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THE PARABLE OF THE UNRIGHTEOUS STEWARD

Luke 16:1-13

[Quotes are from the Revised Version]

by Paul W. Brownlow

The sequence of parables in Luke 15 & 16

Luke 15:3 - 7	The Lost Sheep
8 - 10	The Lost Piece of Silver
11 - 32	The Prodigal Son
Luke 16:1 - 13	The Unrighteous Steward
19 - 31	The Rich Man and Lazarus

The parable of the unrighteous steward was spoken by Jesus to His disciples, but in the hearing of many other people. The composition of the audience is described at the beginning of chapter 15:

- Luke 15:1 Now all the publicans and sinners were drawing near unto him for to hear him.
- 2 And both the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.
- 3 And he spake this parable unto them, saying,
- 4 What man of you, having a hundred sheep,

The three parables in chapter 15 share a common theme: the loss of something valuable which is eventually recovered, giving cause for celebration. There is no doubt that they were, at least in part, a response to the scathing remarks of the Pharisees and scribes, whose malevolent presence has influenced some commentators to identify them with the fictional steward in the next chapter.

In my opinion, though, the parable of the unrighteous steward is very different in both style and content from those that precede it. The "lost and found" theme does not continue into chapter 16, and without the lesson that Jesus based on the parable we would have no reliable guide to its significance.

- Luke 16:1 And he said also unto the disciples, There was a certain rich man, which had a steward; and the same was accused unto him that he was wasting his goods.

- 2 And he called him, and said unto him, What is this that I hear of thee? render the account of thy stewardship; for thou canst be no longer steward.
- 3 And the steward said within himself, What shall I do, seeing that my lord taketh away the stewardship from me? I have not strength to dig; to beg I am ashamed.
- 4 I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.
- 5 And calling to him each one of his lord's debtors, he said to the first, How much owest thou unto my lord?
- 6 And he said, A hundred measures of oil. And he said unto him, Take thy bond, and sit down quickly and write fifty.
- 7 Then said he to another, And how much owest thou? And he said, A hundred measures of wheat. He saith unto him, Take thy bond, and write fourscore.
- 8 And his lord commended the unrighteous steward because he had done wisely: for the sons of this world are for their own generation wiser than the sons of the light.

The structure of the parable

An "unrighteous steward" easily invites comparison with the Pharisees and scribes, who were learned in the Law and the Prophets and thereby *de facto* custodians of the knowledge of God. Nevertheless, a symbolic interpretation of the story developed on that premise encounters two difficulties: firstly, that the parable and its lesson were addressed to Jesus' disciples, and secondly, that His teaching in verses 9 to 13 relies on a literal understanding of the story.

In my opinion, this parable has no hidden or symbolic meaning. It is simply a story that Jesus used in a somewhat tangential way to illustrate His teaching, and it is the teaching which is important. Having said that, if the story doesn't make sense then it is a poor illustration; and so a closer examination is warranted, if only to be satisfied in our own minds that there isn't some flaw in the text. The story divides naturally into three parts, the first being verses 1 and 2,

Luke 16:1 There was a certain rich man, which had a steward; and the same was accused unto him that he was wasting his goods.

We aren't told exactly *how* the steward was wasting his master's goods. Observe, though, that the rich man was so out of touch with his own business affairs that he was unaware of his steward's delinquency until someone informed him.

- 2 And he called him, and said unto him, What is this that I hear of thee? render the account of thy stewardship; for thou canst be no longer steward.

The Greek words translated "render" [Strong #591] and "account" [#3056] each have quite a broad range of meaning, and it's difficult to narrow down precisely what "render the account of thy stewardship" means, but being a condition of the steward's dismissal it is perhaps equivalent to the modern expression, "hand over the books". In any case, the important part of verse 2 is the final statement, "thou canst be no longer steward".

The steward's ruse

So, knowing that the steward has been irresponsible and is about to be dismissed, we come to that part of the story upon which Jesus based His teaching. At first, the steward ponders his situation and wonders what he can do to cushion his fall from grace:

- 3 And the steward said within himself, What shall I do, seeing that my lord taketh away the stewardship from me? I have not strength to dig; to beg I am ashamed.
- 4 I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.

The steward has a sharp but unscrupulous mind: he hasn't yet surrendered the business records to his employer, and seizes the opportunity to do some "creative accounting":

- 5 And calling to him each one of his lord's debtors, he said to the first, How much owest thou unto my lord?
- 6 And he said, A hundred measures of oil. And he said unto him, Take thy bond, and sit down quickly and write fifty.

There is a sense of urgency: "sit down quickly", he says. Obviously, time is short.

- 7 Then said he to another, And how much owest thou? And he said, A hundred measures of wheat. He saith unto him, Take thy bond, and write fourscore.

