



Bible Student's Notebook™

The Herald of His Grace

Presenting every man perfect in Christ Jesus. Colossians 1:28

Volume VII
Issue 151

The Parable of the Dancing God

by – C. Baxter Kruger

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.

By the time the parables of Luke 15 were spoken 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 these stories. [Let's get the idea of the parable's message, by hearing them from *THE MESSAGE*, by Eugene H. Peterson.]

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.

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

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Dear Saints.

This Issue

In this week's issue we will continue our look at "*The Parable of the Prodigal Son.*" Our managing editor gave us an insightful look into this parable in *BSN* #147. Now we will hear from C. Baxter Kruger. These two articles provide us an adjustment to the view of our Father; well worth our careful consideration.

Wonderful Summer

We still have a month left, but this has been our most wonderful summer in PA yet.

As most of you know winter is my favorite season, followed by spring and fall. But this summer our weather has been very mild. I'm sure some hot days lie ahead for us, but we have had many nightly lows in the 40s and 50s and daytime highs in the 60s and 70s! I am afraid to look at the extended forecast to see how long this splendid weather will last!

Our Attitude

It is very important for me that every so often we address the issue of *attitude*.

What follows is a portion of the editorial from our very *first* issue of the BSN in 1989:

"We have no corner on truth, nor does anyone else. None possesses 'all truth' infallibly. Therefore we seek to fellowship with all those who love the Lord Jesus Christ and take pleasure in His precious Word. We agree with the words of George Whitefield when he said,

"I truly love all that love the glorious Emmanuel, and though I cannot depart from the principles which I believe are clearly revealed in the Book of God, yet I can cheerfully associate with those that differ from me, if I have reason to think that they are united to our common Head."

"We desire to avoid destructive 'uniformity' and allow for differences of opinion. We don't expect our readers to agree with everything that will appear within the pages of this publication. But we do trust that you will study out the information and that it will stimulate further Bible study. As one editor has so well said,

"I hope anyone following after me will go further than I have gone in the search for truth, will see more of the Word of God than I have seen, and will explore where I never dreamt treasures were to be found."

(see **EDITORIAL**, page 1536)

Bible Student's Notebook

ISSN: 1936-9360

Volume VII, No. 151 – August 27, 2008

This weekly publication (52 times a year) is dedicated to:

- the proclamation of the riches of God's abundant, exceeding grace (Romans 5:20; 11:6; Ephesians 1:7)
- the affirmation of God's purpose to save all mankind through the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (I Timothy 2:3, 4; 4:10; Titus 2:11)
- the "preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began" (Romans 16:25)
- true freedom and liberty apart from the law (Galatians 5:1)
- the organic nature of the church, the body of Christ (I Corinthians 12)
- the distinct ministry of Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles (Romans 11:13)
- the importance of receiving all whom Christ has received (Romans 14-15)
- the recovery of rich Biblical truth that has too long remained hidden under the veils of traditionalism, prejudice, misunderstanding, and fear (Mark 7:7, 13).
- the completeness of the believer in Christ (Colossians 2:10), with ...
 - total forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:14)
 - identity in His death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6)
 - adult sonship position (Galatians 4)

This publication is a joint effort of a few members of the body of Christ. It is a product of our individual lives and ministries together. We do not claim infallibility for its contents. Our readers are asked to be as the Bereans and search the Scriptures (Acts 17:10-11; I Thessalonians 5:21).

This publication is not connected with any "church," "denomination," "movement," "organization," "mission," "creed," "meeting," "school," "conference" or "fellowship."

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Remember that it is our responsibility as husbands and fathers to take the truths we learn from God's Word, the truths that we hold dear, and impart them to our families.

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DANCING (continued from page 1529)

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!"

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 – "the 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 when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.”

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” did not like the fact that Jesus Christ received sinners (: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 (John 1:18) and who knows the Father inside and out (Matthew 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*" (:18, The Message). Out of his own mouth comes the truth which he cannot see, much less dare to believe – yet.

"I will arise and go to my father" (Luke 15:18).

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 the father is. It has nothing to do with him and everything to do with the father. He has rehearsed his speech and is determined to blether it out. And blether 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*” (*The Message*).

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

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*” (: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.

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.

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.

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.

It is extending the fellowship of the Father and the Son 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.



Our Mailbag

Recently I have let others know that I believe in the eventual salvation of all people. This has of course prompted a less than favorable response. I understand all the verses that would seem to point to the contrary.

I direct their attention to Jeremiah 32:34-42. I know this is spoken to Israel; but I submit that it is a type of salvation that all mankind will receive.

One cannot help but notice that these are not exactly God fearing and believing people being spoken of; but the result is that God Himself without man's overly revered "free will" ... will have His own way.

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.

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.

■

Taken from *The Parable of the Dancing God* (1994)

Praise God for His bountiful mercy. Just think what we have believed all these years – that God knowingly created mankind so He could send most of them to hopeless torments.

Fortunately I now know that we were created by God and for God, not for endless torments. We don't serve an impotent God that wants all to be saved, but loses most to their own "free will."

– OH

Thank you for your ministry. You answered my question by reading "*Is Man Immortal?*" I was taught after death we went to a paradise holding place, like the rich man and Lazarus; but I understand that was a lesson Jesus was teaching the Pharisees.

I know according to the Bible the dead know nothing. We will put on the incorruptible body and immortality when the resurrection happens.

(see **MAILBAG**, next page)

MAILBAG (continued from previous page)

I appreciate your website and all the helps you have given us. We all have to unlearn a lot of misinformation we were taught most of our lives. I do thank you for your help ever so much. May God bless your ministry. – **SC**

The Lord still blesses in revealing Himself to me in ways I never thought possible! The Lord has opened another brother's eyes to the truth of God being "All in All." Since learning the truth concerning hell, the flood of truth has been pouring in. It has been overwhelming how wonderful the Lord is to us all! We are His workmanship. It is the same God which "WORKETH ALL and IN ALL." Nothing needs to be added.

The Lord has been opening up so much about Calvary to me ... truth I have never seen. The utmost truth is that the Lord is working in us all and leading us all to Him and Him ONLY. In the end is LOVE just as it was in the beginning! The truth that HE has shown me puts the flesh to death! No more is it I ... No more boasting, but in Him only!

I am so blessed that the Lord brought you in my life Clyde. Thank you for the Love you express ... looking forward to all being in His Presence
– **ME**

I don't know where you came across all these universal salvation goodies you send me but man they are among the best and most clearly written articles I believe I've ever read. Many of the authors named are ones I never heard of. I'm exceedingly glad that there are so many other believers of this most wonderful truth whom I'm not acquainted with. Thanks for continuing to send me these goodies! – **HI**

EDITORIAL (continued from page 1530)

"And do not be surprised if, from time to time, you read articles which reflect change from previous things which we have said or written. This is progress. We simply ask that you keep an open Bible and an open mind."

Until next week, my love to each of you!

Clyde L. Pilkington, Jr.

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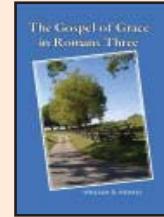


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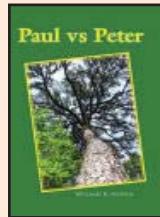
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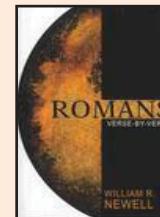
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