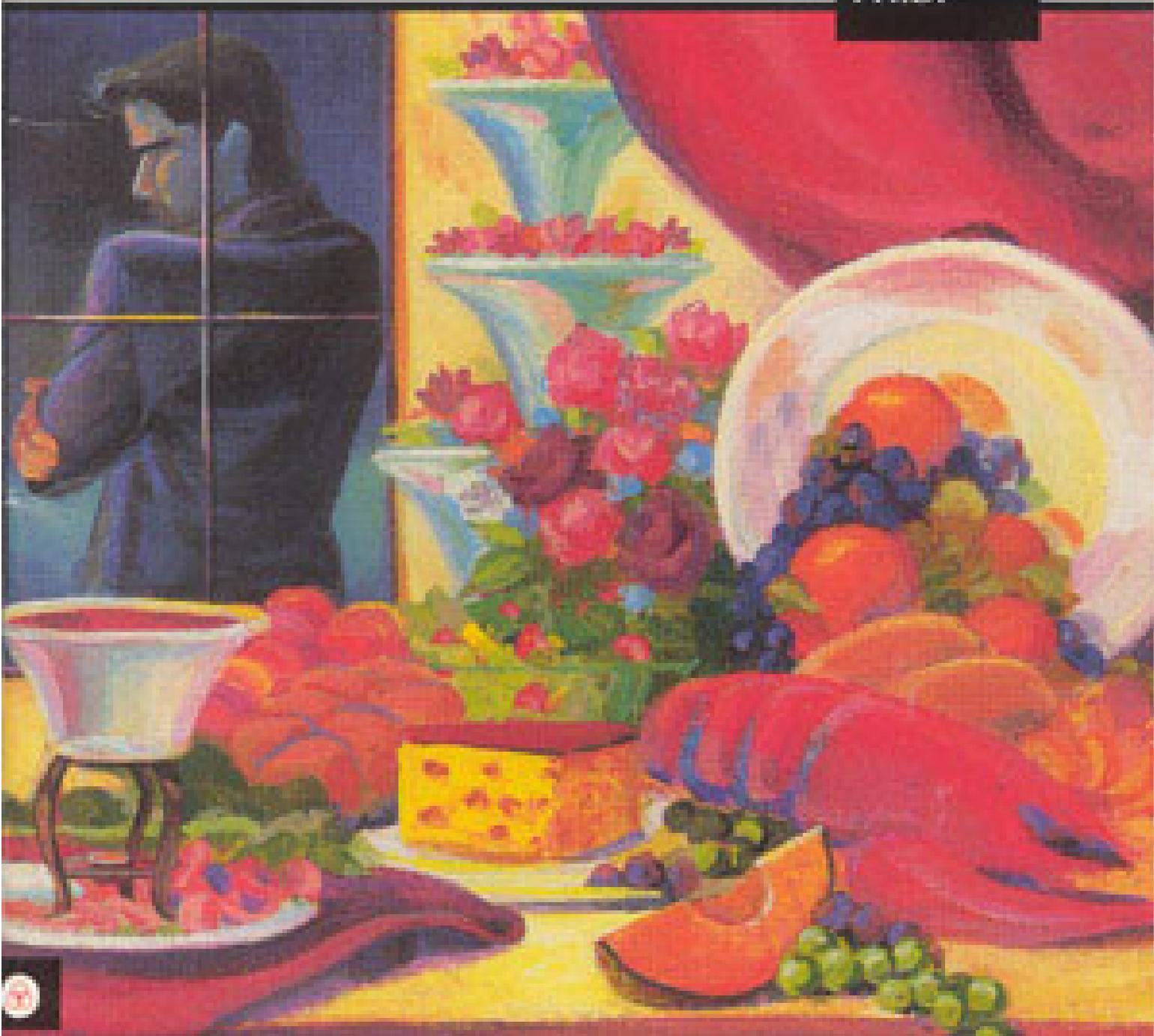

PARABLE OF THE DANCING G O D



C. BAXTER
KRUGER
PH.D.



The Parable
of the
Dancing God

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“The Parable of the Dancing God is the best theological ground in which to anchor the Father Heart of God message. This booklet carries a message desperately needed by billions of non-dancing dancers across the planet.”

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“I had tried for 55 years, 11 months, and 16 days to get it right. I mean, tried really hard. It was after 11 o'clock that night when I decided I had to read this little booklet “Parable of the Dancing God” my son-in-law had sent me. When I got to about the third page, I felt like I had been hit in the face with an iron frying pan. I laid back on the pillow, bewildered, and said, "God, have I been thinking wrong all my life?" The response was a simple and clear, “Yes.” And that is just the tip of the iceberg.

–Julian Fagan, Attorney, Amory, Mississippi

For My Son

James Edward Baxter Kruger

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Introduction

Have you ever met anyone who longed for rejection? I suppose there could be someone somewhere who might wish for such a thing, but I doubt it. The very idea of someone longing to be cut off or spurned or excluded is ludicrous. We all hate rejection. And we hate rejection because it hurts--and hurts in a way that few other things can. Think of a 10 year old girl who breaks her arm at school and has to be rushed to the hospital. The broken arm certainly hurts, but the Doctors will give her a shot, set it, put a cast on it and she will be fine. In a few days she will go back to school something of a hero--everyone will want to sign her cast. But think of the same girl getting off the bus in tears because her best friend laughed at her and made fun of her in front of others. Her mom tries to console her but somehow a mother's words of comfort are not as powerful as a friend's words of rejection. And there is no shot to take to numb this hurt. There is no cast to set a broken heart. More than likely the girl will spend the afternoon in her room alone and in tears. When she goes back to school she will go as a wounded girl, and that wound will make her afraid and guarded and hesitant. That is what rejection does to us. It changes us. It makes us guarded and tentative, even suspicious, and that drives us into one form of hiding or another.

But why is it that rejection hurts us so deeply? I suspect that the power of rejection comes from the way we are wired, so to speak. We are made for acceptance. We are designed so that we come to life when we are accepted. As a fish thrives and flourishes in water, human beings thrive and flourish in acceptance. It is our native environment. We are not much good, and certainly not happy without it.