The steward stood accused of "wasting" his lord's goods, which could mean a number of things, but it does seem that he had allowed the debt situation to get out of hand. Assuming that his employer did not yet know the scale of it, covertly reducing the bills would make a large proportion of the outstanding debts "disappear", while at the same time buying the steward favour with the debtors.

The sequel

The story concludes in verse 8,

- 8 And his lord commended the unrighteous steward because he had done wisely: for the sons of this world are for their own generation wiser than the sons of the light.

Convinced by the falsified accounts, the rich man has changed his mind. The accusation against the steward now seems baseless, and the commendation is proof that the steward's deception has achieved its purpose. When the debtors pay their discounted bills, the rich man will receive what in ignorance he believes to be the full amount owing. From his lord's point of view the steward had "done wisely", although in reality he had defrauded him.

The sons of this world

The "sons of this world", or "of this *age*" [#165], are figuratively the offspring of the prevailing social order. The expression is used in Luke 20:34 in the limited sense of being part of this world through participation in its customs:

"The sons of this world marry, and are given in marriage,"

or, as in the case of the unrighteous steward, the "sons of this world" practise the ethics of self-interest, and in this way resemble their parent. The rich man commended his steward for acting "wisely", because he believed that his wealth was secure. In reality, the steward had acted "wisely" only for his own benefit.

On the other hand, the "sons of light" are those who have been regenerated through the word of God. Jesus said (John 12:36),

"While ye have the light, believe on the light, that ye may become sons of light."

In this world, however, to "love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matthew 19:19; Leviticus 19:18) places the disciple of Christ at a disadvantage, and consequently he is, in practical terms, less "wise" than the "sons of this world".

The lesson

By itself, the story of the steward's dishonesty depicts nothing of true value, and perhaps this barrenness, after the richness of the preceding parable, may have been further incentive for some commentators to reject the literal story and to interpret the various characters and their actions as symbolic, in an attempt to give the parable more substance and to bring it into conformity with the style of chapter 15. But the parable of the unrighteous steward serves its purpose without symbolism, and as we will see, the lesson that Jesus based on it only makes sense if the story is understood literally.

- Luke 16:9 And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when it shall fail, they may receive you into the eternal tabernacles.
- 10 He that is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much: and he that is unrighteous in a very little is unrighteous also in much.
- 11 If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?
- 12 And if ye have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?
- 13 No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

Verse 9 is the key, because it links Jesus' exposition to the story and provides His teaching with a clear and identifiable basis. "Mammon" [#3126] is an Aramaic or Chaldee word meaning "wealth", or "riches". Wealth is an inanimate thing, and as such has no intrinsic moral character; money is neither righteous nor unrighteous. "Mammon" becomes unrighteous only by association with human activity, that is, unrighteous thoughts and actions which involve material wealth.

The Oxford Concise Dictionary, citing the Bible, defines "mammon of unrighteousness" as "wealth ill used or ill gotten", and while that adequately describes the steward's financial dealings, verses 9 and 11 add another dimension. It would seem that Jesus referred to worldly wealth as the "mammon of unrighteousness" because of its power to

corrupt, the object of His lesson being that His disciples should not fall under its sway.

Luke 16:9 And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when it shall fail, they may receive you into the eternal tabernacles.

This is not the only parable in which Jesus used an unrighteous act as an allegory (see Luke 18, verses 1-8). "Make to yourselves friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness," certainly did not mean that His disciples should follow the example of the unrighteous steward. The "friends" that the steward made by cheating his employer may eventually have been useful to him, but whatever benefits he obtained from them would be as impermanent as everything else that belongs to "this world". There is only one "friend" able to receive the disciples of Jesus into "the eternal tabernacles" (or, as in the King James Version, "everlasting habitations"), and that is our heavenly Father. To make Him our friend involves distancing ourselves from the world:

James 4:4 ...know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore would be a friend of the world maketh himself an enemy of God.

1 Tim. 6:9 But they that desire to be rich fall into a temptation and a snare, and many foolish and hurtful lusts, such as drown men in destruction and perdition.

10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil: which some reaching after have been led astray from the faith and have pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

This is what the parable of the unrighteous steward is about: our attitude towards material wealth, and the way we conduct ourselves in a position of trust.

Luke 16:10 He that is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much: and he that is unrighteous in a very little is unrighteous also in much.

It is the little things that truly test one's character, especially those that may go completely unnoticed. To serve faithfully in those things, without expectation of praise or reward, shows a singleness of mind that reliably extends to greater responsibility. On the other hand, irresponsibility or dishonesty in small matters betrays a corrupt conscience which can, as demonstrated by the unrighteous steward, readily manifest itself on a larger scale.

