What’s Missing Today?

I have a friend who has long devoted himself to ministering to men. While we were recently discussing this whole notion of a Luke 15 restoration banquet, he asked: “Where do men go (in the church) to be restored?” From his perspective, the church is full of men who have come home to be with the father, yet are feeling very much unrestored in their church communities. “Where are the (restoration) banquets?” my friend asked. That’s a great question. Reconsidering the prior chapter, we might be inclined to add to his question: Where are the robing ceremonies? Where are the signet ring and sandal ceremonies? Perhaps that is (part of) the next frontier in holistically ministering to men.

The Elder Son

As Jesus continues to unfold this story, the last piece in this restoration mosaic is now for the elder son to assume his co-host position with his father and share in the community-wide celebration of his father’s joy. But first the elder brother has to be found (an intentional double play on words for he too is “lost”). And that is where we will continue in the next chapter of this greatest of short stories ever told.

Reflections

- How would you categorize your joy during these days – meager, reluctant, half-hearted, willful, abundant, over-flowing? Henri Nouwen observes that “there is a radical difference between cynicism and joy.”²⁶ On a spectrum that has cynicism on one end and joy on the other, where do your natural instincts place you? How can cynicism be rooted out and joy (re)planted in its place?
- Continuing on Tozer’s theme that the most important thing about people is their view of God, how have these two contextually restored verses further challenged (changed) your view of God?
- If Nouwen is right that “the reward of choosing joy is joy itself,” where does that challenge you?

- MacArthur points out that “they *began* to be merry. This was only the start. And this is the picture of a party that never ends. That’s what heaven’s joy is all about.”²⁷ If Heaven celebrates every time a prodigal returns home, then think of Heaven as one eternal celebratory gala. Must be so since world-wide there must be a prodigal coming home every minute of every day!
- Are there certain categories of people who we/you feel (deep down) don’t deserve to be fully restored into our fellowships when they come home to the Father? If so, that sort of thinking might lead to different levels of restoration: Full, conditional, or even probational. Based on the parable Jesus is giving us in Luke 15, do you think Heaven has those kinds of categories?
- If someone decided to stage a restoration banquet for you, who would you invite to be a part of that great gala affair?
- A final thought. Helmut Thielicke observes, “The ultimate secret of this story is this: There is a homecoming for us all because there is a home.”²⁸

Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in him! Phil. 4:4 – The Message

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11

Mercy is Missing

*I wonder if this is not tragically repeated in every age.
God in His mercy restores a broken man. He is accepted in
every segment of his community – except among the “righteous.”*

—Helmut Thielicke¹

*Biblical orthodoxy without compassion is surely the
ugliest thing in the world*

—Francis Schaffer

*The Christian should show the same concern
for compassion as for creeds.*

—John Blanchard

Continuity

V



Void of resources, and now facing a severe famine, the younger son starves while tending pigs. That brings him to his senses and causes him to remember his father which, in turn, causes him to decide to go back home to become a hired hand. As he returns, his father sees him afar off, and shocking the village and his son, runs to meet him, then hugs and kisses him. Subsequently, this amazingly compassionate and merciful father quickly places his robe of honor upon his returning son and a signet ring of authority on his finger. To complete these symbols of restoration, the father then calls for sandals (of sonship) to be placed upon his son's shoeless feet. With these welcome-home and restorative acts in place, this remarkable father invites the village to a joyous feast to celebrate his son's return and restoration. With that backdrop, Jesus unfolds what happens next:

“All this time his older son was out in the field. When the day's work was done he came in. As he approached the house, he heard the music and dancing. Calling over one of the houseboys, he asked what was going on. He told him, ‘Your brother has come home. Your father has ordered a feast – barbecued beef! – because he has him home safe and sound. The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in.’” – The Message²

“Now, his son, the elder one, was in the field. And when coming, he drew near the house, and heard music played by a number of musicians in

concert, and the sound of people dancing a circular dance on the lawn. And having called to himself one of the servants, he began to inquire what these things might be. And he said to him, your brother has arrived, and your father slaughtered the calf, that one we have been fattening for just such an occasion of rejoicing as this, because he has gotten him back safe and sound. But he flew into a rage that was the explosive outlet of a long-time resentment against his brother, a resentment that had been smoldering in his breast. And he was not willing to come in. – Wuest³

Mercy Igniting Rage

Jesus uses *anger/rage* to describe the elder son's reaction to learning of his younger brother's return and his father's (*grace upon grace*⁴) desire to extravagantly celebrate his restoration. Does that word *rage* ring a bell? It's what Jesus faced in Nazareth one Sabbath morning when He gave what has been called His "Rescue Manifesto."⁵ Luke uses the word *rage* in that passage to describe the response of Jesus' hometown to His declarations about who He is and what His mission is – bringing God's compassion and mercy to "outsiders." The fact that these two passages both evoke this same emotion suggests there might be a connection between them. While no commentators (to my knowledge) have ever made such an association, contextual curiosity suggests we need to explore this. So let's return to Nazareth (Luke 4) and find out why Jesus' hometown "friends" and acquaintances flew into such a rage that Sabbath morning. Then let's see if their reason(s) for rage might give us some insight into why Jesus portrays the elder brother responding in like manner in this parable. We need to start that exploration with some context

for who these Pharisees are who are listening to Jesus unfolding this "Prodigal Sons" parable (and who are the target of His "message").

Responding to a Crisis

In 332 BC Alexander the Great conquered the Middle East and brought Greek culture and philosophy into this "land of milk and honey." By 200 BC Greek philosophy and its companion worldview were significantly impacting Jewish young men. As a result, more and more of them were abandoning the Hebrew "faith" and embracing the perceived superiority of Greek thought and ways. This created a crisis in Judaism. Would the historic "faith" of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and its attendant covenant responsibilities survive in the generations to come? This alarming Hellenistic trend caused some observant Jews to give birth to what became the Pharisee movement.

The Original Good Guys!

In their formative years, these early-generation Pharisees did everything "right." They had a passion for evangelism – proselytizing Jewish young men back to the historical faith as well as bringing Gentiles into Judaism. They prayed prayers of blessing dozens of times each day. Most of them knew God's word very well having memorized great portions of their Hebrew Scriptures by the age of thirteen. Central to their "belief" was a passion to scrupulously honor God in everything they did (behaviorally). Remember, this was a "doing" culture where "truth" and "belief" were understood as action verbs.⁶ No doubt these early Pharisees would put today's Western evangelicals to shame with their personal piety and holiness. But as is true with many movements, their "theology" began to drift (not unlike the theological "drift" over the last

100 years of many mainline Protestant denominations regarding the inerrancy of Scripture).

Misplaced Zeal

With their passion to honor God, the Pharisees and their rabbis over time created an “Insider-Outsider theology.” By the time of Jesus, they had taken observant Judaism to a place that did not reflect God’s heart. As part of making distinctions about who was on the “inside” of God’s favor and who was on the “outside,” they created a category of people called “sinners.” These were people (the Pharisees began to convince themselves) that God **really** did not like and therefore could not easily (or sometimes never) be forgiven. And how would the “sinners” be recognized? They would be people who are “not like us” as defined by their rabbis; e.g., people with birth defects, chronic diseases, despised occupations, physical maladies, wrong DNA (Gentiles).

The fact that these kinds of people were in their present condition (or state) was all the evidence the Pharisees needed to declare that God did not like them. And so observant Judaism concluded that if God didn’t like you, we certainly weren’t going to like you either! In fact to honor God, we Pharisees would go out of our way to scorn and despise you! This resulting “theological drift” legitimized the withholding of compassion and mercy from those whom God always intended to be recipients of it in His Eternal Plan.