The evil one is well aware of the way we are made. He knows what happens to a fish when it is jerked out of water, and he knows what happens to us when we are "taken out" of acceptance. He is a rejection specialist and his chief strategy is to convince us that we are not acceptable. He has a bag of tricks that he uses on us, some obvious and some more subtle, but by far and away his most pervasive trick is to tamper with our understanding of God. That is the biggy. If he can convince us that God has rejected us, or even that God does not like us or want us, then the game of life is up. We become like the 10 year old girl sitting alone in her room in tears. When we do venture out of our rooms, we do so as wounded people and that is not a recipe for

fellowship and life. It is all very simple. Rejection shuts down our freedom to live.

Of course, Jesus knows all about the power of acceptance. He has lived in the freedom and joy of the Father's embrace and untold delight from all eternity. He knows the Father is no legalist and he was appalled and deeply offended at the way the so-called religious leaders of his day tarred his Father with their legalist's brushes. So he set out to change their notion of God--and ours--so that we could all see and know and feel the lavish embrace and acceptance of the Father, and know its freedom and joy to the core of our beings, and thus live life.

Luke 15 is Jesus' most direct attack on wrongheaded thoughts about God. But beware of listening to Jesus. His Father is good and His love is passionate. To get a glimpse of the truth about God just might kindle a freedom and joy in you that you have only dreamed about.

The Gospel According to Luke Chapter 15

By this time a lot of men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, “He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends.” Their grumbling triggered this story.

“Suppose one of you had a hundred sheep and lost one. Wouldn’t you leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the lost one until you found it? When found, you can be sure you would put it across your shoulders, rejoicing, and when you got home call in your friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Celebrate with me! I’ve found my lost sheep!’ Count on it--there’s more joy in heaven over one sinner’s rescued life than over ninety-nine good people in no need of rescue.

“Or imagine a woman who has ten coins and loses one. Won’t she light a lamp and scour the house, looking in every nook and cranny until she finds it? And when she finds it you can be sure she’ll call her friends and neighbors: ‘Celebrate with me! I found my lost coin!’ Count on it--that’s the kind of party God’s angels throw every time one lost soul turns to God.”

Then he said, “There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, ‘Father, I want right now what’s coming to me.’

“So the father divided the property between them. It wasn’t long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to hurt. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any.

“That brought him to his senses. He said, ‘All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I’m going back to my father. I’ll say to him, “Father, I have sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son. Take me as a hired hand.”’ He got right up and went home to his father.

“When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: ‘Father,

I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son ever again.'

"But the father wasn't listening. He was calling to the servants, 'Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We're going to feast! We're going to have a wonderful time! My son is here--given up for dead and now alive!

Given up for lost and now found!' And they began to have a wonderful time.

"All this time his older son was out in the field. When the day's work was done he came in. As he approached the house, he heard the music and dancing. Calling over one of the houseboys, he asked what was going on. He told him, 'Your brother came home. Your father has ordered a feast--barbecued beef!--because he has him home safe and sound.'

"The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't listen. The son said, 'Look how many years I've stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores shows up and you go all out with a feast!'

His father said, 'Son, you don't understand. You're with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours--but this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he's alive! He was lost, and he's found!'"¹

¹ This translation of Luke 15 is from *THE MESSAGE*, by Eugene H. Peterson (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993). All further citations of *The Message* will be noted by TM.

Chapter 1

A Parable of the Dancing God

The third parable of Jesus in Luke 15 is without question among his most famous. It is also his most loved. It is about a father and his two sons. And this fact alone endears the parable to us. It is most often called “the parable of the prodigal son.” Perhaps this is because the “wayward” son’s story comes first and because it is so real and moving. But there is far more to the parable than this son’s journey. That is why the story does not end when he finally comes home. The story moves on and the older son takes center stage. If we were to focus on this son and his life, the title of the parable should be something like “the parable of the blind son,” or “the parable of missing the whole point.” But this story is not really about either the prodigal or the blind son. It is about the father. He is the central figure. And Jesus is using this father and his relationship with his two sons to reveal to us the shocking truth about God.

This story is about who God is and what God is actually like. It is about the way God thinks, how He thinks. It is about the way God acts towards us. It is about the Father’s heart and joy. It is a story of a God we can believe in--a parable of the dancing God.

Jesus picks the worst person that he can possibly find and he has the *Father* running after *him*. This most pitiful excuse of a son, Jesus tells us, is the object of the Father’s intense longing and passion and affection. *He* is the object of the Father’s care and unconditional no-strings-attached forgiveness.

Jesus paints a picture of God standing on the balcony of heaven, watching, searching the horizon for the least inkling of a shadow of His son’s return. And once He sees him, *this* son, Jesus has the Father running and embracing *him* and commanding a great party to be thrown on his behalf.

What a picture of God! I tell you there is no greater statement about God in the whole Bible than verse 20: “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and was moved with compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed and kissed and kissed him” (NASB). *He* was absolutely thrilled to see *him*.

The first question for all of us, and maybe the only question, is this: Have

we met this Father? Have we met the God of this parable? Do we know Him? Can you not feel Jesus' heart here? Can you not see, written all over his face, the words, "You have just got to meet the real God"? Can you not feel Jesus struggling with the whole wrongheadedness of the prevailing conception of God around him? Can you not hear him saying to himself, "If they could just meet *Him* and know *Him*, it would change everything"?

The Real God

This parable, together with the two which precede it, are told by Jesus in direct response to the apparently "righteous" critique of the religious leadership. The "leadership" of the Jewish institutional church did not like the fact that Jesus Christ *received* sinners (v. 2). Swindlers and sinners, outcasts and failures, were flocking to him and he was treating them as old friends. He was glad to see them. He was excited by their presence, even eating with them and going to their parties. And such outlandish activity quickly found itself under the scrutiny of the ever present religious eye.

"Some kind of holy person you are, Jesus, embracing sinners. Don't you have any religion about you, Jesus? How could you possibly hang out with these people? How could you receive such unrighteous sinners, blasphemers?"

You can almost feel Jesus' reaction. He is certainly shocked by their scrutiny and judgment. But it is more than shock, it is disbelief. "Are you guys for real? Are you really that clueless? Do you really not understand why I embrace sinners and eat with them? I do this because that is the way God is! Because my Father runs to embrace these sinners and eats with them, indeed He throws a loud and lavish party for them."

"*Here,*" Jesus says, "let me tell you about it."

That is what is going on in these parables. Jesus is responding to the way the leading lights of Israel think about God and to the way that their thinking about God leads them to judge him. And He has a shocker for them. They have it all wrong and he attacks their thinking.

