

6. BELONGING IN THE KINGDOM

Coming into the Kingdom

We saw in the parables of the Tower and the War Party that 'we start from an impossible position. We must abandon everything we think we've got going for us that we think will help us to 'make it' in life, and abandon ourselves and all our 'unfinished business' to the mercy of God, and make our peace with Him' (p. 21). We saw also in the parables of the Lost Coin, the Lost Sheep and the Two Lost Sons that our being brought into a relationship with God is entirely by God's initiative and enabling, not by ours. A couple of other parabolic sayings bear this out.

The Camel and the Eye of a Needle (Mark 10:23–27)

Despite attempts from early and later times to 'soften the text and make salvation somehow possible for a rich man if he tried hard enough', this parable 'deliberately presents a concrete picture of something *quite impossible* . . . "The camel-needle proverb is to be taken very literally. Anyone's salvation is a miracle".¹

Born of the Spirit (John 3:1–10)

So significant is the notion of being 'born again' that it has become doctrinalised, such that we can forget that it is another of Jesus' parabolic images. The amazing miracle of a child coming out of the womb and taking its first breath. When a baby is growing in the womb, it doesn't use its lungs to breathe. It gets all the oxygen it needs from the mother's bloodstream, through the placenta and the umbilical cord. As the baby starts to come out through the birth channel, the umbilical cord is compressed, and the oxygen supply is cut off, and the baby starts to turn blue. At the same time, the baby's chest is compressed, but when the baby comes out, its chest expands, the baby takes its first breath, and uses its lungs for the first time to start to breathe air!

We know the saying, 'I didn't ask to be born'. None of us applied beforehand for the gift of life. Life comes to each of us as a gift. No less is our ability to see the kingdom of God, let alone to enter it, a cleansing and life-giving gift from above.

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9–14)

What the Pharisee did was actually above and beyond the call of duty: fasting was expected once a year (Lev. 25:29; Num. 39:7), and tithing was required only on grain, wine and oil (Lev. 27:30; Num. 18:27; Deut. 12:17; 14:13). Super-righteous! The tax collector was a breaker of the law and a traitor to the nation: a defrauder of the public, on a level with robbers, with no civic rights, shunned by all respectable persons. Is Jesus just being perverse here, and setting normal expectations on their head, maybe because he had a personal preference for tax collectors over Pharisees?

On what basis might Jesus be saying that the tax collector is righteous and the Pharisee is not? Our mindset: the Pharisee was proud: he thought himself better than others, despised others, held himself apart from them. The tax collector was humble: he kept his eyes downcast, beat his breast. Is Jesus saying here that God disapproves of pride, and approves of humility, so the way to be in good with God, to be righteous before God, is to be humble and not proud, and that we can do that? If we are making ourselves humble, in order to be righteous before God, where is our righteousness coming from? Ourselves. This parable would then still be directed against us. We would still be trusting in ourselves that we are righteous—by being humble!

¹ Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, p. 166, quoting E. Earl. Ellis, editor, *The Gospel of Luke in The Century Bible*, London: Nelson and Sons, 1966, p. 219.

This tax collector has come to see himself as ‘a sinner’—not in a put-on way but in a real way, and he is striking his own heart where all his sin has come from (as in Mark 7:20–23). This has to be a revelation, a conviction of sin by the Holy Spirit of God (see John 16:7–11).

It is a question of where true righteousness comes from:

No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven (John 3:27).

Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone (Mark 10:18).

Put those two together: No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven, goodness or righteousness included! The only goodness or righteousness that there is in the whole creation is that which comes from God. And we are made to be full of it! We will never get righteousness from ourselves. We can only ever get it and be in it from God. If there is all this righteousness from God there for us, and we refuse to receive it or be in it—that would have to be the worst sin of all, and the root sin of all. Here was the Pharisee, making out that he was righteous in himself—self-righteous—thereby placing himself outside, apart from and over against the righteousness that comes from God, and so without any righteousness at all—in fact with the exact opposite. And here was the tax collector, coming to realise that he was actually in that position of having renounced all the righteousness of God, with all the opposite spewing from his heart like a foul sewer. Both of them sinners; both of them apparently beyond redemption.

