

A DIFFERENT VIEW OF GOD

Could there possibly be anything that has not already been said about the parable of the Prodigal Son? Doesn't matter, because we need from time to time to listen to Jesus' parables afresh. All of us know that when we are adults – and we are not talking about stories or simple principles or being Pollyanna – it's a lot tougher in real life where people's lives are at stake, where we are trying to survive, where there are people we know and love who are getting hurt, and sometimes we ourselves are being betrayed over and over. All of us know that the theories get tough.

Most of you know and love the parable of the Prodigal Son already. You know it is about God's forgiveness and love, and you do not need any further backdrop to help you appreciate it. But I have wanted us to search together for the Gospel in the parables specifically, because I, at least, need the Gospel to keep sinking deeper and deeper into my psyche. And I know from years of experience that many of us still have a sort of "surface relationship" with the Gospel and even with this parable. That is, when we *need* to remember and know the parable of the Prodigal Son the most, we forget. Or it does not feel true for us anymore. Or to get less personal: we live in a world where most everybody knows and loves the parable of the Prodigal Son, but we do *not* live in a world where it is obvious that everybody knows and trusts the forgiveness and love of God.

In any case, I need the backdrop whether you do or not. I have lived for many years with churches all around me teaching people about fear, Hell, judgment, and what we have to do to be saved. And many times other Christian leaders have said that I mislead my people by putting too much emphasis on grace and mercy and not nearly enough emphasis on the judgment and anger of God. In short, they say I do not warn people enough about the wrath they are heading into unless they get more in line with the rules and creeds and requirements of the Christian Faith.

Well, maybe they are right. Is that why I have churches full of so many hypocrites – members who pay little or no attention to the disciplines and spiritual principles of the Faith? I am not blind to our flaws or to the learning curves we are each on. But neither is it obvious to me that other congregations are far superior to ours when it comes to living the Life and earnestly trying to follow Jesus. It's not as easy as some suppose.

But I *do* sincerely care about misleading people. That has caused me again and again to go tracking why I trust God's mercy and grace and love more than the other teachings in the New Testament that emphasize judgment and wrath and the anger of God. This is more than mere Bible study, of course. Such things depend a lot on our own experiences with the Holy Spirit. Finding the Gospel in the parables has to be matched with finding the Gospel in our own lives and in our own personal encounters with the Holy Spirit.

I cannot even talk with most conservative Christians about such things because for them the New Testament is an unbroken and seamless pudding – a puree of homogenized Christian Truth. But I know that all the New Testament writers were *not* seeing things in the same way or from the same perspective. There were arguments between Christians from day one. Is that comforting or alarming to you? Sometimes the twelve disciples argued among themselves. Paul and Barnabas split up over a dispute about Mark. James, the biological brother of Jesus, became the head of the Christian church in Jerusalem, but he and Paul were often at odds. Both died because of their loyalty and love for Jesus, so sincerity was not the issue.

But skipping the rest of the rhetoric: Who is the best and clearest champion of the grace and mercy and love and forgiveness of God in the entire New Testament? Well, Jesus of course. But in this instance, that's not fair because that's the question. We all claim Jesus as the source of our favorite opinions and beliefs. So next to Jesus, who is the greatest champion of the grace and mercy and love and forgiveness of God in the New Testament? Hands down, it's Saul of Tarsus – the Apostle Paul. Why? Because on the Damascus Road he encountered the Holy Spirit – the Risen Jesus – and beyond belief or expectation found himself forgiven, accepted, commissioned ... *even though* he had been persecuting and killing the followers of this same Jesus. That sinks pretty deep when you are the person in that situation. So for the rest of his life, Paul will champion the grace and mercy and love of Jesus against all other claims being made for or about the Christian Faith. The letters to the Galatians and the Romans and indeed all of Paul's letters ring with this certainty and this truth.

At one point, Paul will even face down Peter to claim Jesus' love for Gentiles. And Peter will be man enough to admit that he is wrong and that Paul is right. Imagine that: Peter is the head of the apostles who had walked with Jesus during His mission and ministry on earth.

Paul met Jesus as Holy Spirit after the Resurrection; he never knew Jesus in the flesh. But Paul knows the Gospel even more deeply and clearly than Peter does.

Did that go by too fast? Here is Paul, whose encounter is not with the earthly Jesus but with the Holy Spirit – with the *Resurrected* Jesus – long after the crucifixion. And he becomes the most powerful Christian spokesman in the New Testament, especially when it comes to GRACE: the forgiveness and mercy of God – the Gospel. But again, Paul never walked with Jesus in the flesh. His view of God is a major shift to the New Covenant perspective. He even understands the Gospel better than the disciples who knew and walked with Jesus in the flesh.

What does this mean? This means that Christianity is carried by encounter with the Holy Spirit, not by physical encounter with Jesus. Which means YOU can be in the story too. You can be just as clear and certain a believer and follower of Jesus as any of the twelve apostles, and more so. More so because you can know and encounter the Holy Spirit of this same Jesus, and more so because you have the perspective of all that has happened since, which of course they did not have. Does that sink in? There went all of the rest of our excuses. We are called into Life with Christ Jesus at least as much as any other person who has ever lived on this earth, and as much today as at any other time in human history.

