

Sunday August 16, 2015
“God Wants to Party”
Mark Naylor

We work hard on our translation team to represent the original text of the Bible in a way that people can appropriately access and understand God’s word. What constantly amazes me is that the interpretation of the Bible is not just dependent upon a good translation, but also upon the way the audience reads the Bible. People in Pakistan see the world differently than Canadians and so understand the Bible with unexpected nuances that often surprise me. I don’t mean that one of us reads the Bible right, and others read it wrong. Rather, it is possible to read the same passage of the Bible and come up with different understandings depending on the filters and assumptions that a person uses when they read the Bible.

This is not a problem. Rather it is like different facets of a diamond – looking at the same thing from different angle changes the reflection of light. Or the proverbial blind men who feel different parts of the elephant. They tell us what is there, but from different perspectives and we can learn from each other. The diamond and the elephant are the same, it is our perspective.

It is like an **Optical illusion** – you see more when you see both, staring at the **3-D pictures (magic eye this is a trumpet)** – you see more when you view it in a particular way. If you don't have the glasses for **3-D movie** you don't experience the same thing, even though the picture itself is the same.

People from different cultural backgrounds have a different history, different values, different concerns. As a result they see the world differently. This is a good thing because it expands the way we can and understand the world and way we read God’s message. A Couple of quick examples:

- Friend who said “Allah.”
- **Naturally** curly hair. (God’s power or the way the hair is made? – Both!)
- One story I always struggled with was Korah's punishment, whole family killed, not a problem in a patriarchal society.

A while back I spent time with a group of people here in the church talking about **Significant Conversations** and how to take our conversations to a deeper level so that we can learn to converse about our personal beliefs and faith in a comfortable and enjoyable fashion with

those who believe differently from us. A number of the tools we worked on were on learning to respectfully and actively listen to another person to discover how they viewed the world and what was important to them. This sermon is an illustration of how people see the world differently and so will shape the way we express our own perspectives and beliefs.

It is also an illustration of an important sensitivity in **cross-cultural ministry and missions** to communicate a message in a way that resonates with the worldviews and beliefs of those we engage in conversation.

I want to demonstrate this idea of shaping the story according to the orientation of the receptor by giving you two perspectives on Jesus' story of the prodigal son – one that is common to us here in Canada and one that resonates with the Sindhi people. I have titled this: **God wants to Party (Luke 15:11-32)** which is taken from the Father's response to the son's return. Let's read the story first, and then I will give you the different perspectives.

Read Narrative: **Luke 15:11-32.**

The context of this story is that Jesus is being criticised:

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

In other words, according to the important and influential people of the day, Jesus was out of touch with reality. Jesus' view of God didn't make sense and clashed with what was considered appropriate and essential in society. The Pharisees were looking at Jesus' actions through an understanding of the Law of Moses. Sinners and traitors were "bad" people and rejected by God. Therefore "good" people (and Pharisees and prophets were considered in that camp) do not associate with "bad" people. The conclusion is that if you associated with "bad" people then you cannot be from God, because God would never be connected with sin and so Jesus is rejected.

When we hear the word "sinner" in Canada we tend to think in terms of guilt and innocence. A sinner is someone who has done wrong, disobeyed the law, deserving of punishment. So our view of salvation

primarily focuses on the individual who needs to be forgiven for their sins. Justice is getting what you deserve, mercy is the cross of Christ in NOT giving us what we deserve, but providing forgiveness.

However, in Pakistan, the concept of “sinner” is more about honor and relationship, rather than a specific action and a law. It is not what you have done that matters, so much as how it affects those in your group – either your family or community. The concern is about losing face and causing dishonor.

Two very distinct orientations – honor/shame/status for Pakistan. - Guilt/innocence for our Canadian context. Two distinct grids. Can this one story Jesus tells be understood within or speak into these two distinct orientations? Can we read this story through a guilt/innocence grid and hear one message and then through a shame/honor perspective and get a different message that helps us understand even more? I suggest we can and that we can learn from that. Let me try....

