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IS THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON BAD THEOLOGY?

(O GOD, PLEASE DON'T STRIKE ME DEAD!)

Jesus was a master story-teller. In fact, the primary way He communicated His message was by telling stories, parables, drawn from the everyday life of the people that spoke of deeper realities. While the stories seem clear enough, some of them are incredibly nuanced and have multiple layers of meaning. I suspect that no one has plumbed the depths of Jesus' parables.

Probably the best loved of Jesus' stories was the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It is actually a story about two brothers, and the part about the Elder Brother is as pertinent to everyone, and especially church people, as is the story of the first son. I want to make the point that Jesus' parable about the first son, the boy who left home and fell into evil ways and then returned home to a loving father, misrepresents God and is very dangerous if it stands alone.

First, let me retell the story in the way it is told in many churches in our day:

Rev. Angelo Sweetness is the pastor of a mega church with a worldwide television audience. A typical message of his might end like this:

“Beloved, the Bible tells us that God is love. His nature, His essence, is love. He is reaching out to you today. It doesn't matter what you have done in your life, God loves you and accepts you just as you are. No matter if you are a drug addict, drug dealer, prostitute, pedophile, or murderer, God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. Do you want to be a part of our church family? Do you want to accept God's unqualified love today? As every eye is closed, just slip up your hand. No one will see it but me. If you raise your hand God will welcome you home and you will go to Heaven!”

Isn't the message that Rev. Sweetness preached exactly like the Parable of the Prodigal Son? (Not exactly.) Much of what he said was certainly true: God is love. God accepts you just as you, no matter what sins you committed in the past. God does have a wonderful – but difficult – plan for your life. The main problem lies in what Rev. Sweetness did not say.

- Rev. Sweetness did not say or even hint that people should repent. In Jesus' story the Prodigal Son “came to himself,” got up and left the pig pen, and returned home to his father. That exhibited true repentance and faith. (In Luke 13, Jesus said to the crowd, *You will perish, too, unless you repent of your sins and turn to God.*)
- Frankly, I don't like that invitation that asks people to “slip up your hand so that no one else will see it but the preacher.” Jesus said, *If you are ashamed of me before people, then I will be ashamed of you when you stand before God in judgment.* (Paraphrase) If people are ashamed to confess Christ before people in church, how in the world will they have the courage to confess Him before the world? (And yet I know that that simple step of faith of raising a hand has been the first step of a genuine Christian life for some people.)

- The Parable of the Prodigal Son is a parable. A parable is a story illustrating a truth. Parables do not stand alone, they are a small part of a larger truth.
- Paul says to the Ephesian elders, in Acts 20:27: *For I have not shunned to declare to you **the whole counsel of God.*** This, of course, is a foundational truth of the Bible. We must constantly remind ourselves not to proof text words and teachings in the Bible. Proof texting is taking teachings in the Bible out of their context to prove a point or establish a doctrine. Example: In Matthew 14, Peter walked on the water, so this proves that you can walk on water if you have enough faith. Example: In Mark 16 Jesus said that believers *will take up serpents*, so we should incorporate snake-handling into our services.
- The primary problem with Rev. Sweetness' sermon is that as it stands it is a lie and a misrepresentation of God. This is also the problem with the Parable of the Prodigal Son as it stands.

God does not love and accept us, forgive us for our sins, and accept us into Heaven because of His loving nature. Because of His holy nature He condemns us to hell. *The soul that sins must die.* (Eze. 18:20) *The wages of sin is death.* (Ro. 6:23) *Etc, etc, innumerable verses.*

God does love us with an amazing love, and because of His love He sent his only Son to die a bloody death on the cross for us. Therefore, God loves and accepts us, forgives us for our sins, and accepts us into Heaven because we have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. God makes crystal clear in the Book of First John, and in all of the other books of the New Testament, that the only way for men to be saved is (1) to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (2) the consequence of our faith in Christ is that we will repent of our sins and obey the teachings of Jesus (3) and we will then live a life of love for God and for our neighbors. *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish (come to destruction) but have everlasting life. He who believes in Him is not condemned ; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.* (John 3:16, 18)

As you read through the New Testament, you see that the good news is consistent: Mankind is lost in sin and doomed to destruction, but because of God's great love He has provided a way to salvation, the sacrifice of His Son on the cross. Jesus Christ is the answer, the solution, the provision that God has made. Jesus Christ is the *Way* (to God), the *Truth* (about God), and the (everlasting) *Life*; He is the *Door* (to eternal life); the (*Manna*) *Bread* from Heaven; He is our *Savior, Healer, Deliverer*; in His death and resurrection He defeated death, conquered the devil, and won for us the blessed hope of glory. All praises be to His name! Friends, all our eggs are in one basket: faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus knew when He told the Parable of the Prodigal Son that it was incomplete, but it was Jesus who was telling this beautiful story in Luke 15. And Jesus certainly knew that the whole counsel of God would fill in the rest of the story.

