

You are probably familiar with the popular board game by Milton Bradley called The Game of Life... But perhaps you are **not** aware... as I **wasn't** until I read an article about it this week... that the game has gone through several variations... and every **re**working has reflected the changing values of our culture... at the time of the modification.

In 1798... before Milton Bradley was born... a board game from England arrived in the U.S. and became popular. ... It was called The New Game of Human Life. ... Acquiring **virtues** ... (like integrity... honesty... and a good work ethic) ... sped you through the game... while **vices** (corrupt behaviors... depravities... failings... and shortcomings...) slowed you down. ... Parents were encouraged to play this game with their children. The game's main point was... "Life is a voyage that begins at birth and ends at death. ... God is at the helm... fate is cruel... and your reward lies beyond the grave."

In 1860... Milton Bradley came out with a simple board game... which was based on the older "Game of Human Life"... He called his... "The Checkered Game of Life." ... The **good** path included Honesty and Bravery. ... The **difficult** path (to be avoided) included Idleness and Disgrace. ... Industry and Perseverance led to Wealth and Success. ... Milton Bradley described it as "*A highly moral game ... that encourages children to lead exemplary lives and entertains both old and young with the spirit of friendly competition.*" ... It stayed the same for 100 years.

Then... in **1960**... the Milton Bradley Company released a commemorative edition... It was called simply... "The Game of Life." ... Even the company was surprised... It sold 35 million copies! ... This version incorporated

game money that you earn... in order to buy furniture... and have babies. ... The vices and the virtues of the previous editions fell by the wayside... in this version they were non-existent. The winner of the game is the one who at "Life's Day of Reckoning" makes the most money and retires to Millionaire Acres. ... It was this way for a little more than 30 years.

Then... during the 1990s... Milton Bradley's game re-designers... tried to make the game less about money. ... They emphasized good deeds... like saving an endangered species... or solving a pollution problem. ... But they could not completely distance themselves from the concept of money. The reward for these good deeds was cash... and the objective was to end up with the most money.

But have you seen the latest version that just came out...? In the 2011 adaptation... (get this!) ... players can attend school... travel... start a family... or whatever they want. ... If they earn enough points... they can reward themselves with a sports car. ... There is no end or last square to the game. ... You can stop any time. ... The box says, "*A Thousand Ways to Live Your Life! You Choose.*" Values are up-for-grabs—you get as many points scuba diving as you get donating a kidney. The description on the website says: "*Do whatever it takes to retire in style with the most wealth at the end of the game.*"

The changing values of our culture... reflected by this simple board game... is that virtues... such as honesty and integrity... are no longer important. ... Virtues are long gone!

I am seeing this on the college campus where I teach. ... Fewer and fewer students come with any kind of work ethic... instead of assuming they will

have to **work** hard for a good grade... they think that they are **entitled** to an excellent score... simply by turning in **whatever** they want and **whenever** they want. I deal with a lot of shocked students when I return a poor grade to them... because what they turned in... did not resemble at all what I asked for... even though I gave multiple explanations and demonstrations... and they did not even bother to turn it in... when it was due.

One of the ways that we can deal with the world that is rapidly changing before our eyes... is to be so disgusted by it... and to distance ourselves from it... pulling together with others who **do** share our values... and lamenting about how we wish things were the same as they were several years ago.

I think there is a tendency in all of us to write off this present world and age as hopeless. ... *“Would you just look at all these immoral... rebellious... shallow... superficial moderns... who are around us everywhere today – Boy! How disgusted God must be with these people.”*

But... if that is how we feel... we are very... very wrong! ... We very much need correction by the message of the parables now before us... in the 15th chapter of Luke... which we open today.