These parables of Jesus are a direct assault, an all-out frontal attack, upon the Pharisees' perverted idea of God and the way He operates. They think that God is a bookkeeper. They think that God is keeping tabs. They think that He is keeping a list and checking it twice to find out who is naughty and nice.

And they think that these sinners do not have a snowball's chance in a hot tub, because they are miserable failures. These people have not *qualified* for divine favor. They have done nothing for God. In fact, they have done

everything possible to *disqualify* themselves from everything divine--from everything, that is, but sure and certain judgment.

But Jesus has God embracing these failures. Jesus, the Father's true Son, who dwells in the bosom of the Father (JN 1:18) and who knows the Father inside and out (MT 11:27), throws them a theological curve ball which absolutely blows their minds. He turns their theology on its head. Instead of a bookkeeping, list-checking, divine legalist, Jesus confronts them with a picture of God who dances in sheer joy at the sight of a failure coming home. He confronts them with a God who turns out to be a divine sprinter, who runs after sinners, who throws parties for those who have not and cannot possibly qualify for His favor.

Instead of a God quick to judge--a *hangin' judge*, who has one hand on the rope of the trap door and searches for an excuse to jerk it--Jesus' version of God is of an amazing Father who steadfastly, persistently and unswervingly remains exactly what He is, a Father, even and especially when His sons become rebellious, twisted and wayward.

There is no list-keeping in this Father's heart. There are no Pharisaical-religious steps to forgiveness. There is no mention at all of forgiveness here and especially of earning it in any way. Because forgiveness is already done. It is, in Jesus' word, "finished."

This is about a son, who is and remains a son because he has a father who is and remains a father. This is about a sinner coming to his senses and encountering the truth of who he is because of who God is. This is about a son encountering the truth that *he* has a home, that *he* has a father, that *he* has an inheritance that he cannot squander. This is about coming to know God, coming to know and believe the good news of God the Father's immutable heart.

The son is lost in the far country in tears. He is miserable, for he knows to the root of his soul that he has failed. He cannot escape tasting the bitterness of his shame. His soul is haunted by embarrassment and helplessness. He cannot undo his wrongness. All that he can feel or say is, "Oh, oh, oh, my father, I have sinned against heaven and before your eyes and heart. I am no longer worthy of being your son at all. Make me as one of your hired men."

He feels intense personal humiliation and condemnation. And yet, right in the midst of this, Jesus has the gospel coming out of the son's own mouth. He speaks the gospel to himself in the depths of his misery, but he does not hear it. It is just rhetoric. Did you notice what this son said? He said, "I'm going back to *my father*" (v. 18, TM). Out of his own mouth comes the truth which he cannot see, much less dare to believe--yet.

In spite of all that he has done, there remains an abiding, unchanging, rock solid fact. There remains an inheritance that he cannot squander away. *He* has a *father*.

While he is far off, while he is rehearsing his “Maybe I can earn a place by my repentance” speech, the truth comes crashing down upon him like the mightiest peal of thunder. His father is *his father*.

What hits this son between the eyes is the fact that he cannot change his father’s heart. His father does not love him for what he does. His father does not stop loving him because he has rebelled and miserably failed. His father is his father--no matter what. *He is* and remains the beloved *son* because his father *is and remains his father*.

This poor boy thinks, as we all do, in religious terms. He thinks that he can and must do something. He knows that he has blown it, but he thinks that perhaps his sorrow and repentance will win a point in his father’s heart. He thinks that, while he has rebelliously squandered everything, just maybe his mourning, maybe his deep moaning and groaning, maybe his humility and religion, will at least get him a job and some food.

That is what he is doing. He is putting on religion because he thinks that it might just pull on the strings of his father’s compassion. But how striking and glorious and wonderful it is that he is not given the chance to even open his mouth. He looks up and he sees his father running. He freezes in his tracks and the next thing he knows is that he is completely covered up by his father. All he feels is his father’s embrace and kiss. All he sees is his father dancing with joy over him.

“*That,*” Jesus is saying, “is who God is and how God thinks and acts.”

But the boy still does not get the point. He still thinks that it is about what *he does* and does not yet see that it is about who *God is*. It has nothing to do with him and everything to do with God. He has rehearsed his speech and is determined to blather it out. And blather it out he does: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before your eyes and heart; *I am no longer worthy* to be called your son.” But notice what the text says next. Eugene Peterson captures it best: “But the father *wasn’t listening*” (TM).

Here is this great speech, this confession, but the father is not interested. He is not interested in the least. All the boy sees is his father dancing with joy. All he hears in response is his father’s shouts: “Get the best robe and put it on him, get the sandals and put them on his feet, get the family ring and put it on his finger, and fire up the bar-b-que pit! We are going to have a party! *My son was dead, but is now alive. I had given him up for lost, but he has come home.*”

The glorious good news of grace is crying out of the father's being and action. The gospel has wrapped itself around this boy and drowned out his best speech. Volumes are proclaimed here in this one picture.

“Son, this is not about *your* opinion of yourself. This is not about your worthiness. This is not about winning points with me. This is not about what *you* do or fail to do. This is about the fact that *I am* your father and therefore *you are* my son. This is about you coming to know who I really am and therefore who you are--you belong to me. This is about you coming to know as you are known. This is about you seeing the real riches of your inheritance in me and being filled with a great *hallelujah!* This is about you coming to *bask* in my relationship with you.”

A Note on Heaven and Church

It has been said that while the Bible speaks often about heaven, it does not actually tell us much about what heaven is going to be like. Well, if you want to know what heaven is like, here it is. It is a party. It is a feast. It is a celebration thrown by God the Father and He is the lead dancer. Heaven is about being at the Father's party and being the celebrated guest of honor, in spite of your disqualifying failure.

The first of these three parables says that there is “joy in heaven” (v. 7, NASB) over one sinner's rescued life. In the second parable the angels of God throw a party when a sinner gets the point and turns from his nothingness to the Father. In the third parable there is no mention of joy in heaven, no mention of angels throwing a party, there is only this wonderful picture of the dancing God. There is only this vivid image of *the Father* running, embracing, and kissing this fallen son, and commanding a great celebration.

That is heaven. It is the excitement of God; it is the Father's dancing joy, exploding into the greatest party in history.

