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## **The Revised Common Lectionary Notes**

March 3, 6, 10, 17, 24, 31, and April 7

by the Rev. Dr. Harry Wendt, founder of Crossways International

### **March 3, The Last Sunday after the Epiphany: Luke 9:28-36 [37–43a]**

*(In what follows, we shall focus in particular on Luke’s Transfiguration narrative (a profound event!), and then offer a few summary comments about 9:37–43.)*

In the verses that precede Luke’s account of Jesus’ transfiguration, Luke points out that Jesus, the Son of Man (“the true People of God”; see Daniel 7:13), is present at every moment throughout history. Yes, He would be present when Jerusalem fell to the Romans. With the destruction of Jerusalem, Christianity broke free of the narrow limitations of Judaism and reached out to the world-at-large to establish a radically different worldwide Kingdom. As the disciples began to understand, the Final Age of the world broke in with Jesus’ Person and ministry. Jesus did not focus merely on “getting people into heaven.” He focused on helping people understand that to belong to Him is to belong to His Heavenly Kingdom now and forever. He calls His brothers and sisters to live *now* (in this present world) as they will *then* (after He finally reappears).

**9:28:** Where the Transfiguration took place is not known. Some suggest that it took place on Mount Hermon (in present-day Lebanon). However, what matters is not *locality*, but *implication*. Luke tells us that Jesus went up on a (nameless) mountain *to pray*—a detail found only in Luke’s account of the Transfiguration. We read frequently of Jesus praying before great events in His ministry.

Only Luke makes reference to a time-frame of “about *eight* days.” Matthew 17:1 and Mark 9:2 refer to “after *six* days.” Perhaps Matthew and Mark have in mind a Sabbath day—and Jesus has come to bring endless everyday rest to His brothers and sisters. Perhaps Luke links *eight* to the first day of the week (seven plus one), Sunday—the day of Jesus’ resurrection.

Jesus takes with Him Peter, James, and John—His *inner circle*.

**9:29:** While Jesus is praying, the appearance of His face changes and His clothes become dazzling white. The radiance of the divine glory that once descended from heaven upon the face of Moses (see Exodus 34:29–34) now transforms Jesus’ appearance and reveals His true identity.

**9:29:** The three men now see Moses and Elijah speaking with Jesus. However, both Moses and Elijah met and spoke with God at Mount Sinai; see Exodus 19:1–8; 24:15–18; 1 Kings 18–19. The entire worldview of the disciples had been fashioned by what these two key figures from the past represented. The truths that surfaced during the transfiguration event summoned the disciples to rethink those worldviews!

**9:30, 31:** Moses and Elijah speak with Jesus about (Greek text) His coming *exodus* (rescue event) that He is about to *complete* in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, few translations make use of these terms when referring to the contents of the conversation. However, Jesus came to carry out a “final exodus,” a “final rescue” of God’s people—something that He achieved once and for all when He gave up His life on a Cross and was vindicated in His resurrection. After all, Jesus did not come merely to rescue His people from the *political* dominion of Rome; He came to rescue them from the *spiritual* dominion of the powers of Satan, sin, and death.

**9:32:** No doubt Jesus is strengthened by His visit with Moses and Elijah—even as He is eventually strengthened by the visit of the angel in the Garden of Gethsemane. Although the disciples are weary from lack of sleep on the Mount of Transfiguration, they manage to stay awake—and see Jesus’ glory and the two great men who speak with Him. However, they do fall asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane just prior to Jesus “completing His Final Exodus” through His passion and crucifixion.

**9:33, 34:** As Moses and Elijah depart from Jesus’ presence, Peter suggests to Jesus that he and the other two disciples should build three tents—one each for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. However, Luke states that Peter did not understand the implications of what he was saying. Was Peter suggesting that the Messianic celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles (or Tents) was at hand? Tabernacles was a word rich in meaning, with links to Moses’ Tabernacle that was filled with God’s glory, of God’s constant care for His people during the wilderness wanderings, of the Holy of Holies of Solomon’s Temple, of the Messianic day; see Exodus 40:35; Leviticus 23:43; 1 Kings 8:11f; Zechariah 14:16–19.

**V. 35:** The voice that speaks in this verse expresses a profound truth. It reflects Psalm 2:7 (a coronation psalm) and declares that, in Jesus, the Davidic line of kings was being restored—even though Jesus was a radically different kind of king from David. “Listen to Him” reflects Deuteronomy 18:15, and states that in Jesus, a new, final, and radically different kind of “prophet Moses” has appeared on the scene.

**V. 36:** After the heavenly voice has spoken, Jesus is seen to be alone. The three disciples keep silent, and say nothing to anyone about what they have seen and experienced.

The truths that surface in this event are profound. God has shown up in the flesh-and-blood Person of Jesus. Jesus is the long-awaited King, but a King very different from what the Jewish people were waiting for. Jesus is indeed the final, long-awaited prophet. However, He would teach a way of life very different from that embraced by the Judaism of Jesus’ day.

**9:37–43:** When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, he had to deal with a mob swept into sensuous religious worship. When Jesus descends from the Mount of Transfiguration, He sees a day “darken into night” because of the people’s unbelief. There is a touch of pity in the father’s appeal, “my only child.” Jesus addresses His audience as a “faithless and perverse generation.” Eventually, Jesus heals the boy by rebuking the spirit that occupied him—and then gives him back to his father.