HOW THE UNIVERSE FORMED WITHOUT GOD (Ha !)

In the book A Curious Discovery John Hendricks told about an episode that appeared on Discovery Channel with "the world's most preeminent scientist, Stephen Hawking." He said that Hawking addressed the most profound question of humanity: *Did God create the universe?* Hendricks says:

"I knew this would be a highly controversial topic. Hawking had argued in his book

The Grand Design that invoking God isn't necessary to explain the origins of the universe, that the Big Bang is a consequence of the laws of physics and nothing more.

His explanation isn't simple. A brief summary of his conclusion is that: *The universe could have spontaneously arisen from probabilistic quantum fluctuations acting to bring the negative energy of*

empty space - 'nothingness' - into balance."

When I read that profound statement of "the world's most preeminent scientist" I laughed so loud that my daughter heard me in the next room. When people refuse to acknowledge the obvious, they will end up believing utter nonsense.

It is either: *In the beginning God.....or Once upon a time.....*

It is either God, or a fairy tale.

DO WE HAVE A SOUL?

If you want to have a fascinating Bible study, search out the meanings of the words *nepes* (pronounced *nephesh*) in the Hebrew Old Testament, and *psyche* in the Greek New Testament. *Nephesh* has a wide range of meanings, including: **breath, soul, heart, mind, life, and strength.** Note: *God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul (nephesh).* In the Hebrew understanding, it is not that a person *has* a soul, rather, a human being *is* a soul. Our modern word for soul is person. In the Bible, our soul is composed of our mind, emotions, and will – our thinking, feeling, and choosing. Our flesh (*sarx*), Biblically, includes body and soul. When you know another person, you know their personality, their soul.

The Bible reveals that man is made of spirit, soul, and body. *May your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.* (1 Thess. 5:23) Spirit is *ruah* in Hebrew and *pneuma* in Greek and a basic meaning is breath or wind. (A pneumatic tire, for instance.) Again, God breathed the breath of life into man; also, the Holy Spirit came with a mighty wind in Acts 2. Also consider the connection of the breath of God and the gift of tongues.

Spirit has a wide range of meanings in the Old and New Testaments, but a key meaning is that a person's spirit is that aspect of a person through which God most immediately encounters him or her. *The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.* (Ro. 8:16) *Blessed are the poor (humble) in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.* (Mt. 5:3)

Spirit and *soul* seem to have close to the same meaning in Scripture; also *heart, mind, and life*, and frankly I'm not smart enough or spiritual enough to figure it out very well.

CONSCIOUS AND CONSCIENCE

Another interesting Bible study is the word *conscience*, and also *conscious* or *consciousness*. These words are very closely connected and are, I believe, closely connected to our soul or personality. The difference between a man and an animal is man's self-consciousness (his self-awareness) and his conscience. We are the being that has a mind and self-consciousness and conscience so that we stand outside our self, as it were, and look at our body, our actions, and evaluate them. We are also aware of our mortality and our soon coming death. (Especially when we are 86 and a half years old and our *sarx* is as wrinkled as a prune and is falling out of warranty.)

Conscience in the dictionary is defined as: Consciousness, moral sense, a knowledge or sense of right and wrong, inner thoughts and feelings.

Our conscience is a gift of God to all mankind to assist us to walk in a right way. We are warned to listen to our conscience:

- *Keep your conscience clear...(1 Pe. 3:16, NLT) (1 Tim. 1:19)*
- *The purpose of my instruction is that all believers would be filled with love that comes from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and genuine faith. (1 Tim 1:5)*

Christ can cleanse our hearts so that we are free of a guilty conscience:

- *Under the old system the blood of goats and bulls could cleanse people's bodies from ceremonial impurity. Just think how much more the blood of Christ will purify our consciences from sinful deeds so that we can worship the living God. (Hebrews 9:13-14)*

But our consciences are not infallible. They can be misled and corrupted. A cannibal in Borneo would probably feel guilty if he did not kill his enemy and eat his heart. Our consciences must be trained by the Bible and by God's Spirit:

- *Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect. (Ro. 12:1-2)*

- *In the last times they will follow deceptive spirits and teachings that come from demons. These people are hypocrites and liars, and their consciences are dead. (1 Tim. 4:1-2)* Dead consciences either don't function or function wickedly, rendering judgments that oppose the truth of the gospel. Good teachings unify word and deed, belief and behavior.