Is that not a wonderful picture of what church is to be like here and now--the joy of God taking shape in our hearts and producing a celebration? We are into “models” today when we talk about the church. Well, here is a great model: the partying church.

Is this not the very heart of evangelism? Should it not be that when people, like the older brother (v. 25), come in from work, they hear music and dancing in the church, and want to know what this is all about?

Is this not the very heart of our mission? Are we not called to be a celebrating people who are so excited and filled with the grace and joy of our Father that the celebration gets the attention of the world?

Religion

Jesus told this parable to confront and attack the wrongheaded understanding of God that was percolating through institutional religion in his day. He told it to bring about a reformation, a revolution. He told it to liberate the poor people who were living, or trying to live, under the bondage of a list-keeping theology. And he told it as a serious call to repentance. And I believe he told it in tears. Because he saw that the religious people of his day were not going to God's party. They were offended. Jesus' deepest concern in this parable is with the older brothers of this world and the fact that they were missing out.

There are few verses in the Bible that are more pitiful than verse 28: "The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in" (TM). He became bitter and would not go to the party.

Jesus tells us why the older brother was bitter. It was because of his theology. It was because he had been relating to what he thought was a bookkeeping, list-checking father all of his life. And he kept his own records as well. And, according to his own records, he never once failed: "Look! For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours; and you have never given me a young goat, that I might be merry with my friends" (v. 29, NASB).

You see what is happening here. This brother had done it all correctly. He had been obedient, perfectly so. He had kept the rules. "And you have never rewarded me. And on top of this, when this whoremongering son of yours straggles in from the far country, you go plumb berserk in celebration and make a fool out of yourself drooling over him in front of the servants. You should be ashamed, father! That is not fair! It is outrageous! It is heinous!"

Can you imagine the look on the father's face when he realized that his son had been with him (in church?) all those years and had never understood his heart at all? He must have been astonished and grieved and brokenhearted.

"Son, what on earth are you talking about? You have completely missed the point. You ask me why I have never given you a side of beef to have a party with your friends? Son, *it is all yours* and always has been yours--don't you *know* that?"

Take a look at verses 11-12: "A certain man had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' And he divided it between them" (NASB). Did you get that? He divided it between *them*.

All that the father had, had already been given to the older brother. It was already his. The gift had already been given to him. And yet the older brother spent all those years trying to earn it, trying to earn *what was already his*. And he never enjoyed it. He never understood his father nor his graciousness. And he never enjoyed his father nor his abundant, lavish gift.

He could have been having a celebration all along the way. But he could not accept it on those terms. He had to invent his own terms. He turned it into religion. He spent his time trying to earn what was already his and keeping strict tabs to make sure he had done so.

His anger and bitterness at his father and the great feast thrown for his lost brother was not a temporary flare-up. It was the anger of the whole pattern of his life. It was the expression of his warped theology and false assurance.

He had never understood grace. He had never celebrated grace. He had never *enjoyed* his gracious father. He had never truly known his father nor life in his house. He had completely misunderstood who his father was and what made him tick. He had no idea. All he could think was that this whole deal was bitterly unfair. And he refused to go to the party.

That is what the religious people of every generation fall into. They invent their own terms. Instead of recognizing their own failure and nothingness, and then basking in the Father's sheer grace and living in His lavish embrace, they create a religion. They create imaginary definitions, so that they can convince themselves that they *are* good, righteous and loving. And things get so twisted and wrongheaded, they cannot get to grips with a gracious Father who embraces and accepts the fallen ones, nor a Jesus who receives them freely and treats them as old friends.

They never know the real God and life in His pleasure. Their self-righteousness keeps them from seeing and experiencing His grace. They never join in the divine party. How could they? They do not see themselves as desperate failures who stand helpless and powerless to change--they are doing religion.

Inevitably, bitterness wells up within their heart when they see the freeness of the Father's embrace and His lavish feast. And their religious presence stifles the marvel of amazed sinners and turns the celebration into a dead and boring act of "religious service" to God, which is lifeless and vacuous of glory.

The text says that the father came out and began entreating the older brother (v. 28): "Come on, son, this is your party too. This is our celebration. This is life in my house. Come join us, you belong here." The word used here for "entreat" is *parakaleo*. It is a word that is used in the New Testament for

exhortation in the power of the Spirit. It is used, for example, in 2COR 5:20: “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were *entreating* you through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, come to the party.”

The father entreated, begged, his older son, in the power of the Spirit, to be a part of the celebration. But the son would not listen. He could not accept it. It made no sense to him. His religion and false assurance prevented him from understanding. And he resisted the Spirit and refused to go to the party.

Some Honest Questions

Let’s step back now and think about all of this. What are we to make of this?

Jesus confronts us with a God who is not quite what we expect. This God is shocking. Jesus turns everything around. The religious people, the ones we would naturally think are in the thick of God’s things, end up missing out on the real thing. And the wayward failures find themselves amazed at the Father and in the midst of a party which He throws in His joy over them.

Where do we fit into this picture? A quick way to find an honest answer is to ask ourselves a question about how we listened to this parable. As we heard it retold, we sided with someone. We listened through one of the character’s ears. It may have been the younger son, or the older. It may have been the father or maybe Jesus, the teller of the tale. But we all most surely identified with one of these figures and saw things through his eyes.

It is important to think about this question of identification. It has a way of searching us and revealing our real thinking--the thinking that may well be hidden, but nonetheless profoundly affects us and how we live. This question brings to the surface what we might call our “working theology.” This is different from the theology that we discuss in church or Bible studies. Working theology is our thought about God that really is at work in us and on us. It is the thought of the soul. To ask, honestly, the question about how we listened to the story helps us to see what we really think in our innermost being.

Let’s take the younger son first. If you identified with him, then stop and take a honest look at your life.

Stare your falsehood and failures and pride and wrongness and squandering in the face. Ask yourself this question: Is it possible that this father in the parable is *God* and thinks about me as He does about this son? Can it be, that given all that I have done and not done, that God is and remains my Father and is moved with compassion for *me* and is running to embrace *me* in sheer joy?

Is it possible that He is coming right now, not tomorrow, or when I die, or when I finally get my act straightened up, but right now--and with full knowledge of who I am and what I have done-- and is shouting for His servants to bring His best robe and sandals and the beloved family ring and place it on *my* finger?

