

# A Lenten Journey Through the Parables

## 2. Parables Concerning God and Prayer.

### Parables About Israel

Sunday, March 4, 2012

10 to 10:50 am, in the Parlor

*Presenter:* David Monyak

*St. John in the Wilderness*

# References

- **The Parables of Jesus**, by David Wenham. IVP Academic, 1989. ISBN 978-04308-12864
- **The Parables. Understanding the Stories Jesus Told**, by Simon J Kistemaker. Baker Books, 1980. ISBN-13: 978-0801063916
- **A Journey Through the Parables**, by Rev. John Jay Hughes. Audio CD Course. Now You Know Media. **Stories Jesus Told. Modern Meditations on the Parables**, by Rev. John Jay Hughes, Liguori, 1991. ISBN 0-7648-0413-8
- **Stories with Intent. A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus**, by Klyne Snodgrass, 2008, Eerdmans Publishing Co., ISBN-13: 978-0-8028-4241-1
- *Audio excerpts from:* **The Listener's NIV MP3 Audio Bible**, narrated by Max McLean

# Today

## Grouping as per *Stories with Intent*

- **Parables concerning God and Prayer**
  - **The Pharisee and the Tax Collector** (Luke 18:9-14)
  - **The Unjust Judge** (Luke 18:1-8)
- **Parables about Israel**
  - **The Two Sons** (Matthew 21:28-32)
  - **The Wedding Banquet and the Feast = The Great Supper = The Great Dinner = The Great Feast** (Matthew 22:1-14; \*Luke 14:15-24; Gospel Thomas 64)

God, in the Parable of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee, you have set before us the abasement of the tax collector as a path to exaltation, and a pattern how we may be saved; let us follow his example, rejecting disdainful pride and gaining God's mercy through our humility.

Let us cast out from our soul foolish pride and learn to think with truth and humility; let us not try to justify ourselves, but let us hate the delusion of vainglory and so obtain God's mercy with the tax collector.

Based on Canticle Nine for the  
Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee,  
The Lenten Triodion,  
Service Book of the Orthodox Church

**Parables  
Concerning  
God and Prayer**

**Parables Concerning God  
and Prayer:  
The Pharisee and the Tax  
Collector**

# Pharisee and Tax Collector

## Gospel Context

- Parable is part of the story of the journey of Jesus and his disciples to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51 to 19:48).
- Jesus has been instructing his disciples about himself and the nature of discipleship.
- Fundamental themes:
  - God is a gracious benefactor
  - God's fatherhood is characterized by generosity, compassion, care, and faithful activity on behalf of God's children

# Pharisee and Tax Collector

**Luke 18:9-14**



*Voice of Max  
McLean*

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself; ‘God, I thank you that I am not like all other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

“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.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (NIV)

# Pharisee and Tax Collector

## Background – The Pharisee

- Pharisee has gone to the temple in Jerusalem to pray.
- May have been mid-morning hour of 9 A.M. or the mid-afternoon hour of 3 P.M., the set times for prayer.
- He must go to the outer court because the inner court was accessible only to the priests.
  - Pharisees were lay people who prided themselves on scrupulous adherence to the law, in fact going beyond the letter of the law in their personal lives.
  - Despite a “bad rap” in the New Testament, they were they were a very religious and pious group of people.

# Pharisee and Tax Collector

## Background – The Pharisee

- The Pharisee would have seemed a genuinely pious figure to those listening to Jesus:
  - Goes beyond the old Testament law in tithing (only producers of grain, wine and oil had to give 10%)
  - Fasts twice a week (the law required fasting only once a year, on the Day of Atonement)
  - His prayer is one of thanksgiving, not a petitionary prayer asking God for something

# Pharisee and Tax Collector

## Background – The Pharisee

- There is a prayer of a Rabbi in the Talmud very similar to the Pharisee's prayer:
  - I give thanks to Thee, O Lord my God, that Thou hast set my portion with those who sit in the Beth ha-Midrash [house of learning] and Thou has not set my portion with those who sit in [street] corners, for I rise early and they rise early, but I rise early for words of Torah and they rise early for frivolous talk; I labor and they labor, but I labor and receive a reward; and they labor and do not receive a reward; I run and they run, but I run to the life of the future world and they run to the pit of destruction.