Worthy of thought: In Mark's narrative, the first thing Jesus does when beginning His ministry to the *Jewish people* is to cast a demon out of a man in a synagogue—on a Sabbath day; see 1:21–28. The first thing He does when beginning His ministry to the *non-Jews* is to cast a host of demons out of a Gentile in the Decapolis; see 5:1–20. In like manner, the first thing Jesus does after His identity and mission are revealed in a grand and glorious manner in His transfiguration is to cast out a demon.

## March 6, Ash Wednesday: Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Matthew 6:1–18 contains warnings about doing good in order to be seen, giving three examples:

- Almsgiving (6:2–4)
- Prayer (6:5, 15)
- Fasting (6:6–18)

In each example, the conduct of the “hypocrites” is contrasted with that demanded of the disciples.

Perhaps 6:2 (“hypocrites”) relates to the opposition between Pharisaic Judaism and the church in Matthew.

The scribes and Pharisees desire praise and have received what they are looking for. In 6:5, the Greek verb *apecho* is a commercial term that has to do with giving a receipt for what has been paid in full.

In relation to **fasting**: The only fast prescribed in the Mosaic Law was that of the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:31). However, the practice of regular fasting was common in Judaism. (See *Didache* 9:1. The *Didache* is the oldest known document of a class denoted as “Church Orders” containing directives for catechetical instruction, worship, and ministry. The sole surviving manuscript was transcribed in AD 1056.)

**6:1:** The message of Matthew 6:1–18 might be summarized as follows: “Beware of practicing your piety (literally, “your righteousness”) out in public in order to be noticed—to catch peoples’ eyes and seek human admiration and applause.” To live that way is anything but a demonstration of faith. Those who live this way are not looking for a reward from their Father in heaven, and they should not be surprised when they do not receive one. All they are doing is laying up treasure on earth (6:19). When John Newman was made a cardinal, he declared, “I tremble to take this great honor lest I should be taking out my reward on earth.”

Jesus’ teachings on almsgiving (6:2–4), prayer (6:5–6) and fasting (6:16–18) follow the same pattern. Each paragraph contrasts the behavior of hypocrites with the behavior expected of Jesus’ followers.

**6:2:** When Jesus’ followers give alms, they must not be like the hypocrites. In the Greek world, *hypocrite* was the word for *actor*. In the New Testament, the word has the larger meaning of a moral or spiritual pretender, one who merely *plays* the part of righteousness without *possessing* the inner reality. In Matthew’s Gospel, *hypocrisy* is contrasted with *righteousness* (5:20), *perfection* (5:48), and *wholeness* (22:37–40). Only hypocrites feel the need to give alms out in public, in the synagogue and in the streets, to the accompaniment of trumpet fanfare.

**6:3:** Jesus urges His followers not to focus on when and where the giving of alms will make the greatest public impression. He calls them to give in such an unselfconscious fashion that even their left hand does not know what their right hand is doing.

**6:4:** Jesus' followers are to give alms in secret, hiding the deed not only from public notice but also from themselves. They are to give alms, not to impress crowds or to win words of gratitude from the recipients, but simply as God's partners in divine generosity toward all—especially the poor and defenseless. Jesus combines traditional images and phrases from home and market to proclaim radically new moral insights, demolishing traditional systems in the process.

Jesus tells His disciples that *God is already their Father* (ten times in 6:1–18). God does not become fatherly or motherly, receptive and loving, as some kind of payment to a disciple who has piled up a sufficient heap of deeds well done. Although God likes good deeds better than evil deeds, He is repelled by posturing, disappointed by hypocrisy, and angry when people use other human beings to draw attention to their own religious practices.

An Anglican clergy serving a parish near Oxford, England, shared the following insight: “When the day comes that I want people to notice me rather than Jesus, I invalidate my ministry.”

**6:5–6:** Hypocrites are consistent in that they pray the same way that they give alms. They love to put themselves on display in the synagogues and at street corners so that they might be seen. Jesus sets one extreme against another: prayer on street corners versus prayer in the tool shed or broom closet, display rather than secrecy, seeking applause from others rather than single-minded fellowship with God.

**6:16–18:** Jesus tells His disciples that when they fast, they are to do the opposite of what the hypocrites do. The hypocrites disfigure their faces so that their suffering may be conspicuous. They deliberately cease bathing, anointing their bodies, and combing their hair. They sprinkle ashes on their heads and put on a garment made of coarse materials. *They do these things to advertise their piety!*

Jesus does not forbid fasting (9:14–15), even though some prophets declared that God preferred justice to fasting; see Isaiah 58:3–9; Joel 2:12–13; Jeremiah 52:12. However, He urges those who fast to go to extremes that are the exact opposite of the hypocrites; they are to anoint their head and wash their face. They are to practice piety *for God's eyes only!*

**6:19:** Treasures in the ancient world included expensive cloth and finely woven garments, easily ruined by moths (James 5:2). If the treasure was a hoard of coins (Sirach 29:10); an exquisitely carved box or paneling; or a barn full of wheat, it was vulnerable to being eaten away by rust or worms. Thieves could break in by digging through the mud-brick walls of a home or by digging up a family treasure from its hiding place and stealing it (Matthew 13:44; 24:43).

**6:20:** The answer to human concerns for security is not to hire extra guards or to invest in more durable goods. It is to turn away completely from treasure on earth to treasure in heaven—to security beyond the reach of moth and rust, and from thieves who break in and steal. Jesus' words point to the vulnerability of human treasures and to the insecurity of a life that focuses only on such things.

**6:21:** Jesus calls His disciples to cut any chain that links their joy, peace, and security to the ebb and flow of markets and fortune. When their treasure is in heaven—if what really counts is the name,

sovereignty, and will of God—then their heart, life, and joy will rest on a foundation as firm as heaven itself.

