

Home at Last: Becoming Like The Father

WITH MIKE TUCKER

We are charting our course for eternity. That is the subtitle for these meetings – Home At Last: Charting Our Course for Eternity. That means we are planning to be ready for the Second Coming of Jesus – the event that ushers in eternity for all those who love and trust Him.

This was a frequent theme of Jesus' teaching for his disciples, that group of 12 who were closest to Him and who would establish His church upon His departure. These teachings came under the heading of The Kingdom of Heaven or, the Kingdom of God. While Jesus was yet on earth the disciples misunderstood those teachings as being about an earthly kingdom, but Jesus was speaking of a heavenly, spiritual kingdom.

Most of Jesus' teaching was done in parables. Parabolic teaching was the common mode for teaching and was the means by which Jewish theologians communicated their theology. So, when we read a parable, we are reading Jesus' theological statements.

One such small parable is found in Luke's Gospel, the 12th chapter. This parable is often overlooked, but it is filled with drama.

The story is set in the home of a man of extreme wealth. The house was extraordinarily large and was manned by servants and slaves.

Three types of people lived in the homes of the wealthy. First, there was the master and his family. Next were the hired staff, or servants. These were people with particular skills who were paid for their service in the maintenance of the home and the lives of the family.

The third group of people who lived in the house was the slaves. Slavery was a bit different from what we've studied about in American history. Slavery was not limited to a particular race in Palestine during those days. A person often became a slave because of unpaid debts. A child might be sold into slavery in order to pay off a debt, or you might enter into slavery yourself. Normally, people served as slaves for a limited amount of time, although there were unique circumstances under which you might voluntarily remain a slave for an extended period. However, the maximum time was normally about 7 years.

If you owed a debt to someone and were unable to repay, the creditor might agree to allow you to work off the debt by serving him as a slave. Or, it is possible that a wealthy friend might pay your debt for you in exchange for your service in his house. This was usually a more pleasant way to spend your time as a slave since you were more likely to receive better treatment.

The parable in Luke 12, beginning with verse 35, is about a wealthy man and his household slaves. Jesus used this story to teach his disciples an amazing truth about being ready for the coming of Jesus.

Luke 12:35-38

"Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps lit. Be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master will find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them. Whether he comes in the second watch, or even in the third, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves."

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The slaves did not know when the master might return, so they were to be ready for that moment, regardless of how late it might be. They were to be dressed and ready for work. Everyone wore long robes that almost touched the floor. To be ready for work you would put on a belt or tie a rope around your waist in order to raise the robe a bit further from the floor.

They were to keep their lamps lit, as well. That means having enough oil in the lamp so they would be able to see to perform their duties for the master upon his return. The second watch mentioned in the parable was from 10 pm to about 2 am. The third watch was from 2 am until sunrise. So the master could return very late at night.

But it is curious that the master would knock at his own door. Even a friend was unlikely to knock on a neighbor's door but would instead call out so the neighbor might hear and recognize the voice of a dear friend. While they were unlikely to open the door at night to anyone who knocked, they would certainly open to the sound of their trusted friend's voice. So why would the master knock on his own door?

The likely scenario is that the wedding feast is being held in his own home, so the door he is knocking on is not an outside door but an inner door. The master has chosen to slip away from the feast unnoticed in order to return to his private quarters and his servants. Since he does not wish to alert the guests to his absence, he lightly knocks on the door to his private quarters, knowing that his servants will be awake and hear his knock.

But upon entering his own private quarters and finding his slaves dressed and ready to serve him, the master does something that astonishes the slaves. He puts a belt around his waste as though readying himself to scrub the floor. The slaves are amazed by the behavior of the master! What is the master doing?

Then the master tells the slaves to recline at the table so he can serve them a meal. But what food is he to serve them? Knowing that the master is returning from a wedding feast they are unlikely to have food ready for him upon his return. Is the master to cook at this hour? No. The master is more likely to have brought with him sumptuous food from the wedding feast, and he is now going to serve his slaves a meal from the feast!

This was unthinkable in those days. A master would never serve the slaves! It was their job to serve him. But this is what the master does. He loves his slaves and humbles himself in order to ensure that they may eat from the wedding feast. This is a picture of unspeakable grace. It is shockingly generous. The master becomes the servant of servants! This master serves those who owe him a great debt.

The Apostle Paul spoke of himself as being the slave of Jesus. He owed Jesus a debt he could never repay and so considered himself to be Jesus' slave for life! You and I owe a debt too large to ever repay. But when we accepted the gift of forgiveness and eternal life, we, too, became slaves of Christ.

Our master has gone, but he will one day return. It is our job to be ready. But how? What does the Master require of us? What does it mean to be dressed and ready to serve? What does it mean to have our lamps lit? How can we be ready?

