



November 2013



GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

ONE LAW FOR USAND ANOTHER FOR THEM *By Ron Allen*

A woman stood by her car that had broken down on the freeway. She hailed passing traffic for help. A young man on his way home from work pulled over. Immediately, two other youths emerged from shrubbery at the roadside. They attacked the Good Samaritan, stole his keys, and drove off in his car.

It would have been bad enough if the offenders had stolen a parked car. Instead they presumed on goodness. They took for granted a universe in which people can be altruistic enough to help a stranger. Assuming an unwritten law of benevolence, they defaced it by forcing it to serve them exclusively.



Incidents like this made us indignant. Something similar happens when we read the story of Jonah. In the book's third movement, Jonah joins God in his work in the heathen city of Nineveh. The people take Jonah's message to heart and a great repentance ensues. At the end of forty days, God has an apparent change of mind. He does not carry out the judgment he had signaled through his prophet.

The first people to hear Jonah's story may not have been surprised at God's show of mercy. As Abraham's descendants, they had a precedent in their own history. God had warned he would destroy Israel at Sinai, but Moses interceded and God withdrew (Exodus 32).

In addition, a warrant for Nineveh's reprieve is built into the story by the way God treats Jonah. Jonah earns God's

displeasure with his barefaced refusal to serve God in Nineveh. The storm that breaks over his getaway ship expresses God's intention to bring Jonah to book. Only at the last minute when Jonah is—for all intents and purposes—dead, does God rescue him in a signal act of grace. The story therefore unfolds in a way that prepares listeners psychologically for Jonah himself to welcome the compassion shown to the people of Nineveh. To our disappointment and amazement however, we learn that Jonah is not at all pleased with Nineveh's escape. Whereas Jonah was full of praise for *his* rescue from the pit of death, now he deplores the self-same mercy. The logic of the story is interrupted. It (Jonah) doesn't make sense. Jonah had pursued his rebellion in an environment of benevolence and patience which had ended in being his salvation. When that same good will is applied to the inhabitants of Nineveh, he is angry and miserable.

What is the matter with him? He is a disgrace; an absurdity. He is like the monkey in Dr. Paul White's *Jungle Doctor Fable*. Hunted by one of its natural enemies the monkey cuts through the branch of a tree to stop the pursuer from getting to him. The monkey discovers too late that he is on the wrong side of the cut. He falls to the ground along with the branch. He does not look where he is standing.



Similarly, grumpy Jonah does not take account of where he stands. He is at odds with his own security. He is the enemy of his own truth. He is a fool and an embarrassment.

Continued on the next page

CHRIST ALONE • GRACE ALONE • FAITH ALONE • SCRIPTURE ALONE

www.goodnewsunlimited.org

EDITORIAL . . .

“What is this wisdom that has been given him?” (Mark 6:2).

One of Jesus’ attributed roles in the Gospels is that of a Wisdom Teacher. People recognized the ‘good sense’ in many of the things he said. They saw that his perspectives helped make living more workable, fulfilling and joyous.

Take as an example Jesus’ teaching that basic human needs ought to take precedence over sacred symbols and rituals. We moderns might think that this should be taken for granted; that it should not need to be said. But Jesus said it because it really did need saying, and it does still.

Human beings have a curious propensity to elevate some religious duties to levels which fail to enhance their existence. Indeed, they diminish and disfigure it.

An English woman was traveling in India during a severe famine. One evening she came across a man lying in the middle of a street. He had been abandoned there by his family. They were in fear of catching his disease from him. He was literally rotting to death in his own filth. Above the wretched man, on a bridge spanning the street, two men stood repeating words to one another. The woman called out to them, asking them who they were. “We are holy men,” they replied. “Well, can you please stop your prayers while you come and help me with this poor man?” the woman called back. They turned toward her, their faces ablaze with anger. “We are holy men,” they cried out. “We do not do things for other people.”




Pastor Ron Allen

Anyone familiar with Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan will notice similarities with the incident in India. The two men on the bridge were too holy to do any good for anyone.

Jesus stands out from the religions because he makes the elementary human requirements (such as food, shelter, and physical health) religion’s native air; its first duty. Moreover, he makes it a test of true faith in God. In his view, that which claims to be spiritual is only genuinely so when it awards more than a good deal of attention to men and women’s material requirements.