I feel bad that I have to admit to you... that my response has often been... to throw my hands up and commiserate with others... while dreaming of the good ol' days... when... not only a Judeo-Christian work ethic prevailed... (when the sense of entitlement was not so pervasive... as it is today – “Everybody owes me whatever I think will make me happy – I am entitled...”) but also the Judeo-Christian values dominated our culture...

when everyone seemed to attend Sunday School... when traveling evangelists attracted audiences of thousands... when sex before marriage was a disgrace... not like it is today where it is thought to be a disgrace if a person waits until marriage.

I also feel bad that I have to say to you... that those days of yester-year aren't coming back, folks! And the longer we try to linger in our nostalgia... the less likely we are to spring into the action that Christ wants us to take.

I am not saying that we need to forget those days completely. ... What I **am** saying is that we need to refashion more realistic expectations... of where God has placed us... and what He wants us to do. ... We must **refashion** our expectations and see ourselves as missionary-exiles who now live in a foreign culture. We **are** different... we have a different citizenship (it is in Heaven) ... but we have been left here because we are called to a mission.

It is far more exciting for us to operate from these refashioned expectations... than to live in a wistful longing for the good ol' days. ... Such nostalgia is paralyzing. It keeps us standing still with melancholy.

Rather than stagnating in our reminiscence... Christ would have us imitate Him... and be incarnational. ... Leave our own realm of glory... those bygone days... and see that we have been sent to be among a lost and hurting world.

Last week we celebrated Christ's incarnation... when Christ left the comforts of **His** glories in heaven... and submitted Himself to life as one of His creations... living in the midst of a lost and hurting world. Selflessly... He came to earth and lived among us. He invaded our world... emptying Himself... completely identifying with us... because that was the only way

for Him to introduce us to God. ... And guess what...? Christ says to all of His followers – “*Do what I did!*” ... “*I am calling for you to be incarnational as well...!*”

Leave your comforts and go live among those who... are not at all like you... and year by year... are becoming **less** like you. It is the only way to introduce them to God. ... We must no longer think that they will come knocking on the door of the church. We have to go to them! They will not come and get it from us... we must go... be incarnational... and take it to **them**.

In the opening verse of our passage today in Luke... Jesus receives **criticism** for being incarnational. ... He gets blasted... and then He defends this way of living... using three parables that show us what His heart is... and the heart we should also have. ... Many theologians have called this passage... Luke chapter 15... the “Gospel of the Gospel.” Others more simply refer to it as the “heart of the Gospel” ... because it reveals what Christ’s attitude is... as He lived incarnationally among vile human sinners.

Luke 15:1-2

The occasion for the parables He is about to tell... you notice... is the offense taken by the Pharisees at the crowd which was attracted to Jesus. Luke sums them up by calling them...”tax collectors and sinners.”

That might **not** sound so terrible to us. My mother-in-law used to work for the Internal Revenue Service... and she is a very nice lady. Part of her job included calling corporations and informing them that they are being

audited. ... But even so... she was... and is today a nice lady. But we ought to remember that tax collectors today are somewhat different from tax collectors then. ...They were not official servants of the government... like tax collectors today... but businessmen who bought their positions from the Roman government. They made huge profits for themselves by **over**charging and extortion. Rome said to them "Give me *this* much..." which the private citizen never knew what that amount was. So the tax collector would extort whatever amount he thought he could from the Jewish subjects of Rome... and he got to keep whatever amounts were beyond what Rome told him to collect. If a Jewish person refused to pay... the tax collector had the Roman Army to enforce his will. Tax-gathers had gained the reputation... quite deserved... of being selfish traitors of their own people... making themselves rich by cheating... and keeping Rome in power over them.

The sinners that Jesus links with the tax collectors... were a motley group of various outcasts from society -- prostitutes... non-religious types who would never attend synagogue services... or frequent the Jewish temple. They were thieves... gamblers... perhaps some child-pornographers... militant homosexuals... terrorists... and occupy wall streeters...

