

3) PARABLES FROM LUKE

Luke 10. 25-37

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' ²⁶He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' ²⁷He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' ²⁸And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?' ³⁰Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' ³⁷He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

Luke 16. 19-31

The Rich Man and Lazarus

19 'There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." ²⁵But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." ²⁷He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house— ²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of

torment.”²⁹ Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.”³⁰ He said, “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.”³¹ He said to him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” ’

Luke 18.1-8

The Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge

18 Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.² He said, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people.³ In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, “Grant me justice against my opponent.”⁴ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone,⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.” ’⁶ And the Lord said, ‘Listen to what the unjust judge says.⁷ And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?⁸ I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?’

Luke 18. 9-14

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector

9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:¹⁰ Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector.¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector.¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.”¹³ But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.’

THE KINGDOM OF GOD SHOWS UP WHERE YOU LEAST EXPECT IT

Luke 10: 25-37 - The Good Samaritan

This is one of the best known of parables with a message that appears straight forward. The key to the parable, though, is the unexpectedness of the answer Jesus gives to a question he is asked. A lawyer (of religious/moral law) asks Jesus a question about “eternal (abundant) life.” How is one to inherit it, get it, acquire it? This question is about finding entry into the kingdom of God, the place where God is, the “promised land”, the place where we all want to be. In ancient times, people spoke about place rather than a state of being. Today, we would talk about a state of being - peace, wholeness, eternal safety with God, harmony within, etc.

So then, how do we gain it? Jesus responds to the lawyer’s question with a question. This is a way of getting to know a little better where the lawyer is coming from. Is he asking the question sincerely, or is he there just to test Jesus and look for some flaw in his response? We do not know how Jesus sees the lawyer. But we do get to hear the lawyer’s answer. He responds to the question straightforwardly. The 10 commandments and the whole law of God in the Old Testament (the Jewish Scriptures) is summed up in the double commandment: love God with all that is in you and all that you have, and love your neighbour as yourself. The two go together. Jesus affirms the answer as the right one. “Do this,” Jesus tells him, “and you will live.”

But the lawyer maybe feels he has been outdone and outsmarted by Jesus. So, he asks another question, hoping, maybe to “justify himself”, to nail Jesus by having him give an answer that will be more controversial to the crowd. Or maybe he just wants to prove to Jesus that he is smart, that he’s got deeper concerns than a straightforward answer can offer. Whatever his motives, he asks: “And Who is my neighbour?” Jesus’ answer is the beloved parable we know so well.

What is controversial in the parable? Several things. Jesus is challenging his audience to stretch themselves. If they really want to fulfill the will of God, if they really want to inherit eternal life, if they really want to experience true abundance, peace, and fullness, then they must reach out in love across many obstacles. You do not choose your neighbour. Your neighbour is the person who happens to be “next to you” (the literal meaning of neighbour in Greek). What if it happens to be a Samaritan (someone you despise more than anyone else in the world)? And what if loving this person practically would be an incredible inconvenience to you in terms of your wallet or purse, your time, your reputation, etc.... (a man bleeding, unmoving, possibly dead would be contaminated. A religious person, certainly a priest, on their way to Jerusalem, to the temple, would be contaminated by contact with such a person, and hence would have to return home, undergo rituals of purification, and then make his way back to Jerusalem). So, Jesus is saying, if you really want to fulfill the law of God, the law of love, you have to reach out to your neighbour, indiscriminately, past all the social, material, personal obstacles that would prevent you from reaching out, and love that person. And Jesus adds a further twist. The person on the road is probably a Jew. His own people have not stopped to help him. It takes a Samaritan, an outsider, “the enemy” to do it. Someone

who supposedly does not take God's law seriously is fulfilling it more fully than those who are supposed to be its defenders and practitioners.

Jesus ends the parable by asking a final question: who was the one who showed the fallen man love? The answer = the Samaritan. Jesus then concludes by telling his audience: "go and do likewise." The Samaritan may not be God's chosen person by race. But he is God's chosen person in his behaviour. Belonging to the kingdom is not an entitlement or birthright. It is based on how you choose to live. You can't belong if love is not your driver.