Twice in the gospels (Matthew 9 & 12), Jesus is criticized for attending to people’s primal needs even though they were out of harmony with standard religious practices. In both instances Jesus responds by quoting Scriptures which contain the phrase: *I desire mercy not sacrifice*. And both times he goes on to say: “GO and learn what that means.”

Jesus was himself in no doubt of its meaning. To him it meant that God cares more about how people treat each other; how they attend to each other’s need for physical sustenance and social justice than he does about sanctions and taboos which have been developed over time in pursuit of a private spirituality.

God wants people to be devout in ways that help not just them, but each other. 

Continued from previous page

Jonah felt that the mercy enjoyed by Nineveh was ‘evil with a great evil’ (Jonah 4:1). How so? From Jonah’s own lips we learn that he tried to avoid going to Nineveh in the first place because he half expected that God would not destroy it: “I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love; a God that relents from sending calamity” (4:2) This confession is almost word for word from Exodus 34 where God made all his goodness pass before Moses.

Note how Jonah explicitly claims to know that God prefers mercy over judgment. Yet, despite knowing this, Jonah does not agree with the way God distributes his mercies. He lets them go to the wrong people! Jonah finds fault with God—because he is mistaken about God. He finds fault with God

because of who and what God truly is.

If I am brutally honest with myself, I will admit that I know some people whom I am reluctant to associate with God’s patience and forgiving kindness. We all have our Ninevites. Some of them live in other countries that have shown hostile tendencies towards our country.

In the last few years, you may have lost your life savings, your job and your house, all because of the greed of managers of extremely large financial institutions. These people have made themselves rich on your money. What if God asked you to go and work to help better those people? Would you tell them that they deserve every little bit of God’s wrath; that you hope they rot in hell or that they lose everything they have ever worked for? Would you choose to remain tight-lipped about that other possibility—the grace of God? →

GOODNEWS *Unlimited*

Good News Unlimited magazine is published every month by Good News Unlimited, P.O. Box 6687, Auburn, CA, USA 95604-6687.

Good News Unlimited is an interdenominational Christian organization proclaiming the good news about Jesus Christ and his kingdom of grace. Special emphasis is placed on the message of salvation by grace through faith in Christ’s righteousness alone. GNU also links the gospel to the needs of the whole person, to life-style, and preventive medicine.

Good News Unlimited magazine also seeks to keep readers up-to-date on all aspects of GNU’s ministries. This includes news on national and international radio broadcasts; public seminars, congresses, and Bible schools within the USA (as well as

public meetings in Canada and overseas); and the dissemination of literature, audio and video material. (A comprehensive catalog is available free on request.)

Good News Unlimited is a nonprofit religious corporation supported solely by donations from those who believe in its ministries. Gifts are tax deductible in the USA and Canada. An annual review of GNU’s accounts is made by an external auditor. All regular donors to GNU may receive a financial statement on request.

Good News Unlimited is reached by phone at 530.823.9690. Fax 530.823.5338. E-mail gnu@goodnewsunlimited.org.

This magazine is free upon request.

**November, 2013
Vol. 32, No. 11**

Published by Good News Unlimited

Copyright © 2013

Editor

Ron Allen

Graphic Designer

Debbie O’Brien

Proofreader

Philip Rhodes

Molly Jordan

OVERSEAS ADDRESSES:

Australian office:

P.O. Box 6788
Tweed Heads Sth
NSW 2486, Australia

Canadian offices:

P.O. Box 537
Abbotsford, BC V2S 5Z5
Canada

222 Olive Avenue
Willowdale, ON M2N 4P6
Canada

THE GREAT RISK OF GOD'S LOVE: Luke 15:11-32

by Bruce Burgess

Being a parent can be difficult business. It is an onerous responsibility—and it should be, for there are few things more important than trying to influence a life for good. Especially a life that you helped create. Parents always want the best for their children. We want them to become all that they can be, to realize their potential, to be somehow more than us. Of course our children rarely meet our expectations. They often disappoint. Even though we try to teach them to avoid the mistakes that we have made, they often mess up; sometimes in similar ways that we did; sometimes in new and creative ways. Yet we love them with a passion. We love them so hard we ache inside when we see them struggle, or fail, or rebel.

