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PRODIGAL

It is unfortunate that some words change meaning over time. Some even take the exact opposite of their original meaning. In these changes, we sometimes lose valuable insights from the original meaning. One such word is prodigal. Because of the story of the “Prodigal Son,” some have given the word the meaning of one who returns. This can be seen in our songs, from the old standard, “God is Calling the Prodigal,” to Sidewalk Prophets’ “Come Running Like a Prodigal.” This view misses the point of whoever first called the parable by its current name.

The true point of the parable, of course, is that God was willing to take in the Gentiles among his people because of, or in spite of, the attitudes of the older brother Israel. Over the years we have reduced that further to eliminate the older brother, and just think about God waiting for us as individuals to return to him. The person that first called the parable out as being about the “prodigal” son was making a different point. He was calling out the wickedness of sin.

If you look up the word prodigal in a dictionary, you find definitions such as “wasteful” or “a spendthrift.” It is a description of the son’s habits when he was away from his father, rather than descriptive of his return. (As a side note to the parable: apparently the older brother was fully aware of where his younger brother was, because he immediately describes his behavior in unflattering terms as soon as he hears his brother has come home.) So what can we learn from this description of the son beyond the father’s joy at his returning?

Just taking the money and leaving home did not make the son deserving of the adjective, prodigal. Had he taken his inheritance and invested it favorably, like some of the servants in other parables, he would have been praised rather than called prodigal. Instead, it was his wasteful life style. He quickly ran through his inheritance, rather than building on it.

If it were possible to walk away from God and yet live well, we could be praised, and even save ourselves. If it were possible. The problem is, life away from God is a waste. In that sense, we have all been prodigal.

Some might ask, “How is my life wasteful? I have more than I need. I give to good causes. I help the poor. I’m better than many Christians I know.” That last may be

true; and it may also be true that many who wear the name Christian may be as far from God as the one asking. But how is this person’s life a waste?

One way to answer may relate to motive. There are those who do not fear God, and do good works for the wrong motive. Some give to charities just for the tax break. Others may do so because it looks good, or is expected of them. If those are the only reasons, then such a life is a waste. “If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.” (1 Cor 13:3)

But even if the motives are good, life without God is wastefulness. The Preacher (presumably Solomon) knew this from experience.

Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shewed myself wise under the sun. This is also vanity. Therefore I went about to cause my heart to despair of all the labour which I took under the sun. For there is a man whose labour is in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil. (Eccl 2:18-21)

His conclusion was that one should “Fear God, and keep his commandments.” (Eccl 12:13) Jesus said the same thing in a different way. “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mk 8:36) Without God we are all truly prodigal, for a loss of a soul is a total waste.

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THE WRONG JESUS

It is already election campaign season in American presidential politics. And already we have heard people worshipping at the feet of Political Jesus. This is a Jesus whose whole aim in life, at least according to the politicians, is to agree with one political party or another. This Jesus is good for raising campaign funds, and for building up or tearing down opponents. Never mind that half the sayings attributed to Political Jesus are things he didn't say; after all, that is true of those who worship at his feet, as well. Never mind that the real Jesus would cringe at a lot of what is done in his name. Political Jesus is always good for a photo op. Work the soup kitchen line for the photographers (and vote to withdraw funding from "faith-based" shelters). Speak in support of biblical marriage (and go home to your mistress or sugar-daddy). Political Jesus is there when you need him, and conveniently disappears when the election is over.

We may not like the sound of Political Jesus, but there are a number of other Jesuses that we may like better. And some of them are not much more like God's Son than Political Jesus.

The words of Jesus are important; his death and resurrection are more important.

Philosopher Jesus is a good man. More than that, he taught people some very good things about how to live with others. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." (Matt 7:12 paraphrased) "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:35) And so many more sayings. This is the idea that Jesus was a great teacher, but nothing more. He may or may not have been the Son of God. He was probably just another man. Of course, one wonders how he can be such a great teacher when he also said he was the Son of God. If he lied about that, how can you trust his other words.

The other problem with Philosopher Jesus is that one can take him or leave him. If he is to be judged merely by what he said, then he is no different than Kung-fu-tzu (Confucius) or Friederich Nietzsche. The Muslims could be right, then, in saying he was just another prophet of God. But that goes against everything that the scriptures say about Jesus' mission on earth. "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved." (Jn 3:17) Jesus himself taught what his real purpose was. "And he began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many

things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." (Mk 8:31) His words are important; but his death and resurrection are more important.

