

2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21 (p. 938)

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LUKE 15: 1-3, 11b-32 (p. 848)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Free us from the “Tyranny of the Familiar” Lord! Help us to not take things for granted. Shield us from the temptation to think that we already know what it is you have to say. And instead, sweep through our hearts with your Holy Spirit, so that we will discover anew our place at the Celebration. We ask this in Jesus’ Name. Amen.

“ACCEPTABLE”

Do you ever take things for granted? Think about that. Take electricity, for instance, until an ice storm shuts it down. Or your car, until that one morning when it simply won’t start. How about your job, or your health? Sunshine, maybe? That’s a biggie, or even Blue Sky! Taking things for granted is really quite common. Far too often we don’t even notice, until something is gone! A lost sheep, for instance, or a lost coin!

So, can you think of a time when you were taken for granted? How did that feel? Or can you remember a time when you took someone else for granted? Because that feels the very same way! Picture your grandkids, until they crawl up into your lap and say “I love you”? Or mom and dad, until they get that doctor’s report? How about your son or daughter, until they go off to college? Or your Prodigal son or daughter, who have headed off in a bad direction! Can you think of anyone, right now, who you have written off? Or who, for whatever reason, has written you off! What should you do about that?

Paul, in his letter to the Church in Corinth says, “From now on, regard no one from a worldly point of view”. In other words, now that you are a Christian, only look at people through a Heavenly Lens, from a Heavenly Perspective! If you follow Jesus, like you say you do, then you need to see people through Jesus’ eyes!

And notice who Jesus hangs out with in Scripture. Tax Collectors and Sinners! “Notorious Sinners”, according to the New Living Translation. Jesus breaks bread with the lowest of the low, right? Which I have to tell you, is really great news for me! But notice that He eats with the Upper Echelon of society as well, the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law. And notice, that in Scripture, we see that behavior time and time again!

Jesus traveled with Matthew, remember, for years, a Tax Collector. And with Judas, a betrayer and thief. Peter was with them too, a simple Fisherman, not exactly a white-collar guy, a man who later would deny even knowing Him! Jesus went to the home of Zacchaeus, remember, a Chief Tax Collector, and a crooked one at that! He healed the servant of a Roman Centurion, a Commander of an Occupying Army! Think Vladimir Putin in Ukraine! Jesus even commended that Foreign Commander for his Faith!

Jesus hangs out with everyone—Scribes and Pharisees, Sadducees and Teachers of the Law, Workers and Laborers and Politicians—a broad swarth of society! Those on the left, and those on the right, and all those so-called moderates in the middle are welcomed by our Lord with open arms! It’s scandalous, really, don’t you think? Everyone is acceptable!

I mean, how many times does Jesus cross over the Sea of Galilee to the Gentile side of the lake! Jesus welcomes everyone! The old and affirmed, women and children, rich and poor, clean and unclean! No one is beyond His Grace! He doesn't accept all behavior, of course, or all choices. He often tells people that they need to repent. "Go and sin no more" is also a very common theme! But He welcomes anyone and everyone who desires a personal relationship with Almighty God.

So, what does that say? And what does it say to us, in light of Paul's command to not "regard anyone from a worldly point of view"? Who would you say is acceptable in the eyes of God, and therefore, acceptable to you as well? Who is worth reaching out to, searching for, welcoming, calling back home? Do you realize that includes you?

Our lesson today starts with, "Then Jesus told this parable". He actually shares three, but for some reason the Lectionary skips the first two. Maybe the Scholars thought the reading would be too long, and with a sermon following, everyone would surely fall asleep!

The first Parable is about a lost sheep. Maybe you remember? And about a Loving Shepherd who searches diligently to find it. The Herdsman leaves ninety-nine other sheep—faithful, obedient sheep—all alone, out in the open country, just grazing away without a care in the world, and heads off to find a single stray. That's not exactly a good business model. Think Return-on-Investment. Ninety-nine versus one!

What if that one sheep was a rebellious rascal? More like a stubborn old goat really, one who has a history of wandering off! Would that matter? What if that one sheep was out searching for greener pastures? Sheep have a tendency to do that, you know. And the grass always looks greener on the other side, particularly over the septic tank! What if this sheep was scrawny, or old, or didn't even produce much wool? Or what if it was a prize-winning sheep with all kinds of awards? What if this was the family favorite? Would any of that matter? I don't think so. Not with this Shepherd! I don't think anything in that sheep's character would change a thing! In fact, I think that's the point! The shepherd leaves ninety-nine others, who could easily get into trouble while He is gone, and seeks out the one who is lost! He doesn't abandon even one! Regardless! No one is taken for granted!