In the parable told by Jesus, we see the challenge of parenthood for a father of two sons. There is no mention of a mother, so we can assume he was raising the two sons by himself. The father appears to be well-off—servants, money, property; a prosperous man of wealth and influence.

We can probably assume he was doing his best to raise his boys to be responsible, hard-working young men; equipped when the time was right, to inherit the property and to run the business. We can also assume that the boys expected this process to unfold, for this was the culture of the time. The eldest son—the first born—would succeed his father as the head of the family, and would likely take over the estate and run it. He would also inherit a double portion as the eldest. So the younger son—the prodigal son as he is often called—would not get to run things, but would always be secondary to his older brother. He would inherit less.

So the younger son, no doubt displeased with this arrangement, and unwilling to wait for the demise of his father, demands that the estate be settled before his father's death so

that he can receive what is owed him, so he can benefit and start having some fun. We can try to imagine the scene as the prodigal asks to speak to his dad after supper, laying this request on him. A request that would mean that the prodigal would probably soon leave his family and create his own life of self-indulgent pleasure. We are probably talking about a pretty substantial amount of money here; more than the son could imagine spending in his lifetime.

Now, I would have expected that the father would try to reason with his son and challenge his son's request. He could have flat out said, "no." Indeed, I expect that's what most fathers would say. It was against tradition and custom. If there *was* any discussion we can imagine the father saying: "You're too young to do this. You can't handle that kind of responsibility yet. Why would you even want to do this? Haven't I been a good father?" But in the parable as Jesus tells it, the father acquiesced to the son's request and did what was asked.

We might be tempted to question the judgment of the father. What kind of a father would cave like that to his son's request, knowing that the son was acting selfishly? Why did he not refuse? Surely he knew that his son would get into trouble; that he was not mature enough to manage that kind of money? But the father agreed. The father honored the son's request—out of love, I would suggest. The kind of parental love that allows children to make their own mistakes; having wisdom enough to be aware that denying him might cause worse problems in the long run.

The son, not surprisingly, takes the money and leaves the ranch. He heads to the big city where he 'parties down' with all its new-found friends (they probably found him), enjoying the

Continued on next page


Jonah's default preference is for strong punitive measures. He wants God to act forcefully otherwise those Ninevites will think he is weak. What an outrage it would be if people with no morals received the same consideration from God as us.

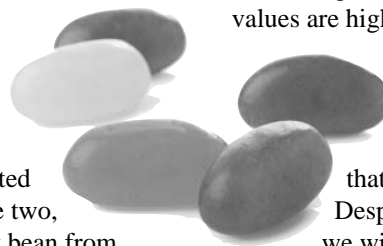
Observe that Jonah's is a world of black and white. There are no grey areas. He believes that the righteousness of God should be unambiguous. This, so everyone, God included, can see who his people are. They are, of course, the guardians of the tradition, the defenders of the institution; those who make certain that drug addicts, communists, political lefties, alcoholics, gays, single unwed mothers, or persons with tattoos are not safe from wrath.

In Jonah's world his religion—the law of Israel—is God's truth. The law is very clear. Those who ignore it, break it, oppose it or make fun of it—they deserve what's coming. It would be a travesty if they got off free.

My wife, Carmen, and I have two children, Andrew and Jeanie. One day Carmen gave them some jelly beans, each on their own plate. Their mother watched them pleasurably as they masticated their sweet treats. Then, Jeanie, the younger of the two, only three years old, surreptitiously swiped a jelly bean from her brother's plate without him even noticing. She popped it in

her mouth. Later, Andrew, conceiving the same crime, tried to do the same to his sister when she wasn't looking. Alas, she turned in time to see the stolen prize disappearing into Andrew's mouth. Immediately she let out a yowl of protest. "Anwoo took my yelly bean. 'mack 'im Mom, 'mack 'im." Seemingly oblivious to the inconsistency of her complaint, Jeanie demanded for her brother, summary justice, with a hint of violence.

We miss the best in the story of Jonah if we do not recognize ourselves in him. As Christians with an ostensible enthusiasm for the gospel, it is easier to talk about it than to practice it. God's way with Jonah is his way with us. What is to be done with an evangelist who is not convinced of his own evangel? His hope lies explicitly in the fact that God's values are higher than those to whom he grants the privilege of service. He never ceases his campaign to have them become agents of the grace to which they owe their very existence. God is not willing that any should perish—and that includes his own recalcitrant disciples. Despite our frequent reluctance and recidivism, we will not be abandoned. *While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.* 



'good' life with little concern for the future. He spends like there's no tomorrow, without a personal accountant to help him keep track of things and plan for the future.

