

Parables: Ancient Stories for Modern Times

#4 “Lost” – Luke 18:9-14

Matt Cassidy – 3/28/2010

Lord, we lift up the way You have made us, fearfully and wonderfully, and not just as human beings. You obviously spent special attention to that as we bear your image. We bear your image as males and we bear your image as females. I would ask that people would be inspired by understanding the depth of what that is and how it applies itself into regular relationships, how it applies itself to just looking in the mirror and how we can maybe filter out or deflect or call these things “lies”.

Lord, I ask that You move in the hearts of people who have injuries to their lives because of choices they have made or, even worse, choices other people have made. I ask that they would try to take this step to see things from your point of view, a whole new point of view, a perspective on life.

Lord, I ask that You would come to us in a special way in our teaching time as we have been singing over and over again about the grandeur of your entrance into Jerusalem, from the east to the west as Jerusalem opened up her arms for her King, and it was just the beginning of things to come.

I would ask that You would open our hearts to the splendor of being in your presence, that we would dare to tear open the veil and see the Holy of Holies for what it is, at risk to our own safety and our souls contentment, that we would stare at You. We pray this in Jesus’ name, amen.

We are studying the Parables together.

It is kind of like this – I am right about just about everything and you are wrong about everything. See, you say --no, no, that you are right about everything because you are seeing life the way you see it. I say – No, I think you have got this whole thing upside down. I think you are backwards and inside out as well and I will prove it.

[Power point of cartoon depicting two men in a hot air balloon] “Watch this. I will pull open the cork and just show you.” Caption: “Ironically, it was Lenny’s premature celebration that finally proved who was right.”

You can be living life completely upside down and still be very wrong. It can all make sense to you. You can think it is working fabulously but you can see that it is not always the case.

When Jesus teaches, He does not teach on the particulars of life. He teaches on the principles, the paradigms, the whole worldview in which we see reality, because He knows if He can change that, the way we look at life, if we can get a heavenly perspective on things, it could change all the particulars all by themselves. That will make sense after we realize that we are upside down in the first place and once we get our balloon right side up, then we will follow Him with new enthusiasm and new appreciation. So, that is the way Jesus teaches the Parables, His stories, His fables.

Review of three preceding sermons from the Parables

A few weeks ago, we looked at how we are to see from the right perspective, right side up, the way God, a holy and benevolent God, rushes out to see and to enjoy His repentant son who has come from a long way away and now has come to his senses. [3/7/2010 – “A Reason to Rejoice,” The Prodigal Son Parable, Luke 15]

Right after that, we spent another week on what that story was truly about – that there was another son who was just as lost and the father humiliated himself another time to go out in hopes that he would receive this son who never left home but was just as broken as the first son, he was the prodigal son’s older brother. [3/14/2010 – “Watch It Again,” Luke 15]

Last week, I taught on how it is hard to teach on perspective in life when most people live their lives around finances. So Christ spends a lot of time teaching on things like the value of gold. He says that gold is asphalt up in heaven and you need to spend it like it is asphalt, invest it shrewdly. Use it to make friends who will greet you in heaven. You have a welcoming party waiting for you if you use your finances strategically. [3/21/2010 – “Making Every Dirty Penny Count,” Luke 16:1-13]

I hope you did that last week (use your finances strategically to cultivate relationships for a heavenly impact); I gave you an assignment on this. I want you to know that there are a lot of easier ways to make friends than to use a lawn aerator. I felt like I was in a Stephen King movie. That is a mean machine. It kind of throws you around and laughs at you when you are on the ground.

Introduction to today’s sermon

This week we are going to share still another story. I want you to see that when Jesus tells a story in Luke 18, He is a wonderful, marvelous storyteller. He is famous for that and it is because He tells a story in a way that is not predictable. It is not a sure thing.

He is telling stories like some of our current popular television stories, “24” and “Lost.” If you have seen “Lost” on television, you meet a character and you think – *Oh, she is a good girl. I like her. ... Oh, she is a bad girl. Stop it.* – Then you realize – *she is a good girl who was a bad girl and she is better now. OH! She is evil and she is scaring me.* --- That is the way that Jesus writes stories. You never know how they are going to end.

