The Parables

Understanding What Jesus Meant

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The Parables: Understanding What Jesus Meant

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Chapter One

Knowing My Father

A. W. Tozer begins his masterly study of the character of God, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, with a provocative sentence: "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." For some, such a claim seems to be pious rhetoric, the kind of thing a preacher is expected to say on Sunday morning. God-talk may have its place, but in the real world other things seem far more relevant. The agenda of modern secular man has little place for God. I remember a philosophy student insisting to me that life's really important questions weren't related to God at all, but to such things as the nuclear issue, environmental crises, economic dislocation, political upheaval, and personal matters of self-worth and personal dignity.

For others, Tozer's words have a ring of truth. What I think about God *is* important. In fact, those other questions can only be answered in the light of who He is and what He says. But that creates a dilemma. In the theological cafeteria of the twentieth century, which God should I choose? Or should I build my own God *à la carte*, combining ideas that seem to me to be palatable or appealing? From where do I get my understanding of God?

For still others, the response is one of applause. Tozer is right. We must be God-centered, and what we think about God is not just important, it is all-important. At the same time, we have a sneaking suspicion that those who speak most confidently about God are often woefully ignorant of Him. After all, history is replete with atrocities and absurdities done in His name by those who claim to be carrying out His will. And recent events have exposed the enormous difference between the public image and private reality of some self-appointed spokespersons for God.

I have no doubt that the Lord Jesus would have agreed with Tozer emphatically. What enters our minds when we think about God really is the most important thing about us. Over and over, Christ sought to scrape away the residue of misinformation and misunderstanding that obstructed people's view of His Father. But He also makes it clear that knowledge of God is not equivalent to theological orthodoxy, important as that is. The evidence that we know God is not so much our ability to define the divine attributes, as it is our response to people. Right knowledge of God is present when we imitate our Father's response.

That is the theme of one of His most familiar and powerful stories. We know it as the parable of the prodigal son, but that convenient name indicates that we have perhaps not listened to it carefully enough. For the story tells not of one son but of two, and the Lord's purpose is not so much to describe a prodigal son as His Father's love. It is, in fact, the parable of the Father's heart, recorded in Luke 15.

The Question about the Lord's Disreputable Companions

To appreciate the story, it is particularly important that we see the events that inspired it. Therefore, we begin with Luke 15:1-2:

> Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

The dust of the centuries has often obscured for us how consistently and deliberately the Lord Jesus shocked His contemporaries. His words and His actions persistently offended the religious and the self-righteous, and I suspect His behavior would have made many of us uncomfortable as well.

One of the surprises of the gospels is their account of the very unlikely people who were drawn to Jesus. "Tax collectors and sinners" represented, to the Pharisees, the dregs of society. To us, the words "tax collectors" conjure up unpleasant feelings about high taxes, indecipherable bureaucratic jargon, and the fear of an audit. But in our Lord's time, tax collectors were not merely unpopular. As agents of the hated Roman oppressor, they were pariahs. The system of taxation made corruption prevalent, and abuse of power was commonplace. Because they dealt so often with Gentiles, tax collectors were religiously "unclean," as well. Honest Jews could only regard such people as disloyal, dishonest, and disreputable. "Sinners" were of the same ilk. As the Pharisees used the term, it did not necessarily

describe notorious sinners. More commonly it referred to ordinary people who lived with indifference to the rigorous observances of the pious. The religious derisively called them *am h'aretz*, "the people of the land," the non-observant, the unclean.

They may have been indifferent to religion, but such people were not indifferent to spiritual truth. They were drawn to the Lord's teaching—a fact that infuriated "the Pharisees and the teachers of the law," men who represented the epitome of religion and respectability in Jewish life. The problem was not so much sinful people's response to the Lord, but the Lord's response to them. After all, who could object if sinners came to learn? As long as they knew their place! But Jesus didn't merely tolerate their presence. "This man welcomes sinners." They felt comfortable in His presence! "And eats with them." In a culture where sharing a meal meant acceptance and even approval, how could a good man behave like this? How could He enjoy their company and have them enjoy His? "That tells us all we need to know about Jesus. You can tell a man by the company He keeps, and since He's not with good people, He's obviously not a good man."