So... here is a crowd of despicable low-lifes... that probably you or I would not want to have ANYTHING to do with. ... These were NOT our kind of people. And... they are all gathered around Jesus... listening to him. It is not all that surprising that the Pharisees objected. ... But what **really** bothered them... according to the last phrase of verse 15... was that some of this crowd were inviting Jesus home to dinner... and he was accepting!

The three following parables are the defense that Jesus makes. We will look at two of them this morning and then cover the third next week. But let's take a look now at the first parable.

Luke 15:3-7

The first thing to grasp is the significance of the fact that our Lord chose a sheep... and not a pig... cow... or dog. ... It was a lost sheep.

Sheep are very unique animals. ... I've been told that unlike other animals... sheep do not often deliberately run away. ... A dog who wants to be free... given a chance...will leave... just like that. Our family has to be very careful with open doors and gates around our house. ... Now... a pig or cow will do the same. ... But sheep do not. They only wander away. And... they do not mean to. They just drift away without realizing it.

Thus Jesus has deliberately chosen an animal for this parable... which represents people who are lost... but who never **intended** to be lost. It isn't that they rebelled. They never meant to be lost... and they don't know how it happened. ... In complete sincerity of purpose they suddenly find themselves lost... and they do not know how it came about.

At first... a sheep is with the flock. ... Then he sees some grass a few feet away that interests him so he goes over to it. ...Then he sees some more in another few steps and moves to that. Then he finds more a little beyond. He is concerned only about the immediate... and... little by little... he is drawn away without realizing it. ... Suddenly he looks around for the flock... and finds they are nowhere in sight. ... So he begins to bleat and run around... but he does not know in which direction to go... nor how to

hide -- so he panics... he runs in circles. ... Every shepherd knows that a sheep in that condition is utterly helpless. They are vulnerable to any wild animal... or any hostile force... that can take him easily.

This is the picture our Lord gives us of certain people who are intent only on the **present** experience. ... They are living just for the moment. ("La...la... la-la.. la-la... live for to-day...") They do not intend to get lost... they do not intend to waste their lives. ... They do not intend to wander off into something dangerous and destructive. ... But... little by little... concentrating only on the present... they wander away.

Eventually they wake up to realize that they are lost... that life is suddenly empty... that their hearts are burdened and heavy with guilt -- and they do not know how it happened. ... Some don't even realize yet... just how lost they really are. ... But these need to be sought as well.

There are millions like this today. Some are poor and obscure. Some are intent on simply making a living... on feeding themselves. That is all that concerns them. They **live** to eat... and **eat** to live. Such a person has been described this way:

Into this world,
To eat and to sleep
And to know no reason
Why he was born,
Save to consume the corn,
Devour the cattle, flock, and fish,
And leave behind an empty dish.

A **second** key to this parable is the shepherd's response. He left the ninety and nine in the wilderness... Jesus said... and went after the **one**. That is most significant. It pictures the activity of God, as expressed in the person of the Lord Jesus himself. ... He left something to come and find you... and me.

Our Lord intends that this should typify and describe those who are moved with compassion to meet the needs of the lost of this kind today. It is necessary... He says...to leave the ninety and nine... and to go out. Be incarnational. ... You can never get this kind to come to church. ... They do not even know that there is anything worth coming to church for. ... And, of course... too often there is not. ... You must leave the safe place... the secure place... the comfortable place... be incarnational and go out to find them. ... They are responsive...they are ready to be found... they do not resist when you find them. But this kind will never come to you.

This is one of the reasons why I am so excited that I get to teach on a secular college campus. I believe that God has given me a wonderful opportunity to enter into a world where so many people are hurting... and to seek those who are lost.

A third key in this parable is the emphasis on the rejoicing over the recovery of the lost. Our Lord says...

Luke 15:6-7

This reveals the value that God sets on lost men and women. They are not worthless in His sight. ... They are not written off... nor neglected. ...They are made in His image. ... That is the declaration of Scripture. ... Therefore they are of unspeakable value to God. ... They bear His own mark... and He longs to find them... and reach them and restore them.