Jesus’ “Rescue Manifesto”

When Jesus returned to Nazareth one weekend, one of the heads of the local synagogue honored Him by asking Jesus to read from the prophetic scrolls, a standard part of Sabbath worship.⁷ Many in that synagogue audience who knew Jesus well from His formative years might have

wondered what portion of the prophets He would read that day. For many, the highpoint of the “service” would be Jesus’ interpretative commentary of the selected passage read.⁸

A Cut-and-Paste Commentary

The passage that was the focal point for Jesus’ Sabbath reading was very familiar to His audience – a messianic portion of Isaiah 60-61. We don’t know the entire scope of the Isaiah passage that Jesus might have read that morning. In Sabbath liturgical protocol, it might have been as few as two-dozen verses, or as much as two “chapters.”⁹ But Luke does tell us what phrases (verses) Jesus chose to focus on for His interpretative commentary.¹⁰

Jesus began by rearranging the first two verses of Isaiah 61 from what the audience had just heard Him read (and from the way many had memorized them). Reading Luke’s record carefully, we see that Jesus omitted two phrases from Isaiah 61:1&2 and then did a creative rearrangement, blending parts of the remaining first two verses of chapter 61 together with an imported phrase from chapter 58. All of this resulted in the following “commentary” forming an inverted parallelism of five statements (verbs emphasized):¹¹

Proclamation *He anointed me to **preach** the Gospel to the poor* (marginalized)

Social Justice *to bring **release** to the captives* (refugees)

Compassion/Mercy ***recovery** of sight to the blind* (those you think God doesn’t like)

Social Justice *to **set free** those who are oppressed* (crushed)

Proclamation *To **proclaim** the favorable year of our Lord*

Words Have Meaning

To understand what Jesus intentionally communicated through His deliberate rearrangement of this Isaiah passage, let's focus on some of the key words. Joel Green contends that the word *poor* needs to be contextually understood as not just the economically poor but also those who are of "low status," those who have been "relegated to positions outside of the boundaries of God's people."¹² Kenneth Bailey contends that the word *captive* embraces the understanding of "refugees."¹³ In making reference to *the favorable year of our Lord*, Jesus is using an intentional hint (*remez*) back to the year of Jubilee when all debts will be forgiven, i.e., the year of total forgiveness.¹⁴

Literary Structure Matters

Whenever the parallelism genre is used, the Hebrew listener is always looking for the "center." That's where one will find what the rabbi/teacher/prophet wants to emphasize as foundational to his overall message. To an observant Jewish culture where mercy to Gentiles and other "outsiders" is conspicuously absent, Jesus declares that the epicenter of His ministry will be to bring God's mercy and compassion *to the blind*, i.e. those who (by definition) the religious culture has predetermined that God does not like. While there is indeed a double meaning here (spiritually blind), this Nazareth audience would have understood this as referring to the physically blind. In addition Jesus said He will bring equal parts of "Good News" proclamation and social justice to those who have been systematically deprived of it, e.g., the *poor* and the *captives/refugees*.

Rearranging Isaiah thusly, Jesus declares that He has come to proclaim the good news that

God is mercifully and compassionately willing to forgive all sin and to bring into being a new spiritual community for those who have been systematically barred from the present "religious" one. To observant Jewish ears, where mercy to "people not like us" is conspicuously absent, this was **not** "good news." In fact it totally contradicted their foundational paradigm about "sinners." (Jesus pulverizes paradigms that are at cross-purposes with His Kingdom.)

A Surprisingly Short "Sermon!"

In the rabbinic tradition of this observant Jewish culture, the more innovative the interpretation rendered by the rabbi after his reading from the great prophets, the more creativity "points" he scored with his Sabbath audience.¹⁵ Jesus would have been seen as indeed very creative with His radical, self-identifying treatment of this passage, but not in a way that found favor with his friends and acquaintances in the audience that day. (Ever wonder what kind of a speaking emphasis He might have placed on the word "me" in the Isaiah text?)

Jesus dramatically ends His brief editorialized cut-and-paste commentary on Isaiah 61 with a one-sentence summary statement – perhaps the shortest wrap up ever given by a rabbi in a Sabbath service. He authoritatively and succinctly says, *Today this* (Messianic) *Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing* (added). The Greek word used for *fulfilled* in this text is best understood as "inaugurated" or "commenced." The phrase *in your hearing* is best understood as "you are being witness to it." With these comments, His Nazareth audience did not miss Jesus' assertion of His Messiahship as well as His declaration of God's compassion for people who were not like them. That was sufficient to ignite their rage.

Adding Fuel to the Fire

Jesus was very confrontational in His hometown synagogue that day. No “gentle Jesus meek and mild” here! Having just ignited the fire of their anger, He added fuel to the fire by refusing to abide by the village cultural rules of (mandatory) social reciprocity. In Luke 4:23-24 Jesus (in essence) says that I know you want your hometown boy to do some of the things you heard “took place in Capernaum,” but I will not do that for you, a rebuke which further inflamed their rage.

Violent Rage

Jesus brings their rage to the boiling point by citing two case histories (you need two witnesses in a Jewish court of law to validate your assertion) from their Hebrew Scriptures of God’s compassion and mercy extended only to Gentiles, not to Jews. Those two case histories are of the widow of Zarephath (I Kings 17:1) and Naaman, the hated Syrian General (II Kings 5:1-14). His listeners can’t contest the historicity of these two events for they are imbedded in their Scriptures. Nevertheless, these references and the extending-mercy-and-compassion-to-people-not-like-us emphasis that Jesus underscores do not go down well with them (now there’s an understatement!). In fact their rage violently erupts as they take Jesus out of town and try to *hurl him headlong down the precipice* (4:29) at what tradition now refers to as the “Brow of Nazareth.” And then in one of the more amazing verses in the Gospels, Luke records in 4:30 that Jesus passes through their midst (ala the parting of the Red Sea) and goes on His way back to Capernaum.

Mercy is Missing

In this observant Jewish culture, *mercy is missing* and therefore compassion is not being extended to people who are “not like us.” This is one of the mega-backdrop themes needed to contextually understand much of what Jesus is addressing and confronting in the Gospels. It is also a key part of the contextual back story for Jesus’ “Prodigal Sons” parable. The elder son in Jesus’ story and that Sabbath morning Nazareth congregation share the same punitive “mercy is missing” value system about people who are not like us (and don’t behave like us). They are convinced that those kinds of people do not deserve mercy and compassion because “we know” God doesn’t look upon them with favor.

Self-Defined Paradigms

If mercy and compassion are not part of your spiritual DNA, you have to come up with another paradigm to justify what you think you are entitled to. And that is what the elder son has done as he feels he has earned by the externalities of his behavior what he thinks he now so rightfully deserves. That is the great lie he has embraced and it is destroying (has destroyed?) his relationship with his brother and his father. It has also poisoned his soul. When that happens, the mercy-is-missing elder brothers in our midst tend to respond to others with resentment (and rage) when those “others” don’t do things according to the norms and standards of their particular brand of religiosity. And they get particularly irate when mercy and compassion is extended to those (in the church family) who they feel don’t deserve it. In the next chapter, we’ll look at the elder-brother implications of this kind of resentful soul in our fellowships as we continue to dig deeper into this greatest of short stories ever told.

Reflections

- How is your personal, and our corporate evangelical compassion index doing these days toward people who come home who are not like you/us? Has spiritual narcissism, with its increasing emphasis on self-preoccupation, self-righteousness and self-indulgence, compromised our capacity to be welcoming-home people to those in the “family” who don’t do things like we wanted them to?
- Can you relate to the rage of the elder brother? Ever been there and done that to another?
- Someone once said, “Resentment is the poison you drink hoping the other person will die.” Agree or disagree? Can you relate to the poison that resentment of another brings (has brought) into your life?
- Have you ever borne the brunt of another’s resentment (or rage)? What did that do to you? And what do you think it did (and still may be doing) to them?
- Isn’t it intriguing how religious cultures can migrate (over time) to positions, postures, theologies, etc., that they think honors God, yet does little to reveal and reflect His Heart. Any examples come to mind? In our communities of faith, have we subtly legitimized the withholding of mercy and compassion to certain groups/kinds of people who have (finally) come home to be with the father?

- Have there been periods in your life when “mercy was missing” characterized your attitude toward those who were not like you (or did not do things the way you felt they should)? What put you into that condition and what (eventually) got you out it?
- Might there still be some mercy/compassion (or lack thereof) paradigms of yours (and your fellowship) that Jesus still needs to pulverize to deepen your understanding of the nature of His Kingdom?
- Someone once said that you can’t truly worship until you have experienced God’s Grace. Agree or disagree? What do you think the elder brother’s flawed understanding of worship is? Have you ever felt empowered to extend “grace upon grace” to another?
- Someone else once said: If we are not very kind, we are not very holy. How does that resonate with you?
- What speaks/challenges/provokes you in the chapter? Where does the rubber meet the road?

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12

Lost in Resentment

*I wonder if this is not tragically repeated in every age.
God in His mercy restores a broken man. He is accepted in every segment
of his community – except among the “righteous.”*

—Kenneth Bailey¹

Continuity

VVoid of resources and facing a severe famine, this younger son starves while tending pigs. That brings him to his senses causing him to decide to go back home and become a hired hand. His father sees him afar off and, shocking the village, runs to meet him and hugs and kisses him. This amazingly compassionate and merciful father then quickly places his robe of honor upon his returning son and a signet ring of authority on his finger. To complete these symbols of restoration, he calls for sandals (of sonship) to be placed upon his son's shoeless feet. All of these welcome-home and restorative acts culminated with his father inviting the village to a celebratory feast in his son's honor.