One of them, the tax collector, is however in a different position. This is his prayer:

God, be merciful to me, a sinner!

‘Be merciful’ means show us favour and rescue us from our misery that we are not able to get ourselves out of. The tax collector is saying that, but he uses a different word here that is more specific: ‘God, make atonement’ or ‘make propitiation’ for me. He acknowledges that there is a separation between him and God that has to be bridged, that he cannot cross. He acknowledges that in his present sinful condition, God is opposed to him in his judgement: God’s wrath is against him, and something must be done to effect propitiation; something needs to be done with that wrath—to turn God from being opposed to him to being propitious or favourable towards him. He is saying: ‘God, *You* make atonement for me; *You* make propitiation for me, a sinner’. The fact that the tax collector was ‘standing far off’ may mean that he was in the outer court of the temple. As an outcast, he would not have been allowed into the inner court of the temple, where the sacrifice for atonement was being offered. He knew he had no access to that forgiveness, and no right to it. But he is saying, ‘God, I don’t know how *You* are going to do it, and I know I cannot do it myself, but I am asking *You* to do whatever is necessary for full atonement and propitiation to be made for me, a sinner, who has no right to it whatsoever, and I know and trust that *You* are the God who can do *even that*’. And Jesus said, ‘this man went down to his home justified rather than the other’. ‘Justified’ means ‘righteous-ified’—the word is the same in the New Testament language—with the true righteousness that comes only from God (as in Phil. 3:8–11).

Jesus is saying that, although the tax collector did not have access to the prescribed sacrifices for atonement in the temple, yet, through this faith and trust in the atoning and propitiating God expressed in his prayer, he did have access to an action of God that would effectively justify him. The tax collector did not know what this action would be—he just trusted that God was able to do it for him. Jesus knew that there would be another sacrifice provided by God, not in the temple, but outside the city walls, accessible not only to Jews but to sinners of every nation and tribe; a once-for-all sacrifice, where the final judgment of God’s wrath on all human sinners would be fully worked through, where propitiation and full atonement would be made for all,

and justification would be effected for this tax gatherer and all sinners who come to God in that way. Jesus knew that he himself would be at the centre of that strong loving action of God. That is why he could tell that story, and that is why he was the one who had the right to tell it, and to say it was true.

The Two Debtors (Luke 7:36–50)

Something has touched this woman very deeply. Note her extravagant and costly expression of love. Jesus makes it clear that all her sins have been forgiven.

Is she forgiven because she showed great love, or does she show great love because she has been forgiven. Which comes first—the love or the forgiveness? Jesus' parable (vv. 41–42) makes it clear: the forgiveness comes first, and this is what brings about the love. The woman loved much because she was much forgiven.

In contrast, Simon the Pharisee showed an unthinking niggardly attitude to Jesus, and probably to life in general. Jesus made it clear that this was because he had received little forgiveness: (probably because he thought he little needed it, and had little asked for it): 'he who is forgiven little, loves little' (v.47). Our love for others will be according to the measure we have accepted love from God.

We are not told here why or how the woman was forgiven earlier. But we are told in the whole of the New Testament. The woman was forgiven because Jesus bore all her sins in his body on the cross, as the sacrificed Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, to bring forgiveness (1 Peter 2:24; John 1:29, Matthew 26:28).

The Two Sons (Matthew 21:28–32)

While one ended up with a change of mind, both were as bad as each other, in their spirit of disinterest and disobedience.

The Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1–15)

Jesus tells this story was about a man who has failed. The general manager of a business, responsible to the owner. He is inefficient, irresponsible, and wasteful of other people's resources. We may have been in that position ourselves, or have had to deal with someone like that.

When the dishonest manager is called to account, the owner tells him: 'Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' That makes sense. The manager doesn't deserve to remain in the master's service. He is fired, and he needs to hand over the books.