It is kind of like “Lost,” the television series that is about people who are lost on an island and they don’t know how to get back, .. but it is deeper still, isn’t it? Isn’t it like an existential lost-ness where the characters don’t know who they really, truly are? Isn’t there a kind of a grappling with whether a person is a bitter, angry man, constrained to a wheelchair, or maybe he is a hero bearing multiple knives. Maybe there is still another meaning for “Lost.” Maybe it is the audience who are lost and they have no clue as to what is happening. They are compelled to watch this week after week. *Hey, kids, get the chart out. “Lost” is coming on.*

When Jesus tells a story, you are not going to know the ending of it. Now some of you, who are churchgoers, might know how this story ends and some of you have prejudices toward the way this story will happen. But I want you to know that when Jesus told the story for the first time, *it was the first time.* People then had preconceived ideas about who the characters were and I am going to have to tell you what that perspective was so that you can enjoy the story like the original audience.

Look at Luke 18:10. Jesus tells this story like He is introducing a joke, doesn’t He?

Luke 18:10 Two men went into a temple to pray ...

It reminds us of – two men go into a bar. One is a Pharisee and one is a tax collector.

Preconceived Bias about Characters in the Parable

Pharisee

So, you are supposed to immediately believe that the Pharisee is wearing a white hat and he is a great man of God, a follower of God. You should because that is how the majority of Pharisees were at that time. That is the way they lived their lives and that is the way this original audience perceived Pharisees.

The tax collector, well that is as bad as you can get back then. So don’t jump ahead and don’t have a prejudicial view just because the Pharisees have that reputation. In our Bibles, they always seem to get the microphone. But they don’t represent the whole group but just a part. So let’s read about the Pharisee in this story in verse 11.

Luke 18:11 The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector (behind me). I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

The Pharisee is a moral success story. He is not a professional follower of Judaism, like a Scribe or a Sadducee or one of those offices, but rather he is a volunteer. He would be like our modern-day elder or church leader.

The Pharisee says that he is not a robber, a person who would take advantage of people financially, either at the temple, for example, where he might be a person who would inspect someone’s offering before it was taken up to be sacrificed. So, people would line up behind this Pharisee because they liked him because he is going to be true and he won’t take advantage of them. If he has a place of work in the regular workweek then people are going to go to him because of his honesty. They trust him because of his integrity.

The Pharisee says that he is not an evildoer. He keeps his word. His handshake is strong as oak. What he says, he will do. He makes a promise then he will deliver.

The Pharisee says that he is not an adulterer. That culture was at least as sensuous as our culture. It would be easy to stray from your house but he doesn’t. He is bringing integrity to his marriage. When he traveled, he would remain pure. He was a man to be looked up to.

But his commitment to following God was not just passive; it was active as well. He was not the sort of person who says – *I haven’t done anything wrong lately*. He actually did things in a positive way. He fasted twice a week. In that culture, the Law only required a person in Judaism to fast once a year, setting themselves up for the Day of Atonement. But this Pharisee would fast on Tuesday and Thursday because he was constantly telling his body that he was in control of it. He shackled his appetites for pleasure or his stomach and would tell them – *No, no, I am running this – not you*. So he would fast twice a week.

He would give a tenth of his possessions. Now, everyone was giving a tenth. It was almost like a tax where they gave 10% of what they earned. But this Pharisee would total his assets at the end of the year and say – *Okay, this is my net worth. I will still give 10% of that as well*. There is no doubt that he altered his entire lifestyle financially so that he could be a person who gave greatly to the temple. He wanted to please God.

This is a person whose religion is good and it is treating him good. He would be Atticus from “To Kill a Mockingbird.” So that is how we have to visualize this person. When we look at him, we say to our

friends, there is hope because this Atticus fellow is coming to temple, leading wherever he goes, and ‘Son, you need to be like him.’ This is how we need to see this man.

Tax Collector

On the tax collector, he can’t even be physically close to the Pharisee. That happens sometimes when people live in this exalted state; other people who feel guilt and shame don’t like to be close to them. So in verse 13, you see that the tax collector is uncomfortable with that (being close to the Pharisee).

Luke 18:13 But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

Let me introduce the tax collector to you. Rome didn’t actually have offices of tax collectors like we do. Rome would ask people in the individual communities to apply to be a tax collector. Whoever was the highest bidder would get that position as tax collector. Then the tax collector could collect taxes among their peers, or the people of that town or community. They would take the minimum tax that was required by Rome and then they would take from the people the amount in tax that it cost the tax collector to get the job. It is kind of like paying a college loan. – *I had to pay this amount to get this job.* – Then any amount in addition to that, he could continue to bilk the community for whatever he wanted. Tax collectors did this with all the authority of the Roman soldiers who stood behind the tax collector’s shoulders.