# Pharisee and Tax Collector

## Background – Tax Collector

- There were two sorts of taxes in Roman Palestine:
  - Direct personal and land taxation, collected by state officials
  - Indirect taxes of various sorts, such as customs duties.
- The right to collect indirect taxes was auctioned off each year to the person offering the authorities the most for the privilege
- The tax collector would pay the money to the Roman government in advance; then with a retinue of assistants recoup the money – and more.

# Pharisee and Tax Collector

## Background – Tax Collector

- Tax collectors were despised by upright, respectable people:
  - They were political and religious traitors, working for the foreign and pagan occupiers.
  - They were corrupt extortionists.
- The tax collector has likely cheated innumerable people, the money he has extorted likely staggering.
  - Lev 6:2-5: “If anyone sins and is unfaithful to the LORD by deceiving his neighbor . . . he must return what he has stolen or taken by extortion, or what was entrusted to him, or the lost property he found, or whatever it was he swore falsely about. He must make restitution in full, add a fifth of the value to it and give it all to the owner on the day he presents his guilt offering”

# Pharisee and Tax Collector

## Interpretation

- Jesus' listeners would have been shocked to hear Jesus say the Pharisee was *not* justified before God, that the tax collector was the person who went home justified before God.
- Why was the *truly* pious Pharisee not justified before God, and scoundrel of a tax collector justified?

# Pharisee and Tax Collector

## Interpretation

- The Pharisee stands where people can see him, comparing himself to others, seeing he is superior, feeling very pleased with himself.
  - He thanks God he is superior to others.
  - He has become complacent, confident and insistent that he is righteous before God, unaware of his own sins.
- The tax collector recognizes he is a sinner, knows he cannot possibly repay the money he has stolen / extorted plus 20%. He can rely only on the mercy of God.
- To be justified before God seems to require, as least in part, a recognition of our sinfulness and our failures

# Pharisee and Tax Collector

## Application

- Good News:
  - God is the god of the despairing, the god of the miserable sinners whose situation seems hopeless.
  - God will never spurn or shun anyone who comes asking for mercy or forgiveness.
- Warning:
  - A confidence and complacency that we are righteous because we seem better than others is a path away from, rather than towards God.
    - We can never judge our progress (or lack of progress) towards God by comparing our lives to those of others
  - Those living closer to the light of God's love see their sinfulness and their failures more clearly:
    - Saints recognize and confess they are miserable sinners.

**Parables Concerning God  
and Prayer:  
The Unjust Judge**

# The Unjust Judge

## Gospel Context

- This parable is also part of the story of the journey of Jesus and his disciples to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51 to 19:48)
- It comes just before the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.
- Jesus has been instructing his disciples about himself and the nature of discipleship.
- Fundamental themes:
  - God is a gracious benefactor
  - God's fatherhood is characterized by generosity, compassion, care, and faithful activity on behalf of God's children

# The Unjust Judge

**Luke 18:1-8**



*Voice of Max  
McLean*

‘Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’

“For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!’”

And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” (NIV)

# The Unjust Judge

## Background - Widows

- Widows were a traditionally vulnerable group in Palestinian society.
- Girls were regularly married at the age of thirteen or fourteen:
  - a widow could thus be quite young, with no grown-up children to care for her.
- A wife who lost her husband lost her position and status in the patriarchal society of the day, and also her natural male protector.
- Widows were thus often easy game for the ruthless exploiter.