I do not think any one of us is able to imagine the **joy** that breaks out in heaven when that happens! ... God is so desirous of setting men free from the things that blast and ruin them... disfigure and destroy them that...

whenever He performs this great work of restoration... heaven just erupts into cheering... and they shoot off fireworks and have a tremendous celebration! ...That is how much God is concerned about the lost... and that is what our Lord wants us to see.

If we Christians can live on the face of this planet and can look at a world as lost as this world is -- with its millions around us whose hearts are empty... hollow... and bleeding... and who did not mean to get lost anymore than we had meant to... before **we** were found -- and not feel some of the same compassion as the God who longs to reach them... then there is something **wrong** with us. But if we enter into God's compassion... then our hearts will begin to burn with a hunger to do something for these poor... lost people whom Jesus described as being like sheep without a shepherd... simply existing... with no destiny except death at last.

Jesus told this parable to show that there was something wrong with His critics... who criticized Him for being incarnational. ... And there is something wrong with us... if we do not seek to be incarnational ourselves. ... Then He told a second parable to drive the point home even further.

Luke 15:8-10

The point of **this** parable... which differs from the lost sheep... is that something was lost -- but lost at **home**. ...The value of the story of the lost **sheep** is that... though the sheep did not mean to... it had wandered away and the shepherd had to leave the ninety and nine to go out and find it. Similarly... the value of this illustration is that the coin was lost **at home**

where you would **not expect** to find lost things. ... This coin did not wander off. ... It was in the place of apparent safety. ... Nevertheless it was lost -- perhaps through carelessness or neglect... When she realizes that the coin is missing... she is stirred to a flurry of activity to recover it... because it is of extreme value to her.

It has meaning to us today... as we apply it to our own situation. ...It forces upon us the question, "Do I have something lost at home?" ... Perhaps... and more concise question would be: "Is someone lost?" -- because our Lord is not talking about things but is illustrating the value of lost persons.

Is someone lost in your home -- a child... perhaps... that you have taken for granted is a Christian... but... as he/she grows up... something makes you realize that he is not? ... You may wake up to realize that these whom you have taken for granted to be safe and sound in your home are not; they are lost.

There are many like this today in Christian homes and who have been under the influence of this church. ... We have raised them in our Christian homes. ... We have taught them the Scriptures... right here in our Sunday School... CrossRunners... and AWANA. We have taught them as best we knew how. ... We have helped them to memorize Scripture... and how God's Word applies to life. ... We have taught them how to know the Lord... and how to walk with him. ... But, as they grow up... if we are honest... observant... and sensitive as parents... there may come a time when... in the absence of any positive evidence to the contrary... we must face the realization that these children are not really saved... are not Christians... are not born again. They are lost -- and lost at home.

This is a frequent occurrence because we parents tend to put too much trust in **externals**. ... I have long ago learned not to trust the fact that a person... who has simply made a public profession... that they have become a Christian... is not providing the **real** evidence that he/she has actually **has** become a real Christian. ... Many people have attended evangelistic meetings... and gone forward at an altar call... or raised their hand to indicate their desire for Christ in their life. ... And fellow believers have naively placed all our confidence of their salvation in this activity. To assume so is the mistake many Christians make.

I frequently meet men and women who have come through this system of false assurances. But actually they **never made** an inner commitment of the heart... and they travel through life with **out** a real knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I do not know how many times I have heard someone say, "When I was a kid my folks made me go to Sunday school, and I went all my life. I won all the medals and prizes for attendance. But, as soon as I got out on my own, I quit and I've never gone back. It never meant anything to me." ... I believe that this is the exact situation our Lord is describing here. ... One is lost, and lost at home.

I have had numerous people say to me: "I just know my son or daughter is a Christian..." (even though there has never been any evident life change)... "because when he/she was five years old he received the Lord Jesus." ... But that is fooling yourself. That is no sign at all.