Luke 16: 19-31 - The Rich Man and Lazarus

This parable is not meant to give us a picture of what heaven and hell are like, nor a description of who will inhabit them. It is a classic tale of reversal of fortunes and it has a parallel in other ancient folk tales (e.g. Egyptian ones). In ancient times, rich men were not seen as bad and poor men were not seen as good. To be rich was considered a blessing from God. To be poor was considered a curse from God, like being sick. The prosperity gospel is as old as human civilization. We know nothing about Lazarus, except that his name means "God helps" and gives us a sense that he turned to God for help in his poverty. The name "Lazarus" is also the Greek translation of the Jewish "Eliezer." Eliezer was the chief servant of Abraham (Genesis 15:2), so it is no surprise that Abraham is also a character in this drama.

What is the message of this parable? It is not that the rich man is bad for being rich. It is not that the poor man was good for being poor. It is that the rich man never noticed the poor man outside his gates, who was his neighbour, the person "next" to him. Again, the kingdom or call of God comes unexpectedly, where we do not instinctively see it or look for it. It catches us unprepared. But it calls us to respond. How will we respond? Only in the afterlife does the rich man acknowledge Lazarus. In this life, Lazarus did not exist for him; he was as nothing, not even worth the scraps of food thrown away. The dogs treated him better than the rich man. The question for us is: if we have the law of God to love, but fail to see the neighbour right in front of our eyes, how can we claim to fulfill it?

Luke 18: 1-8 - The Widow and the Unjust Judge

The purpose of this parable is to encourage us to keep praying even when we don't see any signs of our prayers being answered. But the parable Jesus tells once again breaks through any expectations we have of how prayers are to be answered and the kind of faith that gets results. The kingdom of God is a state of being, a place where we are persistent in our praying, trusting and waiting upon God while continuing to pray.

The widow does not get results because she is in the right. She does not get results because the judge recognizes the justice of her cause. She gets results because she is so stubbornly persistent that she irritates the judge into granting her wishes. He just wants to be rid of her. Now, conceivably, he could be rid of her in other ways. But that is not what happens. Unexpectedly, he grants her wish for justice even if he has no internal or external motivations to do so. The unexpectedness of God's answer to

prayer, the kind of response to prayer, not the kind of response we would necessarily expect or look for... that is what this parable is about.

The message for us: keep praying even if you do not see any results. Keep praying when you feel the obstacles to overcoming the challenge to love in your life seem insurmountable. Keep praying that the kingdom of God be within you even if the world around you is hostile to it and to you.

Luke 18: 9-14 - The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Again, this parable seems to offer us a message that is obvious. Self-righteousness is bad. Humility and confession of sin are good. Such ought to be the way we approach God. But let us go a little deeper.

The Pharisee is not a bad man. In fact, he is a good man, someone who takes his moral commitments and principles seriously. If the world were full of Pharisees, much less evil and neglect of duty would take place. The Tax Collector, on the other hand, is not a good man. Not only has he compromised any principles and commitments to good he may have had, but he has sold his soul for profit. He has extracted taxes from people who have had no money to give him. He has had to be cold and heartless in order to make a profit. And now he has come to the temple, on his knees, pleading for mercy. Part of the challenge of this parable is to locate ourselves truthfully and honestly in it. If we identify ourselves with the Pharisee, we have a hard time appreciating this parable. If we identify ourselves with the Tax Collector, this parable gives us hope. But we should do neither in order to extract the full depth of its message. The Pharisee may be the best person in the world, but he lacks the one quality that would make him closest to God, and that is mercy. He lacks love. That is the problem with self-righteousness. It always leads to judgmentalism and hard-heartedness toward a neighbour. "He deserves what has happened to him, therefore, I don't need to feel sorry for him, I don't need to feel love for him, I don't need to shed a tear for him. And I deserve God's favour. I have earned it. I deserve to be loved because I have proved myself."

And even though the Tax Collector is a bad man, he comes to the temple in full sincerity to confess his "badness" and to acknowledge that should he receive any mercy at all, he, least of all, deserves it. If he is truly sincere, we cannot imagine that this will not affect the practical outcome of the rest of his life.

Thus, the unexpectedness of God's judgment on these two worshippers is this: love is what is blessed by God more than any other moral quality, and without love, all the good in the world is not enough. At the same time, we are "sinners," not only morally flawed in our commitments and principles, but weak and inconsistent in our loving. But with humility and sincerity, there is a grand welcome for us in the kingdom of God. It is not our failure to love that will keep us out of the kingdom, but our failure to acknowledge our sins and open ourselves to the love of God for us.

For next week: Matthew 24: 45-51; 25: 1-12; 31-46. THE KINGDOM OF GOD COMES WHEN AND HOW YOU LEAST EXPECT IT.