### **March 10, First Sunday in Lent: Luke 4:1–13**

In Mark's narrative, after Jesus is baptized (1:9–11) the Spirit drives Him into the wilderness where He spends forty days (1:12–13). During this period, He is “tempted by Satan”—only three words in Mark's account!

Matthew's temptation narrative (4:1–11) is much longer, and consists of three incidents.

Luke's temptation narrative (4:1–13) also consists of three incidents, although the final two are in reverse order of those in Matthew.

Luke's temptation narrative is preceded by his version of Jesus' genealogy (3:23–38). While Matthew 1:1–17 traces Jesus' origins back to Abraham and David, Luke traces them all the way back to Adam. Luke's genealogy focuses on Jesus as a “New Adam”—a new beginning to the human race.

In His *baptism*, Jesus is anointed for His Messianic work; in His temptation, that work is put to the test. The temptations are not so much personal trials as they are a Messianic struggle. Will Jesus walk the way of a Servant-without-limit, or will He expect His Father to serve and deliver Him in miraculous ways from anything unpleasant? The implications of Jesus' temptations are profound; note Hebrews 2:17–18 and 4:15.

**4:1–2:** The Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness of Judea. (Luke delights in speaking of Jesus' total surrender to the Spirit!) While there, He no doubt meditates on His coming Messianic work. Some looked on the desert as the devil's haunt; see Tobit 8:3 (an apocryphal writing). Jesus spends forty days in the desert, during which He eats nothing and is famished.

**4:3–4:** The devil now confronts a hungry Jesus and urges Him to prove that He is the Son of God by turning a stone into a loaf of bread. In other words, resort to the miraculous to meet your own needs! Jesus refuses, pointing out that one does not live by bread alone; see Deuteronomy 8:3. *Throughout His ministry, Jesus never does anything just to benefit Himself.*

This first temptation presumes the presence of Jesus' miraculous powers. It challenges the implications and consequences of Jesus being prepared to be a suffering Messiah—and a servant of others without limit. However, Jesus will never yield to the prospect of seeking His own physical comfort and pleasure rather than doing the will of His Father.

**4:5–8:** Satan now offers Jesus dominion over “the kingdoms of the world” over which, he claims, he has been given authority. Lies! Satan has not been given authority over the kingdoms of the world; he has usurped it. He does not own them, and they are not his to give. No doubt Jesus was repulsed by Satan's suggestion. Jesus can see beneath the seductive shams of worldly systems to the delusions of sin.

It is significant that Satan suggests that Jesus seek political dominion over the world. The Jewish people of Jesus' day were hoping to achieve just that for themselves. In dealing with this issue, it is most important to understand the significance of the term “son of man” in Daniel 7 (see 7:13–14) and to

understand how Jesus radically reinterprets that term in relation to His own Person and ministry. (The term “Son of Man” is used 82 times in the four Gospels. The Greek word for “gospel” [good news] is used 12 times in Matthew and Mark, but never in Luke or John.) Jesus did not seek to dominate the world, but to serve the world and to establish an “upside down, back-to-front” servant-kingdom.

**4:9–12:** Luke’s infancy narrative opens and closes in the Temple (1:4–2:38). The final verse of his Gospel speaks of the disciples being continually in the Temple blessing God (24:52).

The third temptation (according to the order of Luke’s Gospel—but the second event in Matthew’s narrative) takes place on the pinnacle of the Jerusalem Temple. The pinnacle was at the southeast corner of the Temple area; 450 feet below it lay the Kidron Valley. Luke states that Satan takes Jesus to this location. Satan’s temptation invites, “Be a popular Messiah! Offer a godly show of the miraculous and win the eyes and hearts of all in Jerusalem.” However, Jesus’ way of winning Jerusalem was to walk the way of servanthood and suffering to the point of giving away life itself.

Although the devil knows how to quote—but twist—scripture, Jesus responds by quoting Deuteronomy 6:16. Salvation is not achieved outside the ordinary laws of existence, but within the normal, humble (and at times sorrowful) way of faith.

**4:13:** After the devil has finished every test, he departs from Jesus until an opportune time. As in other concluding lines, Luke prepares his readers for the future—for the final, decisive struggle with satanic forces in Jerusalem.

It is important that God’s people understand Jesus’ ministry as a battle with the demonic. The demonic says, “Live for self!” Jesus says, “Live to serve Me by serving those around you.” What a difference! The more we understand this issue, the more we understand that the Lord’s Prayer is really a war cry. Its final petition should read, “Deliver us from *the evil one*.” More translations are now rendering that final petition in this manner—e.g., the NRSV. We would do well to ponder John 12:31 and 17:15, and to bear in mind that, in John’s passion narrative, on the cross Jesus declares Himself to be the Victor and gives away His life as the ultimate servant act; see 19:30. Although Jesus gets crucified, Satan gets nailed!

## **March 17, Second Sunday in Lent: Luke 13:31–35**

**13:31:** The passage under review makes reference to an incident involving Herod Antipas—an incident mentioned only in Luke’s Gospel. (Note also the references to “foxes,” the Herodians, in 9:58.) The dialog outlined raises a question: Did the Pharisees want to save Jesus from Herod (who ruled Galilee and Perea), or did they want to lure Him into Judea and Jerusalem where they were powerful enough to secure His condemnation?

**13:32:** Jesus’ reply reflects a note of bitter irony. Herod is nothing but a *fox*—crafty, without honor, and totally self-centered. The Jews regarded the fox as the most sly and seductive of animals, and they linked the word to a weak and worthless man.