Can you believe that God is like this? Can you believe that God the Father is excited about *you*? Can you believe that He is commanding a party on your behalf? Can you believe that about God right now? If not, I say to you brother or sister, repent! That's right, repent! Change your thinking and believing completely. Turn from believing such grotesque lies about our Father. Take a long look at verse 20: "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and was moved with compassion for him, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him" (NASB). Memorize it. Believe in the God that you see here. Feed on the truth. Drink it in. Bask in it. Sit down and marvel at our God and Father.

Now, let's think about the older brother. If you identified with him, then there is a question facing you about what we might call "religiosity."

Ask yourself honestly this question: Do I harbor hopes in my heart that my religion will get me points with God? Do I think that my goodness and my obedience will make me acceptable to the Father? Do I think that my church attendance and my humility and confession will affect God's heart? Do I think that somehow His relationship toward me is dependent upon my religious performance? If so, I say to you brother or sister, repent! That's right, repent! Turn from believing such grotesque lies about God our Father. Take a long look at verse 31: "My child, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours" (NASB). Memorize it.

You are confronted here with a God who has already accepted you in Jesus and given everything to you in Him. How can you earn what is already yours? Do not sell yourself short. Put the ledger down and come to know Him. Join the marvel. Come to the party of grace thrown by the dancing God. It is your party too.

Now let's look for a moment at the father. If you identified with the father in this story, then I say do not let the proud older brothers of this world turn the party into religion, and thus turn church into a funeral home. Beware of that self-righteous pride which lurks behind our humility and service. The humble are those who know their failure and are absolutely amazed that God has relentlessly pursued them in Christ, embraced them, and accepted them anyway.

Humility is the acceptance of grace. It is the acceptance of the Father's shocking and unearned embrace in Jesus. Beware of those who are proud of what they do for God, rather than filled by what God has done for them. But do not stop entreating them to come to the party. Don't give up. Do not stop telling them that it is their party too. And keep an eye squarely on the horizon.

If you identified with Jesus, the teller of the tale, then I say to you, continue to grieve for those who do not yet see, and for those who refuse to believe. But by no means stop telling the tale. Keep telling it and telling it, until the church again gets the message. Keep telling it until the church of the next millennium becomes a marveling church, a church shocked by the real God, and thus a celebrating church, which gets so filled with the joy of the Father that the world hears the party and wants to know what is going on.

May the Father's heart overwhelm us so.

Prayer and Questions For Reflection

Father, thank you for your passionate love for me. Help me to believe your love as the truest thing in the universe. Show me where and when and how I am not allowing you to love me. Bathe my wounded soul with the joy of your affection, that I might know you with Jesus in the freedom of your Spirit. Amen.

- (1) Why do you think Jesus told the story of the Father and his two sons?
- (2) Do you think God enjoys having you in his creation?
- (3) Put yourself in the younger son's shoes as he looked down the road and saw his Father coming towards him. As the Father looks at you, what do you see written all over the Father's face? Why?
- (4) Why is it difficult for you to believe in Jesus' Father?
- (5) How has your relationship with your parents shaped how you view God? In what ways are your parents like and unlike the Father Jesus portrays?
- (6) Do you think of Jesus as being more accepting and merciful, more tender and accessible than God the Father? If so, what is the basis of your vision of God?
- (7) Do you agree or disagree with this statement: "The Father's forgiveness is prior to your faith and repentance?" Why?

Chapter 2

The Parable Revisited

We revisit this great parable because more must be said about the opening statement of the chapter: “By this time a lot of men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently” (TM). And more must be said about the accusation of the Pharisees and religion scholars: “This man receives sinners” (v.2, NASB).

From one angle this *accusation* is full of hope for all of us because it sets before us a Lord who eagerly and joyously receives sinners. This man receives me, as I am, with no pretense. From another angle, however, this accusation, together with the first statement, is a point of conviction for the church.

Is it the case today that people describe the church as the place that receives sinners? Would that be the way people in your community describe what the church, what your church, is all about? Would your church fall under the accusation, “They receive sinners,” as Jesus did? Do sinners strain to hear what we have to say, as they strained to hear Jesus?

In the middle of a children’s sermon on this parable, the children and I enacted its central scene. We had an older son at work in the fields, and servants around the house, and we had a younger son go off to the far country. I played the part of the father. And when the younger son came into the sanctuary from the far country, I ran down the aisle shouting, “He’s home! He’s home! He’s home!” Just like the father in the parable, I ran and embraced him and commanded the servants to get a robe and sandals and the family ring, and get a feast prepared. It was not a boring moment!

But right in the midst of all of this, the Lord provided us with another parable, a living parable. I saw it happening out of the corner of my eye as I was running back from the far country. It involved my own son, Baxter. I noticed that he covered his eyes and shook his head whilst I was running and shouting in the church. Several people saw it and made comments to me about it after the service.

After church, the two of us rode home together. I asked him, “Did Daddy embarrass you during the children’s sermon?”

He said “Yes.” When I asked why, he answered, “I don’t know, Dad.”

I said, “Son, you have seen me act like that a thousand times and you were not embarrassed. Think about when I was coaching your buddy ball team, or when we were teaching Laura how to ride her bike, or when Kathryn was learning to walk, or when we are just goofing off around the house. You see me act like that all the time. That’s just the way I am.”

And he said to me, “Sure, Dad, but not in the *church!*”

That may be funny initially, but its humor lasts only for a moment. I did not laugh at all. It was like a nail driven into my heart. Instantaneous grief.

An Honest Look at Church

I am aware, of course, that parents are a perpetual source of embarrassment to their children. But there was more going on in that particular case than routine parental embarrassment. Somehow Baxter had gotten the message that whatever else church is, it is the place where it is not alright to be Dad.

“It’s okay, Daddy, for you to be yourself when we are playing, or when you are helping Laura ride her bike, or when you are at home, or most any place, but it is not okay for you to be that way in church. It is not okay for you to be you in here. You are supposed to leave that at home.”

Whatever else he has learned in his six years on earth, he has certainly learned that church is the place where you cannot be yourself, you cannot be real. At best, it is the place where you stop being you for a moment. At worst, it is the place where you pretend to be something or someone else altogether. It is the place where everything is quite different from life.

That quick conversation with my own son has grieved me sorely. It has certainly caused me to do some serious reflecting. I hope it does the same to you. I hope it weighs upon you and haunts you in the same way it has weighed upon me and haunted me. It may be that that will turn out to be our very salvation.