The second Parable is about a woman with a lost coin. She has ten of them, we're told, so some Scholars suggest this might be her Wedding Dowry. If so, it has great sentimental value, in addition to financial worth. Others suggest that it was a gift from her husband, all she has left after his death. That's interesting, but may be reading into the text! Still others say it was simply money set aside for household expenses. But does any of that really matter either? Regardless of its significance, this lady is not about to take a lost coin for granted! She lights a lamp, looks under the bed, and sweeps the entire house. And when she finds it, we're told, she rejoices! We have two, fairly short, pointed Parables. Maybe as warm up for the third?

And it, The Prodigal Son, is pretty well-known! It's been suggested that if we lost the entire written Word of God, and only retained this one Parable, we could still grasp the Gospel Truth! God's Grace and Forgiveness! Do you think that's true?

Parables can be powerful! They are short stories that illustrate a moral, or spiritual lesson. A Parable is a teaching aid, if you will, an extended analogy, an inspired comparison, an earthly story with a heavenly meaning! The word "Parable" comes from the Latin meaning "comparison". But in the original Greek, you have the word "para", meaning "beside", and "ballo", meaning "to cast or throw"! A Parable is a story that is "cast alongside" a Truth, in order to illustrate Truth! I like that image!

Jesus "told many stories in the form of Parables", it says in Matthew 13:3. Mark 4:34 says that in His public ministry, "He never taught without using Parables". And that He explained these "when He was alone with His Disciples". And according to Matthew 12, He did this, to reveal Truth to those willing to hear it. And to hide that Truth from those who are indifferent! I like that too, I think!

There are Parables in the Old Testament too. Did you know that? In 2 Samuel 12, Nathan tells David a Parable about a rich man who stole a poor man's sheep, to illustrate David's sin with Bathsheba! And Proverbs 20:2 casts the image of a "roaring lion" alongside that of a "king's fury". A furious king doesn't actually turn into a "roaring lion", does he? But rather, is like a "roaring lion".

Like I said, Parables are stories that illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson. So, it might be helpful for us to have some rules to interpret them. Let me make a few suggests. First, determine what is really being talked about. “The Kingdom of Heaven is like”. Or, “Jesus told this story to those “confident of their own righteousness, who looked down on others”.

Second, distinguish between the “meat” of the story, versus what is simply “ornamentation”. In other words, not everything in a Parable carries a deep spiritual meaning. Some details are simply there to make the story more vivid and memorable, more realistic. For instance, in Jesus own interpretation of the Parable of the Sower, He doesn’t comment on the fact that there only four different types of soil, instead of many! That detail is meaningless to the overall point!

And third, always interpret Scripture with Scripture. That’s critical! Jesus’ Parables will never contradict the rest of the Word of God! Jesus even says in John 12:49, “I did not come to speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken”. The plea, “He who has ears to hear” then, is a call to “listen” for the Truth. To listen to the Parable as one seeking Truth directly from God.

So, with that in mind, “Jesus tells them this Parable”! “There was a man who had two sons.” Again, the Prodigal Son is pretty familiar! So, we might easily take it for granted! But with three parables in a row, all making the same point—the “value of things”—would that be wise?

Besides, I remember an old Pastor, when I was growing up, saying, “if the literal sense, makes common sense, don’t look for another sense”!

So, two sons have grown up together on the family estate. They have eaten together from the bounty of the land, basked in the abundant blessings of a privileged life. They were born in the Promised Land, amongst God’s Chosen People, to a wealthy family. They are religious too. And we know this, because they strictly adhere to the Jewish Law! Every aspect of life was detailed for the Hebrew people, which including things like inheritance laws. And when a man died, the Law was very specific! It stipulated that all of his possessions were to be distributed amongst his sons. Daughters didn’t get a thing, other than possibly a Wedding Dowry. Neither did wives, or parents, or close friends.

“By law” the oldest son was entitled to a “double share”! Which some historians suggest was twice as much as all of the other brothers combined! But others say, it was simply a double portion. But in this case, even that doesn’t matter! There are only two sons. So, the math is exactly the same! And this “double share” law was so ingrained in the religious culture that it even applied in cases of divorce, or multiple-marriages.

Deuteronomy 21:17 says, a man “must acknowledge the son of his unloved wife as the firstborn, by giving him a double share of all he has.”

So, picture the scenario. The younger son, a spoiled brat, I think, obviously feels entitled! He has no intention of working for a living, at least not in the family business. So, he crafts a “get-rich-quick scheme”!

