

God & me,

A C T U A L L Y

Parables are stories that play in the theater of our minds. Jesus tells such a story about lost sons. (Luke 15:11-32) After wishing his father dead, the younger son gathers his belongings and sets off for a “distant country.” Far from home, we cut ourselves off from the principles and values that made us *us* and anyone who can put a name to us. We hightail it to ‘the distant country’ to affirm our autonomy.

Like the older brother, we can also be lost at home, focused on duty and following rules—a life fueled by conformity and compliance—rather than contagious love.

We become lost whenever we exchange God’s possibilities to chase our satisfactions. In our lostness, we see no signposts, no trail of ‘bread crumbs’ to find our way home. We’re stuck. Folding down upon ourselves, lessening the chill of our dark night, our only hope—our wildest dream—is, just maybe, Home might be out there looking for us.

In our search for love outside of God, we can be as lost at the dining room table as in a distant country.

I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found. Why do I keep ignoring the place of true love and persist in looking for it elsewhere? Why do I keep leaving home where I am called a child of God, the Beloved of my Father? I am constantly surprised at how I keep taking the gifts God has given me—my health, my intellectual and emotional gifts—and keep using them to impress people, receive affirmation and praise, and compete for rewards, instead of developing them for the glory of God. Yes, I often carry them off to a “distant country” and put them in the

service of an exploiting world that does not know their true value. It's almost as if I want to prove to myself and to my world that I do not need God's love, that I can make a life on my own, that I want to be fully independent. Beneath it all is the great rebellion, the radical "No" to the Father's love, the unspoken curse: "I wish you were dead." The prodigal son's "No" reflects Adam's original rebellion: his rejection of the God in whose love we are created and by whose love we are sustained. It is the rebellion that places me outside the garden, out of reach of the tree of life. It is the rebellion that makes me dissipate myself in a "distant country."¹

Our story of the high priest covered in filth, wearing the sins of his people, was unable to help himself. He knew that he needed a way home from the "distant country," back to the presence of a holy God.

1. PREPARING TO PARTICIPATE—Relinquish

"Many inner motions which are more powerful for spiritual good in our lives, more significant for showing us what God is doing in us, fade into the unreflected and eventually forgotten flux of consciousness.

They are never brought to the scrutiny of a faith-enlightened intelligence and integrated into our Christian life of free choice and love. On the other hand, we let ourselves be moved about and badly harmed or impeded by evil or destructive forces without understanding what is happening, much less doing anything about it."²

Our work here matters. The stakes are high.

Like preparing your home for a special guest, prepare yourself to receive and welcome God's work. Pause and wait until your heart is receptive. This is the beginning of *discernment*.

¹ Nouwen, Henri J. M. *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (p. 43). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

² Jules J. Toner, *A Commentary on Saint Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits* (St. Louis, MO: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1982), 42.

2. ABSORBING SCRIPTURE—*Read*

Zechariah 3:1-7

Read this short passage aloud several times, emphasizing the following words in the sentence.

¹ Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. ² The LORD said to Satan, “The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?”

³ Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. ⁴ The angel said to those who were standing before him, “Take off his filthy clothes.”

Then he said to Joshua, “See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you.”

⁵ Then I said, “Put a clean turban on his head.” So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the LORD stood by.

⁶ The angel of the LORD gave this charge to Joshua: ⁷ “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘If you will walk in obedience to me and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you a place among these standing here.’”

3. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?—Think

This is where we do our homework, exploring the background and meaning of the passage. A helpful resource is the free online tool [BibleHub.com](https://www.biblehub.com)

Key Observations

- **Filthy clothes**

Filthy, Hebrew, *tso*, only Old Testament use is in verses 3 and 4. From the word origin, *tseah*, the root meaning to issue; soiled (as if excrementitious)—filthy. Used two times in the OT:

Deuteronomy 23:13, “and you shall have a spade among your tools, and it shall be when you sit down outside, you shall dig with it and shall turn and cover up your excrement.”

Ezekiel 4:12, “You shall eat it as a barley cake, having baked it in their sight over human dung.”

Tso is the most potent expression in the Hebrew language for the most vile and loathsome filth, symbolizing impurity, decay, and the pollution of human sin (cf. Isaiah 64:6). It is incompatible with the holiness required in God’s presence. Here in this vision, Joshua was covered with excrement. As the High Priest, Joshua is representative of the entire nation, who are a severe offense to God. And here he stands, contaminated by filth while in the presence of holiness, i.e., the Angel of the Lord

Joshua stands absolutely guilty before the judge, unable to help himself.

- **Take off his filthy clothes**

Angelic beings not mentioned before are called upon to remove the offending garments and the angel of the Lord explains the significance of the acts.

“Joshua, in his high priestly role, represented the predicament of the whole people, who had incurred the divine wrath, suffered the penalty of the exile, and now knew that they needed a way back to the presence of a holy God. The vision demonstrated that God accepted Joshua, and with him those he represented, having removed from His sight all that offended His holiness.”³

Understanding Grace

Grace reflects God’s character and His desire to restore and maintain a relationship with humanity. In a biblical context, grace refers to the unmerited favor and love of God. It indicates that salvation and blessings are given not because of our actions or worthiness, but solely because of God’s generosity and compassion.

Grace comes to us in many forms. Rather than resolving our issues or fixing our circumstances, grace often shows up in our lives as a supernatural empowerment to live into or through ‘what is.’

³ *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (London: Tyndale Press, 1972) 14.

Illustration:

The bent wheel of a grocery cart wobbles precariously as it rolls down the aisle, veering sharply to one side. Similarly, our habits can shape our behavior to where we live like a bent wheel, constantly pulling toward disorder and dysfunction. God’s gift of grace shows up in our lives, predictably, not to magically change everything about us or our situation. Rather, we experience grace as a supernatural empowerment to live into and beyond our circumstances and habits. Grace is the strength to put two hands on the shopping cart handle and steer it straight down the aisle.