With that backdrop, Jesus unfolds what happens next:

Now, his son, the elder one, was in the field. And when coming, he drew near the house, and heard music played by a number of musicians in concert, and the sound of people dancing a circular dance on the lawn. And having called to himself one of the servants, he began to inquire what these things might be. And he said to him, your brother has arrived, and your father slaughtered the calf, that one we have been fattening for just such an occasion of rejoicing as this, because he has gotten him back safe and sound. But he flew into a rage that was the explosive outlet of a long-time resentment against his brother, a resentment that had been smoldering in his breast. And he was not willing to come in. Then his father, having come out, went to pleading with him. – Wuest² (added)

Flashback to a Problem

We observed in Chapter 3 how amazing it was to Jesus' Near Eastern audience to observe the elder brother's silence upon learning of his younger brother's demand for his share of his father's estate. Birthright responsibilities require that the elder son intercede and mediate all

disputes between the father and the other siblings. Consequently, the elder son's unwillingness to resolve this issue, while also accepting his 2/3rds share of the estate while his father is still living, profoundly shames his father in the eyes of the community.

The elder brother's insubordination is off the charts on the Richter Scale of Shirked Near Eastern Family Responsibilities. What is wrong here? Why doesn't the elder brother intervene? Why didn't he refuse to accept his share? To use current healthcare terminology, his non-actions strongly suggest that the elder brother has a "pre-existing condition" of anger and resentment towards his father.

A Big Estate!

Jesus brings the elder son back into the story by telling us *Now, his son, the elder one, was in the field. And when coming, he drew near the house, and heard music.* It seems that the elder son could not hear the music in the far fields of the estate – he was too distant. Intriguingly, this could well be a metaphor for the distant relationship he has with his father – so distant he cannot hear joyful sounds.³ In first-century Israel, where 90% of the people are poor, and where the descendants of Herod the Great control 67% of Israel's land,⁴ Jesus is using this detail to tell us that the "estate was enormous and the family lands were vast."⁵

The context suggests that this elder son grew up surrounded by wealth and its privileges. To take a phrase from the Psalmist, his father may well have *owned the cattle on a thousand hills.*⁶ Over the years, how might that material abundance have shaped (or altered) his relationship with his father? Helmut Thielicke once observed that it is very easy to get so mesmerized by the pennies in the hand of God that we no longer even see His hand. In a similar manner,

might this elder son have become so focused on the benefits that his father's wealth afforded him that he no longer cared about having a relationship with him? Having access to the benefits (blessings) of his father's wealth may well have been sufficient for him. Ring any spiritual bells in your experience?

A Community Celebration

When the elder son *heard music played by a number of musicians in concert, and the sound of people dancing a circular dance on the lawn*, he knew that the community was celebrating something at the family home. But what? Apparently he is not aware of any reason to celebrate. So he *called to himself one of the servants and began to inquire what these things might be.* He quickly learns that *your brother has arrived, and your father slaughtered the calf, that one we have been fattening for just such an occasion of rejoicing as this, because he has gotten him back safe and sound.*

Another Clue

Returning home, the elder son appears to be surprised at the celebration he finds underway. The birthright protocol requires his participation in the preparations for such an event. Yet he has apparently been kept in the dark. Intriguingly, it appears that his father chose not to send a servant out to the fields to find him. That could suggest that the father understands the condition of his elder son's heart. He knows that his elder son would resent both the return and restoration of his younger brother as well as a community celebration. That's another cultural clue we are given that confirms there is something profoundly out of sorts with the elder brother, and the father knows it. Thus, it was better to keep the elder brother away from the celebration preparation. Who wants a sour puss grouching

over every detail of party planning when joy and celebration is the desired fragrance of the day?

The reference to the “fatted” calf is another cultural reference to the father’s wealth.

Linguistically, “fatted” is best translated “grain-fattened,”⁷ i.e., wheat fed. It is a prized calf raised for a very special occasion. Kenneth Bailey points out, “The highest honor that can be shown to any guest is to butcher a calf.” In this culture most people are so poor they cannot afford to buy wheat, only barley. Thus, feeding special animals wheat is synonymous with wealth.

To Rejoice or Not to Rejoice

As previously developed in Chapter 8, the father’s joy over his returning younger son knows no bounds. He pulls out all the stops in expressing the extravagance of his joy. The elder brother, upon hearing the music and then the news that his “lost” brother is now found, knows his father has chosen to celebrate the return of his brother. The elder brother must now make a choice: To join his father and the community in rejoicing, or to remove himself and not rejoice at all. It doesn’t take him long to decide. For him the return and restoration of his brother is not “good news.” So he responds by flying *into a rage that was the explosive outlet of a long-time resentment against his brother (and father?), a resentment that had been smoldering in his breast.*

Towards A Sound Diagnosis

Any physician will tell you that 90% of an effective therapy is rooted in a sound diagnosis. Contextually we knew by the way Jesus opens this story that there was a problem with the elder son; but we lacked insight into what the problem was and what caused it. Now Jesus gives us some more insight telling us there is a long-held resentment that continues to smolder in the elder brother’s heart. The verb that Jesus uses for the

elder brother’s anger is in the ingressive aorist tense, which means it is best translated not as a sudden, one-time occurrence, but is much more suggestive of an on-going, systemic condition.⁸

From the stage-setting for this parable that was done in Chapter 2, we could also add to the elder brother’s diagnosis that compassion and mercy toward those in his family appear to be missing. Plus, he seems incapable of “rejoicing with those who rejoice” (Romans 12:15). As a result, this elder brother is imprisoned by his resentment, held hostage by his anger, and is incapable of rejoicing over his brother’s return and restoration. In addition, he cannot affirm his Father’s desire to want to celebrate the restoration with the village.

Above All, Look Good!

As an aside, I wouldn’t be surprised if this elder brother saw himself as being righteous as well as religiously sound in venting his anger toward his father in the manner that he did. Hypocrisy has a self-justifying way of redefining a vice as a virtue and a “shameful” act as the “right” thing to do. The Scribes and Pharisees in Jesus’ audience would no doubt have affirmed his brother’s angry outburst with “well done thou good and faithful elder son.” In their view of restoration orthodoxy, no forgiveness can be granted without first receiving full and complete retribution!

I suspect this elder brother also believed he was superior to those he met as he walked to the Synagogue each Sabbath. With smug self-satisfaction, he may have presumed the role of one of the religious pillars of the village! As he worshiped, he may have worn his clothes of “pretended holiness”⁹ with pride. If anyone was entitled to pass judgment on others, certainly he could because of his superior morality and impeccable behavior. Thus, he cannot fathom, let alone

affirm his father's decision to want to "pardon"¹⁰ his brother's shameful rebellion, one totally deserving of punishment. And neither could the Scribes and Pharisees fathom a father ever acting in such a merciful and compassionate manner as they listened to Jesus unfold His paradigm-challenging and paradigm-changing parable.

Interior Choices Matter

What's been going on inside the elder brother teaches us something about the importance of our interior life. For starters, if we cling to and allow our self-generated anger and petty resentments to fester, they will pay us back by sapping our joy, draining us of compassion and mercy, and eventually fostering an anger within us which will prove corrosive to our relationships. Internal resentments eventually lead to external rebellion, be it with passive or aggressive behaviors, or both. Solomon reminds us *For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he.*¹¹ Over time we become that which we nurture – for better or worse. Consider water which inevitably takes upon itself the color of the ground over which it flows – the muddy Mississippi with crystal clear Rocky Mountain streams. So does your heart and mind. That's why Paul exhorts us in Philippians 4:8:

Finally, brethren, whatever things have the character of truth, whatever things are worthy of reverence, whatever things are righteous, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are attractive, whatever excellence there is or fit object of praise, these things make the subject of careful reflection. – Wuest¹²

Interior Rage and External Behavior

You cannot hide the effects of what goes on inside of you. Everything that is fermenting there will eventually leak out in our attitudes and behaviors. As a result of the elder brother's

internal rage, Jesus informs us that *he was not willing to come in*. First-century Near Eastern culture required that whenever a family hosted a village celebration, the elder son was expected to co-host the event with his father. The elder son played a special role in greeting each guest and in overseeing the serving of the guest of honor – his brother!¹³ His refusal to participate in this mandated task would be immediately obvious to the community. It would be another cultural slap of shame to a father who, while celebrating the return and restoration of his younger son, was at the same time confronted (yet) again with the lostness of his first born. What to do? Without hesitation, this loving father demonstrates his willingness to be shamed again as he reaches out to try and restore his elder son.

One Amazing Father!

