

“THE PARABLE OF THE RIVER LET HIM CARRY YOU HOME”

²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; ²⁷ and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another,

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. Romans 1: 26-32

Those are harsh words. Say those words on TV and you'll be cancelled by those who proclaim to have more enlightened views. Maybe we want to shout, “Go get ‘em, Paul! It’s about time someone spoke out against sin! It’s high time someone pulled back the blanket on adultery and turned a bright light on dishonesty.

And how does St. Paul respond to these comments?

He says, “If you think that leaves you on the high ground where you can point your finger at others, think again! Every time you criticize someone, you condemn yourself (Romans 2:1).

So, then, how *should* we deal with sin – other people’s sin, and our own?

Let me answer that question with a story – a parable. A parable, you may remember, is an *earthly* story with a *heavenly* meaning.

Once there were five sons who lived in a mountain castle with their father. The eldest was an obedient son, but his four younger brothers were rebellious. Their father had warned them of the river, but they had not listened. He had

begged them to stay clear of the bank lest they be swept downstream but the river's lure was too strong.

Each day the four rebellious brothers ventured closer and closer to the river until one son dared to reach in and feel the waters. "Hold my hand," he said, "so I won't fall in," and his brothers did. But when he touched the water, the current yanked him and the other three into the rapids. Down the river they rolled.

The waters finally dumped them on the bank in a strange land, in a distant country, in a barren place. Savage people lived in that land. It was not safe like their home.

Though they did not know where they were, one fact they were sure of: They were not intended for this place. For a long time the four young sons lay on the bank, stunned at their fall and not knowing where to turn. After some time they gathered their courage and reentered the waters, hoping they would walk upstream. But the current was too strong. They attempted to walk along the river's bank, but the terrain was too steep. They considered climbing the mountains, but the peaks were too high. Besides, they didn't know the way.

Finally, they gave up trying, built a fire and sat down. "We shouldn't have disobeyed our father," they admitted. "We are a long way from home."

With the passage of time the sons learned to survive in the strange land. They determined not to forget their homeland nor abandon hopes of returning to their father and his castle. Each evening they built a fire and told stories of their father and older brother. All four sons longed to see them again.

Then, one night, one brother failed to come to the fire. The others found him the next morning in the valley with the savages. He was building a hut of grass and mud. "I've

grown tired of our talks,” he told them. “What good does it do to remember? Besides, this land isn’t so bad. I am building a house and settling here. I’m making new friends from the savages, and I’m learning their ways.

And so the other three left their hut-building brother and walked away. They continued to meet around the fire, speaking of home and dreaming of their return.

Some days later, a second brother failed to appear at the campfire. The next morning, his two brothers found him on a hillside staring at the hut of his brother.

“How disgusting,” they could hear him shout as the two approached. “Our brother down there is an utter failure! He’s an insult to our family name. Can you imagine a more despicable deed? He built a hut down there and he’s forgetting all about our father!”

“What he’s doing down there is wrong,” agreed the youngest, “but what we did was wrong as well. We disobeyed. We touched the water. We ignored our father’s warnings to stay clear of the river.”

“Well, we may have made a mistake or two, but compared to the sleaze in that hut, we are saints. Father will dismiss our sin and punish him.”

“Come with us,” his two brothers urged, “return to the fire with us.”

“No,” said the brother sitting on the hillside, staring down at his hut-building sibling. “I’m going to stay right here and keep an eye on our sleazy brother down there. Someone needs to keep a record of his wrongs to show to Father.”

And so the two returned to the campfire, leaving behind one brother building a hut, and the other one watching and condemning.

The remaining two sons stayed near the fire, encouraging each other and speaking of home. Then, one morning, the youngest son awoke to find he was all alone. He searched for his brother and found him near the river, stacking rocks.

“It’s no use,” the rock-stacking brother explained as he worked. “Father won’t come for me. I must go to him. I am building a path back up the river so I can walk into our father’s presence. Rock upon rock I will stack until I have enough rocks to travel upstream to the castle. When he sees how hard I have worked and how diligent I have been, father will have no choice but to open the door and let me into his house.”

The last brother did not know what to say. He returned to sit by the fire, alone. One morning he heard a familiar voice behind him. “Father has sent me to bring you home.” The youngest son lifted his eyes, and saw the face of his oldest brother. “you have come for us!” he shouted. For a long time the two embraced.

“And your brothers?” the oldest finally asked. “Where are they? Where are your other three brothers?”

The youngest explained how one adopted the lifestyle of the savages and made a home here. Another is watching him in order to judge him. The third is building a path up the river.”

The oldest brother visited the other three how had left the campfire. He tried to convince each to come with Him. Father had sent him to take them back home. But none of them would listen or come. Finally, the oldest brother took the youngest boy up, up on his back, and carried him home. Home to his father. Home where he belonged.

This story is just a story, but it’s meaning is spiritual. It tells us about God, our sin, and the amazing grace of God.

The father in the story, of course, represents our Heavenly Father. He made you and has known you from eternity. He designed us to live close to Him and *with* Him. But our ancestors and we, ourselves, have disobeyed God. We ignore His Commandments. We go where He has told us not to go. We do what He has told us not to do. And the result of our sin is separation from God. We have traded being home with Him for the strangeness of living in a broken, sinful world. We long to be home, but we can't get there on our own. There's nothing we can do to save ourselves. We are stuck in our sin. Still, Christians gather to remember our Father's Word and trust that He will rescue come to our rescue.