Those to whom Jesus ministers must note how Jesus carries out His servant ministry: He casts out demons and constantly cures the sick. The term “third day” means a limited period of time. In relation to Jesus finishing His work on the third day, note again John 19:30.

**13:33:** Jesus will not be sidetracked by any fear of what Herod Antipas might be planning to do. He must continue on His way to Jerusalem. After all, Jerusalem has quite a reputation in relation to how it has treated God's prophets! The *grand finale* to His own ministry must take place in that tragically deluded city! And although Jesus' followers will say, "Oh, no!" at the cross, His Father will say "Oh, yes!" on Good Friday and on Easter Sunday morning!

**13:34:** Jesus' words reflect the spirit of Jeremiah's grief in relation to Jerusalem's refusal to heed his message (see Jeremiah 12:7; 21:14; 22:6). Jesus longed to gather God's people into His care and Kingdom, even as a hen seeks to gather her chickens under her wings in a time of serious danger—as, for example, when grass or forest fire breaks out. But sadly, those who see what Jesus does and hear what He says refuse to come to Him to find eternal security.

In Matthew's Gospel (see 23:37–39), Jesus speaks these words when He is already in Jerusalem, and the events of Palm Sunday seem like a distant memory.

**V. 35:** The final section of this verse is a quote from Psalm 118:26. The Jews chanted this psalm when observing the great pilgrim feasts, especially Tabernacles, their autumn harvest festival. It was chanted during the Palm Sunday procession when Jesus entered Jerusalem just prior to His crucifixion. However, in the present context Jesus is referring to the final breaking in of the Messianic Age. The final feast of Tabernacles must wait until the Jewish people are ready to understand Jesus' divine identity and the true nature of His Kingdom—and to participate in its eternal joys.

So, Jesus continues on His way to Jerusalem and the Temple. Scholars suggest that the city's population in Jesus' day was about 55,000. Some suggest that *at least* 9,000 priests served on the Temple's staff but not necessarily on a full-time basis. Although the "top brass" of the priests lived in Jerusalem (and in luxury!), few ordinary priests did—and went to Jerusalem for a week only twice each year. About 80% of Jerusalem's residents earned their living through their involvement in the Temple's "salvation marketing system" by providing pilgrims with accommodation and food and by selling them the animals used in the sacrificial system. Little wonder, then, that Jesus' attack on the Temple system gave rise to fierce opposition and anger on the part of priests, businessmen, and tradesmen. Jesus was threatening their ability to earn a living!

### **March 24, Third Sunday in Lent: Luke 13:1–9**

**13:1-5:** The death of the Galileans at the hands of Pilate (v. 1) and the accidental death of those on whom the Tower of Siloam fell are presented by the Lucan Jesus as timely reminders of the need for all to repent. The victims of these tragedies should not be looked on as outstanding sinners who were singled out for punishment.

**13:1:** The slaughter of the Galileans by Pilate is unknown outside of Luke's reference to the event. However, what the Jewish historian Josephus reports about Pilate indicates that such a slaughter would have been in keeping with Pilate's character. Josephus reports that Pilate once disrupted a religious gathering of the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim by slaughtering the participants. He also reports that, on another occasion, Pilate killed many Jews who had opposed him when he appropriated money from the Temple treasury to build an aqueduct to Jerusalem.

**13:2:** Physical suffering was widely viewed as a consequence of sin; see John 9:2, 3.

**13:3:** John the Baptist called his hearers to repent—passionately; see 3:1–17.

**13:4:** Nothing of this accident in Jerusalem is known outside of Luke and the New Testament. The tower was possibly a part of Jerusalem’s defense system.

**13:5:** Jesus points out the “cause and effect” relationship between the way we live and the life that we experience. The implications relate not only to life here and now but also to life in the hereafter.

#### *Some General Comments*

Jesus denied that individual sinners are punished in this life by specific tragedies. However, He reaffirmed the teaching of the prophets that organizations and communities can and do bring God’s discipline on themselves—a discipline that works its way out in history. However, we should not attribute accidents and misfortunes to *divine punishment*.

A pastor who was suffering great distress dreamed that he was to be granted a personal interview with Jesus. “Now I shall get answers to all my problems,” he thought as he prepared a questionnaire for His Lord. However, while standing in the Divine Presence, he forgot all his questions and was content to learn and embrace all the answers in Jesus’ face and heart. Jesus is the only Answer in relation to dealing with personal difficulties.

Nations, communities, and even churches can and do bring God’s discipline on themselves in this life. Of the fourteen great civilizations that have already disintegrated, Professor Arnold Toynbee (in his ten-volume historical survey) suggests that they were instruments “that God could no longer use.”

**13:6–9:** The term “fig tree” is used frequently as a metaphor for Israel and Judah (Hosea 9:10; Micah 7:1; Jeremiah 8:13). For other references to “looking for fruit,” see Matthew 21:19; Mark 11:13.

In Palestine, fruit trees were often planted in vineyards, turning them into a kind of orchard, but in this instance, it is to no good purpose. In the parable, the fig tree is eating up the goodness of the ground at the expense of the surrounding vines, but it is still bearing no fruit. So, the owner decides to cut it down. It is no more than a glorified weed! However, the gardener pleads for a year’s respite. He says that he will loosen the earth around the roots and fertilize it—trouble that is not taken with fig trees. The owner agrees. He will wait until the next harvest. But this could be the last chance for the fig tree.

Although this parable related to the situation of Jesus’ day, its message is timeless. In His mercy, God continues to give us—His people—many more “second chances.” However, this should not lead us to presume upon God’s goodness. There will be a last chance. The owner’s patience was eventually strained to breaking point with the barren fig tree. Sir Winston Churchill once mused, “I wonder what would happen if God lost patience with the world.”