We have already seen in Jesus' story how this father is willing to be publically shamed to achieve restoration with his younger son; e.g., running to embrace him in full view of the village (see chapter 7). Now he is willing to be publically shamed again as Jesus tells us *Then his father, having come out, went to pleading with him*. It is stunning to Near Eastern ears that this father would permit such insubordination from his elder son. It had to be shocking to the village elders, seeing another display of a son's insubordination and this father tolerating such rebellious behavior. In their paradigm, no father worth his salt would ever go out and plead with such a son. It was incomprehensible to Jesus' audience that this father doesn't immediately banish the elder son from the scene with dire punishment to follow once the celebration is over.

Much to the surprise (and dismay) of the Pharisees listening to His story, Jesus paints a picture of a father who operates in stark contrast to the expectations and norms of this religious

culture. He portrays a father who prioritizes relational restoration over the application of justifiable punishment and retribution. This is one amazingly merciful and compassionate father! And Jesus is one amazing, paradigm-changing Story Teller!

What's Next?

Understanding the elder brother in Jesus' parable and his mind set remains important for us today since on any given Sunday we probably have far more of this kind of elder brothers in our midst than returning prodigal sons. What happens to the character, nature and fragrance of our fellowships when these elder brothers get put in leadership positions? What negative impacts; e.g., rebellious behaviors, anti-church attitudes, etc.,

might be fostered in their children? How are their spouses impacted? Because of these destructive tendencies, it behooves us to ask: What can we do in our fellowships to help those with an elder brother syndrome to break free from these destructive tendencies?

In the next chapter, we will continue to explore the unfolding dialogue between the father and his first born son. That examination will allow us to further understand the root causes of this elder's brother syndrome as well as the decisions and attitudes that caused him to become the person he is. With a diagnosis in place, we will be in a better position to understand how we might best help those in our fellowships who are afflicted with his syndrome.

Reflections to Ponder

- Henri Nouwen observes that *Joy and resentment cannot co-exist. The music and dancing, instead of inviting me to joy, become a cause for even greater withdrawal.*¹⁴ Can you relate to that? Have you ever experienced that reality? Have you ever nurtured a long-held resentment? What are some ways that resentments (like weeds) can be uprooted and removed from the interior gardens of our lives?
- I am reminded of a quote I heard not too long ago (and forgot the source) which really speaks to this parable: *Resentment is the poison you drink wishing the other person would die.* What a great

insight into the destructive power of resentments; e.g., think back to Cain's killing of his brother Abel. In our self-justifying fallenness, we can so easily see our resentments as justifiable homicide of others. In the spirit of the Beatitudes, resentments are just another form of attempted murder. Do you believe that? Is there such a thing as a justifiable resentment? If not, what does that say about the importance of rooting out any and all vestiges of resentments in our lives?

- If you did an audit of your last 100 musings, what thought patterns, themes and subjects come into view? In your thought life, what appetites, proclivities, habits, obsessions, etc. would now be clear? If the measuring stick is Philippians 4:8, how have you been doing lately? Since it matters what we allow ourselves to think on, how do you resonate with Paul's admonition to "take every thought captive?"¹⁵ Obviously this thought goes way beyond our resentments!

- As previously observed, Helmut Thielicke reminds us that it is very easy to get so mesmerized by the pennies in the hand of God that we no longer even see His hand. Have there been periods in your life where you became so mesmerized by the pennies (blessings) in the hand of God that you failed to see or acknowledge His hand? What's a good antidote to keep that from happening?
- Like the father, are you willing to be shamed and misunderstood by others when courageously taking the initiative to attempt/achieve reconciliation and restoration in the relationships in your life?
- Could one of the main reasons that the younger brother wanted to leave home be the condescending, I-know-best-I'm- better-I'm-always-right odor that continually oozed from his brother's pores?
- What struck you in this chapter? Where does it speak especially to you? What challenges you right now?

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13

The Elder Brother Syndrome

*I wonder if this is not tragically repeated in every age.
God in His mercy restores a broken man. He is accepted in every segment
of his community – except among the “righteous.”*

—Kenneth Bailey¹

Continuity

The remarkable father in Jesus’ parable responds to the shameful and outrageous insubordination of both his sons with amazing grace, mercy and emotional maturity. He grants the younger son’s brazen request and divides his estate between them. Surprisingly, the elder son also chooses to accept his share prior to his father’s death! In his haste to leave, the younger son liquidates his inheritance so he can journey to an immorally “far” place with cash in hand. There he dissipates himself and his inheritance in self-absorbed pursuits of pleasure until there is nothing left.



Void of resources and facing a severe famine, he starves while tending pigs. That brings him to his senses causing him to decide to go back home and become a hired hand. His father sees him afar off and, shocking the village, runs to meet him and hugs and kisses him. This amazingly compassionate and merciful father then quickly places his robe of honor upon his returning son and a signet ring of authority on his finger. To complete these symbols of restoration, he calls for sandals (of sonship) to be placed upon his son’s shoeless feet. All of these welcome-home and restorative acts culminated with his father inviting the village to a celebratory feast in his son’s honor.

When the elder son returns from the fields and learns of his brother’s return/restoration as well as his father’s desire to celebrate it, he flies into a rage and refuses to participate. With that backdrop, Jesus unfolds what happens next:

Then his father, having come out, went to pleading with him. And answering he said to his father, Look. So many years I am slaving for you, and never did I neglect your order. And to me you have never given even a young goat in order that with my friends I might make merry. But when this son of yours, the one who went through your money with harlots, came,

you slaughtered for him the fatted calf. But he said to him, Child, as for you, always with me you are, and all my things are yours. Now, to make merry and to rejoice was a necessity in the nature of the case, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive, and has been lost and has been found. – Wuest²

Disclosure

In reading these chapters, it may be helpful for you to know that I am an elder son, the first born of two brothers. Among other things, that means I tend to be very responsible, dutiful, a people-pleaser and often conscientious to a fault. That pattern of behavior helps me to understand the elder brother in Jesus' parable.

When my paternal grandfather left home during the Depression, my father dropped out of high school and became a factory worker to support the family. His life was serious and having fun was not a priority. When I was a teen, my father was the Vice President of the ruling body of our local (conservative, West Michigan) Protestant church. That meant (in those days anyway) I didn't go to movies or high school dances, nor did I play cards. I was a dutiful youth who abided by the carnal rules of the religious culture (they certainly weren't spiritual). My behavior reminds me of Henri Nouwen's great phrase "obligatory obedience."³

With that cultural backdrop, I think you can anticipate how that Protestant ethic environment shaped my early years. Sundays at our house was a day characterized as much by what you didn't do; e.g., play catch in the driveway or ride bikes, as it was by what you did do, e.g. go to church. When I got my newspaper route at age eleven, I was never late, never missed a delivery

day or time, and on rainy days made sure everyone received a dry paper. On Halloween when some of my friends wanted to pull planned pranks in the neighborhood, I always found reasons to excuse myself. I couldn't stand the thought of breaking the rules and (horrors) possibly get caught!

Going through high school, I was an "A" student – never saw a "B." I was chosen Captain of the Detroit Free Press Allstate Basketball Team. When I went to the University of Michigan on a basketball scholarship, I finished my undergraduate studies with one of the highest Chemical Engineering GPA's (a career that didn't last very long!). Like my father, life was work, duty, and not much fun. Because of that, I was always more than a little envious of those who seemed to be going through life to the beat of a different (and more enjoyable) drummer.

It suffices to say I can relate to behavioral legalism, especially when it has a strong negative emphasis – you are mostly defined by what you don't do. Gratefully, in God's Economy, experiences and circumstances over time broke down this rather joyless, perfunctory performance mold – Thank you Holy Spirit! But that's another story.

I relate these memories not to evoke sympathy (there were many in my church raised this way), but to assure you that I can relate to the mindset of the elder brother in Jesus' story – his actions, reactions and inactions. This disclosure may also help to explain why I waited two years after completing the first ten chapters in this series (focusing on the father and the younger son) before digging into these final chapters on the elder son. I felt that I needed some additional perspective on elder brotherism

prior to delving into “the rest of the story.” So if I seem to lose my balance at times in these remaining chapters (“ditches on both sides of every road”), you will understand why.

It’s About Joy!

Remember back to the Luke 15 stage setting of chapter 1 and 2. It is clear the motif Jesus was developing in this cluster of three parables was one of great joy and celebration over recovering that which was lost. First there was the recovery of one lost sheep, then one lost coin, and finally they culminated in the joy over the return and restoration of a lost son.