Little boys like that soon grow up and they bid farewell to the church. They leave it. It is artificial. It is not real. It is about pretending. It is about dressing up. It is about putting on a mask, a *persona*, an image. It is foreign, alien and irrelevant to real life. What is the point?

I wish I could say that this type of conversation is the great exception to the general rule or some kind of strange anomaly. But it is not. This kind of thing hits me all the time. I know, for example, that when people learn that I am a preacher, something changes in the dynamics of the conversation. There is a sudden hesitance, a guarding, a cessation of honesty, and up comes a mask and out come the religious words, or the conversation just stalls altogether.

Not long ago a friend and I had lunch. Afterwards, we went to pick up a decorative iron gate that he was having made. It was a beautiful piece of work, first-class craftsmanship. The whole shop was alive with creativity. There were brass gas lamps and hundreds of other handcrafted items. I was fascinated and took quick advantage of conversation with the owner. He showed me around. And we talked. Not just about brass and iron and copper, but about lots of things.

After we left, we were driving back to the church and my friend turned to me and asked, “Do you know that if I had introduced you as a preacher you would have never had that conversation?” I told him that I was keenly aware of that fact, and it grieved me no end.

Somewhere along the line the church and the preaching profession have communicated the message that Christianity is about *being good* rather than about *being forgiven*. And that means that people feel that they have to straighten up, become good, before they are accepted.

As we got to the church my friend said that if this man at the shop had known that I was a preacher, he would have changed his language, his behavior, his mannerisms, his presentation, so that he would have been acceptable to me. He would have put on a mask or become something different, so that he could be received and accepted.

Why is this? Why would this man have felt that he had to change to be acceptable to me? Because Christianity today proclaims a message that we are not acceptable as we are. Christianity today is about making yourself acceptable. We have to strike a high mark on the goodness thermometer before we can be received.

Somehow, in the whole mix of culture and religion, the message has been communicated that the ground of people’s acceptance with God is *in them*, in what they do or do not do. It lies in their goodness.

But as Martin Luther saw with such clarity, the ground of our acceptance lies totally outside of us altogether. It has nothing to do with us or what we do or do not do. The ground of our acceptance lies in Jesus Christ, the gift of God to us. We are accepted in him, because of him. He has made us acceptable.

I am reminded here of the refrain in a fairly famous sermon preached by Benjamin Baker: “Jesus came to get good folk off their goodness and on grace. He came to get righteous people off their righteousness and on God’s righteousness.”

A couple of months ago I met a young man about 35 years old. We became friends, and in the course of conversation he began to tell me his story and

something of his struggles. (Incidentally, he did not know I was a preacher--we had met through buddy ball.) I invited him to come to church. He was not interested in church. He said he had been to church, all his life. As we talked about this it became clear to me that he just simply no longer believed that church had the answers to real-life questions. The church was not addressing the real pain in people's lives. Church was not real. "*Hoopla*," I believe, was his exact word. "I do not need religion; I need life."

Now, the point of these stories is not to put us on a guilt trip. The point is to help us see what is going on. It is to help us take an honest look at "church" and what is happening, so that we can then begin to find real answers.

When we were in Scotland, the Lord brought me face to face with this. He stood me before a beautiful church building. It was ornate, with striking architecture. But it was *closed*, shut down, and the sign on the door read something like "Mackenzie and Mackintosh Estate Agents." Time and again we saw beautiful church buildings which had become law offices, pubs, restaurants and dance studios.

That memory has made me wrestle for several years now. It haunted me when I was teaching there. It made me wonder what I had to say to these divinity students--soon to be pastors--that was in truth any different from what was said when the churches died out and closed.

There are, of course, many layers that have to be considered in that kind of question. There is no end to the books and articles and sermons that have been proffered on this question, all of which are no doubt helpful. But for my money, Luke 15:1 and 2 speak volumes to us and to the church at large: "By this time a lot of men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently" (TM).

The Attraction of Jesus

Somehow, the radiance of our Lord Jesus Christ attracted sinners--it spoke hope to them. Somehow, they felt comfortable with him. They came to him. They were open with him. His presence and teaching did not put them on guard or make them hesitant. They felt no need of putting on a mask. He was altogether different from organized religion.

These people had long walked away from the church of their day, at least in their hearts. You can almost hear them saying, "But this man is different. Something about this man strikes my heart. There is an unmistakable realness about this Jesus. There is a simplicity about him. He is not against me. He is for me."

“This man does not make me feel ashamed and unworthy, although I know that I am guilty and fallen. And I know he knows who I am and what my life is like, what I am really like, but here he is with me, for me. There is something amazing about this man. I can see it in his eyes. I see compassion. I see mercy. But there is something much deeper than that--I see forgiveness. This man does not condemn me. In fact, he makes me feel at home, accepted, known, loved, and even cherished--just as I am.”

The attraction of Jesus Christ lies in the fact that he did not condemn people; he accepted them. He did not radiate condemnation like the Pharisees; he radiated acceptance.

There is a fairly poignant scene at the very end of the movie *Tombstone*. Wyatt Earp goes to visit Doc Holliday, who is dying with tuberculosis. There is a short conversation between two good friends, in which Doc Holliday says to Wyatt Earp, “Wyatt, you are the only human being in my entire life who ever gave me hope.”

That is what emanated from Jesus Christ--hope, real hope, for failures *as failures*.

Instead of shutting down conversations, instead of making people feel that they could not be real in his presence and had to put on religious airs, he radiated such hope that sinners flocked to him as sinners and strained to hear what he was on about. He exuded freedom to come to him as they really were, right then and there, and talk. No mask--there was no need for one. He accepted them as they were. For he had absolutely no interest in anything other than sinners *as sinners*. His news was for them, right where they were, as they were.

What digs a trench around the church and separates it from people is the church's failure to communicate “no condemnation” to sinners. Radiation is a spontaneous phenomenon. We all radiate something. The question is, what do we radiate? Do the vibes which radiate out of us make people feel at home? Do they make people feel that they have found home?

We can ask any man in the street to come to church and odds have it that he will say, “I will come to church when I get my life straightened out.” Somehow people feel that church is not for sinners, not for folks who struggle and fall and are broken. It is for people who have gotten their act together--at least on the surface.