Following on the call to repentance in vv. 1–5, the parable of the barren fig tree presents a story about the continuing patience of God with those who have not yet given evidence of their repentance. The parable may also be alluding to the delay of the end time when judgment will be meted out and to the importance of preparing for the end of the age, *because the delay will not be permanent* (vv. 8–9). A

Final Day is coming when humanity at large must appear before the throne of the Lord of eternity—and “give account” (Matthew 25:31–46).

### **March 31, Fourth Sunday in Lent: Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32**

A Jewish commentary on the Law says, “There is joy before God when those who provoke Him perish from the world.” In Luke 15:7, Jesus says, “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

#### *The Context*

Jesus had stirred up much opposition in Galilee, and He is now on His way to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). Although tax collectors and sinners gather around Jesus to hear what He has to say to them, the scribes and Pharisees murmur saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Jesus knows full well that, when He finally enters Jerusalem, all hell will break loose.

**15:1: *Tax-collectors:*** It is difficult for us in the Western world to understand the level of hatred that Jewish people felt toward those who collaborated with an occupying power to collect taxes for them. A “tax farmer” bought from the ruling power the right to collect taxes in a certain area. He then hired local people to do the actual collecting. Graft and corruption were the order of the day.

***Sinners:*** The scribes and Pharisees lumped together sinners, adulterers, the unclean, and the breakers of the law, and rejected them as being “beyond the pale.” Luke tells us that Jesus received these sinners (15:2). The word he uses states that Jesus accepted them as His brothers. More, Jesus ate with them. In the Middle East, friendship is one thing. But to eat with a person was a sacramental act in which participants declared total acceptance of each other.

**15:2:** When Luke says that the scribes and Pharisees were grumbling because Jesus was welcoming tax collectors and sinners into full fellowship with Himself, the word Luke uses for “grumbling” is the word the Greek Old Testament uses for the Israelites’ repeated murmurings against Moses in the wilderness.

**15:3:** In Luke 15, Jesus tells three parables. This verse serves as an introduction to the three.

**15:11–32:** The passage records what is perhaps Jesus’ best-known parable. It has been called the “parable of the prodigal son,” and the “parable of the waiting father.” However, Jesus begins, “There was a man who had two sons.” The parable is about *three* people: *a man and his two sons*. It tells of a son who was lost *at a distance* and of a son who was lost although he stayed *at home*. In what follows, we shall refer to the parable as the “parable of the two lost sons.” In many ways, the older son is the key figure—and the one most truly lost.

**15:12:** First, the younger son says, “Father, give me the share of property that will belong to me.” The request can mean only one thing. The younger son is impatient for his father's death. The practice was that a father's wealth would be divided only *after* his death. On very rare occasions, a father *could*, on his own initiative, divide his property while he was still living. Although he handed his property over to a son, the father still retained control over it. In short, a son was given the right of *possession* but not the right of *disposition* (to use it as he pleases). However, what the younger son demands is not merely *the right of possession* but also *the right of disposition*.

When people in the Middle East hear this parable today, the response is the same: “Impossible! This father should beat his son! His son wants him to die!” Even so, the father divides the property. He gives two-thirds over to the older son and one-third over to the younger son.

Note that the younger son does not break a specific law in requesting the division. Deuteronomy 21:17 states that a younger son should receive a third. However, he breaks his father’s heart, for he wants his share now—in *cash*!

The son’s request hurts not only his father, but the entire family clan. The wealth of a village family is not held in a savings account. It is held in the family’s house, buildings, animals, and land. In our story, the land and animals would have had to be sold quickly at a low price. In the Middle East, people can haggle for days over the smallest transaction. Those who sell in a hurry sell cheaply. For a family to lose one-third of its assets would be a staggering loss.

Note also that the son does not state: “I want my *inheritance*.” He states: “Give me the share of the property that will belong to me.” He avoids using the word *inheritance*. To accept one’s *inheritance* is to accept a leadership responsibility in the clan. The recipient is duty bound to administer the property on behalf of the family, to settle quarrels, to defend the honor of the family against all comers (even with his life), to increase the family’s wealth, and to represent the family nobly at village weddings, feasts, and funerals. However, this boy wants no *responsibility*; he wants only the *money*.

Through his actions, the younger son cuts himself off from his roots. In cutting himself off from his father, he cuts himself off from his *real* inheritance. A man’s security in a village is his family. His family is his insurance, his old-age pension, his assurance of marriage, and his physical and emotional well-being. These things are as precious as life itself. Still today in the Middle East, when you ask a person where he is from, he does not give you his address. He replies: “I am from such and such a village.” He may never have been there, but his roots are there. If he is out of work or in need of friends, he will be welcomed, even if the villagers have never seen him. All will open their doors to him and accept him unconditionally. So, when the younger son makes his request, he breaks his father’s heart and all relationships with his family.

The older son knows the entire story. In a Middle East village community, everything that happens is known almost immediately by everyone. Perhaps the conversation between the father and the younger son is overheard by the servants or other members of the family. Perhaps the older son is present. Whatever the case might have been, the older son refuses to honor his obligations and duty.