With that joy motif as a backdrop, the elder brother’s warped sense of righteous indignation ushers in a “black mood” that is in striking contrast to his father’s celebratory joy. This first born son’s response is self-absorbed, joyless, and angry, as well as intentionally insulting to his father. It also reveals his shallow emotional maturity. The resentment that had been welling up inside of him now erupts like volcanic lava spewing forth accusations, distortions and misrepresentations through his veneer of “righteousness.” There is no longer a facade, no pretense to being the dutiful, obedient, compliant first born son. Notice again what he says as well as how he says it: *And answering he said to his father, Look. So many years I am slaving for you, and never did I neglect your order.* For him, “obedience and duty have become a burden, and service has become slavery.”⁵

The emphatic use of the opening word *Look* is both defiant and insolent. It gives us a penetrating look at his heart – one of stone. There is no trace of love and affection to be found in the heart of this elder son for his wonderfully

merciful, patient, long-suffering and compassionate father. That is likewise the condition of many of the Pharisees listening to Jesus who are the intended target of this story. Revealingly, this first-born son characterizes his relationship with his father as one of a *slave* (now there’s a great family word!), not that of a privileged child who grew up surrounded by his father’s consistent love and affection.

Perfunctory Obedience

More of how the elder brother sees things through his prism of compassionless hypocrisy is further revealed in his contention that *never did I neglect your order.* For him, life with his father was all about following orders in a manner of “grudging compliance.”⁶ Apparently he has nothing to draw upon to cite some “good” things he might have done entirely on his own volition. His narrow definition of acceptable (and admirable in his own eyes) behavior is that he always did what he was told to do.

In addition, his boasting response reveals an inflated, prideful sense of self. Could that literally be true – *never did I neglect your order?* Notice he does not say I have always done everything expected of me. At the beginning of Jesus’ story, we discovered that he failed to intervene and resolve the inheritance issue between his father and his brother. In keeping silent, he was refusing to function in the birthright role that was uniquely his.

Time for Self-Pity

The elder brother is not yet finished pleading his self-justifying case. Now it is time for him to wallow in self-pity revealing even more of his emotional and spiritual immaturity. Note how he

frames his case: *you have never given even a young goat in order that with my friends I might make merry*. Setting aside whether this is even a true characterization of his father, which I strongly suspect it is not, his words nevertheless reveal much about his understanding of grace. At its core, grace to him is something you earn by following orders. It is as if he is an Eagle Scout with a cascade of merit badges filling his sash testifying to the completion of his assigned tasks. And the more tasks completed, the more points he earned until he was entitled to have a party. Note that his view of a good time does not involve his family. He wants no part of being merry with his father and/or his brother. For him, merriment is something that takes place outside his family.

Time for Accusation and Condemnation

This elder brother still has more of his version of the “truth” to inflict upon his father as he continues to misguidedly pursue what he feels is his “honorable” position. Perhaps he feels that what he has said so far has not been sufficient to 1) properly state his case, 2) deflate his father’s joyful mood and/or 3) convince his father to change his celebratory intent. So he continues to frame his rebuttal with a self-blinded audacity that suggests his father now needs to seek forgiveness from him for even wanting to celebrate!⁷ Thus he blurts out, *but when this son of yours, the one who went through your money with harlots, came, you slaughtered for him the fatted calf*. His resentment has so warped his sense of family that he cannot even refer to his brother as his “brother.” Rather he is now *this son of yours*.

In our traditional understanding of this parable, we tend to think that what the elder brother said is true – his brother really did

cavort with prostitutes. But as we developed in Chapter 5 “*The Pursuit of Pleasure*,” while the younger brother may well have dissipated himself in pleasure, it does not automatically follow that he indulged himself with harlots. Note that Jesus gives us no facts to support that conclusion.

How could this elder brother have known as a “fact” that his brother had engaged harlots? He never left home to go to that “far place” to observe his younger brother’s behavior. No one from his observant Jewish village would ever have gone to the Decapolis to scout him out and report back. For a number of cultural reasons, it is highly doubtful that any traveling merchants would have ever brought such a message to his village. Perhaps what we are observing is how anger and resentment can fuel hyperbole and exaggeration in crafting false narratives. And how that leads to making accusations we might wish were true, but in reality are not. That’s what “Truth Tellers” do – pass along their distorted, subjective version of truth as objective reality to others (we are going to deal with this “Truth Teller” tendency in the next chapter).

He Deserves Death!

This accusation regarding harlots may be an intentional harkening back to Deuteronomy 21:18-21 reminding his father of a sin “for which, technically under the Mosaic principles of justice, death was deemed a just punishment.” A not so subtle way of confronting his father with: Why are you celebrating the return and restoration of a person who deserves to be put to death (which ironically is the joy of the “Good News!”)?

The irony of this line of reasoning is that if the younger son indeed deserves to be put to death, so does this elder son! Remember the “honor killings” we hear about from time to time

in certain countries when the family has been shamed by the alleged promiscuous conduct of a daughter in the family? In a similar way, one can build a cultural case in this first-century setting that the father would have been fully affirmed by the village elders if he took a posture of extreme punishment against this elder son, e.g. banishment – so stunningly rebellious was his behavior.

Still More Amazing Grace

This remarkable and long-suffering father knows that his younger son is now home. While once that son was lost, now he is found. At the same time he is painfully aware that his first born son (who never left home) is profoundly lost. What to do? Once again He is willing to humiliate himself, this time as he goes out to meet with his elder son. In so doing, he does not force his fatherly love upon him. He does not respond with harsh words, judgment or punishment. Rather he puts his gentle emphasis on the intimate relationship he has always had with his son from the very beginning, *Child, as for you, always with me you are, and all my things are yours*. That is a statement that has no limits and *all my things are yours* includes the young goat the elder son is now lamenting!

The father's "unreserved, unlimited love is offered wholly and equally to both sons."⁹ He offers his love yet again by reminding his elder son of a basically reality, *you are always with me*. He uses the affectionate form of "son" which Professor Wuest has chosen to render as *Child*. It's a reminder to his first born son that from your earliest days, you have always been surrounded by the fullness of my love and the constancy of my care. Is that reminder sufficient to penetrate his hardened heart and bring him to his senses? We don't know. Does the elder

brother get "found" or will he make the decision to stay "lost." The way Jesus ends His story, the final outcome is left hanging.

Emotional and Spiritual Immaturity

Returning to our thesis from the prior chapter that 90% of an effective therapy is rooted in a sound diagnosis, we find more therapeutic insight revealed in these accusations that the elder son hurls at this father. While he may be a religious pillar in the village, his outburst reveals his emotionally immaturity. Peter Scazzero, in his book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, observes that "Christian spirituality, without an integration of emotional health, can be deadly – to yourself, your relationship with God, and the people around you."¹⁰ For Scazzero, "It is not possible to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature."¹¹ This elder brother is the poster "child" for that reality.

Avoiding dealing with the emotional immaturity of believers is a common omission in many of today's approaches to discipling. As Scazzero aptly observes,

The spirituality of most current discipleship models often only adds an additional protective layer against people growing up emotionally. Because people are having real, and helpful spiritual experiences in certain areas of their lives – such as worship, prayer, Bible studies, and fellowship – they mistakenly believe they are doing fine, even if their relational life and interior world is not in order. This apparent "progress" then provides a spiritual reason for not doing the hard work of maturing.¹²

One of the shortcomings of the typical Evangelical "teaching" emphasis on Bible knowledge is its failure to acknowledge and address the believer's need for emotional maturity as well.

You can know your Bible well and still be wrestling with debilitating emotional baggage. You can know your doctrine and dogma cold and still be relationally frozen by replaying “old tapes” that keep us emotionally handcuffed. On Sunday morning, you can look like everything is “fine” on the outside, but still be painfully hemorrhaging on the inside from unresolved

issues of abandonment, humiliation and rejection (what Christian psychiatrist Dr. David Allen calls “The Bermuda Triangle of the Soul”).¹³ This (often) one-dimensional “teaching” approach in pursuit of the “Great Commission” can easily lead to the “Great Omission” of emotional healing in the rescue and restoration of others.

Reflections to Ponder

- Have you ever thought about what it takes to detox someone with an “elder brother syndrome?” If you were involved in that process, what strategy would you take and what challenges would you foresee?
- Is it possible to actually be offended when someone who has dramatically fallen in the faith is suddenly restored to fellowship when they repent? If so, what might that reveal in those who are offended?
- Public boasting is usually frowned upon. We instinctively know that. But a better question to ask might be: In the solitude of our own hearts, do we quietly boast to ourselves “all these things I have done?” It’s more of an internal pride thing that we try not to let others see. Can you identify with that?