The oldest brother, is Jesus Christ. He has come from His home in heaven, down to earth, born in a stable. He came for one purpose: to rescue us. He saved us, not by scolding us. But by carrying us on Himself. He alone did all the work to carry us home to our Father, by paying completely for all sins of all people of all time by giving His life on the cross and taking on Himself all the punishment and wrath of God that sins deserve. His life reassures us of our Father's love. Now, He invites you to simply trust Him and climb on His back. The journey to a restored relationship with your Heavenly Father to live forevermore is a free gift of grace.

Who is the hut-building son? He is anyone who ignores God's clear Commandments and instead follows his own opinion of what is right and what's wrong. More and more, this is America today. Belief in any god has been pushed to the sidelines in America. One third of people in America have NO church affiliation of any kind – one out of three! And even among us here, we have a belief that faith is to be kept private. Belief in Jesus, many of us think, is ONLY for home, and ONLY for church. NEVER is faith to be expressed at work, or in public, we think.

This pushing faith to the sidelines results in people searching for meaning and identity. Some look for meaning in the momentary pleasures of this world. Look on social media. People try to stand out as an individual. They try to find meaning by standing out by

being thin enough, pretty enough, sexy enough, woke enough, conservative enough. On and on it goes.

This is what happens when people live without our Heavenly Father. Like the son in the story who lived with the savages, people today have forgotten that our Father even exists, and so they feel free to express themselves in thousands of perverse sexual ways, and they condemn anyone who will not join in with them. This is the false religion of our time.

Sin and lawlessness drives a holy God crazy! Imagine coming home today, and there in the middle of your front lawn, where all your neighbors can see, is the carcass of a dead, rotting, pig. It's smelly, disease ridden, covered in maggots, and just plain "nasty." When you see something so revolting on your front lawn, would you say, "Oh, that's nice," and step over it on your way into the house? Of course not! You'd say, "I don't care, who, I don't care how – that thing has got to go. Bury it, burn it, haul it away -- I don't care, but I CANNOT live with that decaying carcass.

God feels the same way about our sin. A holy God cannot live with the spiritual rot and decay of sin. Lawlessness drives a holy God crazy, just like fingernails on a chalkboard.

What's more, God is a JUST God. He exists and people ignore Him at their peril. He must punish sin and wrong. And that means, ... trouble! BIG trouble! God's judgement is nothing to fool around with!

The finger-pointing son is the person so obsessed with pointing out other people's sins that he can't see the plank in his own eye. This is the impression non-believers have of Christians. Non-religious people only hear a message of judgement and condemnation from Christians – at least, that's their impression.

Paul says in the Bible to us finger-pointers, **"you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things"** (Romans 2:1). It's not your job to point fingers at others. It's not your job to judge. It's one thing to have a conviction; it's quite another thing to pass a verdict. We are not to suspend our critical faculties. We are

indeed to speak the truth of what God says. We are to call out the government, and the media, and every false belief and say clearly, "Hear what God says. Follow God's commands." They may not believe any of what we say. They may hate us for saying it. They may throw Christ-followers in jail. So? And yet, speaking God's truth is NOT standing in judgement of others. We are not to condemn others, especially when we fail to condemn ourselves, because we are every bit as sinful as others.

This brings us to the rock-stacking son. This is the person who feels the guilt of his sin and tries to work to pay it off himself. Jesus' death on the cross means nothing more than giving him the ambition to stack rocks. Lots and lots of rocks. He's got to build his own way to a restored relationship with the Father.

This was the problem going on when Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses. It was October 31st, 1517. People then were paying money for an Indulgence, which was paying the Church for a declaration that all the rocks you needed had been stacked. People got rich off of that racket! But the common people felt so weighed down. They never knew if they earned heaven or hell, and they feared millions and millions of years in hell.

It would be like comparing heaven to an insurance company. You buy insurance to cover your mistakes and accidents. But too many mistakes and accidents and you could get dropped. The rock-stacker believes heaven has limits on the number of your sins covered. The rest you have to pay for yourself. Could you imagine getting a letter that reads:

"Dear Friend [that's you], I'm writing in response to your request this morning for forgiveness. I'm sorry to inform you that you have reached your quota of sins. Our records show that since employing our services, you have erred seven times in the area of greed, and your prayer life is substandard when compared to others of like age and circumstances. These sins place you as a high-risk candidate for heaven. You understand that grace has limits. Jesus sends His regrets, and kindest

regards and hopes that you will find some other form of coverage.”

If an insurance company can't cover all your honest mistakes, can you expect God's grace to cover your intentional rebellion against Him?

And here is where God's grace shatters all our expectations! Paul writes this to you, from today's New Testament reading: **“There is no difference between people. For everyone has sinned; we fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, in His grace, freely makes us right in His sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when He freed us from the penalty for our sins.”** Romans 3:23-24

This is grace. This is the oldest son, coming to the far-away land, and carrying the youngest brother back home. Carrying him on His own back.

Let me put it again in the picture of the insurance company. Suppose the CEO of the company wanted to have mercy on you and keep you as a client. He can't just wink and pretend that you made no mistakes. He can't tear up your record.

So instead, imagine him inviting you to his office. He says to you, “I have found a way to deal with your mistakes. I can't overlook them – that would be unjust. I can't pretend they don't exist – that would be a lie. But we have found a person with a spotless past. He has never broken a law. Not one violation, not even a parking ticket. He has volunteered to trade records with you. Your name goes on his record. And we will punish him for what you did wrong.”

What's your response? “You've got to be kidding! Who would do this for me?” To which the president responds, “Me.”

If you're waiting for an insurance CEO to say that, don't hold your breath. He won't. Even if he wanted to, he can't because he has no perfect record. But God can. And God has. The Bible says, **“This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.”** 1 John 4:10

This, my friends, is grace. God's grace isn't fair. But it's amazing. Because He is amazingly loving. So climb on Jesus' back. Let Him carry you home. Amen.