In a village quarrel, people involved in a dispute never make up directly. To do so is to require someone to lose face. The reconciliation process takes place through a third party. The “go-between” moves back and forth between the disputing parties until a solution is reached that both can accept. The mediator then arranges a meeting in which those involved in a conflict meet, shake hands, embrace, and perhaps kiss each other. The mediator is always chosen on the basis of the strength of his relationship with the quarreling parties. In our story, the older son would have been the natural choice for mediator. And he must begin immediately. He must do so even if he hates his brother. He must act for the sake of his father. He must say things such as: “O my brother, your father is an old man. You may not see him again—do not leave us! O my brother, your mother will go blind weeping. We cannot bear the thought of you leaving us!” But he does not do so. Apparently, things are bad between him and his brother, and between him and his father. And so, the father grants his younger son permission to turn away from

him. However, he does not sever his relationship with the son. Had he disowned him, there would have been no possibility of reconciliation. Because he does not disown him, the possibility of reconciliation remains.

**15:13:** Perhaps during the days immediately prior to his departure, the younger son exchanges his inheritance for a sack of coins. After all, he must be able to carry his inheritance with him. As he leaves, the villagers scorn him. The only thing that goes with him is the love of a broken-hearted father. The word Luke uses to describe his departure is: “He *traveled away* from his own people.” He leaves—and loses—his village!

In the unnamed “far country” to which the son goes, he squanders his property. We are not told how. The tradition that he spent it on immoral living is based on the older brother’s later slanderous remarks (15:30). In leaving the village, the younger son cut himself off from his original community. He now needs a new circle of friends—a new family. Hence, it is possible that he spends the money foolishly to establish a reputation for generosity among his new associates. Perhaps he throws lavish parties. Perhaps he tries to buy new friendships by giving expensive gifts. Naturally, while he has money, he has friends. When he has no money, he has no friends. He is now in real trouble. What is he to do?

**15:14–15:** First, he tries to get a job. Jesus says he literally glued himself to a local citizen in the hope that the man (most certainly a *Gentile*) might employ him. If the man is a citizen, he is a man of some standing in the community. Most likely he knows the would-be employee is a Jew and that he once had access to money. He also possibly hopes that by offering him a job feeding pigs (Jews cannot handle pigs or eat pork!), the Jewish job-seeker will turn the offer down and leave him alone.

The situation is complicated by the fact that, in the world of Jesus’ day, pigs were not housed in pens or sties. They wandered along public roads and paths. They served as the community’s garbage disposal units. Therefore, in caring for them, the son would be very much on public display. Surely he would never accept such a position!

But, because he is desperate, he does. That makes him a slave, an outcast, in Jewish eyes. And while he cares for the pigs, he holds out his hands to passersby in the hope that they will give him something. But no one gives him anything. What is he to do? He needs money to buy food to stay alive. At stake is his very survival.

**15:16–19:** There is only one course open to him: He must return home! And he must do so while he still has enough strength to walk the distance. But he has to devise a strategy that will deal with what might transpire when he arrives at his home village. *First*, he remembers that his father did not discipline him when he made his initial request, and suspects that his father will not reject him. *Second*, he must face his brother’s scorn and “eat his brother’s bread” and so be indebted to his brother as well as to his father. If his brother has treated him badly before, he will certainly treat him worse now! *Third*, he must face the village community. He has broken all relationships with them and is despised by them. When he gets to the edge of the village, he simply cannot march through it to his father’s house, and say, “Here I am, father!” He must stop at the edge of the village, send a message to his father, and wait for hours and even days to see if his father will respond and agree to meet with him.

So, he works out a plan. He will return to his father and tell him that, although he has sinned against God and his father and is no longer worthy to be called his father’s son, he asks only that his father will help him by letting him become an apprentice and learn a trade. And here he reveals his strategy for

survival. By working at a trade, he can support himself, possibly even pay back some of the family money that he squandered, and perhaps regain even a little dignity in the eyes of his community. And because he will not have to live in or near the family home, but in the village, he will not have to come into constant contact with his brother.

**15:20:** So, the long walk back to his father, brother, and village begins. But note this: He has not yet repented! The issue at stake is his *physical survival!*

While all this is going on, what is the father doing? Has he forgotten his son? Impossible! We can well imagine that he thinks about him daily and anxiously. We can well imagine that he thinks about him each night prior to going to sleep, and asks: “Where is my boy? Does he have food? Does he have friends? Is he well? Is he alive?” And we might well imagine that, from time to time, he looks down the road on which his son has walked away from him and asks, “Will my boy ever come back to me?”

Eventually there comes a day when, while looking down that road, he sees someone on the horizon—walking toward the village. He wonders who it might be. If only it were his son! But he must not let his imagination run away with him. Many people have walked along that road. But the more he looks, the more he suspects something. Is it . . .? Could it really be . . .? Surely not. But finally, he knows! “My boy! It is my boy! My boy is coming back to me!” And he runs to meet his son.

We westerners think little about the fact that he runs, but people in many other cultures react differently. They smile! In many parts of the world still today, as in Jesus’ day, old men never run. Little boys run. Teenagers run. But old men never run. They walk slowly and with great dignity. But this father runs! He must get to the boy first. Why? Because of the villagers! When the son asked his father to give him the share of the property that was due to him, he did not sin merely against his father. He sinned against the village! He has no right to return to it. Moreover, if the villagers see him returning and get to him first, most likely they will carry out a *qetsatsah* ceremony.

*Qetsatsah* is an Aramaic word meaning “cutting off.” The ceremony is described in several nonbiblical Jewish writings, including the Jerusalem Talmud (e. g., Kidd. 1:5). These writings state that if a man sold his field to a Gentile (non-Jew), the relatives would bring parched corn and nuts, place them in a jar, and break the jar in front of the people as they proclaimed, “So-and-so is cut off from his inheritance.” Ketuboth 2:10 does not mention the Gentiles. It states that if a man sold to *anyone*, the ceremony would be enacted. Only restoration of the land could revoke the “cutting off” of the offending person. If we accept the earlier Jerusalem Talmud text as more likely to represent the first century, the threat is even stronger. The prodigal has sold the land and then goes into a far country with the proceeds of the sale in his pocket. If he returns and repurchases it, all will be forgiven. But how will the village react if he loses all the money and adds insult to injury by doing so *among the Gentiles*? If the *qetsatsah* ceremony was not enacted when the son left, it will surely be performed if he dare return under these latter unthinkable circumstances. Little wonder, then, that the father must get to his boy first! How the father receives the son will determine how the villagers must receive him.