- The elder brother's concept of religion has shrunk into slavishness. Yet one of the hallmarks of the Kingdom of God is "an invasion of God's love and pardoning grace."¹⁴ What happens to us in our fellowships when we are no longer fully open to that invasion?
- If one of the antidotes for the "elder brother syndrome" is gratitude, how is your gratitude index doing these days? As Henri Nouwen reminds us, "Gratitude as a discipline involves a conscious choice."¹⁵
- If you asked those closest to you to evaluate 1) your spiritual maturity and 2) your emotional maturity, what do you think you would hear? Have you ever thought of asking such a question of others who know you well? How would you respond to Scazzero's contention that "It is not possible to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature." In our current notions and practices of "making disciples," are we helping or hindering people's ability to grow in both areas.
- At this point in our development of the elder brother, what spiritual work do you think/feel still needs to be done in your life? Where have you been challenged? Any thoughts about where and how to proceed?

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- 4 George A. Buttrick, General Editor, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume 2 (New York, NY: Abingdon Press, 1953) 277.
- 5 Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal*, 66.
- 6 John MacArthur, *A Tale of Two Sons*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008) 175.
- 7 John MacArthur, *A Tale of Two Sons*, 180.
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- 9 Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal*, 76.
- 10 Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (Nashville, TN, Thomas Nelson, 2006) 7.
- 11 Ibid, 17.
- 12 Ibid, 15.
- 13 Dr. David Allen, Handout from The Eleuthera Institute, Arlington, Virginia. Dr. Allen, a Christian psychotherapist and author of *In Search of the Heart* has developed what he calls the "Bermuda Triangle of the Soul." His clinical experience suggests that the three sides of his Bermuda Triangle - abandonment, rejection, and humiliation - speak to the human condition of every person. The only question is to what degree. Contained within that prison triangle are the issues of guilt and shame in what Dr. Allen calls "The Hurt Trail."
- 14 George A. Buttrick, General Editor, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume 2, 280.
- 15 Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal*, 80.

14 The Truth Teller's Tendencies

*The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.
We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only,
who came from the father, full of **grace and truth**.*

—John 1:14 (emphasis added)

Continuity

*W*hen the elder son returns from the fields and learns of his brother's return/restoration as well as of his father's desire to celebrate both, he flies into a rage and refuses to participate. His resentment ushers in a warped sense of righteous indignation wrapped in a "black mood" that is in stark contrast to his father's joy. His reaction gives us a penetrating look at his hardened heart where no traces of love and affection are to be found towards his wonderfully merciful, patient, and compassionate father.



The elder son pleads his self-justifying case by offering his version of the "truth. He makes accusations about his younger brother that he might wish to be true, but are not. That's what "Truth Tellers" do – propagate their distorted, subjective version of "truth" as objective reality to others. Faced with these distortions, his father responds, offering him love (yet) again by reminding his first born son of a basic reality – *you are always with me*. It is a reminder that from his son's earliest days he has been surrounded by the fullness of the father's love and the constancy of his care. Will that reminder penetrate his son's calcified heart and bring him to his senses, or will he continue in his "lostness?" The manner in which Jesus ends this "Greatest Short Story Ever Told," leaves the outcome unresolved.

Stuck in a Ditch

The elder brother has lost his way in understanding the interrelationship between grace and truth. With ditches to be found on both sides of every road, he has veered away from grace towards the truth ditch and is now deeply mired in it. This has made him a consummate "Truth Teller" with little or no capacity for grace. And that imbalance has destroyed important relationships in his life. Everyone afflicted with an Elder Brother Syndrome (EBS) becomes a difficult-to-deal-with Truth Teller. And many

others without the EBS nevertheless have pronounced Truth Teller tendencies. Thus, this chapter addresses a wider audience than just those afflicted with EBS.

Sequence Matters

In reflecting on the fullness of Jesus Christ, John records that the disciples saw the glory of the Godhead in Jesus Christ *full of grace and truth*.² Note he did not invert that sequence and write *full of truth and grace*. If every word in Scripture is inspired, it has to follow that the sequence of these words is likewise inspired. This pastoral reality is at the core of this chapter. That inspired sequence is part of the “therapy” Truth Tellers desperately need.

E. Stanley Jones, a missionary to India for the better part of half a century, once observed that when Truth precedes Grace, relational damage inevitably results.³ Thus, without preceding Grace, Truth injures people leaving them “wounded and bleeding” often with profound feelings of humiliation and rejection. It is only when proceeding Grace is in place that we become open to hearing the Truth about ourselves. When you know that someone really cares about you because you have repeatedly experienced his or her Grace in your life, you will be much more willing and able to listen to the tough things he or she might have to say to you about how to best relate to others.

Healthy Relationships

This sequencing of Grace before Truth is an essential ingredient of all healthy relationships. It is a pattern deeply embedded in the interpersonal dynamics of Jesus. This sequence was manifested not only in how He remade the disciples, but was His pattern for interacting with all kinds of

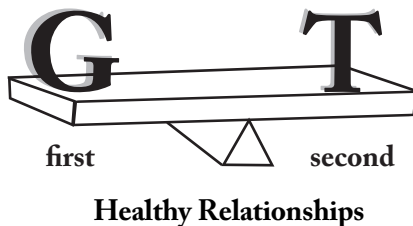
people in all kinds of circumstances. Grace before Truth is one of those unchanging “laws of gravity” at work in fruitful relationships. And like gravity, if you choose to defy it, you do so at your own peril, for surely you will end up injuring others. The elder brother in Jesus’ Luke 15 parable is Exhibit A of this outcome.

Balance is the Key

The graphic that follows portrays the intended interrelationship between Grace and Truth as we see Jesus living this pattern out in His relationships with the Twelve, as well as with lepers, tax collectors, people of ill repute, and people with disabilities. If you were one of the many marginalized people in that first-century religious Jewish culture, you experienced Grace before Truth in the Person, Presence and Power of Jesus Christ. Jesus’ interactions with these invisible people never contained any criticism, condemnation, or judgment from Him. He was always tender and gracious towards those He invited to become citizens in His Kingdom of Heaven. It was this consistent pattern of Grace before Truth that magnetically drew people to Him, manifesting itself in acceptance, rescue, and restoration. However, if you were part of the religious establishment who spurned His myriad acts of Grace, you would eventually be confronted by the Truth of your situation, e.g., Matthew 23:13-33.

In trying to capture this Grace-before-Truth dynamic, I chose to make use of a familiar childhood icon – the teeter-totter. Anyone who has been on one end of a successful teeter-totter experience knows how important proper weight distribution is if appropriate balancing is going to sustain teeter-tottering. The key to using this Grace and Truth teeter-totter graphic is to

understand that the first relational priority always starts on the left with **G**race, and then progresses to the second priority, **T**ruth, as indicated on the right hand side. It is intentional that the **G** and the **T** are of equal size. This symbolizes equal amounts of both **G**race and **T**ruth being experienced over time in healthy relationships and in that sequence.



Tilting Tendencies

By the very process of describing spiritually and emotionally healthy relationships as having equal amounts of Grace and Truth at its core, with Grace preceding Truth, we can also describe various unbalanced conditions alive and well in the human condition:

- Bringing too much Truth too quickly to a relationship.
- Leading with Grace – at least got that part right - but never getting past Grace to bring the Truth that is so desperately needed if people are going to be remade into the image of Christ.
- Starting with token Grace, but not investing enough Grace time for it to be effective, for the Truth to be heard so that it can become a transforming Truth.

Each of these tilting tendencies toward one ditch or the other is observable in marriages, families, friendships, churches and ministries. As a result, we often have out-of-balance Grace and Truth dynamics operating between husbands and

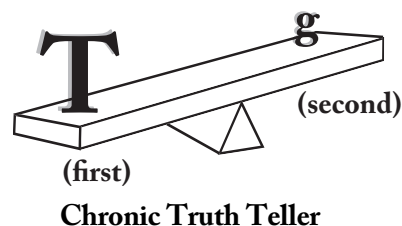
wives, parents and children, managers and subordinates, disciplinators and disciples.

Two Distortions

We all know people who tend to be either predominately Truth Tellers or Grace Givers. Furthermore, each of us, in the fallenness of our human condition, tends to predominately lean toward one or the other. That's partly why healthy relationships are so hard to establish, let alone maintain. It takes hard work in the best of relationships to stay balanced during stressful times and to lean against our instinctive tendencies to automatically veer toward our preferred Truth Teller or Grace Giver ditch.

The Chronic Truth Teller

There are people, e.g. those with EBS or EBS tendencies, who always seem ready, willing, and able to put the emphasis on quickly dispensing strong doses of Truth, or at least his or her version of the "Truth." This tendency is clearly evident in the behavior of the elder brother. The following graphic tries to capture the essence of the injurious pattern lived out by wound-inflicting Truth Tellers:



This type of Truth Teller pattern is typified by the

- Parent who is always criticizing or reprimanding a child, but seldom praising or complimenting. It's the Truth Teller's misguided way of keeping children humble!