Guilt/Innocence

The son was guilty. He had sinned against God and he had sinned against his father. He had done wrong. He deserved to be punished. The Pharisees are standing there listening, people whose one goal was to obey the law of God and keep themselves pure from contamination. Wholly devoted to God, religion, Mosaic Law. In the Pharisee's mind comes the word of the Lord: kill the rebellious son. If a son rebels, take him out and stone him! (Does the Bible really say that? Whoa. that's kind of severe, isn't it? I suggest that our reaction to that is caused by the glasses we wear, the grid through which we view the world). So the Pharisee's have judged the son from the beginning when he goes against the Father's will wrt inheritance.

Note that the father did not refuse the son in the beginning - "You are free to go, take your portion of the inheritance." - Why did he not refuse? It is because of what GK Chesterson calls "God's terrible insistence upon human freedom." It is the recognition of the potential for a higher good than forcing someone to obey. But it also shows a willingness on the part of the father to suffer wrong, to suffer pain, to suffer anguish in order to bring that about. A willingness to take such consequences on himself for the sake of the son. He could have controlled the son and refused his freedom. But he gave the freedom, let the son sin. Why? He gambled that the son would eventually turn and come back of his own free will.

God is a gambler! Well, not in the sense that he does not know what will happen, but in the sense that he gives us a true choice: God lets us go because he wants us to turn to him in love. From within our reality of making choices, he lets us go in the hope of our return. **The father suffered pain from the son with the hope of a better future: to receive love from the son.**

Note also that **the father did not punish when the son returned.** The son was ready to bring in the moral law. He was ready and willing to suffer the consequences. There was no thought of redemption in the son's mind, but rather the just deserts. "I have sinned against God, I have sinned against you. I am no longer worthy..." (NOTE: the word is "hired worker" NOT servant. Servant has security, he wasn't asking for security). The father stopped him. **The father taught him the impossible lesson. "Justice is mine," says God, "I punish and I redeem." And he holds up his wounded hands, he opens his wounded heart, and welcomes the son home.** The cross of Christ is the Father's welcome for us who do not deserve his grace. It is at the cross that we experience his love.

There is no redemption in law, only condemnation - you are guilty. You have to remember, this is all the Pharisees had - the law, condemnation. Jesus says, "Hey, I've brought some new wine. Let's drink it and party!" **God brings justice, a new kind of justice, a justice that the Pharisees could not accept, by taking the wounds the rebellious son had inflicted** and, instead of giving an eye for an eye, and ear for an ear, a life for a life - which is simply a recipe for a blind and deaf nation of corpses as C. Miller points out, he bore those wounds himself, and absorbed that punishment in his vast grace and mercy. In God's economy Justice = making things right. In the Pharisees' economy justice = punishment. Did the father have a right to punish? - yes. Was the woman caught in adultery guilty before the law? - yes. Do we stand guilty before a holy judge? - yes. But then we look up into the judge's face - the father we have spurned and rebelled against - and as M. Card says, we see a saviour there.

"But God demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Rom 5:8

Then Jesus turns to the Pharisees, who are represented in the older son. They are innocent. They have committed no crime. They have not rebelled. They do not deserve punishment. In fact, they are the ones most sensitive to justice, because they have just suffered an injustice: the younger son is celebrated - not condemned, whereas the older is ignored

and left to work the fields. **Is it right that the wicked get off scott free?** You act wickedly, and then you come and say you're sorry and BAM - there is forgiveness. Is there to be no punishment, no justice? In the face of the law, salvation appears like a kind of spiritual liposuction. Rather than doing the hard work of exercise ourselves, we get a quick fix by having all the bad stuff sucked out, and not only that but it is paid for by our medical system. We live an indulgent life, goofing off, having fun, rather than living a disciplined life and working hard - and we get off scott free. There was a popular song a while ago - "I want to live consequence free." And what do you know, Jesus says we can. Is that right?