In running (literally “racing”) to his son, the father demeans himself. To run, he must hold up his outer garment that he might move swiftly. He exposes his undershirt—if you like, his underwear! And without a doubt, the boys and teenagers of the village run alongside him, laughing loudly, pointing at his exposed legs and knees, and saying, “Look! His underwear! His underwear! Ha, ha, ha!” But the father is prepared to demean himself to get to that boy first!

Finally, the two meet. An *obedient* son has the right to kiss his father's hands. This *wayward* son has only the right to fall to the ground and kiss his father's feet. But the father does not let him fall to the ground. Although the father says nothing, he takes his son in his arms, holds him up, and kisses him.

**15:21:** The boy tries to deliver his little speech but succeeds in getting out only the first part of it: "Father, I have sinned against God and you, and am no longer worthy to be called your son." But he does not get out the bit about becoming an apprentice and learning a trade. Why?

**15:22:** The father takes over and does the talking! "Place the best robe in the house around him. Place a ring on his finger. Put shoes on his feet. Kill the fatted calf and prepare a feast!" Note the implications: The father accepts the boy back as his son, and reinstates him in the household. The best robe? Most likely the best robe from the father's own wardrobe. A ring? That was a symbol of authority in the household. Shoes? Only slaves go barefoot; sons wear shoes. Son? Yes! Hired servant? Apprentice? Never! He orders the servants to serve his *son*! Everyone in the village must now treat the son in keeping with the father's wishes. The father's actions have established the way things are to be.

**15:23–24:** The father calls for a feast—There must be a feast to celebrate! He instructs that the family's fatted calf (an expensive item that now belongs to the older brother!) be part of the menu. In that part of the world still today, a village feast is a truly special event. In the situation described in the parable, the father is the focus of attention. He has decided the nature of his son's reception and has decreed the future of their relationship. He sits in the center of the house, and all the guests come in to him and thank him for inviting them. He, in turn, thanks them for honoring him with their presence. On this particular occasion, the guest of honor is the younger son. No person in the village dare say anything unkind to him. They may not like what he has done, and may not feel well-disposed toward him, but they must accept and welcome him. The father's actions have determined what theirs must be.

**15:25–27:** But now comes a tough question. Who is to be the head waiter? The older brother! Although the servants would do the bulk of the work, the older son must be present to set the tone of the hospitality offered by assuring the guests that they are most welcome, and that they honor the family by coming!

But the older son is not home when the banquet begins. He is out in the fields. No, he is not working; he is the older son in a household of some wealth. The family has a home, servants, fields, and cattle. He does not work, but he supervises. Most likely he is lying under the shade of a tree, nibbling away at some fruit, watching over the hired servants, and paying them their wages at the end of the day.

Within half an hour of the son's return, everyone in the village knows what is happening. The older son asks one of those serving the banquet, "What's going on around here?" The servant replies, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf."

**15:28:** The older brother is furious. He will not go in. And within a matter of moments, all in the house sense the tension. The atmosphere is electric. The eating, music, and dancing stop. All eyes turn toward the father. The situation must be resolved. But how? The father should not leave his place of honor. He should stay inside among his guests! To go outside would be again demeaning. Even so, out he goes—to face the older son's fury and insults!

**15:29–30:** The older son explodes with, "Father, you've never done anything like this for me! You have not even given me a kid goat from the flock to share with my friends. And I've worked all these years for

you. Yet, when this son of yours (note: *your son*, not *my brother*) comes back, this son who has been wasting our assets on harlots (*a false charge!*), you kill the fatted calf!"

Let's give some thought to the older son's way of thinking. He has never left his father. He has stayed home and carried out his duties. His father should be impressed with his track record, and see himself as indebted to his older son. However, he says the father has never shown him any special favor. He has never even given him so much as a kid goat to share with his friends at a feast! (His "friends" are people "out there," not members of the family or the immediate community.) He feels that he has done so much but has received so little. Moreover, as he sees it, the father has demeaned the family reputation by welcoming back this womanizing vagabond!

**15:31–32:** The father replies with great concern and kindness, "My son, (and he uses a very tender word here) all that I have is yours! You see, we thought *your brother* (note that term) was dead, but he is alive. We thought he was lost, but he has been found!"

What does the older son do to his father? We are not told. Possibly, in his rage he beats him or even kills him. These suggestions are not so far-fetched if we bear in mind that those to whom Jesus told this parable would eventually scream, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"

The father in the parable does not impose laws and constraints on his sons. He does not force them to do things against their will. He lets them do their worst to him so that he might do his best for them. And if the older son did indeed choose to beat his father, perhaps the father's hope was that he would eventually come to his senses and ask, "What am I doing? How can I possibly do this to my father? What kind of a father do I have, who lets me do this to him? Why does he act this way toward me?" And if the older son does get around to asking these questions, his whole relationship with his father and brother will change.

Let's say that, as the weeks go by and things settle down, the younger boy returns to work in the family circle. Can you imagine the spirit in which he does that? Can you imagine the difference the villagers see in him? Can you imagine how he relates to the servants in the household? And perhaps some, who do not know the family story, ask him, "Why are you like this—so kind, concerned, and compassionate?" To such questions, the younger son might well reply, "Have you not heard my story? Let me tell it to you!"