You have to completely distance yourself from the modern day tax collector. This is close to what we would consider a loan shark who would beat us up if we did not pay him back, with increasing consequences to our physical safety.

So the tax collector is not a very pleasant individual. You would not want to be seen with him. You have that job description and let’s say we are plain Romans and we didn’t like him either because of what he did. You add Judaism on top of that, the fact that he is enforcing the rules and monetary vice of the Roman government on his own people. He is a traitor nationally but also a traitor to his faith as well. No one wanted to be around him.

So Jesus picks this ultra-villain. It occurred to me as I was reading this passage this morning that one of Jesus’ twelve disciples, oddly enough, was a tax collector and his name is Matthew. So I was reading this and my humor jumps in there every once in a while. I thought, I wonder how many times Jesus broke into a parable about a tax collector and Matthew is like – *Dude, pick some other bad guy. It is always me, isn’t it?*

One famous Roman historian said: If there ever were to be found an honest tax collector with integrity, then a memorial would be built in his honor to which we would all genuflect.

So in summary, we have this Pharisee on one hand and a tax collector on the other. They are the extremes of good and evil. If the Pharisee were to run for office, we would not just vote for him -- we would campaign for him. We would put his sign in our front yard and if we met him at some fundraiser, we would tell all our friends. If one of our daughters were to be engaged to him, oh boy, there would be a photo op.

Then the tax collector – if he were engaged to our daughter, there would be fireworks. – *Your mom is in the bedroom crying. Where did we go wrong with you? We will never see you on the holidays.*

That is the way this scene is pictured with the original audience.

Plot Twist

Now let's look for the plot twist where everything turns on its head and turns out to be right side up; in fact we were living our lives upside down.

Luke 18:14 I tell you that this man (the tax collector), rather than the other (the Pharisee), went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

Now in hearing this story for the first time, we now say – *What? Where did we go wrong? We were tracking all the way to the very end of the story where the punch line is delivered. Does the tax collector go home justified? Does the Pharisee go home with nothing?* -- Let's just review.

Luke 18:10 Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

Well, clearly, Jesus is not against prayer. That is not where they went wrong. It was a good thing to pray.

So, let's look at the prayer a little closer.

Luke 18:11, 12 The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.

When you read that, some of you even snickered when we read it the first time. You think, *man, this Pharisee is so consumed with himself. He is conceited and he is vain.* Don't you just want to pull him over and say – *Look, it is really gross to hear that out loud. You can't even think those thoughts. This displays that you are self-absorbed. You need tact. A little discretion would help because people hate that.*

Doesn't that chaff on us when we hear people who are vain and conceited? It is a disgusting thing to be around.

On the other hand, it is more like a nagging cough that keeps you awake. It doesn't destroy lives. As a matter of fact, it has a self-destruct button built into it. It devours those who hold on to it too long. So people who are vain get what is coming to them eventually.

A school teacher told me a few years ago about a situation in her classroom. After the first week of school, she sat all the guys over in one part of the room and they were in a circle talking with the assistant teacher. All the girls were with her, the teacher, in a circle. This one girl leans in, looks all the way around to the right and looks all the way around to the left and sits back. Then she says with great confidence, "Well, I am the prettiest girl in this class." – You don't have to say it out loud. I am sure she figured out that attitude and certainly saying it out loud cost her. She probably never had a friend or she certainly would never have close friends and probably would never have close relationships with even a guy. That is what happens with vanity and conceit.

But the problem here is not that. It is much deeper than that. Look again.

Luke 18:10 Two men went up to the temple to pray ...

They went up to the *temple* to pray. That changes everything. They are now in the presence of God and the mistake that was made here is that the Pharisee thought that all those values outside the temple and the way people looked up to him and admired him and turned their heads towards him, he thought that those values mattered inside the temple, that God would care. So the Pharisee brought his outside values from outside the temple, inside the temple. It turned out that his whole balloon was upside down. He was not well.

That tells us why Jesus told that story in the first place. I think I said this a few weeks ago. How do you know the meaning, or the purpose, or the big idea of a parable? You don't look at the red letters where Jesus speaks, if you have a red letter Bible. You actually look at the black letters, the narration, the circumstances, the context of that parable and that will tell you. So look at verse 9 and you will see what inspires Jesus to go into this little story with a twist.

Luke 18:9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable.

He looked down on everyone else. Jesus could see this in the religious leaders and He said – this is so inside out. It is like self-righteous people to compare themselves to others because in the math in their head, if they can tear someone else's house down it makes their house look so much taller.