- **Sin**

The Hebrew word is, *avon*, meaning iniquity, guilt, punishment for iniquity. This is a general term for the whole sinful disposition leading to distress and guilt. This is what God removed from Joshua, i.e., from all of his people.

The biblical authors use *avon* to describe a twisted or crooked road (e.g., Lamentations 3:9) or a malformed back that’s bent out of shape (e.g., Ps. 38:6). Isaiah uses *avon* to mean “dazed and confused” (Isa. 21:3).

Avon is about distorting what was otherwise beautiful and good. . . examples of this type of twisted behavior include deceitfulness, broken faith, violence, and other kinds of harm.

Avon also refers to the crooked results and consequences—the suffering people, shattered relationships, and cycles of retaliation that come from this behavior. When we are abused and taken advantage of, we are experiencing (the effects) of *avon*, iniquity—sin.

. . . The story of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament describes a God who opposes and works to eliminate sin, and he also understands it more than we do. He consistently forgives sin. Seeing God’s posture of strong lovingkindness can empower us to forgive others’ sins as he forgives our own. This is a key part of living out our human purpose to love all people as God does.⁴

The Broken Image: Understanding Sin and the Disordered Soul

Our problem-solving culture is driven by analysis, control, and efficiency, where we apply the rules of cause-and-effect for understanding our world and experience in it. Thus, a predictable cultural Christian definition of “sin” is reduced to something like, “actions done in violation of God’s law.”

We end up discussing the cause-and-effects of sin without ever comprehending what it actually is and what it does to us.

⁴ “Defining Iniquity: Distorting What Is Good (© 2023, www.bibleproject.com)

But the structure of sin in the human personality is something far more complicated than the isolated acts and thoughts of deliberate disobedience commonly designated by the Word. In its biblical definition, sin cannot be limited to isolated instances or patterns of wrongdoing; it is something much more akin to the psychological term complex: an organic network of compulsive attitudes, beliefs and behavior deeply rooted in our alienation from God.

Sin originated in the darkening of the human mind and heart as mankind turned from the truth about God to embrace a lie about him and consequently a whole universe of lies about his creation. Sinful thoughts, words and deeds flow forth from this darkened heart automatically and compulsively, as water from a polluted fountain. “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5).

The human heart is now a reservoir of unconscious disordered motivation and response, of which unrenewed persons are unaware if left to themselves, for “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9). It is as if they were without mirrors and suffering from tunnel vision: they can see neither themselves clearly nor the great peripheral area around their immediate experience (God and supernatural reality). At the two most crucial *loci* of their understanding, their awareness of God and of themselves, they are almost in total darkness, although they may attempt to remedy this by framing false images of themselves and God.

Paul describes this darkness of the unregenerate mind: “Now this I affirm and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds; they are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart” (Eph. 4: 17-18).

The mechanism by which this unconscious reservoir of darkness is formed is identified in Rom. 1:18-23 as repression of traumatic material, chiefly the truth about God and our condition, which the unregenerate constantly and dynamically “hold down.” Their darkness is always a voluntary darkness, though they are unaware that they are repressing the truth.⁵

Just as sin fundamentally—intellectually, psychologically, emotionally, relationally—separates us from God (Isaiah 59:2), so, “the soul is restored through union with God.” (Leanne Payne)

God’s Memory and Sin

The writer of Hebrews 8:8-12, quoting from Jeremiah 31, reaffirms that God says that He will make a new covenant with His people. He will make his people new, putting His law in our hearts and minds. God says that His people will know Him, “from the least to the greatest,” and that He will be “merciful toward their iniquities, and remember their sins no more.”

⁵ Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979) 88-89.

If God remembers our sins no more, then our identity must not be found in our sins, either the acts we have committed or those committed against us.

We hold in tension the truth that while sin is a part of the human condition (Romans 3:23), our identity in Christ is a “saint” (1 Corinthians 6:11) who is a new a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17).

4. WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR ME?— Pray

Not, “What does it mean *to* you? but “What does it mean *for* you?”

What might Jesus be inviting you to pay attention to or consider as you reflect upon this passage?

5. CHOOSING GOD’S INVITATIONS— Respond

This is about activating our will and aligning our thinking and feelings with what God is inviting us into. It means we have to change. What will it mean for you to welcome and receive God’s invitations here? How might this challenge you to reconsider how you think about or relate to God? And yourself?

TO PONDER

The three main characters in Rembrandt's painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, are also found in The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) — the father, the younger brother, and the older brother. Sit with this image, reflect upon it, and ask for the grace to notice His invitations through it.



The Return of the Prodigal Son
Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1669)

The Return of the Prodigal Son is among Rembrandt's final works, likely completed within two years of his death in 1669. In the painting, the son returns home in a wretched state from travels where he has wasted his inheritance and falls into poverty and despair. He kneels before his father in repentance, wishing for forgiveness and a renewed place in the family, having realized that even his father's servants had a better life than he. His father receives him with a tender gesture. His hands seem to suggest mothering and fathering at once; the left appears larger and more masculine, set on the son's shoulder, while the right is softer and more receptive in gesture. Standing at the right is the prodigal son's older brother, who crosses his hands in judgment; in the parable, he objects to the father's compassion for the sinful son. The woman at the top left, barely visible, is likely the mother, while the seated man, whose dress implies wealth, may be an advisor to the estate or a tax collector. The standing man at the center is likely a servant.

How does this speak to your story? How do you understand God's forgiveness? How do you experience it?