The apostle Paul instructed those in the church who were servants,

- Ephes. 6:5 Servants, be obedient unto them that according to the flesh are your masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ;
- 6 not in the way of eye-service, as men-pleasers; but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart;
- 7 with good will doing service, as unto the Lord, and not unto men:
- 8 knowing that whatsoever good thing each one doeth, the same shall he receive again from the Lord, whether *he be* bond or free.

And Jesus Himself pointed to this life as a proving ground for the Kingdom:

- Luke 16:11 If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?
- 12 And if ye have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?

The responsibilities of this life are a test on His disciples, a test of faith in practice. We profess faith in Jesus Christ, but we must demonstrate our capacity for *faithfulness* by the way we behave in this world, in this case where the property of others is concerned. If we are unable to do this "very little thing", we show ourselves unfit to be entrusted with the "true riches" of the heavenly inheritance, or "that which is your own" (Matthew 25:21, 23; James 2:17, 18).

- 13 No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

The parable of the unrighteous steward is found only in Luke, but the above verse corresponds word-for-word with Matthew 6:24, the only other occurrence of the word "mammon" in the New Testament. The precept is that one cannot serve two masters faithfully; loyalty cannot be divided without bias or compromise. To serve mammon is to deify wealth, that is, to make it an object of worship, and serving other gods is a transgression of the Law. In rebuking Satan, Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy 6:13 and 1 Samuel 7:3,

Matt. 4:10 Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.

To serve mammon is to reject God; conversely, to serve God must be to reject mammon, because the requirements of their worship are mutually exclusive.

Luke 16:14 & 15

The lesson properly concludes with verse 13; however, the reaction of the Pharisees gives us further assurance regarding the nature of this parable.

14 And the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things; and they scoffed at him.

The description of the Pharisees as "lovers of money" reveals the motivation behind their derision and confirms that the story was intended to be understood in a literal sense. The King James Version renders the Greek *philarguroi* [#5366] as "covetous", which in this context seems too broad a term. Strong's Concordance defines it as "*fond of silver (money), i.e. avaricious*".

15 And he said unto them, Ye are they that justify yourselves in the sight of men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

Elsewhere, Jesus referred to them as "hypocrites" (Matthew 23:13-29; Luke 11:44), a Greek word [#5273] that means "an actor under an assumed character (*stage-player*), that is (figuratively), a *dissembler*" (Strong).

Matt. 23:27 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which outwardly appear beautiful, but inwardly are full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.

28 Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but inwardly ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.

Their iniquity included "extortion and excess" (Matthew 23:25), and concerning the scribes Jesus warned His disciples,

- Luke 20:46 Beware of the scribes, which desire to walk in long robes, and love salutations in the marketplaces, and chief seats in the synagogues, and chief places at feasts;
- 47 which devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayers: these shall receive greater condemnation.

The final clause of Luke 16:15, "for that which is exalted among men ...", aligns the Pharisees with "the sons of this world" (verse 8); and the word "abomination" [Gk. #946; Heb. #8251], although rare in the New Testament, is commonly applied in the Old Testament scriptures to the idols of the heathen. Here "abomination" refers in general to worldly values, but in particular, given the context, to "mammon" or material wealth (2 Kings 23:13).



KNOWLEDGE

by Bob Simpson

This devotion is about seeking knowledge. The meaning of knowledge is simply 'to know something'. Knowledge plays an important part in life, as we know.

The Bible strongly urges us to seek knowledge, and recommends it more than gold. *"Receive my instruction, and not silver; and knowledge rather than choice gold",* (Proverbs 8:10) and *"There is gold, and a multitude of rubies: but the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel"* (Proverbs 20:15).

What do the Scriptures say about knowledge?

Our Father in heaven is actually the basic source of knowledge and the cause of one having knowledge, as we read in Acts 17: 25 and 28, *"Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;" ... "For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring"*. Jesus also stressed the importance of truly knowing Him and His Father; *"And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent."* (John 17:3). The apostles also recognised the importance of knowledge; *"And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment"* (Philippians 1:9) and *"But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen"* (2 Peter 3:18).

Furthermore, God created all things, so human knowledge is based on a study of God's handiwork; *"Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created"* (Revelation 4:11) and *"The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork"* (Psalm 19:1). God also inspired his written Word, from which man can learn of His divine will and purposes; *"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works"* (2 Timothy 3: 16 and 17).

Thus the focal point of all true knowledge is our Father in heaven, so a person seeking it ought to have a fear of God that makes him careful not to incur God's displeasure. Such fear is the beginning of knowledge. *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction"* (Proverbs 1:7). Such Godly fear puts one in a position to gain accurate knowledge, whereas those who do not consider God readily draw wrong conclusions from the things that they observe.