What does the manager do then? In the short time he now has before the books need to be handed over, and before anyone else knows that he has been dismissed, the manager acts in haste and secrecy. He calls in each of his master's debtors in one by one. It appears that they are renting land from the master for a fixed amount of the crop at harvest time. The steward agrees with each one of them for a markedly reduced amount owing—in some cases up to 50%! He is able to do this, because the tenants still believe that he is acting on the authority of the master. He is being extremely generous with the master's resources, and they appreciate what they think is the master's generosity. They are also gratefully indebted to the manager, and he hopes that will serve him well once he's been kicked out. The manager has in fact just kept on doing what he had always been doing—being irresponsible and wasteful with the master's property—only on a bigger and more daring scale. That meant the master lost out even more. What is the master going to do when he finds that out? Is he going to say to all the tenants that he is not as generous as the steward has made out? Is he going to demand that the original amounts be

reinstated, and that the manager pay compensation and damages? It's a crazy story—the manager is a rogue, and no self-respecting worldly master would ever let him get away with it. Jesus' hearers would have found it laughable—an absurd situation.

That's the point at which Jesus says: 'his master commended the dishonest manager'. That's what hits us between the eyes. And we say, 'No—that can't be right!' And we ask, 'Was Jesus saying then that it was right for the manager to be wasteful, fraudulent, and dishonest, and disloyal?' No, because Jesus himself immediately goes on to say, Don't be dishonest—be honest, be faithful, serve your master truly:

Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. 11* If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? 12 And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?

So Jesus is telling us *not* to do what the dishonest manager did, and to do all the things that the dishonest manager didn't do. So when Jesus says: 'the master commended the dishonest manager'—that's when we realise that there's something screwy about this story—it doesn't quite fit with what we'd expect, the way things normally are.

Don't try and make it fit—don't try to explain your way around it—just feel the impact of that when Jesus brings it through to you: 'his master *commended* the *unjust* steward'—the *dishonest* manager.

There is a bit of an explanation given, but I don't think it helps us much:

And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.

The translators are having a bit of a go at an explanation here, I think, when they translate the word 'shrewdly'—that makes it sound a little bit devious and worldly-wise. But it is a word that normally means 'wisely'—which is how it is translated in the old King James Version—or it means, quite straightforwardly, 'considerately, providently'. So that makes even less sense. The master commended the manager for acting wisely, considerately, providently—all the things the manager hadn't been.

Jesus does say, 'the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light'. So is Jesus telling us that we need to be like worldly people, skilled in the ways of the world, using all that they can lay hands on to serve their own advantage? Jesus goes on to say: 'You cannot serve God and wealth'. And he tells us, 'make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes'. Any dealings we have with what he calls 'dishonest wealth' must be entirely with a view to how it will impact on our 'eternal homes'. So Jesus is letting us know: this is a story about serving God, and not getting caught up in the things of this world, but focussing on the eternal 'true riches' God has in store for us. In this story Jesus is confronting us with our situation as far as God is concerned. And the screwy or unexpected bit of the story is what clocks us in to where we stand before God. The 'master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted wisely'. How could that be?

We are all in the position of the dishonest manager. Inefficient, irresponsible, and wasteful of resources that belong to another. It's a picture of the whole human race—all of us. Look how much we have been given, and look what we've done with it. Squandering our Master's property. Where would we stand if we were called to account for it? We would deserve to get the sack, and especially when to that we add fraudulent dishonesty and self-serving disloyalty, at our Master's expense.

And yet we hear the master's voice, commending us. Jesus' stories invariably do not contain the explanation inside the story. Mostly they just pose us with a conundrum, or a question. To make some sense of it, and to find some kind of answer, we need to go outside the story itself. And to do that, we need to look at the one who is telling the story—who he is and what he has come to do—and how we relate with him. Jesus' stories are never just general truths about life. Jesus' stories never stand on their own. They are always to be taken in and understood in relationship with Jesus as the one who is telling them to us, in the light of what he came to do.

So who is this one who is telling us this story, and what has he come to do? He is God's own Son, the man from God, and he has come to go to death on a cross, where he would take into himself all our failure as hopeless managers of God's good gifts, and all our defiant, self-serving dishonesty and fraudulence and robbery of God. He himself carried our sins in his own body—in our flesh—to that cross, where he became sin for us, where he suffered our curse, where he came under the condemnation due to us, where he loved us to the end, where he died our death. He took all of that into the grave for us. And he was raised up from death, free from all of that, so that the same might happen to us: 'so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness' (1 Pet. 2:24). And so that we might hear our Master's voice commending us: 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master' (Matt. 25:21; compare Luke 16:10–12). Remember the previous chapter in Luke began with the words, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them (Luke 15:2).