The Scriptures tell us that if the Spirit of God is at work in the heart... there will be evidence of it. As John tells us in his first letter, "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers (in Christ)," {1 Jn 3:14 }. ... Love awakening for other Christians is one sign. Paul says, "Let every one that names the name of Christ depart from iniquity," {2 Tim 2:19b }. A desire to turn from that which is obviously evil is another sign. There are other indications of the fruit of the Spirit throughout the Scriptures.

The point of these two parables is that we need to have the same kind of heart that Jesus had – a heart that is willing to be incarnational... leave our comforts and glory... and bring the Gospel to others.

If we take the incarnation of Jesus seriously – which we just celebrated at Christmas – then we must take seriously the call for us to live incarnationally. ... Instead of forsaking those who are lost and hurting in the world all around us... instead of backing away from them... and into our safe Christian huddles... we need to pull up close... as we see what Christ did... to those whom God wants to redeem. We need to intentionally get close enough to unsaved people so that our lives rub up against their lives... and let them see the incarnated Christ in our values... beliefs... practices.

This means a deliberate getting close to those who are unsaved and actively sharing our life with them... participating in their fears and showing them ours... sharing life with them... with all of its frustrations and afflictions... but authentically demonstrating a different way to handle our fears and disappointments.

We have to go to the people... and stop expecting that they will automatically come here on their own to get the Gospel. Jesus came from the heavens to humanity... and we have to be prepared to enter the circles of today's culture.

Then... we need to have the confidence that the gospel we bring... can be communicated by ordinary means. It can be shared through acts of servanthood... loving relationships... and our good deeds.

Living among the unsaved is only one aspect of being incarnational. The other aspect is showing an authentic Christ in us. This means that we must practice the presence of Christ... so that the wonderful aroma of Christ can be sensed.

I am not talking about hanging out with them while wearing cheesy Christian Tee shirts with clever slogans... or pushing witnessing tracts at them. Some people can do this kind of witnessing very effectively... but I don't think most of us are called to do it that way.

Practicing the presence of Christ is not a quick or one-time activity. It is where our allegiance to Christ is unfurled slowly... over multiple interactions while authentically living the life of Jesus before their eyes. ... This of course means that our lives must become increasingly aligned to Christ in moment-by-moment obedience... even when no one is watching. It means increasingly becoming people of justice... kindness... mercy... strength... hope... grace... and generosity.

It is a lost and dying world that you and I have been sent to. But we have to stop being so critical! We need to have the eyes of a doctor... not the eyes of a critic.

Don Sunukjian was a seminary professor that taught me a lot about preaching. I would like to close with an illustration that he used in one of his sermons. ... I've quoted this before... but I want to use it again... as it puts our need to live incarnationally into great perspective.

Let's suppose that on your way to work each morning, you usually stop at a Starbucks. You tend to get to the store at the same time each morning, and you usually see a young girl who gets there about the same time you do. On many mornings you find yourselves standing next to each other in line. In fact, you both order the same thing—double espresso with skim milk.

She seems to be into the gothic culture—black hair, black clothes, knee-high jackboots, black fingernails, black lipstick, piercings in the nose, lips, ears, and eyebrows, and scattered tattoos. She usually has a backpack that she has to take off to get her money, and sometimes it seems hard for her to hold the backpack, get the money, and pay for the coffee all at the same time.

She doesn't make too much eye contact with others. You wonder whether you should strike up a conversation with her—maybe offer to hold her backpack while she pays. You're not sure what to do with the whole gothic bit, and you don't know whether she'd give you a dark look and not say anything.

Should you try to be friendly? Maybe find out what brings you both to the same Starbucks each morning? See if she ever tries any of the other specialty coffees? Move toward greeting her each morning? Learn about other parts of her life? Yes! By all means! Move into her world. Make a comment one day about how the barista probably already knows both of your orders as soon as you walk in the door. Offer to hold her backpack while she pays. A couple of days later, tell her your name and ask for hers. If she misses a few days, tell her you hope she wasn't sick the next time you see her.

