

The Parables of Mercy

July 20, 2016

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Summary

In the booklet, *The Parables of Mercy*, Jesus' teachings about mercy as explained through his parables are presented as part of the Year of Mercy. Three stories in Luke 15:1-32: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son are commonly identified as the "parables of mercy."

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

In each of these parables we become part of the story by shown a disarming truth. This in turn causes us to rethink our everyday relationships. The three-way relationship: "he, I and other" structure of these parables links God's mercy to the mercy displayed by human beings.

"Be merciful, even as [and because] your Father is merciful' (Lk 6:36) is the central architectural beam of mercy in parable form." Common to all the parables of mercy is a reversal that catches the hearer off guard. The parables of mercy involve two categories of people; those who are in the parable and those who hear them and include a range of sinners who Jesus uses to implicate all listeners. By implicating all listeners Jesus dispels the concept that mercy is based on merit not grace. "The parables of mercy do not leave people untouched."

I encourage you to read and prayerfully reflect on the parables of mercy and how they might challenge you in your own life.

The Parable of the Lost Sheep. 1The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to him,²but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."³So to them he addressed this parable.⁴“What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the lost one until he finds it?⁵And when he does find it, he sets it on his shoulders with great joy ⁶and, upon his arrival home, he calls together his friends and neighbors and says to them, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’⁷I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance. (Luke 15:1-7)

I myself will pasture my sheep; I myself will give them rest—oracle of the Lord GOD. The lost I will search out, the strays I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, and the sick I will heal; but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd them in judgment. (Ezekiel 34:15-16)

*The Parable of the Lost Coin.*⁸“Or what woman having ten coins and losing one would not light a lamp and sweep the house, searching carefully until she finds it?⁹And when she does find it, she calls together her friends and neighbors and says to them, ‘Rejoice with me because I have

found the coin that I lost.’¹⁰In just the same way, I tell you, there will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (Luke 15:8-10)

*The Parable of the Lost Son.*¹¹Then he said, “A man had two sons,¹²and the younger son said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.’ So the father divided the property between them.¹³After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation.¹⁴When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need.¹⁵So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine.¹⁶And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any.¹⁷Coming to his senses he thought, ‘How many of my father’s hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger.¹⁸I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.¹⁹I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.”’²⁰So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.²¹His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.’²²But his father ordered his servants, ‘Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.²³Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast,²⁴because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.’ Then the celebration began.²⁵Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing.²⁶He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean.²⁷The servant said to him, ‘Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’²⁸He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him.²⁹He said to his father in reply, ‘Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends.³⁰But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.’³¹He said to him, ‘My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours.³²But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’” (Luke 15:11-32)

Process Activity

Having read the parables of Jesus, 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? Do you think that is it necessary to sin in order to obtain justification and reconciliation with God? Finally, 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?

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.