There are hints of this in the story itself. The manager squandered the master's property, and tried to feather his own nest at the master's expense. Did the master did ask him to pay any of it back? None of it—neither the original wasted resources, nor the amounts the manager deducted from the clients' accounts. So who bore the cost of all of that? The master himself. And is that not what God was doing in Jesus on the cross—bearing in Himself the cost of all our sins, at no cost to us? What generous love is that? This is not a story about ordinary normal human life, this is about us and our situation as far as God is concerned. He has taken away our sin, and given us His righteousness. So that He can personally commend us before Himself.

So what is true wisdom? What is it to act wisely in that situation as far as God is concerned? There is a hint about that also inside the story. Did you notice what the manager said to the master when the master called him in to terminate his employment? Normally, especially in this setting, we would expect the manager to come up with all kinds of excuses and protestations of innocence. He doesn't. He remains silent. His silence is an admission of guilt. This is not a case of unfair dismissal. He knows he has deserved it. He knows he does not have a leg to stand on.

This is the beginning of wisdom. All of us, sooner or later, need to come to the realisation that this is how we are before God. (Isa. 6:5). (Luke 5:9). (Luke 23:40–41)

Before God, without excuse—without a leg to stand on. It is never a comfortable position to be in—in fact, it is quite devastating. But, having said that, it is a good place to come to. There is no pretence, and no dishonesty. No excuses. At last we are being straightforward with God. And there is a sense of blessed relief about that.

Especially when we realise that we are still standing there, before God—we have not been written off, we have not been wiped out. In other parables and sayings of Jesus, anyone in the manager's position would have been thrown into gaol (see Matt. 5:25; 18:30), and recompense would be demanded. None of that happens here. The master does not take it out on him. He does not say, 'Now you must pay it all back'. He does not send him to the debtor's prison. He does not even scold him. The master is just and righteous, and requires a high standard of honesty and reliability. The master is also merciful, and incredibly generous.

It could be that the manager recognised this, and acted on it when he was being so generous with the master's resources towards others. He has been generous to me, and on that basis, and on His account, I will be generous to others. Perhaps that is also the wisdom on which the master commended the dishonest manager—who knows?

There are hints inside the story, but the story itself never gives the full picture, apart from the one who is telling it to us, and what he has come to do. We will only know the righteousness and generosity and mercy of God—and make any sense of the story—as we come to Jesus, the one who has carried us and our sins to the cross, and finished us there in his death, and has risen and raised us up with him so that, free from sin, we might live towards God and towards others in that mercy and love and generosity of God that has come to us—all at God's own expense. Jesus is confronting us with our situation before God. He is uniquely qualified to do that, because he is the one from God.

Living in the Kingdom

Knowing where all our belonging to the Kingdom has come from, life in the kingdom consists of looking to God for everything, and living in the fullness of what God gives.

Where Your Treasure Is (Matthew 6:19–21)

Not a case of investing wealth in a future life, by giving it to the church or the poor (though it may issue in that), but knowing that God is our reliable never-failing treasure chest, and living from Him.

Ask, Seek, Knock (Matthew 7:7–11)

'And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him' (Heb. 11:6).

Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5–8), Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1–8)

These are further instances of Jesus' cheerful sense of humour with regard to the sureness of these things. When we are assured of love, and free of anxiety, we can wear these things lightly, and without heaviness (see Matthew 11:28–30). While we may consider it irreverent or improper, Jesus does not mind comparing (and contrasting) his Father with a grumpy home-dweller woken up at midnight by a pesky neighbour, or an unjust judge prevailed upon against his better judgment by a persistently nagging widow! Compare Psalm 78:65–66, where God wakes up like a soldier from a drunken stupor:

Then the Lord awoke like a man out of sleep:
like a warrior that had been overcome with wine.
He smote his enemies in the hinder parts:
and put them to a perpetual shame.²

² Translations from *The Liturgical Psalter* in Anglican Church of Australia, *A Prayer Book for Australia*, 1995, p. 305, and Miles Coverdale version of the Psalms in *Book of Common Prayer*, 1662.