Our Bible repeatedly links our Lord and knowledge, calling Him a God of knowledge; *"Talk no more so exceeding proudly; let not arrogancy come out of your mouth: for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed"* (1 Samuel 2:3). In Job He is described as perfect in knowledge. *"For truly my words shall not be false: he that is perfect in knowledge is with thee"* (Job 36:4). Also Job 37: 14 to 16, *"Hearken unto this, O Job: stand still, and consider the wondrous works of God. Dost thou know when God disposed them, and caused the light of his cloud to shine? Dost thou know the balancings of the clouds, the wondrous works of him which is perfect in knowledge?"*

Paul, in expressing praise and honour to God, said, *"Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God"* (Romans 11:33).

So, to put knowledge to work one must also have wisdom. A person might have considerable knowledge but not know how to use it because of a lack of wisdom. Jesus linked wisdom with accomplishment when he said, *"Wisdom is proved righteous by its works"* (Matthew 11:10).

Solomon asked for, and received from God, not just knowledge but also wisdom; *"Give me now wisdom and knowledge, that I may go out and come in before this people: for who can judge this thy people, that is so great?"* (2 Chronicles 1:10) and *"And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the sea shore. And Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of*

all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men; than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, and Chalcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol: and his fame was in all nations round about. And he spake three thousand proverbs: and his songs were a thousand and five. And he spake of trees, from the cedar tree that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall: he spake also of beasts, and of fowl, and of creeping things, and of fishes. And there came of all people to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all kings of the earth, which had heard of his wisdom." (1 Kings 4:29-34).

In the case of two women who claimed the same child, Solomon had knowledge of a mother's devotion to her child, and he displayed his wisdom by using his knowledge to settle the dispute (2 Kings 3:16-28).

Proverbs 4:7 tells us that wisdom is the prime thing, for without it knowledge is of little value; *"Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding"*.

In 2 Peter 1: 2 and 3, Simon Peter gave his blessing to those who had received faith, saying, *"Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord, According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue"*. And in 2 Peter 3:18 he wrote, *"But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen."*

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians wrote that he prayed *"That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height -- to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."* (Ephesians 3:17-19; NKJV).

Studying the character of Christ brings increased knowledge of God, because Jesus was a perfect manifestation of God's attributes in a human being (1 Timothy 3:15,16), and by practising His virtues brings comprehension of the motive of purity and love underlying His acts, and leads to the development of the same unselfish disposition. It becomes a habit to trust God and to be loyal to Him, because increased knowledge demonstrates that this is the only reasonable conduct (New Covenant Advocate No. 32, page 174).



INHERITANCES

by Merv Buckmaster

Introduction

An inheritance is something passed on, usually from parents to children, and there are two aspects to this: the legal and the biological.

The first aspect of inheritance is the passing-on of the possessions of a deceased person. The process is usually formalised legally through the preparation of a will before a person dies. This type of inheritance is mostly concerned with the transfer of property from parents to children, but includes transfers outside the family, such as bequests to charities. This aspect of inheritance deals only with material assets. This legal inheritance is mentioned in Genesis 26:4 by Isaac, speaking to Jacob, *"And give thee the blessing of Abraham, to thee, and to thy seed with thee; that thou mayest inherit the land wherein thou art a stranger, which God gave unto Abraham"*.

A will cannot transfer personal characteristics. Understanding, that is, comprehension, and moral inclination, that is, personal behaviour, cannot be disposed of in a will.

Secondly, there is the genetic transfer of physical characteristics of the body such as size, eye colour and so on, but only physical characteristics of the body, including abnormalities, are passed on. Intangible characteristics such as information, understanding and moral inclination are not inherited genetically. The understanding of good and bad, of right and wrong and related behavioural attributes which are concerned with human morality, are learned by example from family members, particularly parents, by social interaction, and by direct instruction at school. Such understanding is not part of genetic inheritance.

Of the physical characteristics of the body and its organs, it could be said that the most important of the organs is the brain, because it controls all the functions of the body, and in return it responds to all the functions of the other organs. The brain is also the seat of the intellect, of memory and reason, and thus is the arbiter in all decisions made by the individual. The intellect confers on the individual the ability to make moral judgements: to choose between good and bad, and between right and wrong. The infant brain begins with the control of the physiology of the body, but it has to learn: how to gain information and how to function in a social sense, that is, how to make moral choices, in other words, to develop a conscience.

The understanding of goodness and evil, right and wrong, are learned; they are not inherited genetically or by law. Just as each human being has a physical body shaped by its genetic make-up and animated by the God-given breath of life, so each personality is shaped by all the factors in his or her environment, family, schooling and opportunity to choose a path in life.

