

18 The Prodigal Father

Luke 15

He had surrounded himself with a crowd of bad characters. People who notoriously failed to observe the Law of God, who co-operated with the enemies of Israel and compromised the integrity of their people – these were coming to listen to him, eager to hear him. The Pharisees and the legal experts, those who were most committed to the observance of the Law and saw themselves as guardians of the purity of Israel, disapproved. A prophet, or a teacher in Israel, should stand apart from such sinners, to condemn their wickedness. But Jesus even sat down to meals with them. How could any devout Pharisee, or any respectable leader in Israel, ever invite him to eat with them again?

But Jesus reasoned with them:

If one of you has a hundred sheep and one of them strays, what do you do? Don't you leave the ninety-nine in the pasture where they'll stick together, contentedly eating, while you go and search for the missing one? And when you find it, after a long search – what joy! You lift it on your shoulders and carry it home, shouting to your neighbors: "I've found my sheep!" That's what it's like in heaven. There is more joy over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who don't need to repent.¹

Or again, he said, think of a woman with a dowry of ten silver coins. It's her pride, a symbol of her worth to her family and her husband. But one of the set gets lost. In the hurly-burly of household activities one goes missing. Did she accidentally put it down somewhere? Did it drop into a crack or a hole? Did it come loose from the set and roll away somewhere? She lights a lamp, searches thru all the corners of the house and sweeps every inch of floor until she finds it. And when she does – what a relief! She shouts with happiness and calls her friends and neighbors to come and celebrate with her. She has found her lost coin, the missing one of her dowry.²

In the same way, Jesus told them, there is joy among the angels in heaven over one sinner who repents.

¹ 15: 4 – 7

² 15: 8 – 10

Heaven is an important part of Jesus' teaching and story as we find it told by Luke. I have been at pains to show that we cannot simply invoke heaven as an escape from the reality of this world, as the place where all Jesus' teaching, inapplicable as it is in this world, really belongs. We cannot misuse heaven as the repository where God's promises are locked up for us till after we die; for heaven is the kingdom or rule of God which is now establishing itself among us. And yet, Jesus has spoken of it almost as an alternative place (where we are to put our investments), and now explicitly as a place where the angels are with God, looking on, as it were, at the drama of this world, where sinners repent.

But even now we must not be too quick to download a pile of images from later speculation about heaven. Jesus' words reflect those Hebrew scriptures where heaven had been described as the court of God,³ busy with the spirits, the angels or messengers of God, who carry out the will of God thruout the world. And Luke was aware that the angels who, at Jesus' birth, broke thru from the relms of God to proclaim peace upon earth, are able to see and rejoice when a sinner comes into that peace. What we are told of, what is reaffirmed here, is the interaction of heaven and earth, the involvement of heaven in what is happening on earth, and that interaction and involvement will get stronger and more sustained as the story goes on.

Jesus told his critics another story:

There was a welthy man who had two sons. The younger of them sed to his father one day "Give me my share of the property now." So the man divided his estate between the two sons, and the younger quickly sold up, took the cash and left home. He went to live it up in a distant country, where he soon squandered his money on the high life. When he had spent it all, there was a famine in the country, and he had no resources left to live on. He managed to get a job with one of the local farmers, looking after pigs. He sat there watching the pigs eat and wishing he could fill his belly with some of the vegetable cuttings they were scoffing. No one gave him anything to help.

At last he came to his senses. He thought of his father's house, where even the servants had plenty of food to eat, while he was here starving to death. He decided to make his way back to his father and confess to him: "Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son, but treat me as one of your hired servants."

³ See, for instance, Job 1: 6 - 12, I Kings 22: 19 - 23

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So he set out for his father's house, but he had not reached it – he was still in the distance approaching – when his father saw him and was overwhelmed with love and pity. He ran to meet him, flung his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him: “Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son.” But the father said to his servants: “Go and fetch my best robe and put it on him, and give him a ring for his finger and shoes for his feet. Bring out the fatted calf and kill it. Let's eat and celebrate! This is my son who was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, and now he's found again!

Now the elder son had been out working on the farm, and as he was coming back to the house he heard music and the sound of dancing. He called a servant and asked him what it was all about. The servant told him: “Your brother has come home and your father is so pleased to see him safely back that he's killed the fatted calf.” The older brother was outraged and refused to go in to the celebration.

So his father came out and pleaded with him, but he retorted: “You know that I have worked hard for you all these years. I've never once disobeyed you. But you never gave me so much as a kid to throw a party with and celebrate with my friends. And now this son of yours turns up, after he's thrown away all your money on his loose women, and you kill the fatted calf for him!” The father replied to him, “My son, you have always been with me, and everything I own belongs to you. But how can we not celebrate on this happy day? Your brother was dead and he has come back to life. He was lost and has now been found.” (15: 11 ff)

Jesus' contemporaries knew that God forgives sinners. There were rules and rituals for earning or acknowledging the forgiveness of God, and their history told them that God had often in the past forgiven his wayward people. But they felt that forgiveness should be a concession, and something of a just ordeal for the forgiven. Sinners should be in sack cloth for a while, to make it clear to them and to others, that they had done wrong.

After all, the good had endured the heat of the day, the tests and trials of a contrary world and the temptations it had put before them. They had forgone the pleasures and delights of an easy life and the luxuries of sin. Those who had not should have to pay for their indulgences before they were quit of their account. The reception of a repentant sinner, especially those

who repented when sin could no longer bring them any profit, should be a stern face reminding them of the wickedness into which they had descended. Only so were the good, the righteous who had not sinned, to be properly affirmed.