Maybe he plans to live on easy street for the rest of his life? You know, living off the family nest egg! So, he eventually works up his courage, waltzes up to his father, maybe slams his fist on the table for added effect, and demands his share of the inheritance! Being the second son, he is entitled to a third of everything, a third of the father's entire estate, by law! The only problem is, dad is not dead yet!

How would you feel if you were the father? Betrayed? Rejected? Can you imagine the tension in the room? Do you think that's how God feels with us, when we act entitled? "Just give me the money, Dad. Pour out your blessings. I want what is coming to me, and I want it now! I don't want some future promise. I'm not looking for you to add my name on the title to the farm. I want to be cashed-out, now, immediately! Refinance the ranch if you have to. Sell something! I don't care what you have to do! I'm going to decide my own life from now on! I don't need you, and I don't want you meddling in my affairs!"

Maybe it's even more direct? "You are obviously not going to kick the bucket any time soon, which is what I would prefer, so, how about paying me anyway. Let's pretend that you're already dead, okay? Just give me everything that I have coming, and I'll be on my way. I don't want you, or anything to do with you. I just want what you can give me!"

What would be going through your mind if you were the parent of this willful child? Would you feel unloved? Taken for granted? Outright betrayed? I've got to tell you I would be devastated! Broken-hearted! Followed immediately by mad! Really mad!

Who in the world does this little punk think he is? I mean, my gosh! It would be difficult, wouldn't it, to have such a willful child? But the father goes ahead and blesses his son. He gives him a third of everything! He takes his worldly possessions, one third of everything that he has worked for his entire life, and hands it over as if he were dead! The younger son is, in effect, saying "you don't matter to me"! And yet the father responds to this, with self-giving, sacrificial love!

I think for most of us, it's easy to see ourselves in the role of the Prodigal, at least if we're honest. We have all, at one time or another, let our parents down, or disappointed a loved one! We can probably all remember times when we completely disregarded the feelings of others, and only thought about ourselves! I'll bet that there are instances when we wasted precious resources, or outright squandered them on things that were not good for us! We all know what it means to be a selfish brat!

I also think that most of us know what it feels like to take our relationship with the Lord for granted. To, in effect, snub our noses at our Heavenly Father, take our blessings, and walk away, only to squandering them as we see fit! I think it is safe to say that many of us have willfully walked out of the Presence of the Lord, only to venture into foreign lands of high living! "Just give me the blessings, God. I'll pick my own friends. I am going to decide for myself how I will live. I'll be the one in charge from now on. In fact, from now on, I'll just treat you as if you were dead!" We know the life of the Prodigal, don't we! But do we comprehend the magnitude of the Father's love? I wonder! I think that's something we take for granted, don't you?

And I don't think we can understand the depth of His love, until we first understand the depth of His pain! To comprehend this unconditional love, we need to feel the agony of the betrayal. To even touch on the concept of forgiveness and reconciliation, we have to see the rejection! That knife-thrust into the Father's heart, by His own child, who He loves with every fiber of His being, must have been excruciating, don't you think?

We know that this son runs off to live the "high life" in a foreign land. And that, after a while, things weren't going so well, which is often the case with Prodigals. He blew all his money, and had to actually get a job! The only one he qualified for, however, was feeding pigs! That must have been quite a change for this privileged boy, raised in wealth and comfort on the family estate! Now he's hungry, and lonely, and living, literally, in a pigsty! Remember, to Jews, pigs are considered unclean. So, anyone coming into contact with a pig is also considered ritually, and therefore spiritually, "unclean"! And by law, an unclean person is not allowed to attend Worship on the Sabbath, let alone offer sacrifices for their sins!

This young man is lost, completely cut off, out of money, separated from his family and friends! But he is also separated from his Faith! He is separated from God, in every possible way! He is separated from Salvation! Because of his chosen lifestyle, he has effectively created a wall between himself and Almighty God! It's no wonder we can relate! We too have made decisions, or lifestyle choices that separate us from the Father! Can you feel the anguish here?

When he finally comes to his senses, this willful child repents, and turns away from sinful living. Finally, enough stuff has taken place that the young man clearly sees the situation he is in! He even looks back and compares his life with where he used to be! Life in the Presence of his loving Father, and in the company of a supporting family, is far better than starving with a bunch of pigs! So, he says to himself, “I’ll get up from here and go back to my Father. I’ll confess that I have sinned”. Repentance, is a defining mark of returned Prodigals! It’s not easy! But if you want to come home, it’s the first step!