But the broken people, the strugglers and the stragglers, the fallen, all flocked to Jesus Christ. They felt his acceptance, and they *strained* to hear what he had to say.

Becoming the Real Church

How do we do that? How do we give off those kinds of vibes? How do we get to the place where people flock to us?

How do we get to the place where our introduction as Christians or preachers does not shut down the conversation but opens it up with honesty and reality? How do we get to the place where people actually strain to hear what we have to say?

How do we get to the place where people know in their spirits that whatever else this person is about, he makes me feel the freedom, and not just the freedom but the command, to be real, to be who I am, no pretense, no hiding? How do we exude and radiate hope to people around us?

The answer to these questions is that we cannot do it. It is not something we do. It is something that happens to us. As best I can understand it, it is something that takes shape spontaneously within our innermost beings. And it happens to us and in us as we discover and encounter the real Jesus Christ again and again in our own lives.

There are two critical parts to that statement. The first is the phrase “the real Jesus Christ.” The second is the phrase “in our own lives.” Perhaps the better way of saying this is “in our own guts,” because this discovery and knowing of the real Christ is not abstract. It is a knowing in the deepest recesses of our being and in the midst of penetrating awareness of our own bankruptcy.

By “the real Jesus Christ,” I mean the Christ who was sent by the Father to reconcile us and bring us home; the Christ who has come for us and owned our failures and sin, taken full responsibility for them and made them his and dealt with them; the Christ who will never turn his back upon us, forsake us, or go back on his forgiveness, no matter what.

And by “in our own lives,” I mean that *we* come face to face with the fact that Paul’s statements--“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (ROM 3:23, NASB), “there is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one” (ROM 3:10-12, NASB)--apply directly to *us*, to *me*, to *you*.

We come to the point in which we realize that *we* are lost and we feel a profound fear and utter helplessness gripping our souls. We feel our shame and woe and hopelessness and desperation--angst!

It has all suddenly ceased to be an abstract idea we read about in the Bible and has become something of which *I*, inescapably and fearfully, know to be

true of *me*.

And then, right there, in the midst of that gripping fear and piercing awareness of our own nothingness and failure, we hear the News that the ground of our acceptance has nothing to do with us at all. We hear the Word that our acceptance is completely dependent upon someone else--Jesus Christ.

In the midst of the dark night of our woe, we encounter the truth that the Father has made us acceptable and received us in Jesus. In trembling knowledge of our lostness, and helplessness, we see that the Father, in His amazing grace, has snatched from us the responsibility of making ourselves acceptable and cleaning ourselves up, and has placed it all into the hands of Jesus. And we see that Jesus has accomplished his mission.

When that News sinks into our broken souls; when that Word gets poured into the place of our pain, where we see and smell our failure and taste it, we then begin to know the Word's healing glory.

When we come to see that we are broken and when we feel the sheer desperation of our helplessness to do anything about it, and then hear the Good News of Jesus Christ, things begin to happen in us and through us. When the truth of our *just as we are* acceptance in Christ intersects with deep, personal and afflicting awareness of our shame and failure, it begins to produce its own fruit in us.

There are several key points that need to be explored here. First, hearing the Word of our acceptance in Jesus produces a celebration in our broken hearts. We begin to live in a state of amazement at God. We marvel at Him, that He could be this good. To put this another way, we begin to *enjoy* Him and know Him and love Him. We begin to glory in Him. We want to be near Him. We cannot help but want to get to know this God.

That is surely what happened to the younger brother in the story. In the midst of his gut-wrenching awareness of his shame, he got hit between the eyes with amazing grace. All he could do was stare his father's unconditional acceptance in the face. All he could do was receive it and stand there and *marvel* at his father. All he could do was want to know this father and enjoy him--enjoy his grace, bask in it, glory in it. This is what begins to happen in us when the truth about God gets loose in our saddened souls.

Second, discovering ourselves as accepted in Christ begins to set us free to be ourselves. It eats away at the root cause of our hiding--fear of exposure. We begin to be free to be real, to drop our guards and take off our masks.

Church begins to breathe "grace," because everyone in church is there on the same terms. They are there because they are failures, and because they know to the roots of their beings that they are failures, and they have heard the

good Word of Christ and thus know they are accepted as failures in Jesus Christ, received as sinners. So there is no reason to hide and pretend. The ground of our acceptance is not in us; it is in Jesus. There is no reason to put on some kind of *persona*.

Then, a wonderful thing begins to happen. It is called, in the New Testament, fellowship. The fellowship of the church is not a holy fellowship of good people. It is a fellowship of amazed sinners. It is a fellowship of people who have come to the end of themselves and religion, who know that they cannot make themselves right with God, who know they have failed, and who have discovered that while they were yet sinners, God reconciled them--He made them right with Himself in Jesus. And this knowledge generates freedom to be ourselves and to expose ourselves.

The door to real fellowship opens when the forgiveness of God taking root in one sinner's bleeding soul, and the forgiveness of God taking root in another sinner's bleeding soul, *meet* in the Spirit of acceptance. There is no condemnation.

Christian fellowship is produced in the mutual awareness of God's amazing grace. And in the atmosphere of the celebration of forgiveness and hope, there is an opportunity, maybe for the first time, to begin to deal with one another. The freedom to come out of our hiding and be ourselves creates an opportunity to find some real healing in our brokenness and some real changes in our lives. For, at last, we have the confidence to be known and the hope that there are real solutions.

Third, as we know our own deep need, as we face it honestly, as we become keenly aware of our hopelessness and feel our desperation, and as we find hope in Jesus Christ, we begin to radiate. As we see ourselves lost and then see ourselves accepted *as failures* in Christ, as we see that our relationship with God has nothing to do with us at all and everything to do with His act in Christ, and as we begin to enjoy this God and His sheer goodness with one another in the fellowship of forgiveness, we give off vibes.

As the grace of God percolates in our own wounded souls, we spontaneously emanate grace towards others. Instead of the feeling that they must straighten up around us, sinners begin to feel at home. They begin to feel, to use a great Scottish word, *engraced*--included in grace.

Out of our being radiates God's acceptance, and sinners around us feel that acceptance. And this is, in essence, extending the fellowship of the real church, the fellowship of forgiveness and acceptance in Christ, the fellowship of grace, the fellowship of non-hiding togetherness, to a despairing and broken world trapped in lostness--even religious lostness.