Definition of Sin

Some people have said that sin is inherited. In this paper I will present the reasons why I believe that understanding to be incorrect.

The apostle John defined sin as the transgression of the law (1 John 3:4). That is God's definition of sin, a definition that is direct and all-inclusive. The Hebrew and Greek words for sin in the Bible have a wide range of meanings, so the definition of sin as disobedience in John's epistle gives clarity to this important subject. It is also worth noting that there is no mention of inheritance in connection with sin in the Bible.

Here, then, is the definition of sin. Sin is the transgression of the law. Sin is disobedience, that is, something one does, an action that one takes. It is not something that can be inherited or something that can be given away.

For the Jew that law was the Law Covenant (John 7:9). For the Christian the law is the law of love embodied in the New Covenant (Matthew 22:37-40). In deference to our obligation to care for the natural world around us, we must respect the laws of nature, which are also God's laws (Genesis 1: 28).

The definition of sin as disobedience could be regarded to include disobeying the laws of society. This is difficult to accept because many man-made laws are inhuman in nature and intent. The dilemma was foreseen by Jesus in his answer to the disciples' question in Matthew 22:17-21, to "*Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's*", showing that God's laws have priority over man's laws.

However, the nature of transgression given in the definition in John's epistle is essentially the moral issue that God put before Adam and Eve, who were created as sentient beings, to reason and to remember, and to love. They were made in the likeness of their creator, to love and to reason.

The Problem of Morality

The most important aspect of a Christian's life is his or her religious and social behaviour before God, that is, one's attitude to good and bad, to right and wrong. All human beings are confronted by this moral dilemma between right and wrong, even though some choose to ignore it.

For most people, and particularly for the Christian, life is an unremitting challenge in resolving this dilemma, the problem of morality; how to be upright in an amoral world; how to practise Christ-like behaviour in a godless society. The gospel of Jesus Christ is deeply concerned with the problem, the problem of immorality, the problem of sin (Genesis 4:7).

Jesus has shown that to do good is acceptable to God (Luke 5:13). The gospel message is God's call to each person to try to do the right thing, to strive for righteousness. And yet we fail day by day. Everyone has failed in a moral sense (Romans 3:23). The realisation of his failure distressed Paul the apostle. He admitted that he did things he should not have done, and failed to do things that he should have done (Romans 7:21). Everyone has this propensity for moral failure, and should ask where it comes from.

It is thought by many that sin is inherited. But as set out above there is no evidence that sin is inherited, neither genetically nor legally. There is no gene for sinning. There is no legal document that bequeaths us sin.

The problem of sin originated with Satan when he tempted Adam and Eve. When Adam disobeyed he was condemned to death, but his death took place about nine hundred years later, so he did not die immediately. But when he sinned he immediately became unrighteous. He lost his favourable standing with God who abhors unrighteousness.

Thus unrighteousness caused by sin became the crucial problem between God and humankind. From God's viewpoint, death was not a problem, as shown by the resurrection of Jesus. The problem was sin. The glory of God's creation had been tarnished, and reconciliation became necessary for its restoration for a God who would have nothing less than perfection. Because of the disobedience of one man the problem became one for all mankind.

The problem of sin compromises our Christian lives. God's response to the consequent need for reconciliation and restoration is twofold. Firstly, the way of reconciliation has been established, through compliance with the terms of the New Covenant ratified by Jesus' sacrifice (Acts 4:12). Secondly, He has made a promise of restoration which has yet to be fulfilled. He will make all things new (Revelation 21:5).

The Responsibility of Choice

The problem of sin is a moral problem for sentient beings, those who can reason, and thus make choices about their behaviour, those who can decide about their moral conduct. The confluence of a reasoning mind and a loving heart given to Adam and Eve was necessary to enable them to make choices that would govern their lives, and the lives of all their descendants.

Right from the beginning God called upon Adam to make choices. The first choice was whether or not to obey God's command not to eat of the forbidden fruit, while being fully informed of the consequence of disobedience (Genesis 2:16,17).

Adam was called upon to choose between obedience and disobedience, which was essentially a moral decision, and to equip him to make that decision he was created to be able to make moral choices. That is, he could choose either way: to choose goodness over evil; right over wrong; to obey or disobey; to sin or not to sin. When he disobeyed he became aware that there were usually two aspects to every action. He became *"... as one of us, to know good and evil"* as God said in Genesis 3:22.

Other Bible students have defined this same point. One author put it that 'Adam ... was created with free moral agency ... Adam and his posterity are free to make their own decisions. Therefore, free moral agency is a crucial factor in the relationship between God and his offspring (sic)' (Larson, J., 'The New Creation', vol. 78, no. 11, page 6). Another writer called it '... the power of moral decision making ...' and argued that it was an aspect of the creation of man who was made in God's image (Brownlow, P.W., NCN No. 83, page 9).