- *Everything is pure to those whose hearts are pure. But nothing is pure to those who are corrupt and unbelieving, because their minds and consciences are corrupted. Such people claim they know God but they deny him by the way they live. (Titus 1:15-16)*

Please note the following verses:

- *As for me, it matters very little how I might be evaluated by you or by any human authority. I don't even trust my own judgment on this point. My conscience is clear, but that doesn't prove I'm right. It is the Lord himself who will examine me and decide. So don't make judgments before the Lord returns. For he will bring our darkest secrets to light and will reveal our private motives. Then God will give to each one whatever praise is due. (1 Cor. 4:1-5)*

This is a very important insight. A clear conscience is important, but it does not necessarily mean that we are OK with God. I've known people who have abandoned their spouse and kids for their lover, and they told me that they prayed and God said it was OK, that they had found the one God had meant for them. Annnh! Jeremiah said that *Our hearts are deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.* And David prayed (Psalm 139): *Search me, O God, and know my heart, and show me if there is any wicked way in me.* That is a great way for us to pray.

LORD, BREAK OUR HEARTS WITH WHAT BREAKS YOURS

Rich Stearns, President of World Vision, tells the following story:

“At the end of an exhausting road trip in India, about six months after their huge earthquake, we were waving goodbye to a throng of people around our car when a desperate woman rushed up to my window with a little boy in her arms. She held him out to me with a pleading look in her eyes that said, *Please help my little boy!* To my horror I saw that the little boy had no feet. His legs had both been amputated below the knee. And then, just as quickly, she was gone, and we were headed back to the hotel.

Gradually I put her haunting face out of my mind. I was tired. World Vision had helped thousands in Gujarat in the months after the earthquake, and we couldn't be expected to help every child. I tried to forget what I had seen and flew home the next morning.

Over the next few days I returned to the demands of my office, but that disturbing image kept returning to my mind. One night at dinner I told my own kids what I had seen and how it was troubling me. 'Can't you do something, Dad?' they asked. That very night I sent an e-mail to our team in India, describing the boy and asking if they could find him. One child in the midst of a billion people, and I

didn't know his name or even remember the name of the village. But two weeks later I received an e-mail with a photo of six-year-old Vikas and the story of what had happened to him. During the earthquake, his house had collapsed on him, crushing both of his legs and injuring his mother. By the time help arrived days later, amputation was his only option. Unable to walk, Vikas now could only crawl on all fours or be carried everywhere by his mother or father. So when I arrived in his village that day, a desperate mother rushed to our car hoping for help. Like the father who approached Jesus, knelt before Him and said, *Lord, have mercy on my son!* (Matt. 17:15)

I asked our team in India whether we could help him. The answer came back that he would need another surgery and prosthetic limbs which would cost \$300. They asked if World Vision would pay for this. I replied, 'No, I will pay for this.' My wife and I already take responsibility for dozens of kids around the world, but we felt we had to take on another. So I sent the money.

Four months later, over the Christmas holiday, I was muttering under my breath; someone had sent me a large e-mail that was taking far too long to download on my home computer. Finally, I opened the file with irritation and saw that it was a photo – of Vikas, holding his mother's hand and standing on his new legs. I wept as I stared into the eyes of somebody else's child, a little boy I had never actually met but whose predicament had become so very personal to me. Today, his picture hangs in my office in Seattle to remind me that every child is precious.”

Frankly, I have been feeling rather stretched lately because of certain expenses, including some giving commitments I felt led to make, and I started feeling a vague fear about the future. This resulted in my feeling poor (have you ever felt that way?), and pulling back when new giving challenges came my way. But when I finished Mr. Stearns' book about World Vision, I asked God to help me to change my attitude so that I will live generously. God has been so generous to me in so many ways that I can't count them, and I believe He wants me to live fearlessly, trusting Him. I challenge you to think about this, and maybe pray about it, and ask God to make you sensitive to His heart when another need comes to your attention.

Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.....What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, and you say, 'Goodbye, and have a good day; stay warm and eat well, but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do? So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless. (James 1:26-27, 2:14-17 NLT)

God Bless

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