After his money ran out there was a famine in the land and guess what? There's no letter or email to dear old dad, letting him know of his situation and asking him to send some 'tide-me-over' money. No, this young man who wanted for nothing on his father's estate and who was surrounded by servants to meet his every need has to get a real job to support himself.

Sometimes life just rises up and bites you with a reality check. He is now feeding pigs and they are eating better than he is! My guess is that most of us, when we read that part of the story are thinking: "Serves you right you little snot! That's what you get for acting so selfishly; for not appreciating your father more. You deserve it, you bozo." I would expect, if we didn't know this story so well, we would assume the father would feel the same way.

We might further assume that after the son finally clues in to his foolishness and rashness and decides to repent before God and his father; to come limping home with his tail between his legs asking to be hired as a servant—that the father, seeing him approach would use this opportunity as a teachable moment. This is one of those teachable moments that a parent could really relish.

I would suggest that as the people were listening to Jesus tell this parable, when he got to the point where he says: "So he got up and went to his father," they would have had a little smirk on their faces just waiting to see the son get blasted by the father. Oh, we know exactly where Jesus is going with this—assuming that the whole point of the parable was about disobedience and honoring your parents and the implications of sin. They probably imagined some of what the father might say: "Ah, my son, you have returned. Looking a little different than when you left, I might say. Things not worked out as you thought they would? Is life not quite what you expected? Is life with daddy looking a little more appealing now?"

But the father completely surprises us. As the text reads: "*But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him*" Let's pause there for a moment. The first thing he felt was compassion. If we rewind this parable back to the beginning and try to guess how the father felt after his son departed, we would be safe to assume that the father felt hurt, betrayed, sad, frustrated and probably angry. We can assume that because that's how we probably would have felt. But all that evaporated when the father saw the son—before the son even gave any kind of explanation or confessed his sin or asked just to be a servant on his dad's property. No, the first response was one of compassion, identifying with his son's suffering, recognizing the son's pain, and desiring to restore him in love. To be sure, the son did suffer. Whether he deserved it or



not, he experienced it. He was humbled and shamed by his actions and he did indeed pay a price for it. But from his father's perspective this was not the time to blame, to teach a lesson or to say, "I told you so."

The text tells us that "*While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*" Lots of parents would have acted much differently. Lots of parents would have said: "Oh, so

you think you can just waltz in here after what you've done how you've humiliated your family and just pretend that—everything is the same again. Well let me tell you a thing or two, sonny-boy..." But no, this father embraced him and kissed him. Then the son in turn said: "*I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.*" Before he could even get to the "*Do you think you might be willing to hire me as a servant; I'll work hard and stay out of your hair*" part, the father tells his servants, "*Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate.*"

Jesus' listeners at this point are probably shaking their heads in consternation. What kind of a story is this? What kind of irresponsible behavior is the father engaged in? According to the Law, the father could have had his son stoned to death for bringing shame and dishonor to his family. Disobedience to one's parents could result in death. Some of Jesus' listeners—some of us perhaps—might have been thinking: what kind of a lesson is this? It is almost as if the father is rewarding his son's bad behavior. Where is the lesson in that?

But you see, Jesus is trying to communicate something of the nature and scope of God's love for us. When the son tries to take the blame and make confession, and offer to become a hired hand on the ranch, the father will have none of it. The loving father never asks the prodigal to do penance or reparation for his sins. He doesn't ask the son to begin a program of repayment for the squandered inheritance. Those sins and wasted years are swept out of the way by the father's transcending love and forgiveness. The father simply reinstates the son as a full and respected member of the family, so that he can begin to participate in life productively as he was meant to.

This is one of the shocking elements of the story; the "unexpected twist" so to speak, that absolutely captures his listeners' attention and indeed challenges their expectations. What the father is doing seems wrong; it seems too permissive. It's like the father not only caved at the beginning by allowing his son to leave, but here he is again caving when he should have used the moment to teach a stern lesson and to demand some significant penalty be paid.

-BRUCE BURGESS. Pastor: Immanuel Baptist Church. Toronto, Canada. Used by Permission.

Continued next month