What is especially disgusting about this story is that this Pharisee is a religious leader and he specializes in the knowledge of God's benevolence, God's grace, God's mercy, the God who runs towards a repentant sinner, and humiliates himself for a son who could repent.

So this is grace gone sour or rancid. This is something that is supposed to smell good but instead smells bad.

Yesterday, Melinda was making some chocolate something or others and she was going to melt the chocolate for some purpose, and we had invited guests over to our house. The smell of these treats would just bring about a welcoming aroma to those who would visit. Well, something happened with the microwave and so the chocolate stayed in there too long and what was supposed to be sweet smelling – if you have not burned chocolate, you have got to do this for no other reason than to make it a bucket list issue. It really stinks and it gets into the paint of the house and now we had to open up the house and even the garage. The smell of the lawn aerator's exhaust is coming through the house and that smelled better than this burnt chocolate. That is the smell of something good gone bad. – That is like grace gone sour.

That is what is especially alarming about this story of the Pharisee who is looking down on and judging other people.

It is like a young woman who grows up in a wonderful family and they love God and they trained this young girl with the teachings of Christ. She grows up learning about the parables and the wise ways of living. When she gets into her twenties, instead of using that advantage to help other people, she finds herself looking down on others. *What are they – stupid? How come they don't know the basic things about life. Look how hypocritical they are. Look at the life style they live.* That is the smell of grace when it goes bad.

It is like a bouquet of flowers in a vase that sits there too long. What was meant to give us a beautiful smell, now smells sour.

The issue is not vanity or conceit; the issue is pride. The man needs to be humbled. He is in the temple, you see. He has one eye on the mirror and the other eye on the tax collector and he has neither eye on God. We hate vanity. We sing songs about it, don't we? "You are so vain." It is disgusting pride.

What place does pride have in the temple? It is like the Pharisee is looking back and he has 10 or 20 strokes ahead of the tax collector and he is saying – *I have got this guy.* -- He forgets that it is a race across the grand and beautiful Pacific Ocean. What are 10 or 20 strokes? He will share a common grave; that is all the Pacific Ocean is. He will never get across it. Yet he is looking back and looking at himself. There is no place for that in the temple.

In today's culture, it is not that the tax collector is transparent and he is coming to terms with his sinfulness and is expressing it to other people. That is quite popular today. *At least I am not a hypocrite. I am out there and saying what I did.* There are two ways to fall off this horse. We can take this in our little Sunday School class and say – *Hey, children, let's bow our heads to God and pray. Dear God, Thank you that I am not like that Pharisee.* – There are two ditches on the sides of the road and we can fall into that other ditch too. *I am glad I am not like that Pharisee.*

Here is the point. The man or woman of God never grows old or tires or become complacent with the absolute demand for mercy. They are continually and perpetually overwhelmed with the greatness of God and that causes them to see their sin and that causes them to want to cling to the gifts of forgiveness. That is the mark of a godly man and a holy woman. They are always looking for God's mercy to cover them. You can see this. There are not but a few examples in the Bible because we can't tolerate being in the absolute real presence of God. But when it happens, you can see that it has consequences.

Bible Characters Who Recognized their Need for God's Mercy

Job

You go all the way back to the beginning of time in the life of Job where God himself says that Job is a righteous man. Two times Job calls himself a holy person. But when untold calamity that is unequalled by any human experience comes upon Job and he brings his friends in to help him make sense of it, his friends just say – *Look, there has to be some kind of sin in your life. You cannot be visited by this kind of evil, at this depth, without inadequacies or evil in your life.* Job in his righteousness, in his honor, cannot find anything to confess. He is not just going to make stuff up. He says – *I am without sin here. So I have nothing to confess.* So it sits until the end of the book of Job where God visits him and shows up to Job's prayers.

Job: Oh, God.

God: Yes, Job.

Job: I have heard you with my ears of hearing but now I see you with my eyes and I repent with sack cloth and with ashes. [Job 42:5, 6]

He is covering himself in a heap of remorse and regret because he is in the presence of God and when you see God, you will see yourself. When you see yourself, you will see your sin. When you see your sin, you will cling to mercy. You will appeal to God's grace and gifts of forgiveness.