The religious leaders were people who claimed to know God and who were offended by the kind of people Jesus attracted. They are not alone in having these feelings. If we are honest with ourselves, we sometimes share their attitude. Not everyone who follows Jesus is "our kind of person." It is precisely this prejudice that leads to what follows: "Then Jesus told them this parable." In fact, He tells them three parables—about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. And each parable is addressed to the self-

righteous Pharisees, putting a mirror before them and opening a window into heaven. They, in fact, know far less about both themselves and God than they think they do.

There is an ancient story about a young man who came to a rabbi he greatly admired. "Sir, I love you, and I want to follow you. May I become your disciple?" "My son," came the reply, "do you know what hurts me and gives me pain?" "No, sir, I don't think I do." "Then how can you say you love me, if you don't know what hurts me?"

That is the sense of these three parables. How can we say we know God if we do not know what gives Him pain and brings Him joy? The Lord wants us to see that the Father's heart hurts for the lost and rejoices when the lost are found. He uses a concept we all understand. When something of value is lost, we do not despise it, we search for it, and rejoice in the finding of it. It is obvious that people feel this way, but the amazing discovery is that God does also. That is the point of the parables. They tell us not so much about a lost sheep as a seeking shepherd, not so much about a lost coin as a searching woman, not so much about a lost son as a loving father. And all these speak of our Father in heaven.

All three of these familiar stories are beautiful, but our focus here is on the third parable of Luke 15, which is one story told in two parts. This is an important observation that is often ignored. The Savior's story does not end with the return of the prodigal, but with the appeal to the older brother, and it is in the last half of the parable that the most powerful application is found, the one intended for the scribes and Pharisees.

The Wayward Son and the Welcoming Father (Luke 15:11-24)

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

> "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate."

I haven't lost any sheep, but I have scoured the neighborhood searching for our wandering poodle, with my children in panic at the thought that she may be gone forever. And I have turned the house upside down looking for the diamond that had fallen out of my wife's engagement ring. We found the dog but not the diamond. But what can compare with the anguish of a parent's heart over a lost son? There is a horrible panic when an infant vanishes, a different but real panic when a grown child wanders morally or spiritually. The problem in the latter situation isn't that we don't know where they are or what they are doing, but that we do. We know they are in the far country, not only wasting their money but wasting their lives. Perhaps it is only a parent in such pain who can enter fully into the mood of this story.

Leaving the Father's House (15:11-12)

Late in the summer of 1986 I drove with my father from Portland, Oregon, to Vancouver, B.C. Two years earlier my mother had died, and my father had known deep loneliness since then. He was not a man who found it easy to talk about his emotions, but on that trip he began to talk about his funeral and his finances. He died nine months later, and I am glad for

the memory. But at the time, I was terribly uncomfortable. I didn't want to talk about *my* inheritance or what his death would mean for me financially. The money was his, and I wanted him to use it for himself. Anything else seemed disrespectful and grasping. And I wanted him to think about living, not about dying.

If we feel that way, we can guess that people in the Lord's time did too. This young man's request is a dagger in his father's heart. He doesn't want a loan, he wants his inheritance. "If you won't hurry up and die, give me what's coming now. I want it, and I won't wait for it." The Lord wants us to feel the shock of that request. Some experts in Middle Eastern culture tell us that the young man was virtually expressing a wish for his father to die. A father could initiate a discussion about inheritance, but never a son. "To my knowledge in all of Middle Eastern literature (aside from this parable) from ancient times to the present, there is no case of any son, older or younger, asking for his inheritance from a father who is in good health" (Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*).

I can't imagine that the father meekly followed his son's request. He knew his son's character, and he knew his intentions. Undoubtedly he tried to dissuade him. But his son persisted. Heartsick, the father finally relented. Sometimes a parent is helpless to prevent a course of life leading to destruction. There comes a time to let the prodigal go. So he divided the estate, with two-thirds going to the older brother and one-third to the younger, as Jewish law required. Apparently the father went beyond usual practice, because he distributed not only his

capital but also his property. This was no small matter. After all, this represented the old man's security for the future. He was now totally vulnerable.