Sin is disobedience, that is, making a wrong choice in relation to the law. Disobedience is something you do: it is not a thing: it is not something that can be inherited. This obligation to choose between the opposites of moral behaviour: good and bad; right and wrong; has been part of human responsibility since God enlivened Adam with the breath of life. At that moment, when Adam became a breathing and sentient creature, his mind and heart were activated for him to make judgements that would govern his behaviour and his life, and thus the behaviour and lives of all his descendants.

Morality, that is, moral judgement, is not inherited, neither genetically nor legally. Each person is born with the faculty to make moral choices, which sets human beings apart from all the other members of the animal kingdom. Sin, transgression of the law, disobedience, is a characteristic of only human beings among the animals.

We are the only ones of God's earthly creation who can make moral choices, but in the spirit realm, spirit beings also have to make the choice to obey or disobey their creator.

Through the disobedience of one man sin entered the world and death by sin, and so death passed upon all men (Romans 5:12). It was not sin that was passed on from Adam to his descendants. It was the curse of death that was passed from Adam to the human race. Every person will die because of Adam's disobedience, and every person was then condemned to remain in death until the curse of death could be annulled.

Paul pointed out to the Roman congregation that "... *in Adam all die* ..." (1 Corinthians 15:22). Some take the use of the preposition 'in' to imply that Adam's sin, his transgression, his disobedience, was passed on to all of us. But it was death, not sin that came upon the human race. The word 'in' here has the meaning of 'because of', so the meaning is that because of Adam all will die.

While sin is not inherited, it could be regarded that death is inherited, although that view is not necessarily applicable because death was, and is the administration of divine justice. It is unnecessary to invoke inheritance to explain the death sentence. God said that disobedience would result in death, and God cannot lie (Hebrews 6:18).

Paul observed that everyone has disobeyed and come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). When Adam disobeyed God his glorious relationship of direct communication with his creator was lost, and everyone born since suffers the same loss, a loss that is overcome temporarily during this gospel age only by Jesus acting as the mediator between God and each individual who accepts the appointed way of reconciliation (1 Timothy 2:5).

Adam's disobedience made him unrighteous.

Jesus used the analogy of a good tree producing good fruit while a corrupt tree cannot produce good fruit to show that the corrupt behaviour of the scribes and Pharisees prevented them from teaching the truth, and accepting the authority of Jesus' ministry (Luke 6:43). By applying the same principle, that corruption cannot produce purity, unrighteous parents are unable to beget righteous children. A baby is born sinless since it is too young to have disobeyed, but it is unrighteous because the whole human race was cursed with unrighteousness by the disobedience of our first parents. And as the baby grows into childhood it has to try to cope with its moral choices, its responsibility to choose between goodness and evil in every aspect of its life.

The Heavenly Inheritance

God as the creator determined the characteristics of genetic inheritance. God, as the heavenly Father has an infinite bounty of good things to bestow as an inheritance, on all those he chooses to be his sons and daughters. There is one inheritance mentioned in 1 Peter 1:4 that is of great importance to us, "... *an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven ...*", and defined by Paul as "... *the prize of the high calling of God through Jesus Christ*" (Philippians 3:14).

While the Israelites received the inheritance of the land of Canaan promised through Abraham because of his faith, God had planned a superior inheritance for the faithful of the gospel age. Abraham himself looked for a kingdom where God would rule in righteousness, "... *a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God*" (Hebrews 11:10). The apostles, especially Peter and Paul, were joyful in being able to preach the promise of the new inheritance.

"That in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him: In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will" (Ephesians 1:10,11).

The curse of death passed on all the families of the earth because of disobedience. But God promised Abraham that one of his descendants would bring blessing to all the families of earth (Genesis 28:14). In order to bring reconciliation between Himself and the human race, as an act of grace and mercy God provided, through His Son, a ransom, a redeeming price, to buy back the disobedient race of mankind (Matthew 20:28).

When the ransom was paid by Jesus' sacrifice, the condemnation to everlasting death was lifted and, by the forgiveness of sins, God was justified in calling people to submit to a spiritual revival to faithfulness, and, because of their faithfulness, to impute to them righteousness, thus allowing him to call them children, children of God and joint heirs with Jesus (Romans 8:17), to inherit a kingdom of righteousness: an inheritance of everlasting life, of glory restored to both man and his creator.



SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

by Russell Collins

Introduction.

So-called same-sex marriage is one of the biggest social issues debated nowadays. The issue of same-sex marriage is basically a moral issue, and the contentiousness of the issue is based on the acceptance or rejection of the morality set out in the Bible.

