

JOURNEY WITH JESUS.

B. THE AMBASSADOR.

21. A Father's Joy.

Luke 15:1-32. In this best-known and most beloved set of parables the note that resounds again and again is one of exultant joy. But look at the situation that prompted Jesus to tell these stories, in **verses 1 and 2**. The tax-gatherers and “sinners” found a welcome in Jesus but their presence raised the ire of the “righteous” and the learned. Their grievance found expression in one great epitome of the gospel - “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Eating together in that culture denoted mutual and total acceptance. The orthodox Jew had a label for those who did not keep the law meticulously – “The People of the Land.” Between these People and the Pharisees a great gulf was fixed. There could be no intermarriage, no trust, no business transaction, no travel and no social interaction. So they were shocked to the core to see Jesus actually encouraging these outcasts into his circle of friendship, while he delivered to the upright law-keepers some of his strongest rebukes.

Jesus’ response was to tell them a set of 3 parables which actually were 3 aspects of the one great truth and not simply 2 repetitions of the same thing. In his book “The Treasury of the New Testament” C.H. Spurgeon saw that in this chapter Jesus gave us a glimpse of each Person of the Trinity - each with a different function yet each one caring, seeking and joyfully welcoming back the lost one.¹

The first parable, in **verses 1-7**, speaks of Christ, and in an earlier study we have already seen how apt is his title, the Good Shepherd. The one sheep that went astray did so simply from its own foolishness, nibbling some sweet grass farther and farther away from the flock, never even thinking of the possibility of getting lost until too late. The shepherd might have said, “That stupid sheep! Too bad! He’s lost and it’s his own fault. Why bother with him? I still have 99 sheep left.” But even the biggest nuisance of a sheep could not wander from the caring concern of the shepherd, who sought until he found it and then, far from punishing it for its transgression, put the poor lost one on his shoulders and carried it home. And then his joy would overflow to his friends and neighbours, who all just had to hear the good news! For the Israeli mind the shepherd had come to symbolize the loving concern of their God, who would lay down his life for the sheep. And here Jesus was talking about himself, the Son of God, who had come all the way from Heaven to lay down his life for the lost sheep – not only of Israel, but of the whole world. The climax of this story is in **verse 7**, where “there will be rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents” – far more rejoicing than over the majority “righteous” who can’t see they too need to repent!

We can be so like that sheep, foolish and self-seeking, grabbing at inviting pleasures even though we are moving farther and farther away from the Shepherd. And still Jesus seeks us.

Jesus went on to speak of another aspect in the second parable, **verses 8-10**. A bride wore a braid headpiece in which were sewn 10 silver coins and this became a precious symbol of her marriage, like a wedding ring. If she was missing one, her virtue could be called into question: for instance, if she was found in adultery one coin would be taken from her. Beside this the headpiece was her dowry, the only insurance policy she had. A woman therefore would be devastated if one coin was lost, and despite the difficulty of finding it in a one-windowed house, the dirt floor covered with dried reeds and rushes, she would set to with a broom and persevere until she found it. And with what joy would she set it again into her precious headpiece! There is a difference here, in that the coin was quite helpless to even ask anyone to come to the rescue: it couldn’t even bleat! And without the Holy Spirit we are helpless to save ourselves: it is the Holy Spirit who convicts us of sin, who cleans up the mess we have got ourselves into, and who then enables us to add to the glory of God, as in **Malachi 3:17** - “They will be mine, says the Lord Almighty, “in the day when I make up my treasured possession (A.V. ‘jewels’)”. Again we have the happy conclusion – “There is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” – a stark contrast to the attitude of the strict Jews, who would have said, “There is joy in heaven over one sinner who is obliterated before God.”

Unlike the sheep, the coin was lost through the carelessness of someone else – which is a grim warning to us as parents, teachers, guardians or friends. If we know Jesus as our own we have a tremendous responsibility to those who do not, that never through our lack of concern or care will they be lost for all eternity.