Living in the Far Country (15:13-16)

The young man is determined to be totally independent. When the text tells us that he "got together all he had," it suggests that he turned all his assets into ready cash. He sold the property, because he intended to cut all ties with his past and his parents. And he left behind not only his father's house, but also his father's God. "A distant country" can only mean Gentile country, characterized by pagan values and heathen morals. It takes little imagination to realize how he "squandered his wealth in wild living." He scattered his money like a sower scatters seed, and his crop was dissipation, "wild living." Back home few had any doubt that he was "squandering [his] property with prostitutes" (15:30).

Sooner or later, choices bring consequences. And so here. The young man runs out of money and into a famine. The good life is soon only a memory, and finally the realities of life drive him to desperation and even degradation. A local citizen hires him to feed pigs, a task unthinkable for a proud Jew. But desperation knows no pride, and the young man not only lives with the pigs, but is willing to eat with them. The fodder of pigs looks enticing. But in a time of famine pigs are more valuable than people, and so "no one gave him anything."

Had the Lord stopped at this point, his critics would have risen up with enthusiastic approval. "That's right. That's what happens to a sinner. He ends up degraded, with the stench of

pigs upon him. He's getting what he deserves." But the Lord did not end there. The Pharisees were content to leave sinners in the pigpen. The Savior wants them to find the way back to the Father's house.

Looking in the Mirror (15:17-19)

In a striking way, the Lord describes the turning point. Literally, he tells us that the young man "came to himself," or as we more commonly say, "he came to his senses." There is an insanity to sin, and this boy suddenly saw himself as he really was. The first step to spiritual sanity is repentance, a return to a realistic understanding of who God is and who we are in relation to Him. The young man realized that his choices had been sinful, against God and against his father. ("Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.") In accepting the responsibility for his actions and recognizing the wrong he had done, he embraced truth.

Undoubtedly, the young man's anthem when he left home had been, "I've gotta be me. I've gotta find myself." But we can never find ourselves in sinful indulgence. There is often more truth in the pigpen of consequences than in the banquet halls of revelry. The prodigal had left home to find his freedom. Instead he had found servitude, a bondage far worse than anything his father's hired men experienced. Sadly, it is often not until we reach the pigpen that we come to understand the glory of the Father's house.

But the boy's proposal indicates that, while he desires the father's house, he doesn't understand the father's heart. He

knows he has forfeited all right to sonship. The best he hopes for is that his father may accept him as a hired servant. He is aware that he can claim nothing more.

Learning about the Father (15:20-24)

There is no harder place to go than where you have failed. Villages can be cruel places. This boy's actions had been the talk of the town, and he knew that going home meant running a gauntlet of criticism and hostility. To come home bearing the smell of pigs and wearing the rags of failure was the ultimate humiliation. He had left town so sure of himself and his future! But if that was the price, it had to be paid. So he returned, not merely to home, but to his father.

And then, as the Lord tells the story, we realize the most amazing fact of all! This father is no austere figure who has disowned his son and shut him out of his heart. While the boy is still a long way off, the father sees him. The implication is astonishing. Here is a father who is not only willing to receive his son, he has been looking for him! Day after day, he has been waiting for this moment. At a distance that only a broken heart can leap, he recognizes his son and instinctively realizes his need. Only a broken man would run as his son is walking! And he "was filled with compassion for him." Note the timing. The son is too far away to express his repentance, but already the father's grace is present.

To understand the story, we need to know that older men in the Middle East do not run. This father was an aged and wealthy landowner. Robes made running difficult, and the concept of dignity made it inappropriate. Even in our time, important

people restrain their emotions publicly. They may jog for exercise; they rarely race in excitement. But this father's heart is filled with two things: love for his son and a desire to reach him before any of the judgmental villagers do. Suddenly, the villagers are startled by the sight of this dignified man bolting through town to throw himself upon a dusty, ragged stranger and to smother him with kisses.