What changed the younger son? When he "came to his senses" in the far country, he did not repent. He simply realized that he was in a dangerous situation. There was a drought in the land, and a severe shortage of food. His own survival was at stake. His concern was to save his own life and regain some of the security that he had enjoyed prior to his departure. The thing that changed him was the look that he saw on his father's face and the welcome that he received. He was "found."

Luke does not tell us what the older son finally did to his father. This points to the challenge that Jesus was presenting to the scribes and Pharisees. He was saying, "Yes, I do welcome sinners and eat with them. That is at the heart of My ministry. That is what the Kingdom of God is all about. What will you do about it? What will you do with Me?" Their murmurings will eventually give rise to "Crucify Him!"

### *Concluding Thoughts*

In many parts of Africa, when a dispute takes place in a village, this is what happens: In the center of the village is a round hut. (In Liberia it is called a *Palaver hut*. In South Africa it is called a *Ndaba Hut*). The

village elders, and the parties to the controversy, meet in the hut and sit on the floor in a circle, facing each other. After some initial small talk, they face up to the problem head-on. They talk things out and settle the problem. When the talk is over, there is a village feast which all attend. And when the feast is over, no person in the village may ever again refer to the problem or controversy. It is past, finished, and forgotten! Perhaps we Westerners would do well to refer to our places of worship as *Palaver huts*!

What does this parable mean for us? We are the ones who have wandered away from God. We are the ones who have claimed ownership of creation and life and want to use them to enjoy ourselves rather than use them to glorify God and serve others in our earthly village. But when we come to our senses and return to our Heavenly Father, what do we have to bring? The younger son had only pig-stink to bring with him. We have only sin-stink to bring with us. But when we come, the heavenly Father rushes out to meet us, welcomes us passionately, and reinstates us in His family circle. God “finds” us.

When God restores us to His family circle, we are to serve Him by serving each other, and do so in the spirit of the Servant Jesus, with images of His cross and His empty tomb fixed in our minds. Within that family circle, we are to invite others to return to the family fold, and welcome them warmly when they come, so that God might “find” them. And we are to go on telling *God’s* story, not *our* story, so that God’s family might continue to grow, and the heavenly village might be more densely populated.

### **April 7, Fifth Sunday in Lent: John 12:1–8**

In John 11, we read of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead—a deed that results in the scribes and Pharisees calling a meeting of the Sanhedrin. Those who attend the meeting vote to have Jesus put to death. Jesus now leaves Jerusalem and goes north to Ephraim, no doubt for security reasons.

**12:1–3:** Jesus eventually returns to Jerusalem six days before the annual Passover celebration. In John, the Passover observance begins on a Friday evening, not on a Thursday evening as in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

The Lazarus miracle, which provoked the Pharisees’ hatred, now inspires love from Mary. When Jesus returns to the vicinity of Jerusalem, He (and apparently His disciples) call on Mary, Martha, and Lazarus at their home in Bethany. They invite Him to share a meal with them. Martha busies herself with the practical details of looking after the dinner guests. Lazarus is with Jesus and other guests around the meal table. The table is low to the floor, and the guests do not sit on chairs. They lie on their sides on a U-shaped sofa-like *triclinium* around three sides of the table—with their legs stretched out away from the table. Suddenly, Mary does something remarkable. She anoints Jesus’ feet with precious ointment and then wipes them with her hair.

Naturally, Mary loves Jesus dearly, both as a friend and as the One who brought her brother back to life.

But there is a deeper meaning behind her act of devotion. Kings of Israel were anointed with oil by a prophet at the direction of God. The term *Messiah* means “the anointed one.”

A rabbinic maxim says, “Good ointment spreads from the bedroom into the dining room, but a good name spreads from one end of the world to the other.”

**12:4–6:** Had we witnessed what Mary did, we might have said, “What a beautiful act of love!” However, Judas says, “What a waste!” He is the disciple who “managed” the funds that Jesus and the other disciples needed to buy food and other basic supplies as they moved around the countryside. Like any greedy person, he quickly works out the price of what is obviously valuable ointment. Three hundred denarii! The denarius was a Roman silver coin equal to about a day’s pay for a laborer. Treasurer Judas is not only a thief but also a pious fraud. His objection that the money used to buy this precious fluid should have been given to the poor is nothing but a mask. He uses pious words to cover his disappointment at not being able to get his own hands on that tidy sum of money!

**12:7–8:** Jesus does not reprimand Judas as we might expect him to do. However, Jesus will eventually expose his greed; see 13:21–30. All Jesus says is, “What Mary has done is right and proper. She is serving Me while she still can.” Jesus was physically present with His friends for but a short time, whereas they always had plenty of opportunities to serve the poor. (The sad truth is that the poor are still very much a part of our world, despite all the advances in technology.) The surprising thing—and Mary probably does not realize the full meaning of her action—is that the King here has been anointed for His death and burial. Jesus is marked as the Messiah who must die. John pictures the cross as Jesus’ throne, and His crucifixion as His coronation.

**12:9-11:** Lazarus is only just out of the grave, and the Jewish authorities want to see him dead again! His “great crime” is that he is the cause of many more people flocking to Jesus and believing in Him. Blind, fanatical opposition does not care about rights and wrongs, about truth and justice. Little fish like Lazarus must also be removed to get rid of the big fish, Jesus of Nazareth! However, John makes no reference to Lazarus being put to death by the Jerusalem political and religious elite.