# The Unjust Judge

## Background - Widows

- Numerous protective laws in Israel attempted to meliorate the oppression and hardship that were often the lot of widows:
  - God himself defended the cause of the widow (Deut. 10:18)
  - God places a curse upon the man who withholds justice from her (Deut. 27:19).
  - Anyone wishing to deprive the widow of her rights would have to face God, the defender of widows (Psalm 68:5)

# The Unjust Judge

## Background – The Judge

- There does not seem to have been one uniform judicial system in Palestine
- When Jesus speaks of the widow coming to a “judge,” we should probably imagine some prominent local citizen, perhaps having links with the Herod family, who had authority to decide disputed cases.
- In Jesus’ story the judge is one who “neither fears God nor respects people”
  - He is the sort of judge who will listen to money (= bribes) rather than to considerations of morality or even public opinion

# The Unjust Judge

## Interpretation

- In due course the Judge relents, not because he is a reformed character, but “because this widow is a bother to me” and “so that she does not keep on coming to me forever and wearing me out”
  - The powerful judge, for all his corrupt laziness, is forced to act by a poor impotent widow.
- The crowds listening to this story would be surprised and intrigued that Jesus is using a corrupt judge to describe the goodness of God.

# The Unjust Judge

## Interpretation

- This is a “**how much more**” parable:

If an unrighteous judge		God in his righteousness
faced with the persistent cry of a widow in whom he has no interest	<i>how much more</i>	faced with the persistent cry of one of his adopted children
responds eventually and vindicates her		will respond and vindicate them quickly

# Parables About Israel

**Parables About Israel:**  
**The Two Sons**

# The Two Sons

## Gospel Context

- Jesus is teaching in the temple when the chief priest and elders interrupt him and demand: “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”
- Jesus asks them a question in turn: “Did the baptism of John [the Baptist] come from heaven, or was it of human origin?”
- The question puts the chief priests and elders in a quandary:
  - If they answer “yes,” then why did they not believe John the Baptist?
  - If they answer “no,” then they will alienate the crowds around them who regarded John as a prophet.
- Jesus then tells the parable of the Two Sons.

# The Two Sons

**Matthew 21:28-32**



*Voice of Max  
McLean*

“What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’

“‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

“Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go.

“Which of the two did what his father wanted?”

“The first,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.” (NIV)

# The Two Sons

## Background

- In the society of Jesus' day, the father was the master of the household, a figure of unquestionable authority.
- In the parable, the father owns a vineyard, one of the sources of income for the family.
- All members of the family would be expected to work in the vineyard on a communal basis.
- It may have been:
  - early spring when the vines were pruned, or
  - summer when the weeds were cut down, or
  - autumn when the grapes were harvested

# The Two Sons

## Background

- The first son's response is rude and deeply disrespectful.
  - He fails to address his father as "Sir."
  - He does not even bother to give an excuse for his unwillingness to go.
  - Jesus' hearers would have been shocked.
- The second son's response is respectful and appropriate, telling his father "I will, sir."
  - But he does not keep his promise.

# The Two Sons

## Interpretation

- Jesus suggests an the interpretation of the parable for his own day:
  - The first son, who refused but later changed his mind and worked in the vineyard, personifies the tax collectors and prostitutes:
    - They initially lived a sinful life and refused to do the will of God
    - But when John the Baptist came “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4) they repented and believed.
  - The second son personifies the religious leaders of the day:
    - They loudly proclaimed their commitment to God. They claimed to look forward the coming kingdom of God.
    - But when John the Baptist came, proclaiming the imminent arrival of the kingdom, they backed away, taking no action.

# The Two Sons

## Application

- How might we apply this parable in our own day?
- Consider:
  - Matthew 7:21: [Jesus:] “None of those who cry out, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of God, but only the one who does the will of my father in heaven.”
  - James 1:22: “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”

# The Two Sons

## Application

- Warning:
  - Going to church every Sunday and saying the words reverently, crying out “Lord, Lord”, is no guarantee of salvation. The Word must bear fruit in our actions.
- Good News:
  - Having negative feelings, mixed feelings, doubts, questions (feelings / initial responses of “I will not”) as we try *to do* the will of God does not count in the end.
  - What matters is our ultimate *action*, what we ultimately try *to do*.