Fortunately, Jesus told us exactly how we were to prepare. He has told us exactly what He expects of us. One place to find this is in Matthew's Gospel, the 22nd chapter. Jesus

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had been teaching about one of His favorite topics, the Kingdom of Heaven. People who opposed him were trying to test Him, or to catch Him saying something they could use against Him. Political and religious groups of the day, the Pharisees and Sadducees, actually teamed up against Jesus, even though they were normally bitter rivals. We pick up the story in verse 34.

Matthew 22:34-40

But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together. One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And He said to him, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."

To the Jews, the Law was God's greatest gift to man. It was the most important and most profound thing He had to offer man. So to ask which commandment was the greatest was like asking what life is truly all about! What is the most important thing that God wants from us?

Jesus' answer was pretty straightforward. He declared that the greatest commandment was that we are to love God with every part of our being. We are to love Him with all of our heart, with all of our soul, and with all of our minds. This implies true affection that comes from the very core of our being, plus a mind that is fixed upon Him and His goodness. This is the first part of what is required.

Next, we are to love people just as much as we love ourselves. The word used here is neighbor. In another mention of this twofold requirement, Jesus makes it clear that we are to be neighborly to everyone in need, regardless of race, creed, or gender. We are to love everyone at least as much as we love ourselves.

This was not a new teaching. Jesus was quoting verses in Deuteronomy and Leviticus. He put those two verses together to form the basis of His own teaching.

If you were to summarize Jesus' most basic theology it would be this: love God and love others. And if you were wondering how we are to prepare for the Second Coming of Jesus, this is it! We are to love God and love others. Another way of putting it is that we are to live every day in the love and power of Jesus Christ.

The Apostle John quotes Jesus in John, chapter 13:

John 13:34-35

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Love God and love others. Pretty basic stuff, no doubt, but this is what it takes to be ready for the Master to return. When He returns, He himself will serve his slaves a sumptuous meal. He will gird Himself in order to serve you.

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The process of becoming more loving is what theologians call Sanctification. When you accepted Jesus as your Savior you were Justified. But once you have received Jesus it is important to grow as a Christian. It is important to begin to look more and more like God in our behavior, attitudes, and words.

Now all of that sounds wonderful, but the truth is that none of us have it within ourselves to do these things. Our best efforts are just about worthless. The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah understood this.

Jeremiah 17:9

The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it?

What that means is that I am incapable of doing the right thing for the right reason. The problem is my heart. Even if I do the right thing, I feel proud about doing it and hope someone has noticed! So that makes it a bad thing instead of a good thing.

But here is the good news. You don't have to do it in your strength. A changed life is just as much a gift from God as is forgiveness and eternal life. Only God can change you. And God has promised to do just that.

Again, turn to the prophet Jeremiah in the verses preceding the one we just read. Start with verse 7.

Jeremiah 17:7-8

*"Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord
And whose trust is the Lord.
"For he will be like a tree planted by the water,
That extends its roots by a stream
And will not fear when the heat comes;
But its leaves will be green,
And it will not be anxious in a year of drought
Nor cease to yield fruit.*

How do we grow? How can we become more like Jesus and yield good fruit? By trusting in the Lord.

How does a tree grow and bring forth fruit? It remains in contact with the earth, draws life-giving water, and allows nature to do the rest.

You grow by living in Jesus every day. You grow by surrendering to Jesus every day.

Fortunately, God has given us some tools for this task. They are simple things, but oh, so important for daily Christian life. Remember that these things are only tools. They are not a measure of your spirituality. They are only tools we use to remain connected to Jesus.

One of the tools is Bible study. I urge you to read your Bible every day. But studying and understanding the Bible can be tricky if you are new to this book. For that reason, I urge you to find someone who is experienced at studying the Bible so you can learn from that person. For those of you here in Sanford, Florida, the pastors of this church will be

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happy to help you learn how to study after these meetings are over. For those of you watching on television, I urge you to find someone in your area. If you need help, go to the Home At Last website and leave us a message. We will help you find a qualified teacher in your area.

Reading the Bible changes how you think. It helps you understand who God really is and helps you remain connected to Him.

Another tool is prayer. Prayer is simply talking to God as you talk to a friend. It is a way of telling Him about your day, of thanking Him for the good things in your life, and of asking Him to help you face the challenges of life. Prayer also changes the way we think. It changes our attitudes. And don't worry if you think you don't know the right words or formula, because there are no right words or formulas. Just have an honest conversation with God.

One way to learn how to pray is to read the Psalms in the Old Testament. The Psalms are songs and poetry, but they are also prayers that were used in the worship services. I often pray a Psalm every day. I change the personal pronouns in order to personalize it. Doing that has taught me a lot about prayer.