So it was with many of the Pharisees and others like them. They had worked hard to please God, and felt that this should count with God much more than his willingness to forgive sinners. And we too, if we have striven to keep the law of God, to follow Jesus and obey his teaching, may feel that we have a right to the love of God which should not be cheap. There is much that is challenging in the teaching of Jesus, especially that about giving up our wealth, forgiving our enemies, foregoing status and power, that is difficult for us to accept and practice. If we do, or if we make some progress in that direction, we may want to see that those who don't, those who don't even try or don't even believe, suffer the consequences of their refusal. Those who have gone off to enjoy a good life while we struggled to keep to the way of God and to live as Jesus taught us, should have to feel the pain before they are accepted back into the friendship of God.

And yet, we too need the forgiveness of God. When we really take on board the heights and seriousness of the challenge in the coming of the kingdom, we need to be reassured of God's ready forgiveness. For we don't make the grade. None of us make the grade, and as disciples of Jesus we fail most of the tests. We need to know that God forgives us, that the high and challenging ideals the gospel puts before us are matched by the wide forgiveness of God, however often we fall short, or fall over, in our attempts to live up to the standard. Without that assurance, without the guarantee of God's ever-ready forgiveness, we fall back on watered-down versions of the gospel and take refuge in some of the heresies I have described. It is one of the main reasons for resorting to those alternatives. Without confidence in the utter acceptance and forgiveness of God, we have to turn to more livable versions of the gospel, to manageable heresies that don't leave us so heavily behind on our delivery, so thoroughly in need of forgiveness.

God is compassionate and forgiving – not as a cautious response after carefully examining our motives for repentance, but lavishly, promptly, with absolutely prodigal abandon. Like the prodigal father, he does not hold back his goods even from a wastrel son, or his welcome and forgiveness even from the son who has left him and betrayed him. With God, forgiveness is not a legal transaction, but a rush of glad welcome from an overflowing heart. It's the full restoration of a relationship, from one who has never wanted the relationship to be broken. God does not have to be persuaded to

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forgive, but has the sinner so much in his thoughts that he recognizes their approach from a long way off and rushes to meet them.

It's not that God undervalues his relationship with the good. The story ends with the father going out to his loyal but disgruntled son to persuade him to come in and join the celebration. There is a bond of loyalty and love which the older son has always honored, and the father values and acknowledges it. "Everything I have is yours." But the father's love – God's love – is not a scarce commodity to be rationed out to the most deserving. It is endlessly abundant. It can be given wholeheartedly and completely to the one, and yet still be there, undiminished, to be given wholeheartedly to the other. The father shares everything he has with his loyal son, and so he invites the loyal son to share in this too: love, joy and celebration at the return of his wayward brother.

As we have seen and as we shall see, the teaching of Jesus points to a crisis in which the kingdom of God breaks into our history, and to the need for radical repentance if we are to survive that crisis. But we cannot expect to slip the teaching of Jesus into our pocket, do our repentance and be redy – just like that. Repentance is not a once-in-a-lifetime event, as some Christians would have it, but a radical change of attitude that results in a new relationship with God, only to expose and challenge deeper and unsuspected hostilities to the way of God. We cannot say over how long we will find ourselves again and again confronted with evidence of our failure or betrayal – sins we were not aware of, because we are so good at deceiving ourselves, or because we are so deeply embedded in a way of life that will not let us recognize how alien it is to God's.

In many places and in many ways we will come to our senses and realize that the life – even the Christian life – we thought we were managing so well is in fact a mess. And then we will need to turn again to God, humbly admitting our condition; that even while we fondly thought we were (by the grace of God) safely on his path, we were, in many of our ways, still walking far from God. We shall see that Peter, who has followed Jesus as his disciple, who has recognized him as the Messiah, still has much in him of which to repent. And we will be no different. Our journey will be one of repentance, and we will need to know the free forgiveness of God.

The forgiveness of God is not a matter of legal stipulations or religious performance. It is a relationship restored. Nor is it a case of God changing God's attitude to us, but of our being recovered into a good relationship with God. The relationship between us is mended. God, like the prodigal father,

is already for us. At the first sign of our return, God rushes to meet us, for it is already decided, in God's heart for us, that we are forgiven.

What is needed is our returning to God, and because God is, before everything else, utterly and uncompromisingly real, that means facing the reality of ourselves. There is no encounter with God that does not bring into the daylight of critical judgment the reality about ourselves.⁴ That is why repentance can never be a mere tactic. If it is, it is evading the truth and can make no approach to the reality that is God.

The wastrel son "came to himself". He got real about his own position and relationship with his father. However much he had managed to kid himself before, whatever illusions of invulnerability had cocooned him in his days of high living, he had lost them when he ran out of money. In destitution he came to his senses and saw himself as he was.

His decision to go back to his father was not a noble one. It was desperate self-interest – his only chance of survival. But the important thing is that he did not go back to presume on his claim of sonship, nor to spin some tale of misfortune to excuse his failure. He went back to confess his own guilty stupidity, and to throw himself on the kindness of the one he had only exploited as a father. He went back to accept a diminished role in his father's house, to work as a servant. God's forgiveness is not just a weak tolerance of our wrongdoing, giving up on any hopes that we might know better – we must face up to the wrong we have done. But neither does God display a stern self-righteousness before which we must cringe and grovel to earn our forgiveness. Tho it is important, the prodigal Father almost brushes aside the acknowledgement of guilt, in his eagerness to welcome back his son.

It is not any high motives for our repentance that count with God, but its reality, and that, not any reluctance on God's part, is what often keeps us from forgiveness: we don't want to face the reality. When we take refuge in denial and burn up our energy excusing ourselves, when we are too proud or too ashamed to face the truth, it is we ourselves who run from God's forgiveness. Jesus, who has come to call the people to repentance, encourages us to turn to God without illusions, but confident of God's utterly forgiving love.

⁴ cf Too Close to God, ch 9