And now, having alluded to the Holy Spirit and to himself, Jesus turns the spotlight onto his Father, God, in **verses 11-32**. This passage has been called “the greatest short story in the world.” Again the keynote is the wondrous joy of God when the sinner is restored to his relationship with his Heavenly Father. Under Jewish law the elder son must get two-thirds of his father’s property and the younger son, one-third, and sometimes the father would distribute his estate before he died so that he could retire from the actual management of his affairs. But here the younger son is callous enough to ask for his share of his father’s estate even before he was dead or retired. In effect he was saying, “I wish you were dead so that I could get my hands on your money!” And the father, knowing his son would only learn the hard way, gave him his request. As we watch the son taking off to enjoy his fortune, we can see nothing at all attractive about him: he was completely self-centred and oblivious of the feelings of others. But that didn’t stop the father loving him or grieving for him when he was gone – and here Jesus is giving us a picture of the heart of his Father God, who loves us as we are and is grieved when we step out of the blessedness of fellowship with Him.

It is true that when we stray away from God we land ourselves in trouble, even if it takes a while for us to become aware of it, and sometimes God has to “hit us over the head” like the recalcitrant donkey, to get our attention! This is just what happened to the son, who having spent his fortune, was reduced through the ravages of a famine to feeding pigs – anathema for any Jew! And in that desperate situation, the son at last “came to his senses”, although even here he was more concerned about his own comfort than his father’s feelings. Still not understanding the depth of his father’s love, and knowing he had broken their relationship by going away, he sought only the lowest rank of servant, a day labourer who could be dismissed at a moment’s notice. Whereas slaves were considered almost a part of the family, the son did not dare to aspire even to that relationship; the debt he owed his father for his behaviour hung heavy upon him.

Here the spotlight moves from the son to the father in the wonderful **verse 20**, “But while he was still a long way off, the father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.” The next words are remarkable – it was extremely unusual for an older man in that culture to act in so undignified a manner as to run! But this father had been watching daily for his son and could not wait to shower him with his love. There could have been a second reason for his speed, which we could surmise from reading **Deuteronomy 21:18-21**, where the parents of a stubborn and rebellious son were obliged to bring him to the elders, who had the right to stone him to death. “You must purge the evil from among you,” says God. In the case of this son, if he had to pass through the village on his way home the locals, on seeing this “traitor”, might have lynched him, and only the father’s presence would have stopped them. So God, in welcoming us home with His love, saves us also from the punishment we deserve.

Overcome, the son at last recognized his sin and sought forgiveness from God as well as his father, whereupon the father showered him with all the privileges a son could have – the best robe as a sign of distinction, the signet ring as a sign of authority or power of attorney, the sandals as a sign of sonship, (slaves wore nothing on their feet) and the fatted calf as a sign of a special occasion. To celebrate his overwhelming joy the father ordered a feast because “*this son of mine* (the relationship restored) was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

You most likely know the joy of welcoming home a loved one from overseas, or from a broken relationship, but it is a greater wonder to consider the joy in the heart of God when we come home to Him. And how did God feel when He welcomed back to Heaven His only Son who had accomplished His mission on earth? The full choir of angels no doubt had to swing into action!

Verses 25-32 introduce a sour note and remind us that Jesus was talking to the self-righteous Pharisees and teachers of the law. The older brother, conscious of his morally correct behaviour, still had no

love for his father and certainly none for his brother. His accusation against his father was false and heartless: even the younger son knew that his father's servants were well cared for. (**verse 17.**) His words betray his jealousy - (**verse 30**) "this son of yours" – countered by the father with "this brother of yours" (**verse 32**). The older brother had no more understanding of his father's heart than had the younger brother: both thought they had to work to earn their father's approval and both were unaware that their attitude to him, served to break his heart. In refusing to join in the party, the elder son was transgressing a code of behaviour, in that the elder son was expected to act as host in any party held by his father, so in effect he was putting his father to shame by not fulfilling this duty.