Western civilisation has been built on Christian morality, and such morality is stated clearly in the Bible. Nowadays, however, the authority of the Bible and the teaching that the God of the Bible is our Creator and also our law-giver are being rejected. The theory of evolution is, to a great extent, responsible for this widespread rejection of God and the Bible.

SOME QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS FOR CONSIDERATION.

1. What is marriage?
2. What is written in the Bible?
4. What did Jesus say about homosexuality?
3. What is wrong with same-sex marriage if it is based on love?
5. The core of the problem,
and how to help people with Christian-based advice.

1. What is marriage?

After God had created Adam, He said, *"It is not good that the man should be alone, I will make him a helper fit for him"* (Genesis 2:18; ESV). And so God created Eve, the first woman, from one of Adam's ribs, so she was from Adam's body and the same sort of created person that Adam was.

Following the creation of the first man and woman, the Scripture records, *"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh"* (Genesis 2:24; ESV). The Lord Jesus made reference to this original statement in Matthew 19: 5 and 6, thus giving a defining statement of marriage in accordance with, and re-affirming God's intention of what marriage should be.

We understand that the disobedience of Adam and Eve has resulted in the degradation of marriage and human sexuality, so that polygamy, divorce and prostitution have entered the world of humanity in consequence of the original fall from God's favour.

It may be seen from history that almost every culture, whether pre-Christian or non-Christian, has recognised the role of marriage as foundational for society. The view of marriage as a union between one man and one woman was adopted and practised by pagan societies such as ancient Greece and Rome, where the practice of homosexuality was also commonplace.

It is interesting to note that Doug Mainwaring, a practising homosexual, wrote in his Public Discourse (March 2013) the following statement: 'The notion of same-sex marriage is implausible, yet political correctness has made stating the obvious a risky business. Genderless marriage is not marriage at all. It is something else entirely.'

2. What is written in the Bible?

The first mention of homosexuality in the Bible is the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. In the account, two angels appeared as men to visit Sodom to see if its wickedness warranted destruction. Lot encountered them and persuaded them to spend the night at his house. The men of the city of Sodom then went to Lot's house and demanded that Lot send the two angels out so that they might have sexual relations with them. When Lot refused, the angels had to save Lot from the anger of the crowd by striking the men, both young and old, with blindness (Genesis 19:10).

Earlier, in Genesis 18, Abraham pleaded with God not to destroy Sodom, and God said He would not destroy the city if ten righteous people could be found in it. But He could not find any, and the crowd who surrounded Lot's house indicated that there was wholesale acceptance of the city's homosexual practices. As a result, God's judgment of the sin of the city meant that the city was destroyed.

This is worth pointing out because today whole countries are celebrating and endorsing, as did Sodom and Gomorrah, the very same behaviour for which God judged and destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities of the plain.

In Leviticus 18: 20 to 23 male homosexuality is listed along with other sexually deviant behaviour which was forbidden under the Mosaic Law. In verse 22 it is written, "*You shall not lie with a male as with a woman: it is an abomination*" (ESV).

In Leviticus 20 verses 10 to 16, the same list of acts is detailed again, as in chapter 18 verses 20 to 23, each and all of which are punishable with the death penalty, presumably death by stoning. Leviticus chapter 18,

verses 24 to 30, tells us that God drove the Canaanites out of the land [for practising “*all of these abominations*”, which demonstrates the seriousness of God’s judgment of sexual immorality, not just amongst the Jews, but amongst all people.

In the New Testament, Paul argued in Romans chapter 1 that homosexual behaviour among men as well as women is the result of suppressing the knowledge of God as the Creator, as the One Who makes the rules for what He created. Such suppression has resulted in the worship of God as revealed in nature being cast aside in favour of the idolatrous worship of creatures instead. God created all things to be enjoyed, but not to be worshipped.

Paul continued in Romans chapter 1 to describe homosexual behaviour as unnatural and completely improper. *“Therefore God gave them up in the lust of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen”. For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.”* (Romans 1:24-27 ESV).

Paul then continued in Romans 1 to describe how the refusal to acknowledge God as Creator leads to all kinds of sin. Elsewhere Paul specifically included male homosexual practices in the lists of conduct that exclude people from the Kingdom of God. He wrote, *“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolators, nor adulterers, nor men who practise homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God”* (1 Corinthians 6:9,10; ESV). [See also 1 Timothy 1:10.]

The Bible tells us that God is completely against homosexual behaviour because He is completely against all sin and every sort of behaviour that falls short of and contravenes anything that He intends for His creatures.

