

We have spent three Sundays in Luke 15. I wish we spent more time to discover more about the character of God.

Luke's style of writing is to portray characters in parables is different to Matthew and Mark. Luke invites us to participate in people's thoughts, to hear *will-I-won't-I, should-I-shouldn't-I* struggle through their monologue.

Last week we read the younger son's monologue after he had taken his inheritance left his father's home and spent it all, then facing a famine he remembers, *'In my Father's home, even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant."*'¹

We have a ring-side seat to hear the lad's thoughts.

Chapter 16 continues the l-o-n-g evening of Jesus' teaching! First, as they arrived for the Sabbath meal, there was jockeying for position at the table. Then Jesus asked the host, his motive for inviting guests. The Pharisees complained that Jesus was ignoring the them and the host who had invited the high and mighty, and was instead, pandering to *tax collectors and other notorious sinners*.

So Jesus addressed the Pharisees and Teachers about God's unique character-trait that had slipped their minds. In case they missed it in the parable of the Great Banquet, God values each individual person, and has a seat at the great eternal banquet table for everyone. Anyone who is lost to the world or lost in their home, He will search until He finds each one, and He will host a grand celebration of their return home!

¹ Luke 15:17

If I could, I would rename Luke 15 as the *Parable of the Vastness of God's Love*, perhaps add the word *Incomparable* to describe the vastness of God's love.

Now in ch. 16 we read, *Jesus told this story to his disciples...* Jesus now turns to His Disciples to help them connect His teaching with the world around them. This is true even today: to those who commit themselves to being in Jesus' company, to be his followers, He will open their heart, mind and spirit to a deeper understanding of the mystery of God, but this commitment is made by each individual. No one can do this for them.

In this sixth and penultimate parable, we meet a manager who reasons to himself, the severity of his plight, and the brilliance of his solution.

To better understand this parable, we need to appreciate how the Roman Empire functioned.

In the 500 year history of the Roman Empire from 27 BC to 476 AD², the Empire had 70 Emperors. The Roman Empire was based on a governance model of tax collection from the working classes, funnelled back to Rome through a bureaucratic maze of Governors, Consuls, Proconsuls and others, where it fed the lifestyle of the Emperor. Rome's emperor at the time was the decadent and unpopular Nero, known to "*play the fiddle while Rome burned*", the picture of an ineffectual leader in a time of crisis.

At its height, the Roman Empire covered 32 countries, governed by over 36 Governors, each of whom had an army of tax collectors (*like Zaccheus*) each given a target for tax collection. e.g. a tax collector might have a monthly target of £500. He would collect as much as he could, £600 or £700 or more, give the Governor £500 and keep the balance for personal use.

² 70 Roman emperors from the beginning (Augustus — 27 BC) until the end (Romulus Augustus — 476 AD)
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30-40 Governors across the empire would do the same: keep what they needed for their lifestyle, and remit the balance to Rome.

Business practice was the same. Using the story we have today, the owner of an estate would employ a Manager to manage his business.

When he sold 700 bushels of wheat, he would create an invoice for 1,000 bushels, forcing the buyer to pay for 300 bushels he did not receive.

When the buyer paid, the Manager would remit into the estate owner's account money for 700 bushels sold, and keep the difference for himself!

Jesus' parable starts when a whistle-blower informed the owner, his trusted Manager was profiteering from his stock of wheat and olive oil!

When caught, the Manager summoned each buyer and re-wrote the invoice, removing his "commission", removing evidence of his deed.

Verse 8 reads, *the estate owner had to admire the dishonest rascal manager for being so shrewd*, which throws a spanner in the works! Why "admire" the manager's cunning solution of getting out of trouble?

Once again, Luke portrays the main character in this parable thinking aloud, weighing his options, "*What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. . .*" (16:3)

He has obviously enjoyed the good life, and the prospect of hard work is difficult to accept.

This is the question Jesus addresses the Pharisees: You love money because of the lifestyle it buys for you. You want to appear righteous in public, but God knows your heart. God knows what controls your inner thoughts. Don't be fooled that you can use, misuse even change God's laws and His plans, to suit you.

Jesus declares a stunning Truth, *The sky will disintegrate and the earth dissolve before a single letter of God's Law wears out.*

Through science, we are introduced to pictures of the swirling, twirling, explosive universe beyond us. Imagine, all that will change, but not a single letter in the law of God will change, and that includes His promises.

Jesus very rarely, if ever, preaches morality. He uses parables, stories that relate to real life, to teach about God and the Kingdom of God.

So, is this parable about making friends using dirty money, who will come to your aid when you are in trouble? Not many readers and listeners relate to this, so what is the point of the parable?

Is this parable about issues with money: the lost coin (15:8-10), the prodigal son (15:11-32), and the dishonest manager (16:1-13)?

It might seem so, if we read it superficially.

These parables are about the choices we make which determines our future. The woman double-bent over with a curved spine, **CHOSE** to be in the Synagogue every day, praising God, and that's where she received healing! The invitees to the Sabbath meal at the Pharisees home, **CHOSE** to jockey for a place close to Jesus, the guest of honour, only to be reminded of a spiritual truth which can be a social embarrassment, *those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*

The younger son **CHOSE** to leave his Father's house for an exciting future; when that did not materialise, he **CHOSE** to return to his Father's home where his future was secure, while the elder son **CHOSE** not to celebrate his brother's return, unable to see the security he enjoyed in his Father's home, because bitterness towards his Father's actions, blinded him.

Today, we read of a manager who **CHOSE** to set straight his employer's accounts, **not** with the motive of doing what is right, rather driven by the motive of feathering his nest for the future.

To the Pharisees and teachers of the law Jesus said, *You **choose** not to know the height, breadth and depth of God's love, because you are caught up with keeping up your image of being more righteous than others. You are feathering your nest, here and now, without a thought for the future. You are as good as lost in the Father's house.*

To His Disciples Jesus said, will you **choose** to be shrewd in dealing with matters in the world, or will you **choose**:

- to be faithful in small things, so the Father can trust you with His big plans?
- to be trustworthy with wealth in this world, that God can trust you with true riches of Heaven?
- to be faithful with other people's things, that God will trust you with things of your own?

The parable of the Shrewd Manager reminds us, all that we have done in the past, good or not, has brought us to the present. The principle of this parable reminds us, the choices we make with the resources God has given us, determines our future.

Are you spending enough time getting to know your Father in Heaven, because not knowing your Father might lead you to serve a different master who has no future to offer you.

The choice is yours to make.

AMEN