What more can be said? I guess we should just pause to thank God once again for His tremendous love, His forgiveness and the countless blessings He lavishes on us as His children. And our thanks brings joy to His Father-heart –which means we in turn can actually bless Him!

Get a Life!

Luke 16:1-18. The criticism handed out to someone that "he is so heavenly-minded that he is no earthly use" could never be applied to Jesus. Yes, he had lofty thoughts to impart to his disciples about his Father in heaven, but his teaching was always intensely practical. Commentators differ on the reason for this first passage, but it could be that Jesus used it to highlight the contrast in the expected behaviour of 2 groups of people. The rogue in the story had a cunning plan to feather his own bed for his enforced "retirement", and even his master commended him for his foresight and ingenuity. Jesus pointed out - ruefully, I imagine - that people only concerned with this life often made a better fist of it than those who were always looking to the next life. Franky Schaeffer (son of Francis Schaeffer) bemoans in his book that so many Christians are "Addicted to Mediocrity,"² and stresses in his Introduction that "The area of creativity .. is no minor footnote to the Christian life but is an essential." Jesus had already promised that he would give life – life in all its fullness – but often we spoil the enjoyment of our possessions and our fancies by feeling they are something evil to be shunned. God made us human, with human needs and aspirations, and by living in His grace we can – and should – make the very most of our earthly life, for our own fulfilment and for the glory of the Father who gave it to us.

It is significant that in Matthew, Mark and Luke, one verse in six deals with our attitude to possessions! So Jesus goes on to talk about money. Whatever wealth we have, should be used not to gain favour with our friends in this life but to influence them towards eternal life which they will be happy to share with us in heaven. As a responsible parent, God entrusts us with small things and if we pass the test, He will entrust us with more and more as we can handle stuff. It sometimes happened that a slave was shared between two not-very-wealthy people, but it was never a happy situation. Jesus says, (**verse 13**) it is impossible, and in just the same way it is impossible for one to give full allegiance to both God and money.

In the next verse we see that the Pharisees, notorious money-lovers, were listening to this and chose to cover their guilty conscience with a sneer, whereupon Jesus pulled no punches. "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight." Jesus was echoing a stinging rebuke from God in **Amos 5:12-14** – "For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts. Seek good not evil, that you may live. Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you." Far from nullifying the Law, Jesus was always quoting it, and here he emphasised that the Law would last forever. We like to echo Paul's sentiments when we say, "We are not under the Law, but under grace", but a study of the Old Testament Law should convince anyone that the Law of God is simply the framework of a huge monument to the grace and love of God which will endure forever.

God's Word has so much to say about enjoyment. 1 Kings 4:20 describes the ideal state under the reign of King Solomon: "The people of Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand on the seashore; they ate, they drank and they were happy ." And after Pentecost the new Christians fairly overflowed with joy: in Acts 2:46,47, "They broke bread in their homes and ate together with

glad and sincere heart, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people.” Do we attract to ourselves folk who don’t know Christ, by the integrity of our behaviour but also by our good humour, our lightness of spirit and our hearty laugh?

Rich Man, Poor Man....

Luke 16:19-31. Then Jesus showed the other side of the coin with this story. Dives, the name given to the rich man, was not only “filthy rich”, but indolent with it, feasting on meat every day in a land where the common people were fortunate to get meat once a week, and wearing clothes worth enough to feed a family for a year. Food was eaten with the hands and in wealthy houses the hands were cleansed by wiping them on hunks of bread, which were then thrown away. It was this bread that Lazarus was waiting for. Dives was enjoying his life – but without a thought for the needs of other people, even Lazarus who was placed almost under his nose to beg. Jesus brought out the dreadful finality of death: too late then to mourn and try to make amends. Man has every chance in this life to hear and believe: after that comes only judgement. In **Luke 17:1-10** Jesus gives his disciples a strong caution against leading others into sin, urging them to have a forgiving spirit, an unquestioning faith and a faithful heart to carry out their Master’s work.

What’s the Magic Word?

