



# The Parables of Mercy

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# The Parables of Mercy

- All from Luke (the Gospel of Mercy)
  - Eight of the parables in Luke deal with mercy in some form
  - Seven of those are told during Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51-19:46)
- Three main parables of mercy (Luke 15:1-32)
  - The lost sheep
  - The lost coin
  - The father with two sons

# The Parables of Mercy

- Five other parables that expand the concept of mercy
  - The two debtors and their creditor (7:41-43)
  - The good Samaritan (10:25-37)
  - The rich man and the beggar Lazarus (16:19-31)
  - The unjust judge and the persistent widow (18:1-8)
  - The Pharisee and the publican in the temple (18:9-14)

# Why Parables?

- **Mirror of Life**
  - We don't interpret the parables, they interpret our lives and challenge us!
  - Nameless people allow us to identify with various players in each story – our life with God and with other sinners.
- **He, I and Other Structure**
  - Parables of Mercy are told in a three way relationship.
  - Other parables (such as sower and seed) do not have this structure.
  - It is intentional in Parables of Mercy.
  - “Be merciful, just as the Father is merciful” (6:36) is the central architectural beam of these parables.

# Why Parables?

- The Reversal
  - **Ironic twists**
    - One who was given forgiven more has more to forgive.
    - Which one is neighbor?
    - Shepherd leaves 99 sheep to find the one lost.
    - Father forgives son who strayed.
    - Rich man and Lazarus – one who had comfort on earth meets hell, while man who lived with adversity lives forever in heaven.

# Why Parables?

- **Mercy Seen from the Inside**
  - A transformation of the heart
  - A kindling of compassion
  - Requires looking into ones' very self to change
- **For Whom Are These Stories Told?**
  - The people in them (tax collectors, lawyers, Pharisees, scribes, wealthy) and those who hear them

# The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin (15:1-10)

- The three Parables of Mercy follow each other without interruption in Chapter 15.
- The first two end with celebration, the third leaves us holding our breath.
- Lost sheep.
  - Jesus not the first to use this comparison. (Ezekiel 34:15-16).
  - Who honestly would put 99 at risk in search for the one lost sheep?
  - Point to ponder: it is not the action of the one who converts, it is the action of God seeking that one sinner.
  - All actions are on the part of the shepherd, not the sheep.

# The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin (15:1-10)

- The housewife and the recovered drachma.
  - More of us can relate to searching for one lost coin than putting 99 sheep at risk.
  - Strong commitment to one item worth far less than one sheep.
  - One drachma was about one day's wages.
  - Focus on search and being overcome with joy at finding it. Celebrating with friends. Her dedication and joy actually put the value on the recovered coin.

# The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin (15:1-10)

- The housewife and the recovered drachma.
  - Because Jesus uses an inanimate object here, one not subject to conversion, it is easier for us to see the action of the seeker.
- Takeaways for the Christian community.
  - Matthew's version of the lost sheep draws a stronger parallel to the Christian community.
  - "So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." (Mt. 18:14)

# The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin (15:1-10)

- Takeaways for the Christian community.
  - The Church is personally involved in this parable because it is entrusted with the will of the Father not to let any of these little ones be lost.
  - The Church becomes like the merciful heavenly Father in seeking the lost sheep.
  - The little ones, the lost ones – those with no voice of their own, those with no citizenship in the Christian community.
  - God pardons so many deeds for one act of mercy.

# The Merciful Father (15:11-32)

- Human beings are far different than sheep or coins.
- This parable is a work of art.
- Several names: The Prodigal Son, The Forgiving Father, The Compassionate Father.
- Let us reread the story in all its richness and profundity.

# The Merciful Father (15:11-32)

- Threads below the surface of the story:
  - Going beyond a just recompense.
    - Laws of Deuteronomy (21:17) require that firstborn receive twice as much as other son. It further required “reward more those sons who do good.”
    - Father violates the law of recompense showing the depth of his love.
  - Father leaves the house twice.
    - He is waiting for the younger son’s return.
    - He must leave the house again to reach out to the older son.

# The Merciful Father (15:11-32)

- Threads below the surface of the story:
  - Father leaves the house twice.
    - Shows the depth of his compassion.
    - Church likewise, must go out into the world.
  - The son who died is alive.
    - Son comes to the realization just as St. Augustine of Hippo did when he wrote, “I strayed far away from you and I wandered, my God. I became myself a land of misery.” (Confessions 2, 10, 18)

# The Merciful Father (15:11-32)

- Threads below the surface of the story:
  - The son who died is alive.
    - Initial turning is hunger, not repentance. Willing to work as a servant for his father.
    - Compassion of father is undeserved. He not only met his temporal need for food, he restored his lost dignity.
  - This is your brother.
    - Second part of story is parable in a parable and this time the older son is the protagonist.

# The Merciful Father (15:11-32)

- Threads below the surface of the story:
  - This is your brother.
    - Contrast father “had compassion” with brother “was angry.”
    - Blind rage prevents him from seeing the good in his brother’s repentance or his father’s mercy.
    - Ending of story is not a celebration as in the first two. It more is a call for us to ponder what was the older son’s ultimate choice.
      - Did he take his own portion of the inheritance and leave?
      - Did he look his brother in the eye?

# The Merciful Father (15:11-32)

- Threads below the surface of the story:
  - Servants, not judges of mercy.
    - Consider the servants in the story. Few commentators ask us to reflect on them because they are considered part of the background.
    - They participate in the festive reunion.
    - One of them conveys the news of the brother's return to the older brother.
    - They are involved in the mercy of the father – killing the fatted calf, putting the ring on, dressing the son, etc.

# The Merciful Father (15:11-32)

- Threads below the surface of the story:
  - Servants, not judges, of mercy.
    - Servant delivering the news to the older brother actually withholds just enough of the story to ignite his rage. (Does not mention repentance at all.)
    - Servant, like older brother, reasons according to the logic of rewards based on merit, not grace.
    - Servants are either servants of mercy for restoration of lost dignity and share in the joy of their master, or they judge as unjust the compassion of the father.
    - Which type of servants are we?

# Some Takeaways

- The Different Faces of Mercy
  - Mercy is a grace that generates gratitude.
  - Mercy does not have to go looking for neighbors to love. Love for God is always operative in love for one's neighbor.
  - Mercy is seen through the eyes of the lost rather than those who presume they are safe and secure. Every single sinner who converts is precious.
  - Jesus wants us to focus on the essential traits of mercy rather than making moral judgements.

# Some Takeaways

- Open-ended conclusions
  - Parables leave listeners with the responsibility to choose wisely.
  - Did those who heard these three Parables of Mercy stop murmuring or questioning Jesus?
  - Parables continue to challenge in every time and place because they are relevant in authentic ways.
  - Parables take place in the context of all of Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God. The mercy of God moves through the parables indicating paths to salvation.

# For Group Reflection

- Considering the Parables of Mercy, share with the group which parable taught you the most about God's mercy.
- Which one taught you the most about the justice of God?
- Reflecting on the idea that "It is easy to talk about mercy, but difficult to live it!" what are some of the takeaways from these parables of mercy that will inform your thoughts and actions during this Year of Mercy?

# Closing Prayer

My God. I ask that you have mercy on me. I know I am a sinner, but I cast myself before you, confident of your never-ending love. Help me to be a witness of your mercy—especially to those who are poor or vulnerable, sick or lonely, or marginalized. May I never forget to be merciful with family members and others who are closest to me. Help me to always live in your mercy. Amen.