- Spouse/teacher/coach who is always criticizing or correcting a mate/student/player, but never praising him or her.
- Person with a critical spirit whose tendency is to dwell on what's wrong, bad, weak, problematic, etc., not what's constructive, positive or good about something.
- Self-absorbed person who talks too much about himself or herself while seldom asking anything about you. Or the corollary, a person who tries to steer any conversation toward him or her and what he or she thinks or feels. Other people are just convenient foils for their monologues.
- Someone in a Sunday school class who can't wait to pounce on the teacher and correct him or her in front of the whole class, for the slightest error or mis-statement. Or the corollary, the person who uses the chance to ask a question as an opportunity to make an extended statement of what he or she thinks about something.
- An opinionated leader who always seems to know, in his or her own eyes anyway, what the right thing is that needs to be done at any point in time, despite what others think and feel - a not so subtle form of rigid elitism.
- Person with an agenda - hidden or otherwise - who does whatever it takes to get the conversation or the meeting agenda focused on his or her pet issues.
- A church or ministry that continues to dwell on the cost of discipleship with little or no emphasis on the joy of being a disciple of Jesus.
- People who take pride in "telling it like it is," or "letting the chips fall where they may," and in so doing try to make a virtue out of a vice.

They function as the equivalent of hit and run drivers in relationships.

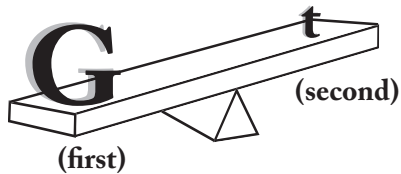
- Advice-giving, I've-got-your-answer people who like to quickly spoon out simplistic black and white answers to fix/solve the complex gray issues in the lives of others. Often times they are interrupting you with their "solutions" before you even finish describing your problem! For them, Truth becomes embodied in the rapid, pat application of a formula at the expense of taking time to graciously discern the complexities that might be at work in another's life.
- People who are not very good at listening to others. While they are partially "listening" with one ear, they are already silently rehearsing their next response.
- Para-church ministry with a dogmatic "must do" list that makes you feel like a second class citizen in the Kingdom of God if you fail to measure up to their implicit or explicit performance expectations. These ministries often have relatively few disciple "successes" and many more casualties along the way who end up feeling like second-class citizens in the Kingdom of God.

With a Truth Teller, if there is any leading with Grace, it is usually bite-size amounts of token Grace that are insufficient and ineffective precursors for their heavy confrontational dose of Truth.

The Chronic Grace Giver

A full development of the Chronic Grace Giver is outside the scope of this Reflection. It suffices to say that this type of person has the sequencing right in that he or she always leads with an initiating emphasis on Grace, or his or her (often misguided) notions of what each thinks Grace is.

However, he or she never seems to be able to get beyond that posture to deal with the Truthful reality of a situation. These chronic Grace Givers are typified by the following graphic:



Chronic Grace Giver

Practical Wisdom

Watching the dynamics of Grace and Truth at work in healthy relationships suggests some practical wisdom we can all benefit from, wisdom that those with elder brother tendencies usually miss. A wise and balanced Grace Giver knows that:

Grace Time Takes Time Intentionally investing in Grace Time in a relationship with another person (or organization) usually takes a lot longer than we might think or want. We live in a fast-paced world. We want things to be done quickly and well. But trusting relationships are not amenable to a microwave approach, as if we can spend two minutes on Power 10 and force-feed effective Grace Time. Rather Grace Time can often take months and years. Rather than the microwave approach, healthy relationships benefit most from the slow bake process. The biggest temptation in any relationship, discipling included, is to be in a hurry, to gloss over the need for Grace Time investment in order to earn the right to be heard in the life of another.

Grace Time Is More Than Nice Words Words don't always communicate what they were intended to say. The disingenuous use of "nice" words is epidemic today, even in the church. All too often we intentionally or unintentionally

say things we don't really mean. All of us are familiar with people whose "nice" words are empty. All of this helps in understanding why nice words and flowery phrases don't meet the criteria of meaningful Grace Time. When we say nice things to people, we have to live them out. They have to be genuine, appropriate to the situation, and credible. Importantly, they also have to be consistent with our behavior, which raises another issue. Noble thoughts don't qualify as Grace Time. The ancient Chinese long ago observed that a thousand noble thoughts are not the equal of one humble deed. As a result, Grace Time encompasses doing gracious things for people – a note, a call, a gift, a surprise visit. It is love, care, and concern in action.

Don't Presume on Prior Grace Time The Bible reminds us that God's mercies are fresh and new each day. Based on the way each of us lived yesterday, that fresh-and-new mercy reality needs to be true! In a similar manner, the same can be said about Grace Time. The fact that two people enjoyed some meaningful Grace Time a week ago does not mean that one of them is entitled to rush in and suddenly confront the other with Truth time today. Relationships work best when Grace Time is repeatedly established early in each encounter. Re-establishing Grace Time yet again in each new day is the anesthetic that allows the scalpel of Truth to effectively operate on us. Bringing the "Truth in love" assumes that prior Grace is in place, and that Grace Time has been meaningfully experienced by the other.

Everyone Has a Tilting Tendency

It is the reality of the human condition that we seldom function in a consistently balanced Grace-before-Truth manner in our relationships.

Most of us seem to be set in motion with an inherent tendency to be much more of either a Grace Giver or a Truth Teller. As a result, most of us have to consciously work toward leaning in the opposite direction, away from the ditch that we naturally gravitate towards. Fortunately for the follower of Jesus Christ, one of the many helpful roles of the Holy Spirit is to prompt, correct, and teach us how to remain balanced in our relationships.

Every Ministry Has a Tilting Tendency

Since people are always involved in churches and ministries, the dynamic of those organizations tends to take upon itself the nature - Truth Teller or Grace Giver - of the person designing the program(s), leading the organization, or providing the mentoring. Thus, it is important that each person in ministry be aware of and consciously work at leaning in the opposing direction of his or her inherent Grace or Truth tilting tendencies.

Being Equally Yoked

If two Truth Tellers get into the leadership harness of a program or ministry, they have the likely possibility of re-enforcing the other's out-of-balance tendencies, thus increasing over time the potential harm inflicted on participants. The same is true if two Grace Givers are in a leadership yoke together. Thus the ideal combination for providing Kingdom leadership is when a person with a tendency to be a Truth Teller partners with someone who has an inherent tendency to be a Grace Giver. In the biblical reality of "iron sharpens iron," this joining of a Truth Teller and a Grace Giver results in a more balanced approach to ministry, albeit with some creative tensions from time to time, than either could facilitate on his or her own. For a number of reasons, Jesus sent out the disciples "two by two"⁵

on their disciple making journeys, not "one by one" as Lone Rangers.

Balancing Grace and Truth

Under the continual leading and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we can live balanced lives leading with Grace before bringing the "Truth in love."⁶ People who operate this way are not so soft that they have no substance, and not so hard that they injure people. They function in a balanced Grace-before-Truth mode, maintaining a tender heart, while not losing sight of the objective - the long-term spiritual maturity of another. In so doing, they often exemplify the following:

- As parents, spouses, leaders and teachers, they will first meaningfully compliment a person before bringing up an item for constructive criticism.
- They seldom use the word "why," a negative word, which tends to function as a conversational closeout that typically puts people on the defensive, e.g., "Why did you do that?" Their vocabulary is much more punctuated with "what" and "when" type questions. Instead of asking, "Why did you do that?" they are much more liable to gently ask, "What caused you to consider doing it that way?"
- When they lead a ministry or are developing a relationship, they are very intentional about investing in substantial Grace Time with others before they will even think of venturing into Truth Time territory. They understand the need to earn the right to be heard before effectively bringing the Truth into a relationship.
- In organizations, these balanced people just seem to have a knack that allows them to create empowered teams and enthusiastic committees that are productive as well as nurturing.

Changing Truth Teller Tendencies is Hard

Work. But it can be done. With the help of the Holy Spirit, and the encouragement of good friends you invite into your life to help you break these Truth Teller tendencies, sufficient Grace will come your way. But the key questions are 1) can you see the reality of which ditch you tend to veer towards when interacting with others, and 2) do you really want to change that pattern?

The Teeter-Totter is not a Rigid Formula.