Hippie Jesus is all about love and independence. Back in the 1960s sandals were sometimes known as "Jesus boots." When people objected to the hairstyles of the day, the response was often, "Well, Jesus had long hair." The message was love, peace, and a form of religious universalism (not to mention "sex, drugs, and rock and roll). Actually, the message of love and peace is a good one. The problem comes with the conclusion some drew from that message. That conclusion was often phrased, "If God is a loving God, how could he condemn anybody to an eternity in hell?" This was not a new doctrine, because a form of it has long existed in the doctrine of purgatory. The result of following this Jesus was predictably that sin is unimportant. If eternity is eternal, and if God will eventually forgive everyone of all their sins, then it doesn't matter how much you sin since you will still spend most of eternity with God.

On the other side of the coin you have those that believe to save everyone would not be love at all. How can a God establish boundaries and then tell those who try to stay within them that their effort was meaningless? Those who ask this question (like those who believe in purgatory) tend toward a salvation by one's own merit or works. The proper question is probably closer to, "If God sent his Son as the only possible sacrifice for sin, how can his love forgive those who intentionally flaunt that sacrifice?" The author of the book to the Hebrews gives this answer:

Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? (Heb 10:29)

Entertainment Jesus is very popular today. One air conditioning specialist commented that the design for one church was the first time he had to worry about venting for indoor pyrotechnics. While most churches don't go that far, many worship at the altar of Entertainment Jesus. Worship has everything about what the worshiper will get out of it, and nothing, or almost nothing, to do with others or with God. This is the Jesus of flash and dash. Go in, watch a concert, hear a short sermon, and head home. Even if that is an exaggeration, many churches pride themselves on their "worship teams," light shows, and how many jokes the preacher can get into a sermon. Even among the churches of Christ, who have prided themselves on congregational singing, some

churches have gone over into the band or worship team mode. (Those that still object to instrumental music in the assembly have gone to semi-professional choruses or quartets.) Even in those churches where a quartet on stage is intended to help the congregants sing, fewer people are actually participating; many simply listen to the praise team. Some churches used to pride themselves that their young people went into school bands or choruses already knowing how to read music. Now they are lucky if their kids even sing.

Fortunately, many young people now realize that worship is not about being entertained. “And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is.” (Heb 10:24-25) Paul did not command Christians to listen to the band; we are the band. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” (Col 3:16)

Banker Jesus is gaining in popularity. This is the Jesus that promises that his followers will get rich, or at least live well. This Jesus is more concerned with the physical things of this life than with the spiritual life. The emphasis in Matthew 6:33 is less on “seek ye first the kingdom of God,” and more on “and all these things will be added unto you.” They ignore that “these things” are the treasures in heaven, and make them the wealth of this earth. The danger with worshiping Banker Jesus is that bad times will come. “Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.” (2 Tim 3:12) Banker Jesus will foreclose on you quickly. He must have done so to Paul. He must not have been around for those Christians who suffered in the arenas and on the streets of Rome. Their souls prospered (3 Jn 2), even when they suffered physical and financial setbacks, and death.

Philanthropy Jesus is a close cousin of Banker Jesus. He says that the greatest good is for a Christian to try to cure the social ills of this world—poverty, homelessness, abuse. That is a good goal, but Philanthropy Jesus doesn’t worry about the eternal fate of those he saves. Feed them, shelter them, but only teach the gospel if you happen to think about it.

Nobody argues that the social gospel is not important. We are commanded to help others in need. Throughout the Bible, this is one of the enduring themes. Several of the prophets even claimed the failure to assist the helpless was one of the major factors in the fall of the kingdom of Israel. The tendency today, however, is to make Philanthropy Jesus the central figure of Christianity. If following God is about personal salvation, it seems that this salvation comes through Good Deeds and not through the blood of Jesus.

The Great Santini Jesus is all about rules. He runs his household according to a strict code, and it

doesn’t matter who gets hurt along the way. Like the father in the Pat Conroy novel (the Robert Duval character in the movie), this Jesus is a type that many people find distasteful. But like the son in that story, his children want to earn his approval, although it seems that approval is always just beyond their reach. Although it sounds like this Jesus would not be very popular, he has a lot of followers. Even more people think he exists, and so do not want to become Christians.

This is the Jesus that requires strict adherence to all the rules. As soon as you sin, you have to pray for forgiveness, just in case you die before the next time the church doors open. At the next altar call or confessional you have to have the congregation or the priest grant you absolution. It is all about earning your way into God’s acceptance. But that is not God’s Jesus.