I'll tell you what justice is, says the older son, I'll tell you what true salvation is. Blow by blow we will make him pay for every selfish, rebellious, lust-filled action. We will make him pay for each penny of that stolen and wasted inheritance. That is true salvation - make the sinner pay! Why should I pay for the lazy slob that doesn't work, the drug addict, the fellow with aids. They brought it on themselves, let them suffer the consequences. What right do they have to live consequence free! I don't have that freedom.

You can't argue with that. Everyone should bear their own burden, says scripture. You don't work, you don't eat, that's what the Bible says. But could there be something more? something other than this harsh call for justice! Not less than justice, but more. Going beyond justice, to mercy? Could it be that the emperor's magic (to use CS Lewis' terminology in the Narnia series) is greater than this eye-for-an-eye quest for justice?

What is the father's response to the older son? Does he acknowledge the importance of the law and then point out the older son's faults? Does he say, "Hey, son, wait a minute, Listen! Everybody is a sinner. You're not perfect. You too are a sinner"? No! he does not, in fact, he acknowledges the son's position - before the law he has every right to complain. But what Jesus does is reject the category and importance of law and retribution. He says "Let's not go there." God comes to the older son and says, "It is not about law, it is not about crime and punishment, it is not about an eye for an eye. It is not about crushing the guilty. **It is about restoring relationship through love.** My child was dead, and is now alive. That's what counts."

Can you live with that - allowing the wicked to go free? No retribution, no revenge, no suffering for the pain inflicted on others? Is it possible,

really, to forgive someone who has deliberately hurt you, or hurt the ones you love?

The father's point is that **this is not the same son**. This is not the son who left, this is the son who returned. This is a different son, This is a resurrected son. This is a son with new life. The past is no longer identified with the son, the new identity has come. New robe placed upon him, new ring on his finger, new sandals on his feet. No longer the criminal but the son of the father.

Is that story familiar to you? Is that understanding of salvation familiar to you? I hope it is. It is the way we understand salvation here in the western world. In terms of **guilt and innocence. In terms of law and justice**. But note that Jesus explained salvation in the form of a story. Notice that in all four gospels, salvation through the cross of Christ is given in the form of a story. Why is story important? Partly, because it has meaning no matter what cultural grid through which it is viewed. No matter the beliefs and values and worldview one has, it communicates.

Story relates God's reality to our reality - God's story relates to our story, the story that we are living.

A story can hold many different concepts and be greater than them all. You see, **God didn't send us a plan of salvation to be understood. He sent a savior to be accepted - to relate to - to enter into our life, our story**. Salvation is a relationship with God to be lived out in our reality, our story. But what does that relationship look like? It depends on our story, our culture, where we are standing.

I told you the story through a **guilt - innocence grid**: Jesus restores our innocence with God. This is the model we are very concerned about in the western world. But let me tell you that story again from another perspective - **the honor - shame** model which is a dominating concern in many cultures, especially Muslim cultures.

Shame/Honor

II. **The son had shamed his father** personally. He had shamed **the family name**. He had shamed **the family religion**. He had shamed **his nation** - a Jewish boy living with prostitutes and feeding pigs with no respect for the land. In many contexts in Pakistan there is one appropriate response to shaming one's family and religion - death. In Pakistan a number of people still follow the tradition of *Karo Kari* - killing the defiled daughter. A teenage girl was dancing and a teenage boy came up and grabbed her hand. The girl's uncle saw this and she was taken out and stoned to death. People in the west misunderstand the driving force

behind *Karo Kari*. We are so caught up with the guilt - innocence grid and the desire for justice that we do not see life in any other way. In Pakistan, in Islam, there is another way to understand life. The purity of the woman is the honor of the family, to break that code of purity is to bring shame. How is that shame purged? Through death. A Japanese student commits suicide because his marks are too low. The shame must be purged. Through death. The Samurai warriors could not live with the shame of defeat. It must be purged. Through death. **Honor is all and there is no redemption for shame.**