And don't forget that if you study with a pastor or someone else skilled in the Bible, they can help you learn how to pray, too. Don't be afraid to ask.

Another tool is simply obedience. When you read the Bible, you will find that God asks you to do certain things or not to do certain things. Make it your life policy to obey what He tells you to do. This doesn't reduce your freedom. Instead it enhances it, and it keeps you from making some really dumb mistakes.

For instance, if you are married, and you read in the Ten Commandments that God says you are not to commit adultery, and you obey that commandment, you have just spared yourself untold misery! You miss all the guilt and shame, the nerves associated with hiding the relationship from your spouse, and you miss causing your children, family, and friends a great deal of pain. It's just good advice that frees you from the crippling effects of broken promises.

Another tool for loving God and loving others is generosity. When you share what you have to further God's work or to help those in need, you find a deeper sense of love for other people. You also experience the joy of knowing that you have partnered with God to complete His work on earth.

Did you know that worship is a tool for spiritual growth? Attend church. Most of the truly successful spiritual people I know go to church. And as we learned earlier, the day God has set aside for you to worship in church is the seventh day, the Sabbath.

But in addition to worshipping at church, find a little time every day to worship at home. This should include reading something from the Bible, prayer, and maybe even a song. It provides a great opportunity to repent of sins and receive forgiveness and to ask God to meet your needs and the needs of others.

A companion for worship is thankfulness. Give thanks to God on a daily basis for all His blessings. It is amazing how developing an attitude of gratitude can change you and make you more like Jesus!

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But the best advice I can give you to help you grow in Jesus is simply to keep your eyes focused on Him. Read stories from the life of Jesus. Focus on the teachings of Jesus. Read books about Jesus. Jesus is the key to a changed life.

The temptation will be to focus on the tools for a better life as being the measure of spirituality. "I'm reading the Bible two hours a day, so I must be a very spiritual person." That's not true. You cannot measure spirituality by how often or how well you use spiritual tools. The only measurements are the things mentioned by Jesus – we are to love God and love others.

You may hear a lot of preachers talk about getting ready for the Second Coming, but they may not tell you exactly how to do that. Well, here is the answer: Live in Jesus today and every day. Allow the Holy Spirit to make you a person who looks and acts like Jesus – a person who loves God and loves others. And become a person of joy. Experience the joy that can only come from resting in the promises of Jesus. That's how to get ready for the Second Coming.

Remember what Jesus said?

Luke 12:35-38

"Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps lit.... Blessed are those slaves whom the master will find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them..."

He says, "Be ready. Keep your lamp lit." How? By staying close to Jesus. By allowing Him to make you a person like Himself, who truly loves God and loves others.

But don't miss the second part! "Blessed are those whom the master will find on the alert." Being alert is not an obligation – it's a blessing. It's a blessing because the Master Himself promises to come in person to you. He will seat you at His own table, He will bring you food from His own feast. The Master will serve the servant – because of His great love for His servants. Unheard of!

He loves you so much that He is actually looking forward to putting on an apron and serving you. And...He even does the work required to make you ready for the feast. He enables you to love God and love others.

One of my first jobs after college was teaching in a Christian boarding school. I taught Bible classes to high school students.

There was a young student in that school, who, while he was charismatic and quite charming, was about the most deceitful kid I'd ever met. His name was Kenny. He had a great smile and was very likeable, but behind the scenes, he was into drugs, he was a thief, untruthful, sneaky, and a cheat. Eventually, he was caught doing some pretty bad things and was sent home. I really thought that if I ever saw that kid again it would be when I visited him in prison.

Years passed, and I began to pastor a church. While serving as pastor, I received an invitation to hold a series of meetings for students at another Christian boarding school. I accepted the invitation and traveled to the school.

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The first day there, I walked into the boy's dormitory to visit with some of the kids. I went to check in with the boy's dean so he would know what I was doing. I knocked on the dean's door and when he answered I nearly fainted. The boy's dean was Kenny!

When Kenny saw the surprised look on my face he just started to laugh. "Bet you never thought you'd meet me again under these circumstances!"

"No way!" I said. "I'm truly amazed! How did this happen?"

Again, Kenny laughed. He told me the story of how, when he was at rock bottom, he met Jesus and accepted Him as his Lord and Savior. He then spoke of how Jesus took from him all the evil things he used to do and replaced those things with love. He loved God with all his heart, he loved his wife and children, and he loved the students he worked with every day. He also admitted that his favorite students were those who reminded him of himself at that age.

Today Kenny is a very effective pastor who is doing a great work for Jesus. But that only happened because Kenny allowed Jesus to change him.

And Jesus will change you as well. He's promised to do it. He always keeps His promises!