That probably *should* be the point, but back to the point: Paul is the champion of the Gospel of grace and mercy in the New Testament. Second point: Why is Luke the clearest of all the Gospel writers when it comes to proclaiming the Gospel of grace and mercy? Bingo! Luke is a convert of Paul's. Luke meets Paul near the beginning of the second missionary journey, as we call things. Luke persuades Paul to cross from Turkey into Macedonia, and most of the second missionary journey takes place in what we call Greece, starting in Philippi. A few years later, Luke becomes the constant companion of Paul for the last six years of their lives. My claim (unprovable) is that Luke was writing his two-volume work of Luke/Acts during Paul's imprisonment in Rome while Paul awaits trial before the Roman Emperor. I am convinced that Luke/Acts is a brief that Luke was preparing as a defense for Paul and the Christian Faith when the case comes up before the Emperor. They will lose that case. We never hear any more from Luke *or* Paul. The book of Acts does not end; it just gets chopped off. These were not men famous for being quiet for very long.

So we know that one of our Gospel writers (Luke) had trained under the top proponent for grace and mercy. That does not mean Luke was making things up. It means he was tuned to hear, see, and listen for the Gospel in whatever information he was gathering from the Christians he knew as he tried to write his books.

If Luke and Paul were wrong about grace and mercy, I want to be wrong with them. Not just because I am stubborn or because of some personal opinions I like to hold onto. It is *my* experience too. If God were not gracious and merciful, I would not be here – not for many years now.

Many of you have heard me say it before: the most clear and blatant claims for the grace and mercy of God are always found in the writings of Paul and Luke. I will not go into the long list again, but I know you have heard of the communion cup as Jesus' claim that "*this is the New Covenant in my blood.*" Jesus picked up this theme from Jeremiah, but only Paul – far more steeped in Jewish scripture and tradition (rabbinically trained) than most Christians – hears it proclaimed. That is, Paul catches it, *hears* it – it sinks in. And of course Luke hears it from Paul. So we hear it in Paul's letter to the Corinthians and in Luke's story of the Last Supper in his Gospel. Where else? Find it for me. "*This cup is the New Covenant in my blood.*" Some of the most powerful words in the whole New Testament.

Every time we hear the Gospel with clear and unequivocal clarity, it is Paul or Luke. Others claim the Gospel too, but with escape clauses and warnings and conditions in the margins. If somebody puts it out there in all its naked glory, it is Paul or his friend Luke.

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Well, I do want to say a word about the parable of the Prodigal Son. But first, where does this parable come from? Of course, the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15, right in the middle. No Luke – no parable of the Prodigal Son (or many other parables). Matthew and Mark tell good parables also, but neither of them would ever put the Gospel this clearly and blatantly. They are still steeped enough in Judaism and the requirements of Torah to be more careful.

So we find the parable of the Prodigal Son only in Luke. And it is a dramatic departure from every previously held understanding of the nature and purpose of God. Though we already know and love this parable, maybe it does not sink in *deep enough* because we do not realize how blatant and dangerous and unique it really is.

The Prodigal Son has taken his share of the inheritance and gone off to a foreign land, where he squanders it, wastes it, loses it in inexcusable living – inexcusable because it is in defiance of all the laws of God and all the teachings of Judaism. It would not take a genius to figure out where this will end up. Maybe our generation is not as clear about such things, but nobody can defy the rules and laws of creation without courting disaster, sooner or later.

The tragedy is not that the Prodigal ends up starving and feeding pigs. He deserves it! The tragedy is that the Prodigal has squandered and lost half of the estate – half of the family holdings. The Father, the Elder Brother, and everybody who lives and survives on the farm back home are all now living on half of what they should have had to work with – what should have been theirs. Half the land, half the fortune, half the resources. Well, probably not exactly half, but close enough for us to understand.

Expecting the Elder Brother to forgive the Prodigal is ludicrous and ridiculous. Seeing the way the Father welcomes the Prodigal is offensive. Even if the Prodigal is truly repentant, who can trust it? And the Prodigal can never ever make up for the damage he has done. The only sane character in the story is the Elder Brother. And picturing God, the Father, as a doddering old fool who is now too sentimental to care what his younger son has done would not “sell” to any Middle East culture in any age.

The offense of the Gospel is very clear here. Nobody in Luke’s time would like this parable at first glance, or second or third glance either. God is more interested in restoring relationship than in justice or fair play or keeping conscientious people safe against the damage and uncaring mayhem of scoundrels?

This is a horrible parable. And it claims a different view of God – different from anything Judaism or even most of Christendom has ever claimed. But Luke puts it out there, crystal clear and in the open: This is what God is really like. And this is what those of us who want to follow Jesus must struggle to come to terms with.

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I do not know how you are doing with your struggle, but I still struggle with it almost every day. I need the grace desperately myself, but should other people get the grace and forgiveness too? This is a *horrible* parable!

In any case, when I need to claim the grace and when I need to declare it to others, I know there are people all around me saying that I do not honor the justice of God or the rightful demands of God. Yet I really want to please and serve God. But when push comes to shove, I trust Paul and Luke – and I hope Jesus – more than the logic or the traditions of any religion on earth.