

Parables of Grace

Introduction

Good morning! Would you want to hang out with Jesus and go where he goes?

Once there was a farmer who had a couple of thousand square bales of hay on the ground. He lined up his usual help. “I’ll pay you \$75 for the day. We’ll start at 7:30 a.m.” They started loading and then unloading wagons of hay. It was hard work, and it was going to be a long hard day in blistering heat.

While they were making good progress, it was clear they would not get done, and rain was coming after the sunset. The farmer gets in his truck and goes to the town swimming pool where young strong people are bored and eager to make money. He hires another crew. They change clothes and get in the back of his truck. He takes them to the field.

At lunchtime, it is clear the workers still need more help, so the farmer borrows a wagon and tractor from a neighbor, goes to town, and picks up another crew, promising to pay them fairly.

At 3 p.m., it is clear the rain is coming and the present crew will not be able to finish without help, so the farmer borrows another tractor and wagon from another neighbor and goes back to the pool and finds more workers.

About 7:30, as the sun disappears behind the thickening clouds, the work is finished. It was a hot day, and everyone was so glad to be done. Now the fun part is about to happen. The farmer has a huge wad of cash in his hand, and all the workers line up. He asks the last ones hired to come to the front of the line.

The farmer shocked everyone by giving them \$75! Everyone else got very excited, because they thought, “If those guys are getting \$75, then those of us who worked longer and harder, will get more!”

Well, there was more than disappointment when the farmer paid everyone the same, even those who worked for about 12 hours! They got the same as the guys who worked for 3.5 hours. Clearly, it was unfair! The first workers could hold their tongues no longer! One of them shouts, “It’s just not fair! How can you pay those who worked 3.5 hours the same as those of us who worked for 12 hours in the heat?” The farmer gently but firmly answered:

“Friend, I haven’t been unfair! Didn’t you agree to work all day for the usual wage? Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am kind to others?”

—Matthew 20:13-15 NLT

Grace is unfair! God is not fair, and his unfairness is the best thing you will ever know. People have always had trouble with the fairness or unfairness of God’s grace. Maybe we still do? This morning I want to think about Parables of Grace. Parables—the word shows up a lot in Scripture and it’s mostly around the teaching of Jesus.

In fact, in his public ministry he never taught without using parables; but afterward, when he was alone with his disciples, he explained everything to them.

—Mark 4:34 NLT

Jesus told more than 30 parables. The Greek for parable, παραβολ (par rob o lay) means casting/throwing down something beside something else, placing them two side-by-side to compare them. We often define parables as “earthly stories with heavenly meanings.” So, Jesus throws down an earthly story—sometimes a bit surprising/shocking—and then alongside it lies a heavenly meaning. We look at them and can see what the Kingdom of God is like. The Kingdom of God is grace-based.

Discussion

Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!

—Luke 15:1,2 NLT

Would you want to hang out with Jesus and go where he goes?

The company that Jesus attracts and keeps is scandalous! These are the people most of us would stay away from and warn our kids about. These are rough-living hardened people living out their hurt, living out their painful past—sex workers, thieves, liars—the maligned and marginalized, the rejects of society. You can understand why the religious folks were muttering.

The religious leaders MIGHT have been ok with Jesus IF Jesus was talking to the wicked sinners in order to tell them how wrong they were, to tell them how they were going to Hell. But he wasn't approaching them that way. The complaint against Jesus was that he was spending time with these people without pre-conditions.

The message of Jesus to the outsider was not “turn or burn” but rather, “The Kingdom of God is yours.” By eating with sinners, Jesus was signaling the Kingdom was available to them, something they had not considered because they were not “good enough.”

When we read about the protest of the Pharisees, we are quick to condemn them and side with Jesus. But if Jesus were physically present in our world today, would we be comfortable if he spent his time with cheaters, pornographers, sexual deviants, and people who have stabbed us in the back? Would we be comfortable/OK if he constantly went to their parties and didn't come to our potlucks?

Now it's getting real, and we begin to sympathize with the Pharisees. Maybe they have a point? “We work hard to live right, be right, and do right, and Jesus seems to like the sinners more than us.”

Would you want to hang out with Jesus and goes where he goes?

What is Jesus doing and why? He explains it with three well-known Parables of Grace, all found in Luke 15. He throws down some earthly stories and beside them are Heavenly meanings about grace.

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

*“If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won't he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’ **In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away!**”*

—Luke 15:4-7 NIV

The Parable of the Lost Coin

*“Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Won't she light a lamp and sweep the entire house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she will call in her friends and neighbors and say, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost coin.’ **In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents.**”*

—Luke 15:8-10 NIV

The Parable of the Lost Boy - Luke 15:11-32 NLT

To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: “A man had two sons. The younger son told his father, ‘I want my share of your estate now before you die.’ So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

“A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

“When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! I will go home to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.”’

“So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.’

“But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.’ So the party began.

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, and he asked one of the servants what was going on. ‘Your brother is back,’ he was told, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.’

“The older brother was angry and wouldn’t go in. His father came out and begged him, but he replied, ‘All these years I’ve slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!’

“His father said to him, ‘Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!’”

The older brother is having a hard time with grace. The younger brother did not get what he deserved. It’s totally unfair. Grace—marvelous grace. Interestingly, the father treats the older brother with grace also. The father:

- Goes out to him
- Begs him
- Acknowledges his loyalty
- Assures him of acceptance, now and in the future
- Explains his actions

Did the older brother go to the party? Would you? Would I?

Would you go hang out with Jesus at this party?

Conclusion

God's grace is frustrating to those of us who keep rules, to the good people, to those who do right and live right. We have a hard time figuring it out. Do we ever figure it out?

Grace and truth are in tension. They are in tension in the life of Jesus and in these parables. Jesus is full of grace and full of truth (John 1:14,17).

What is the ultimate goal of God?

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

—2 Peter 3:9 NIV

God is patient and long-suffering and frustratingly unfair with his grace, yet he is full of truth and is the truth. Grace meets us and accepts us where we are. Grace teaches us and moves into the heart of God where true transformation takes place.

The younger brother seems to humbly accept the grace-filled will of his father because his father was willing to accept him in his sin, as he was, where he was. Motivated by the acceptance and love of his father, we believe he radically changed and became the son his father always wanted.

What about the older brother? Most of us, honestly, probably are more like him. He was a loyal, faithful rule-keeper, a good citizen, a good student, and a good son. And in the end, when his hardheart is exposed—as he is having a hard time with the grace of his father—the father still loves, pursues, and accepts him, where he is.

Does he respond to his father's grace? Does he learn to celebrate the grace of God? Does he go to the party? Would you? Would I?

Do I want hang out with Jesus and go where he goes, generously receiving and giving grace?