The Gospel message tells us that believers are set free from sin by the atoning and redemptive work of Jesus. Believers are also promised the assistance of a measure of the Holy Spirit of God in their lives, so it would be completely inconsistent to allow any form of homosexual activity in any part of the Christian’s life.

3. What did Jesus say about homosexuality?

Some people claim that Jesus did not address the issue of homosexuality, so we cannot argue that He condemned it. Such an assertion cannot be sustained because Jesus affirmed the historical record and truth of the Old Testament, including the account of creation in which God ordained marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Jesus affirmed the truth of the Old Testament, so it may be understood that He also affirmed the truth of God's condemnation of homosexual practices.

Jesus said, *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them”* (Matthew 5:17; ESV). Jesus specifically affirmed heterosexual monogamous marriage as God's intention for human beings in Matthew 19: 1 to 12 and Mark 10: 1 to 12. *“Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?’ ”*.

These words of Jesus show that there is continuity between Old Testament and New Testament morality. To infer that Jesus approved of same-sex marriage because He did not speak specifically against it, would be the same as saying that silence means consent, which is not the case legally nor in any of the circumstances of everyday life. The apostle Paul was inspired to state the case for the condemnation of homosexuality in unequivocal terms.

4. What is wrong with same-sex marriage if it is based on love?

This argument is used, even by some professing Christians, to defend same-sex marriage. Christians know from Scripture that God is love (1 John 4:16), and to love is part of our God-given nature, and we are exhorted many times in Scripture to love God and the Lord Jesus and also our brethren as much as we love ourselves.

It is unwise to try to define love. The great Apostle wrote about love in 1 Corinthians 13, and told the Corinthians, and all of us, how to recognise love. He did not attempt to define love, but told us how to recognise it in the behaviour and conduct of others.

The 'love' that homosexuals talk about is not the deep spiritual experience that the Apostle described, which is essentially concerned with the benefit of others. The strongest feelings that dominate homosexual behaviour are sexual, lustful, and the appropriate standards

of sexual behaviour are those decreed by God. God is our Creator and as such has the exclusive right to be our law-giver and the setter of standards for all our conduct.

God hates all sin including the sin of homosexuality, because it is contrary to His will and His original design for marriage, which is the foundation of family life. The Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is all about freedom from sin to those who believe, offering strength to keep clear of improper behaviour.

Same-sex relationships are sinful and in opposition to God's standards set down in the Bible, so to oppose same-sex marriage is not unloving. The Christian knows that he or she is a sinner, as are all members of the human race, but the Christian is set free from sin by faith in God through Jesus Christ, the only way, and therefore does not deliberately practise sin or engage in any wilful disobedience to God.

5. How believing Christians may assist people who are unsure about the morality of same-sex marriage.

Christians understand how sin originated by going back to its origin. Sin entered human activities when the first man and woman disobeyed God as recorded in Genesis 3. But, sadly, a different and false view of our origin, namely the theory of evolution, is taught in our schools and universities to the exclusion of everything else, undermining the authority of the Bible, especially the book of Genesis.

This is most significant because views about our origins will affect our meaning and purpose of life. If there were no God and no Creator then people could make up their own rules and laws and take no notice of the idea of God our Creator and what He has recorded for us in the Bible. People who believe there is no God have no-one to be accountable to, so they live for today according to their sinful desires and practices.

The key to helping people with the basic issues of life is to help them to come to believe in Jesus Christ and come to God through Him, and understand that God is ultimately the Creator and Law-giver Who instituted marriage as the union between a man and a woman, and has declared homosexual relationships as abhorrent to Him.

Apart from the evidence of scripture itself, there is now a very compelling amount of scientific evidence and information to support the Bible's account of creation in the book of Genesis, and there is much less reason to be ignorant of the truth of creation that exists all around us, as Paul wrote in Romans 1.20, *"For since the creation of the world God's invisible*

qualities – His eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse”.

Those who go to Christ in repentance and faith are accepted by God and are no longer regarded by Him as sinners because they have a new identity in Christ which enables them to escape from the bondage of sin. Scripture tells us *“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come”* (2 Corinthians 5:17; ESV).

NEWS AND NOTES

Autumn Conference

Our annual autumn conference for 2018 will be held from Friday 6th to Sunday 8th April, inclusive, at the Comfort Inn Main Lead in Ballarat, about 2 hours’ drive from Melbourne. We are looking forward to a time of blessing, with talks, Bible studies, devotions and fellowship. Registration is now open.

For further information contact info@newcovenantfellowship.org.au.

THE NEW COVENANT NEWS

The New Covenant News is compiled by an editor responsible to the New Covenant Fellowship. The thoughts expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of all of the members of the group, and readers are requested to heed the words: ***“Prove all things”*** (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

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