The existence of the Teeter-Totter framework, helpful though it may be, is no substitute for spending Abide time communing with the Father, the Son and the Spirit in a posture of meditative, listening prayer. That posture best allows the God Head to prompt us, remind us,

teach us, and guide us into the discernment of those Grace and Truth dynamics that make for healthy relationships. When that Abide time with the Father is missing, and we go forth in our own insufficient strength and wisdom, we often end up functioning as clanging cymbals⁷ in our relationships, no matter how hard we might try to draw upon the insights afforded by the **G/T** Teeter-Totter dynamic. Therefore, resist the notion to make the teeter-totter into a rigid formula.

Remember: To close out these thoughts, we also need to remember that when we mess up in our relationships, and we do and will, God's mercies are indeed fresh and new each day. Be sure to avail yourself of that incredible reality, as well as extend that reality to others.

Reflections to Journal and Share

- Does the Grace-and-Truth Teeter-Totter make sense to you? Can you recall instances when that reality was operating in your life?
- Are you naturally more of a Truth Teller or a Grace Giver? What does that suggest? What might that mean for your relationships in the family and with peers at work, church, and in the community?
- Which insights and what challenges particularly resonate with you in this chapter?
- Henri Nouwen once observed, *Only in the context of grace can we face our sin.*⁸ True for you?

- Is there anything about how you tend to function in relationships that you would like to change? If so, how do you propose to go about effecting those changes? What might the role of others be in this change process?

Closing Prayer

Lord, thank You for Your Grace, and thank You for Your Truth.

And Lord, thank You that You always deal with me with Grace before Truth.

Lord, help me to see myself as I truly am.

Reveal to me where I need to be rebalanced in how I function in relationships.

Provide those people in my life who can encourage me and help me to change,

And grant me the courage to make those changes.

Lead me in Your Spirit in those ways so that I can ever increasingly be the aroma of Christ in the relationships you have entrusted to me.

And Lord, thank You so much that Your mercies are indeed fresh and new each day.

Only You know how much I need that in my life.

Amen

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About the Author

Doug Greenwold is a long-time teacher of the Scriptures. He received his BS and MS degrees, as well as a MBA degree from the University of Michigan, where he also played basketball. For thirty-two years, Doug worked in general management and executive positions in Information Systems, Healthcare Services, and Life Sciences. He retired from the corporate world in 1999 to work with teaching ministries.

In 1978 Doug discovered he was called to teach the Scriptures, his true vocation. An ordained Elder in three denominations, Doug has been teaching the Bible, writing and leading retreats, conferences, and workshops for churches and para-church ministries ever since. In 1988, he first visited Israel on a study tour and realized the importance of integrating the context of the land with the biblical texts. Since then he has been an avid student and teacher of the Bible in its contextual setting.

Presently Doug is the Senior Teaching Fellow at Preserving Bible Times, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and presenting biblical truth through contextual restoration of the biblical record. Prior to that, he was a Teaching Associate at the C. S. Lewis Institute in Washington, D.C. Doug was also a Teaching Director with Community Bible Study and a Christian educator in the Washington, D.C. area.

Doug's first book, *Zechariah and Elizabeth: Persistent Faith in a Faithful God*, is a contextual revisiting of Luke's first chapter. This innovative book opens up this couple's remarkable journey of faith by telling "the rest of their story." His second book, *Making Disciples Jesus' Way: Wisdom We Have Missed* contextually examines the

missing ingredients from "making disciples" in the First Century in our Western notions of "discipleship" today.

Doug's third book *The Rest of the Story* takes familiar Bible passages and contextually restores them so we can understand all the implications of the passage as if we were Middle Eastern villagers. His fourth book *Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Those Stories* examines Jesus' interactions with Simon Peter, the leper, the paralytic, the calling of Levi, the rescue of the demoniac, the woman with the issue of blood, and others in a way that restores the First Century contextual richness of these encounters.

Doug's fifth book *Becoming a Judean Shepherd* revisits the 23rd Psalm through the eyes of a 12-year old boy learning shepherding from his father in Judea in the First Century. His sixth book *That Good Samaritan* contextually explores who is my neighbor and what does it mean to be neighborly.

Doug is the creator of PBT's "Bible Alive" multimedia weekend seminar and "Bible Alive" week-long intensives for pastors and teachers. He also leads PBT's multimedia seminars and conferences on "The Last Days of Jesus," "The Bible: It's Land and Culture," and "Making Disciples Jesus' Way."

Doug also co-leads contextual immersion trips to Israel (The Life and Land of Jesus) and Italy (Paul's Response to the Roman World). He is a frequent interview guest on Christian radio and is the author of over 50 articles on aspects of biblical context.

Presently Doug and his wife Nancy live in Columbia, Maryland, in close proximity to their children and grandchildren.

*Ever Wonder if There is Something More You Could be
Getting Out of Your Bible Study?
Consider PBT's Teaching Programs for Churches*

- **“Bible Alive” Spiritual Refreshment Weekend***
A contextual immersion experience in God’s Word. A wonderful multimedia exposure in equipping people why context matters.
- **“Making Disciples Jesus’ Way: First-Century Wisdom For Today” Conference***
Do you wonder what we in the West have missed in Jesus’ pedagogy for making disciples?
- **“The Last Days of Jesus: The Greatest Story Never Told” Lenten Seminar***
A multimedia contextual immersion experience in the last 40 days of Jesus’ life. It is the greatest story never (fully) told.
- **“The Bible: Its Land and Culture” Seminar***
A more in-depth delving into the geographical, historical and cultural context of the Bible with many aha! moments.
- **“A Father and Two Sons” Men’s Retreat**
Four sessions that contextually opens up the greatest short story ever told – Jesus’ spell-binding narrative of “Those Prodigal Sons.”
- **“Bible Alive Intensive”**
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TRIPS: Don’t forget PBT’s contextual immersion trips to Israel (*The Life and Land of Jesus*) and Italy (*Paul’s Response to the Roman World*).

* 5 ½ hours of teaching - usually Friday night & Saturday morning

To order additional copies of *Making Disciples Jesus’ Way: Wisdom We Have Missed*; *Zechariah and Elizabeth: Persistent Faith in a Faithful God*, *The Rest of the Story: A Closer Look at Familiar Passages*, and *Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Their Stories, Becoming a Judean Shepherd, That Good Samaritan, Those Prodigal Sons*:

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THOSE PRODIGAL SONS

**Ever Wonder if There's Something More You Could Be Getting Out of
Your Bible Study? Could Your Time in the Word Use a Jump Start?
Then This Book is for You!**

Doug Greenwold has a way of unearthing the beauty and power of Scripture by exploring it in its original context. It has been said for those of us in the 21st Century that, "Scripture was not written to us, but it was written for us." Before we can fully understand, appreciate and reveal the beauty of the Scriptures intended for us, we need to mine those gems that can only be discovered by understanding the original context. Doug is a guide *par excellence* for such a task, and he demonstrates so again in his latest book *Those Prodigal Sons*. No matter how familiar you are with this classic parable, this work will lead you to undiscovered terrain!

—Allan Love, *Pastor of Disciple Making, Trinity Church, Lansing, Michigan*

The text within these pages is like someone pulling the curtain back so you can see the movie that's been playing for quite some time on the BIG screen. While it's been there all along, you just didn't have the capacity to see it due to it being covered up. Within these pages, Doug Greenwold "pulls back the curtain" to help all of us uncover wisdom and insights that have been staring us in the face for centuries. Yet, due to holding onto old paradigms and a lack of cultural, geographical, and contextual understanding, we miss much of the great "movie" of all God has given to us to draw our hearts toward His.

—Pat Goodman, *Teaching Pastor, Grace Fellowship Church, Timonium, Maryland*

Read this book. It is for anyone interested in developing a more comprehensive understanding of certain key New Testament Biblical passages. We all look at Scriptures through presumptive and culture-shaped glasses. Doug Greenwold helps us correct our vision and take those glasses off. *Those Prodigal Sons* is for Biblical explorers both old and new. Any serious believer or seeker is a "student." New students will be struck with delight and made thirsty for more study. Experienced students will be renewed and refreshed and once again realize just how rich these texts can be!

—Richard L. Gathro, Ed.D, *Executive Vice President, Council for Christian Colleges & Universities*

In his latest study, Doug Greenwold continues to encourage us to accurately interpret Scripture as the original authors intended. Using familiar Bible stories, Doug challenges us to discover the true, original meanings. This is not always comfortable because it challenges traditional paradigms; however, it is essential if we are to correctly acknowledge what the original authors intended. An excellent study and resource, highly recommended for individuals or groups desiring to seriously consider Scripture as those who first read and heard the accounts many years ago would have understood it.

—Dr. David Hansen, author, *In Their Sandals: How His Followers Saw Jesus*

**An Exciting Introduction to a Wonderfully
Transforming Way to Approach God's Word –
In Its Original Context – That Will Stir and Soothe Your Soul.**