The son begins to pour out his well-rehearsed speech. "Father, I have sinned. . . ." He gets no further. That is all the old man needs to hear. He turns to the crowd that has followed and gathered around to watch. Strikingly, he says nothing to his son; his actions will say it all. "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him." That would have been the father's festival robe worn on grand occasions; the boy was to be the guest of honor! "Put a ring on his finger"—not just as an ornament but as a symbol of authority. ". . . and sandals on his feet." Slaves and servants went barefoot. The father isn't merely clothing his son; he is covering him with honor and acceptance. "Bring the fattened calf" (the one carefully prepared for a special occasion) "and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." Nothing is to be ordinary. His prodigal son is to receive the highest honor.

There is a Buddhist story that provides a fascinating contrast to the Lord's story. It also tells of a son who left home and returned years later in rags and misery. His degradation was so profound that he did not recognize his own father. But his father recognized him and told the servants to take him into the mansion and to clean him up. The father, his identity unre-

vealed, watched his son's response. Gradually, time wrought changes, and the son became dutiful, considerate, and moral. Satisfied, the father finally revealed his identity and formally accepted his son as his heir.

The Pharisees would have understood and approved of such a story. It makes sense to wait for a son to achieve worthiness. It is reasonable to treat a repentant person according to the stage of penance achieved. But that is not the Father our Lord describes. It is not a parable of merits. Here is a picture of grace. God is not an austere being, impassively dispensing justice. He does not merely smile benignly upon the good and the righteous. His grace is almost undignified in its exuberance. Here is a God who runs and rejoices and embraces. Here is a God who not only accepts the dry-cleaned and the sanitized, but who runs to the filthy, wayward son who has turned his heart toward home. Here is a God who, as time will make clear, gives not His best robe but His only Son. Here is a God who shouts to the returning rebel, "Welcome home!"

God celebrates over the dead child who has come to life, over the lost who is found. He doesn't merely accept the prodigal son, He rejoices with him and over him. But this is a God the Pharisees did not know. And that is why the story does not end with verse 24. In fact, the key to the story is what follows.

The Respectable Brother and the Rejoicing Father (Luke 15:25-32)

> "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he

called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

"'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "

The Anger of the Older Brother (15:25-28a)

If the prodigal son is meant to represent the tax collectors and sinners of verse 1, it is obvious that the older brother is the Lord's portrait of the Pharisees of verse 2. Here is the hard-working, respectable son. When the villagers had criticized the wayward son, they had been warm, no doubt, in their praise of the dutiful son. He was a credit to his father, the one who had done the right thing.

Certainly the Lord is not criticizing goodness and respectability. But as Mark Twain said in his typically sardonic way: "Having spent considerable time with good people, I can

understand why Jesus liked to be with tax collectors and sinners." There is a "goodness" that is not good and a "righteousness" that is not right. This older brother appeared to have a relationship with his father which, in fact, he did not have, and the Lord used him to unmask the Pharisees' claims truly to know the Father.

The sounds of celebration fall on very unsympathetic ears as the elder brother returns home. Music and dancing are not what he desires in his father's house. And the news he receives confirms his worst suspicions. His brother has returned—that good-for-nothing whom he despises—and his father has gone off the deep end in his celebration.

There is no doubt about the son's duty here. The oldest son should act as his father's special assistant on such occasions, as a co-host. This brother has no intention of playing such a role. "The older brother became angry and refused to go in." This is a studied insult to his father. Publicly he makes clear his disapproval of his father's actions. Like a teenager picking a fight with his parents before a house full of guests, he behaves in a way that is not only hurtful but humiliating. But there is even more here. *This son would rather not have fellowship with his father than accept his father's treatment of his brother*. He will not accept someone who has been the companion of pigs and prostitutes. If that costs him fellowship with his father, so be it.

The relevance of this to the context of Luke 15 is obvious. The Pharisees would not have fellowship with Jesus because of His treatment of people the Pharisees considered prodigals. Thus, they were putting themselves outside the Father's house.

Refusal to accept all those whom the Lord accepts is no small matter. It reveals our relationship to God Himself.