The son had shamed his family, his father, his nation, his religion, the land. There can be no redemption and the Pharisees knew it. **Gherat is the Sindhi word describing the emotion, the passion, the desire for preserving the family honor.** Gherat is a good thing. Oh, the passion, the gherat that would have swelled up in the breast of father at the sight of the living shame walking through the front gate. The Pharisees are listening, "What gall, what an insult! that this son should return and walk brazenly up to the father after what he has done." The foundations of the universe are shaken, the honor of the family, of the nation, of the religion are at stake. There is only one response that is possible, to kill the son, to remove the son from the earth, to restore the honor that was lost. And so the father rushes out, throws his arms around the son - and hugs him, and welcomes him back.

The Pharisees are shocked. How can this be? What is being said? **How can the father embrace the shame?** Can it possibly be that there is redemption for shame? Jesus reached out and touched the leper. "Unclean, unclean". The crowds draw back, shocked - what has he done? Jesus has touched a leper and made himself unclean. He has touched the impurity and has become impure. But wait, what is this? **Something new - the unclean have become clean. The shame is gone.** [Could also use the woman with the 12 year flow of blood. Not just a physical but a spiritual one as well: she can't come into God's presence] The father hugs the son covered in pig filth and transforms him. A new robe! No longer the identity of filth. A new ring, the signet ring of the father! No longer the identity of rebellion. New shoes! The place of dishonor (the greatest insult in Pakistan is to take off your shoe and show the bottom of it to someone). But now, the feet of shame have been cleaned and covered. No longer the identity of shame.

Kill the fatted calf! The shame is gone, the son is redeemed - Let's party! God wants to party.

But the older son is angry. (Remember, the older son represents the Pharisees). He is full of passion for the family honor. O, how he hated his brother. The shame they bore as a family. The whispers behind their backs, the shaking of heads, the questioning of the family honor. "There he goes, nice guy, but too bad about his brother." Oh, it would have been better if the brother had not been born, better to kill the brother and reclaim the honor of the family. And now the father has the opportunity to do so - and he welcomes him back. It is unthinkable! He takes the shame upon himself, and me and the family! How can we live with that shame? Must we all be tainted!

And then the Father comes to him and what does he say? "you too have brought shame"? No, the older son had NOT brought shame on the father. Rather the Father rejects the category of purging thru death, of restoring honor by removing the wicked one from among us.

Instead he says, "It is not about shame and honor. Do not think about life in those categories. Is not honor in the hand of God? do I not give and take away? It is not about redeeming honor through vengeance. **Salvation is about destroying shame through love.** My child was dead, and is now alive. That is what matters."

Can you live with that? Can you take the pain of shame inflicted upon you by a child, by a spouse, by a parent, by a friend - set it aside, no, absorb the pain and shame and redeem the relationship? That is what God did for us, in Christ. **He bore the sin, the curse, the shame in his body on the cross (1 Pet 2:24, Gal 3:13).** He bore the curse of the shame and the shame of the curse.

The father's point is that **this is not the same son** who left. This is no longer the son of shame. This is a different son, this is a resurrected son. This is a son with new life, new purity. The past is no longer identified with the son, the new identity has come. No longer the shameful one, but the son of the father.

Two cultural grids: Guilt – innocence. The world sees justice as punishment. In the cross, God redefines justice as making things right. Shame – honor. The world restores honor through the death of the wicked. In the cross, God removes the shame and restores the relationship.

Whatever the grid we have reason to celebrate: no longer guilty and hampered by the law, but made children of the Father through the love of the Son. No longer people of shame, but people of God, people of honor, through the love of the Son. Two views, both valid, **for Jesus is the savior no matter the context. We are called to experience, revel in**

and live out the reality of our salvation. God overwhelms us with the generosity of his embrace as he makes all things right – we are forgiven, we are loved, we are restored. God invites us to his party.