Luke 17:11-19. As children we were all firmly drilled into saying “thank you” before we could receive any favour. Here we see Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, travelling along the border between Samaria and Galilee, and meeting 10 lepers outside a village. The lepers stood at a distance; there was at least one authority that specified when the wind was blowing from the leper to the healthy person, the leper should stand almost 50 metres away. So they had to shout to make themselves heard, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”

When Jesus caught up to them he gave them an instruction to really test their faith. “Go and show yourselves to the priest” – which a leper only did once he was cleansed. They showed their faith by obeying him and he honoured that faith, for as they went, they were cleansed. Among that pitiful lot was a Samaritan – accepted by the Jews as one with them in his misery – and he was the one who saw beyond his own good fortune to the God Who had given it to him. Gratefully he turned back, fell down at Jesus’ feet and gave thanks and praise to God. Jesus remarked on the ingratitude of the other 9, but gave the Samaritan an added blessing with his words, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.”

How often do we stop to thank God for all that He has done? We could not live without Him sustaining the air in our body. So much of the good things in life – and the assurance of eternal life – the list is endless. A grateful spirit brings a blessing to our own uplifted soul, and joy to the heart of God.

A Nagging Woman and a Bragging Man.

Luke 18:1-7. Using the principle of contrast again, Jesus told his disciples of the widow who fairly badgered the heartless judge into giving her justice. In **verse 7** He sets this over against God who will “bring about justice for His chosen ones, who cry out to Him day and night.” We don’t know why some prayers are answered immediately while others seem to be put on the back burner: only God has the wisdom to determine that. But we do know He hears, and that His answer will be best.

In **verses 9-14** the Pharisee prayed with himself and itemised his virtues while casting a slur on the tax collector next to him. The latter, under conviction of sin, could not even raise his eyes to heaven while pleading for God’s mercy. Of course, we are all so happy that Jesus said *he* was the one to go home justified, but let’s beware of saying smugly, “I’m glad I’m not like that Pharisee!”

The Shepherd’s Last Plea.

John 10:22-42. In Jerusalem, Jesus went to the temple for the Feast of Dedication and John adds the eye-witness touch that it was winter and Jesus walked in Solomon’s Colonnade. I imagine it was draughty. In no time the Jews gathered around him and demanded that Jesus tell them plainly

whether or not he was the Messiah. Jesus had been telling them plainly for a long time, if only they had listened !

But in the midst of their scorning Jesus gave us one of the loveliest pictures of the love of God and of himself in relation to us. I once heard **verses 27-30** illustrated like this: the preacher picked up a pebble and said, "This pebble is you." He put it in his left hand and closed his fist tight over it as he quoted, "I know my sheepthey shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.' This left hand is Jesus." Then he put his right hand over his left and closed that fist tight too as he quoted, "My Father is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand . I and the Father are one." "You imagine," he concluded, "here you are, the pebble inside Jesus' hand, which is wrapped up in God's hand. How safe are you?!!"

But the beauty of it all was lost on the Jews. This man who claimed to be God was guilty of blasphemy and he should die. They picked up stones – in defiance of the Roman law that forbade them to carry out the death penalty –while Jesus calmly asked them to state their accusation. "Blasphemy!" they shouted. "You, a mere man, claim to be God!" They tried to get hold of him but in some way he managed to escape their clutches.

For his safety Jesus had to cross the Jordan to the very place where John the Baptist had begun his ministry three years before. Jesus was to spend some time ministering in Perea, even here continuing to be an ambassador for the Kingdom of God, and even here the eager crowds came to him. "All that John said about this man was true," they decided, and many believed in him. We wonder what were his feelings as he left the temple, knowing that the next time he saw it, would be his last. That would be at Passover, when spring would be with them. And this would be a unique Passover, when the spring in Judea would begin to spread and bring its life-renewing benefit to the whole wide world.

¹ C.H. Spurgeon, "The Lost Silver Piece" in *The Treasury of the New Testament*, II, Marshall Morgan & Scott, p.1

² *Addicted to Mediocrity*, Franky Schaeffer V, Crossway Books, Illinois,