The Plea of the Seeking Father (15:28b)

The father could have sent out a servant to order his son inside. Certainly a father in the Middle East had such authority: "We'll talk about it later, but not now. Get inside, smile, and do your job. But don't do this—not now, not this way. We deal with matters like this behind closed doors."

But the father who humbled himself to run to the returning prodigal humbles himself to appeal to the angry older brother. He "went out and pleaded with him." His love for this son is no less profound than his love for his other son. He does not stand on his dignity, but reveals his vulnerability.

The Complaint of the Older Brother (15:29-30)

The older son has only contempt for such a response. In the light of the father's appeal, the heart of the son is exposed. He speaks angry words that reveal who he really is. Appearances suggest a son respectful of his father, totally different from his rebellious brother; anger unveils attitudes every bit as contemptible as the attitudes that led his brother to leave home. In fact, what we learn about this older brother may explain why the younger brother wanted to go to the far country!

The older brother has an attitude of *contempt for his father*. The "Look!" of verse 29 is full of disrespect, as is the litany of complaints. Clearly he has rehearsed these in his mind over the years, carefully calculating and storing up his grievances. He

hasn't stayed home because he loved his father, but because working in his fields was a way to get what he wanted. He has shared his father's house but not his father's heart. At the same time, he is full of *contempt for his brother*. "This son of yours" says volumes. He will not accept him as "my brother." In his heart, he has written him out of the family and out of his life.

But despite his protestations, this man is more like his younger brother than he realizes. He is full of *concern for himself*. He is intensely self-centered, judging things only by how they satisfy his own interest. He cares nothing for his father's longings or his brother's needs. He is self-indulgent and resentful, angry that his father has not catered to his wishes. Most of all, he is no better than a servant. "All these years I've been slaving for you." He knows nothing of the joy of being a son. The younger brother was willing to become a servant; this son has been one in heart all along. He now stands exposed. This respectable son is, in fact, a rebel, lost in his father's house. He is so close to the father and yet so far from him.

What a penetrating portrait of the self-righteous and the religious! Morally respectable and publicly approved, such a person may be much farther from the Father than the prodigal in the pigpen.

The Choice of the Older Brother (15:31-32)

The father's grace persists despite this outburst. A normal father would be furious at such an attack. But this father is different. He explains carefully, and says, in effect, "We had to celebrate and be glad; we had no choice. Because of who I am, a

father, I rejoice over lost sons who return. Joy is the only possibility. Not to rejoice would be to deny who I am." The father is clear. He will not cancel the party, because he cannot. He is a gracious father who rejoices over children found.

Neither will the heavenly Father cancel the celebration. His heart aches, too, over the lost son—whether he is partying in the far country or working in the family's fields. When sinners repent and come home, He must welcome them with outstretched arms, and He must share a joyful meal with them. What Jesus is doing with tax collectors and sinners (15:1-2) is what the Father does in heaven. The deity of the Lord Jesus and the grace of God are the themes of this story.

But there is a fascinating omission in the story. There is no ending. Did the older brother enter or not? We are not told because that is precisely the issue the Lord sets before the Pharisees and before us. To reject the Father's gracious treatment of the most unworthy of sinners is to deceive ourselves about our need for grace and to forfeit the fellowship with God that is based on grace alone. As long as the Pharisees stayed angry at the grace shown to sinners, they stood outside the Father's house.

The awful possibility is that we, too, can be in the Father's fields as servants but not really in His house as sons or daughters. We may be moral and respectable, but, because we have never truly known the Father who is loving, gracious, and welcoming, we are "older brothers." To such, the Father's appeal is "Come in."

Or we may be in the far country, scattering the resources of which He is ultimately the Giver. Perhaps the money has run out and the famine has come in, and we have reached the pig-pen. We despair of ever being accepted in the Father's house. To all such, the Lord's story shouts, "Come home."

The bottom line is this. What we know of God is seen in how we view ourselves as lost and how we deal with others as lost. God's heart aches over those who are lost; God's heart rejoices over those who are found. How well we know Him is revealed by whether or not we ache and rejoice as He does.