**Parables About Israel:**  
**The Great Supper**

# The Great Supper

## Gospel Context

- Jesus often told his parable stories more than once.
- The Parable of “The Wedding Banquet and the Feast” = “The Great Supper / Dinner” as told in Matthew (22:1-14) is sufficiently different from Luke’s version (14:15-24) that some commentators feel they should be treated as separate parables.
  - Matthew’s version: Jesus tells the parable near the end of his life, relating the story of a king provoked to anger who metes out swift retribution.
  - Luke’s version: Jesus tells the parable after morning Sabbath worship in the home of prominent Pharisee. It is a somewhat humorous after dinner speech, relating the story of a snubbed host who give vent to his emotions by inviting the riffraff of society.
- We will consider Luke’s version.

# The Great Supper

**Luke 14:15-24**



*Voice of Max  
McLean*

When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, “Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.”

Jesus replied: “A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’

“But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’

“Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’

“Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’

“The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’

“‘Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’

“Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’”

# The Great Supper

## Background

- There were two invitations involved in giving a large banquet:
  - A *first* invitation was made as the host begins planning the banquet.
    - In Jesus' story, all the guests have accepted this first invitation.
  - A *second* invitation was issued when the food is ready and the banquet ready to begin.
- Prevailing custom:
  - Excuses to the host can be made at the time of the *first* invitation.
  - To decline the *second* invitation when all the preparations were made was not merely breaking a promise but an insult to the host.

# The Great Supper

## Background

- The lame excuses offered for rejecting the second invitation would have seemed humorous to Jesus' listeners:
  - You would not buy a field unseen – you would check it out *before* you bought it.
  - Similarly, you would try out your five yoke of oxen *before* you paid good money for them, not *after*.
  - A newlywed husband unable to leave his wife for an evening of feasting would be fodder for many good jokes (dinner parties were for men only in Jesus's day)

# The Great Supper

## Interpretation

- One interpretation:
  - The guests who accepted the first invitation but not the second invitation personify the religious leaders of Israel in Jesus' day
  - God's kingdom will not lack citizens. God wants his house to be full. If the religious leaders of Israel rejected God's invitation to enter the kingdom, God will extend it to the social outcasts: the tax collectors, the waywards, the Gentiles.

# The Great Supper

## Interpretation

- Another interpretation:
  - The guests who accepted the first invitation but not the second invitation personify the rich, who reject the second invitation because they are preoccupied with many family and business commitments (stock market, family matters, home maintenance ...)
  - The “rich” therefore will find themselves shut out, and others will take their place. The invitation will go to the “poor and maimed and blind and lame”; those not blinded by material riches to their absolute dependence upon God.

# The Great Supper

## Application

- Warning:
  - We have accepted the first invitation and made a promise to love God and our neighbors.
  - Now the second invitation has come. We are called to obedient service. We are called to the banquet. We cannot keep making excuses, assuming there will be other opportunities, other invitations, that our place at the table will always be waiting for us.

# The Great Supper

## Application

- Good News:
  - God welcomes not just the fit and strong, people whose good moral character makes them role models and leaders
    - The Lord continues to welcome and eat with sinners
  - To claim a place at God's table, we can show:
    - Not our successes but our failures,
    - Not our strengths but our weakness,
    - Not our health but our sickness.
  - 1 Corinthians 1:27-29 (NJB): No, God chose those who by human standards are fools to shame the wise; he chose those who by human standards are weak to shame the strong, those who by human standards are common and contemptible – indeed those who count for nothing – to reduce to nothing all those that do count for something, so that no human being might feel boastful before God.