Isaiah:

It happens again in the life of Isaiah. He is a young prophet, just getting started. He is hoping for God's rejuvenation of Israel. He has placed a considerable amount of hope in the king who was ruling and that king dies. Because of his grief, Isaiah goes into the temple to pray. While he is in the temple, he has a vision of God. God's gown has a train and the train fills the temple with God's glory and splendor. Being in the temple and seeing God, Isaiah says – *Whoa is to me for I am a man of unclean lips in a whole community of people with unclean lips. Slay me.* –

When you see God, you will see you. When you see you, you will see your sin. When you see your sin, you will go clamoring for mercy and for grace and some kind of covering to protect you from the greatness and the glory of God.

Paul:1

Paul, I think arguably, is the author of our theology. He wrote most of the epistles at the end of the Bible, the letters to the various churches and to individuals. Near the very end of his ministry, he is writing to a dear friend, Timothy, and he closes the letter with this. This is Paul the Apostle:

1 Timothy 1:15 – Here is a trustworthy saying which deserves full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst.

Let's rewind – of whom I *am* the worst. Paul does not say – I really messed up when I was younger and I was actually giving creditability to the people who were killing Christ-followers. Paul does not say – when I *was* the chief of all sinners. He says – *right now*, in light of the churches that I started across the Roman Empire, in light of all the suffering and near death experiences that I have endured, in light of giving my whole life poured out, I wrote letters that I knew were holy writ. I *am* the chief sinner.

Paul says that because you know the context in which he is writing because he is in the temple in his mind because he continues and says –

1 Timothy 1:17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God be honor and glory forever and ever.

That is who Paul was in the presence of. Paul saw God and when he did, he saw himself. When Paul saw himself, he saw his sin, and because he saw his sin, he grasped hold of the cloak of God's mercy that he might be able to wrap that cloak around himself and cover himself so that his sin would not be seen by God.

We never outgrow the need for God's mercy

We never outgrow the need for mercy, for God's grace. The closer we pursue God, the closer we will see ourselves. When we see ourselves, we will see it all. We won't be talking about other people. We will be looking for something to cover ourselves with.

It is interesting that the tax collector does this. It says

Luke 18:13 But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his chest and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

The church where I grew up, the women would do this. They would come up to the altar and they would kneel and look up at the Christ and beat their chest and say this common prayer of the church: *God, have mercy on me. I am just a sinner.*

If you are new to Grace Covenant Church, I want you to take a look around because what we have here is an auditorium that is not full of Pharisees but tax collectors, just clinging to God's mercy. If you want to join us, we would love to have you.

There is a lot more meaning to that single sentence than meets the eye. 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' If you see that they are in the temple and quite probably he has just offered a sacrifice, that sacrifice was a blood sacrifice where the blood poured over the altar. The word *mercy* in the original language is Greek and then going back referring to the Old Testament is the word that means *cover*. They would offer these sacrifices as sin offerings so that the blood would cover them.

Do you want to be part of the family of God? Then you see God for who He is and then you see yourself and you see your sin and you are looking for something to cover yourself with and it is not the blood of a lamb but the blood of The Lamb. It was Christ who shed His blood, not because it was just time to die or there was a conspiracy against Him but because He knew He had to provide an everlasting cover for you and for me. So when we see ourselves and we see our sin, we run to cover ourselves underneath that blood of Christ. We put our faith in that blood being adequate to save us, to shield the holy eyes of God. When He sees us, He just sees that covering.

If you have never in your life run for that cover, you can do that today. If you have done that before but you have taken it lightly, you can repent and you can change and you can get that balloon back to where it belongs (right side up). Because if you see yourself for who you really are, if you really see God as we prayed [that is why I prayed that prayer], if we see God, we will see ourselves. If we see ourselves, we will see our sin and we will appreciate the covering.

Let's pray to that end. Let's appreciate what God has done for us through Christ's blood.

Jesus said, I will tell you people at Grace this: That tax collector, not the Pharisee, went home justified before God because he ran for the covering that I provided him. Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

God, I ask that if it did not happen today, right here while we were singing songs and hearing your teaching, I ask that it would happen this very week that we would have an encounter with You that would be comparable to something that was like Job or like Isaiah or Paul, that we would not look at others and see that we are better off than the Cravatts but rather we need You. Lord, I pray that we would find ourselves putting our absolute, complete faith, our souls trusting in Christ's blood to cover us and to shield our sin from the eyes of the Father.

Thank You for deflecting the wrath of God and enduring it so that we might be followers of Christ. God, I ask that we would have this overwhelming sense of joy that it is combustible and others can see that in our lives because we are free at your cost. At your cost, we are free. And all God's people said, Amen.