It is extending the fellowship of the Father and the Son in the Spirit to those around us. It is including them in the grace which God is and which radiates out of His being.

Other sinners begin to encounter God's engracing through us. Other sinners begin to feel the Father's embrace through us. They begin to detect the Father's heart in our hearts.

When visceral knowledge of our failures and hopeless lostness is met with the reality of the Father's forgiveness and acceptance in Christ, when they intersect in the soul in the Spirit, and that marvel and glory begin stirring in us, a spirit of "no-condemnation" begins radiating out of us. It is quite invisible, but very evident. It is mostly nonverbal, but speaks volumes.

We become participants in the embrace of the dancing God. The attraction of Jesus Christ himself shines out of us. He receives sinners and eats with them through us. He welcomes them home and accepts them through us.

That is the essence of authentic Christianity--experiencing the glorious grace of God in the depths of our own sinful failures, living in His grace, feeding on His grace and glorying in Him, and thus radiating His grace to all those around us.

That is where the church of the next millenium is heading, for God is too faithful to have it any other way. And I for one want to be right in the middle of it. And I want my son there with me. Amen.

May God grant that we would so know our failure and His grace in Jesus Christ, that out of our innermost being would radiate life and hope. And may our Father grant that fellow sinners would encounter, in us, the fact that they have a home in Jesus Christ.

Prayer and Questions for Reflection

Jesus, thank you for sharing with me your own experience of the Father's love. Send your Spirit to bear witness to me that I too belong to the Father with you. Help me live in the freedom and joy of the Father's embrace, and help me love others with the love you share with your Father and Spirit. Amen.

- (1) Why do you think people *strained* to hear what Jesus had to say?
- (2) In what ways are you proud of Jesus' Father? In what ways is he proud of you?
- (3) Does religion or religious people make you feel inadequate, as if you never measure up and can never quite get it right? Why? Does the feeling of being inadequate come from Jesus' Father? How does your feeling of inadequacy affect your relationship with Jesus' Father?
- (4) Which is more beautiful, the fellowship of broken people who have found the Father's acceptance, or the fellowship of people who, in their own minds, do everything right?
- (5) How has religion kept you, like the older son, from experiencing the Father's acceptance?
- (6) How do you hide from the Father?
- (7) What do you want most from God?

Questions for *Further Reflection*

- (1) Does God the Father receive sinners as Jesus did?
- (2) How would you respond to a man who came to you and made the following comment? “I have been in the church all of my life; I have done everything I was told to do and served on every committee in the church, and I am bored out of my mind—I am never going back!”
- (3) What is the grace of God?
- (4) Why do people do bad things to themselves and others? What is the root cause of the pain of the human soul? How does this root cause relate to your vision of God?
- (5) How has your failure to let the Father love you has affected your marriage and your relationships with close friends.
- (6) What is the relationship between anxiety and the Father’s acceptance?
- (7) In what ways are you disappointed with God?
- (8) Why do people seem to enjoy the mistakes or failure of others?
- (9) Which of the two, the fear of punishment or the love of the Father, changes people’s hearts?
- (10) In what ways would you change if you let the Father love you?
- (11) Why are people so prone to believe that they are not acceptable to the Father?
- (12) To be rejected by God and abandoned is the greatest fear of the human heart. Why would the Father abandon you?
- (13) Did Jesus come to change the heart of God? Can anyone change God’s heart?

- (14) Why does the Father love you?
- (15) Why was Jesus so persecuted by the religious elite of his day?
- (16) In what sense were the two sons separated from their Father?
- (17) In what ways are you like the older son in the parable?
- (18) If you could hear the Father speak your name right now, what message would be in his voice?
- (19) Is your country more like the younger or the older brother in the parable?
- (20) What would happen in your country if people believed in Jesus' Father?

About the Author

Baxter Kruger is a native of Mississippi. He has degrees in political science, psychology, divinity and a Ph.D. in theology from the University of Aberdeen in Aberdeen, Scotland. Over the past twenty years he has served as a campus minister, lecturer in theology at the University of Aberdeen, and as an associate pastor. He is currently the Director of Perichoresis Ministries and preaches and teaches across the USA and abroad. He and his wife Beth have three children, Baxter, Laura and Kathryn and live in Brandon, Mississippi. He is the author of seven books, and holds two US Patents for fishing lure design. Baxter is also the President of Mediator Lures.

A Note on the Word *Perichoresis*

Genuine acceptance removes fear and hiding, and creates freedom to know and be known. In this freedom arises a fellowship and sharing so honest and open and real that the persons involved dwell in one another. There is union without loss of individual identity. When one weeps, the other tastes salt. It is only in the Triune relationship of Father, Son and Spirit that personal relationship of this order exists, and the early Church used the word “perichoresis” to describe it. The good news is that Jesus Christ has drawn us within this relationship and its fullness and life are to be played out in each of us and in all creation.

For more information on the ministry of Perichoresis visit our website www.perichoresis.org or www.perichoresis.org.au

Perichoresis: A Trinitarian Ministry

Perichoresis is a thriving, engaging, Christ-centered fellowship that fosters Christian faith and hope, brings healing to relationships, marriages, and families, promotes authentic community, and frees people to embrace their humanity. We are committed to the historic Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity and are determined to share the Gospel with the widest possible audience.

- We believe in the Triune God, Father, Son and Spirit, and we believe that this God created, reconciled and embraced the world in the Incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, as it was eternally purposed.
- We believe Jesus Christ is the Father's eternal Son sharing being and life and all things with the Father and the Spirit, and that this Son became human for our salvation. He died to cleanse us of our alienation. He rose again to give us new birth. He ascended to take us to His Father.
- We believe that in the Incarnate, Crucified, Resurrected, and Ascended Son the human race and creation have been lifted into union with the Father, Son and Spirit.
- We believe that Jesus Christ is himself the union between the Trinity, humanity and creation, and that this relationship is the truth of all truths underneath creation itself and human existence and history within it.
- We believe the Triune God is now at work in all creation, revealing the truth of our adoption in Jesus Christ, breaking through the deception and darkness that binds us, so that we may discover and believe and experience our inclusion in the Son's relationship with His Father in the Spirit.
- We believe that the Church is called to participate in the Spirit's work of revealing the truth about God, humanity and creation until the knowledge of the Triune God fills the earth and all creation as the waters cover the seas.

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