[God] hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began. (2 Tim 1:9)

American Idol Jesus may be the most insidious of all the wrong Jesuses. This is not a Jesus for the aspiring singer. This is the Jesus that Americans put on a

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pedestal and worship, thinking that worship is all he wants. American Idol Jesus just wants attendance numbers. It doesn’t matter what you do the rest of the week, as long as you are present on Sunday morning. It would be preferable that you not sleep through the sermon, but if you do it is OK. His followers used to be called “Sunday Christians.” As long as he is up on that pedestal, there is no personal interaction. As long as I attend at least one assembly a week, I have done my duty.

There is something good in all of these Jesuses; but each is incomplete. To worship any one or more than one is like the six blind men of Indian legend who were asked to describe an elephant. Based on where they were around the animal, each described it differently, and got into an argument because none could agree. John Godfrey Saxe, in his poem based on the legend, concludes, “each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong!” The Son of God is concerned with meeting the needs of the poor and downtrodden. He is to be worshipped, but by all rather than a select few. He did teach much of value, and especially about peace and love. But he also taught about eternal punishment and eternal life, heaven and hell. What the blind men miss, though, is that Jesus died so that sinners could be forgiven. All the rest is response to that truth.

SINISTER SWORD

Call me Ehud. I didn't ask to be famous, but here I am. I was just a humble Benjaminite, suffering along with everyone else under the foot of Eglon of Moab. I don't know why I was selected to deliver a gift to the king. I just took it as an opportunity to do something for my people.

I guess I ought to tell you a little background. Eglon was the king of Moab. He was king of one of the most fertile areas outside of Egypt. His territory was in the high country east of the Salt Sea. It was the bread basket of the Jordan valley. And yet he looked westward to the mountains. Maybe he thought there were valuable minerals there. Or forests. Or maybe he just thought that this land was occupied by a bunch of interlopers who had recently, but not too recently, conquered the land, and they might just make easy pickings. Whatever his reasoning was, he came, and saw, and conquered. And we suffered.

There were a few of us who knew the real reason he came, or thought we did. Our poor people had seen the wonders of God. Our parents and grandparents had crossed the Jordan on dry land. Against all odds, they had conquered the land because they had God's help. But now they hardly acknowledged God. Not a few of us thought that was the reason we had been conquered, and so we called to God for salvation.

For some reason, probably because of God's intervention, I was selected to accompany the regular tribute to King Eglon. So I began to prepare. We weren't allowed weapons, but I managed to fashion a short sword. It was only about as long as my forearm, and didn't look like much. But I made it sharp, and I made it easy to hide.

Oh, I forgot to tell you one thing about me. Like many from the tribe of Benjamin, I am left-handed. Most Israelites knew that Benjaminites tended toward the sinister hand, but most foreigners would not have known this. I planned to use that to my advantage.

Back to my dagger. As I said, it was only a short dagger. I was able to fasten it to the inside of my right leg without hampering my ability to walk normally. For a dexterous person, that would be the most inconvenient place to hide a weapon, but for me it was ideal.

I traveled to Moab with the gift, and came into the presence of King Eglon. And what a presence. This was the largest man I had ever seen. Not tall, mind you. To put it bluntly, he was fat. Extremely fat. He obviously did not lead his army himself.

We delivered the present and I sent the bearers away. Then I told the king that I was also the bearer of a secret message. I don't know why he trusted me, but he sent everyone out of his presence.

We were in his summer palace, in a room on the roof. These rooms were quite common. The floor of the room was raised above the roof so air could flow underneath. This helped cool the room, and so it was a popular place to spend a hot summer afternoon. The room was fully enclosed, for privacy.

I repeated that I had a message for the king. He started to stand up, which was a prodigious feat without his servants. As he did so, I reached for the dagger I had made and thrust it into his belly. And kept thrusting. The blade went so far in that I feared I could not get my hand back out; it was being sucked in by the fat. Once I did get my arm out, I locked the doors and left. I hoped (and apparently it so happened) that the servants would delay disturbing the king and I would have time to escape.

As soon as I announced to the Israelites that King Eglon was dead, we were able to amass an army to defeat the discouraged Moabite army.

I don't know why God picked me to do this job. It certainly was one of the dirtiest jobs I ever did. But when God calls, you just gotta listen.

(From Judges 3:12-30)

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