Like I said, we know the story, right. Our young man, hungry and humble, finally makes his way back to the Father. I can almost hear him practicing his confession as he walks down the road. “Dad, I blew it... I’m sorry... I was only thinking of myself.” Can you imagine the fear in his heart, and the questions that must have been going through his mind? “What if he doesn’t take me in? What if he chases me off? What if he says he doesn’t love me, like I did to him by walking out?

What would you say if you were the Father? What would you do”? Punish him? Banish him? Chain him up in the barn? Would you turn your back on him? I mean, He did take a third of your entire life savings! He squandered it on wine, women and song. Doesn’t even asking for his inheritance imply that he wishes you were dead? So how would you respond? A lecture? Some form of penance? He has put you through a lot! You’ve got to do something, right!

And the Father does. He “runs” to meet the boy. He hikes up his robe, kicks off his sandals, a most unbecoming act for a wealthy land owner. He sprints to his wayward son with open arms! And before the boy can even get his entire apology out, the Father instructs the servants to put a robe on his shoulders and a ring on his finger! He puts fresh sandals on his son’s feet. That signifies that he is welcome, right! A robe and fresh sandals! And the ring says he is again part of the family! The Father continues to love his child unconditionally! No matter how far the Prodigal has strayed, no matter what he has done in the past, it is not enough to separate him from the love of the Father! Wayward children, like you and me, are always welcome back into the family! Always invited to come back home!

Like I said, it’s a familiar story. It might be easy to take it for granted. We have heard it before, heard it preached, from several different angles. How did the older brother feel when the younger one was welcomed back? The rest of the estate was his, right? How did he feel, giving up one of his fatted calves, or a robe, or a ring, especially after coming in from the fields from a full-days worth of work? Maybe he felt taken for granted? Notice though, that the father goes to him as well, and begs him to join in the Celebration too!

Even the servants are invited to come! Everyone is welcome in this family! No one is “regarded from a worldly point of view”! The Celebration just isn’t complete until the entire family is home! Which is why it’s called Good News! And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Almighty and Compassionate Lord, Eternal God, receive the silent prayers that we have just shared. And please, receive those that still lay heavily on our hearts, as well as those that will become manifest in the days ahead. Lift us up Lord, and sustain us, with the power of your Holy Spirit. Guide our every step, and direct our paths, so that we will be your Ambassadors, a light of hope in an ever-darkening world.

Father, we worship you and praise you, because you are our Lord and our Salvation. We accept your deep, unconditional love freely offered to each one of us. And we reach out now, with open hearts, to grasp your outstretched hand of forgiveness. Please, strengthen us as we do. Lord, we all carry burdens. And the weight of these hardships is something that we wish to lay down now, on your Holy Altar of Grace. And we all have moments of joy, and blessing, directly from your own hand. And these celebrations we wish to place before your Throne as well. For we know that you are in control of each and every aspect of our lives. We know that your love is indeed deep and unconditional. And we know that all things ultimately work together for our good, and for your Glory.

Therefore, as a family Lord, we pray now for your world and for your Church. We pray for our leaders, and for our nation. We pray for ourselves and our loved ones. And we pray for each of your people, especially.....Please grant healing, and comfort, and peace, in ways that only you can do. Fill each one of your people with your Holy Spirit, and empower us to obediently do your will! And please, heal and guide your Church Lord, in all of its many manifestations throughout the world. Cause us, your Ambassadors, to reach out to each other, and especially to those who do not yet know your Son. We ask this in His Name, and pray as He taught us, saying, Our Father...

COMMUNION MEDITATION

“We are Christ’s Ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us. And so, from now on, we regard no one from a worldly point of view.” What a powerful declaration! When we share communion on a weekly basis, we make a similar statement to the world. When we eat with sinners and tax collectors, as well as the religious and political elite, we claim that everyone is loved by God. When Catholics and Baptist, Lutherans and Methodist, Presbyterians and Disciples break bread together, we proclaim what this world is intended to be like. So come, with all of your differences, and all of your frailties, and all of your hopes and dreams. Come, and break down walls!

BENEDICTION/OFFERING

In the story of the Prodigal Son there is key word in verse 12 that is often overlooked. It says, “He divided his property between *them*”. The fatted calf for the feast, the sandals placed on the younger boy’s feet, the ring and the robe, all belong to the older son. He has earned it. He has worked hard for it. He has stayed faithful and close to the father all these years.

One uncomfortable way of looking at this, is that for the younger son to be restored, reconciled, some of the stuff that rightly belongs to the older son, needs to be spent!

Most of us have worked hard. We earned what we have. We’ve got a lot of good stuff, and we deserve it, including time! But what if letting go of what is rightly ours could restore a lost brother or sister? Would that bring us joy? I know it would to God! Imagine, being the answer to someone’s prayer!