Why move into her world? Because with the eyes of a doctor, you see a hurt that God can heal. You see an anger and alienation. Maybe it's because of sexual abuse from a stepfather, a brother, or an old boyfriend. But you see the heaviness, the sadness. With the eyes of a doctor, you see a hurt that God can heal.

There's a man at work that everybody shakes their head at. He's been divorced a couple of times, and both of his ex-wives are suing him for past child support. He's a deadbeat dad—way behind on his support, sending them just a little bit, every so often. He's been living with another woman and her small child, but a couple of weeks ago, he slapped her around pretty hard. She called the cops, he spent a couple nights in jail, and she kicked him out and now has a restraining order against him. He's currently living in one of the cheap motels that rents by the month.

Every day at lunch, he goes out by himself to get a hamburger or a burrito, always coming back with mustard or chili on his shirt. Nobody talks very much to him, because he's too quick to complain about how everybody's

taking advantage of him, everybody's pushing his buttons, everybody's squeezing him dry. Who wants to listen to that?

You've often wondered about being nice and offering to go to lunch with him. You like the same fast food he does—Burger King and Taco Bell and Subway. And you know Subway has a sale going on—three foot-long sandwiches for \$10. You couldn't possibly eat that much, but it seems like a shame not to take advantage of such a bargain.

Should you invite him along one day? Yes! By all means! Move into his world. Go to lunch with him. When you get to Subway and you both sit down with your sandwiches and chips and drinks, ask him if he's watched any of the baseball playoffs. Who's he rooting for in the World Series? Mention that it's been just about the worst umpiring you've ever seen.

Why move into his world? Because with the eyes of a doctor, you see a hurt that God can heal. You see a bitterness at life, failing at relationships, blaming others instead of knowing how to change himself. You sense his fear of the future—no money, a criminal record on the books—and his desperation over being all alone in the world. With the eyes of a doctor, you see a hurt that God can heal.

Your company has a co-ed softball team that competes in the city league, and they're looking for a couple of extra players. You like softball. You like the feel of connecting on a pitch, running down a fly ball, making a clothesline throw on one hop to home plate to nail a runner trying to score. The first game is next Tuesday, and they're pushing you to join them.

But you're not sure. You like softball, but you don't know about playing with the people in the office. You went to a company picnic a couple of months ago, where there was a pickup softball game, and some of the guys were drinking a lot of beer, getting pretty raunchy in their comments about some of the women on the other team. Some of the wives of your coworkers were loud-mouthed, and they flirted with other husbands. The parents yelled mean things at their children but did nothing to control them. And in the parking lot, one of the married men from the office who had come to the picnic by himself was behind his pickup truck going at it pretty heavy with one of the single moms in the office. Do you want to deal with all that every week? Should you join the team? Yes! By all means! Move into their world. Get to the park, shag those balls, and run those bases. Bring some Cokes to put in with their beers. When one of the women on the other team lines it into a gap between center and left for a stand-up double, instead of questioning her sexual preference, shout out, "Great hit! Did you play in college?" Buy a cheap glove for the single mom's kid, ask if he wants to be batboy, have him sit beside you on the bench, and teach him the strategies of the game.

Why move into their world? Because with the eyes of a doctor, you see their hurts that God can heal. You see that the machismo and the raunchiness merely disguise insecurity and failure. You see marriages where there's no love and children that don't have the security of boundaries. You see the single mom's loneliness and vulnerability that puts her at risk of being deeply hurt. With the eyes of a doctor, you see the hurts that God can heal.

In life we can have the eyes of a judge or we can have the eyes of a doctor. The eyes of a judge see a gothic girl, a deadbeat dad, and a foul-mouthed team, leave us thinking, Why have anything to do with them? The eyes of a doctor see the hurts that God can heal.