

Today, we bring to a close our 11-week exploration in Luke chapters 13-16, in which he has captured Jesus' exposé of God's character. These four chapters cover two Sabbath narratives, one in a Synagogue (ch 13), and a longer one (14-16) *in the home of a leader of the Pharisees* where an elaborate meal would have been served, attended by a veritable list of who's who in society. One wonders if Jesus had time to enjoy the sumptuous feast others were relishing as He did most of the talking, and they listened, whilst eating the meal!

I trust these 11-weeks have been rewarding to you as it has to me, discovering Jesus' deep desire that we should know God as our Father, who is present and active in our lives here and now, and His yearning to help us uncover the heart of Father God, oozing and overflowing with compassion and love.

We are often led down the wrong path to believe, we can understand God's mind. We reason, as we are created in God's image, God and we think alike. This is where our mistake takes root, that we the natural being think like God the Supernatural, that we the created can think the Creator's thoughts!

To allow this thought to take root in our mind, is to step on the slippery path towards the biggest mistake of our lives: to assign human motives to God's actions. We become frustrated when God's plans don't align with ours, leading us to a wrong understanding and distorted beliefs about God's character.



This cartoon illustrates Jesus' message in these four chapters. Human "progress" has put us at par with the Pharisees and the Teachers of God's Law; we have so much knowledge at our disposal, we believe we can discover God through our knowledge (the Law)! As our knowledge increases with advances in technology, science and

medicine, so does our blindness to God's wisdom, and frustration sets in.

In these four chapters, Jesus wants us to grasp a simple Truth: no one can understand the mind of God¹, but we can say, with no reservations, everyone can experience the heart of God.

We might not all use the same language to describe our experience of God, nor recognise the experience as having anything to do with God, and we might not share our experience with others, because it is deeply private, or because we're unsure how to communicate it, unsure of a "proper" language to narrate our experience, whether it will be received in the same way as we express it.

Fortunately for us, we don't have to go looking for God; He meets us where we are, in ways we are able to recognise Him and relish the encounter. To experience God is to be conscious, He seeks us; to experience God is to be alive to His desire for our company; to experience God is to be aware, God is extremely patient as He waits for the opportunity to meet, when we are ready.

Luke's starts with Jesus' narrative of the current events at that time, which people used to misinform themselves of the character of God. So, when *Pilate murdered pilgrims from Galilee as they offered their sacrifice at the Temple*, (similar to political and religious oppression in our time), when *the tower of Siloam collapsed killing 18 people* (calamities like Grenfell Tower in our time), why do we claim God's judgement on these people?

Pilate was acting under the influence of a murderous spirit; the tower at Siloam could have collapsed due to shoddy workmanship. We don't know enough of the details to claim, this who died were under God's judgement.

Jesus calls us to **repent** of our wrong and distorted ideas about God, blaming Him for what He has not done! God is extremely patient, waiting for us to discover His true self, and Jesus illustrates this with a parable about a fig tree. *If a fig tree does not bear fruit for several years, shouldn't it be cut down and make room for a fruit bearing tree? ... No! Leave it for another season, says Gardner God. Feed*

¹ 1 Corinthians 2:11; Romans 11:33-34; Psalm 139:1-6; Job 36:26; Isaiah 55:8-9

and nurture it all you can. If it still does not bear fruit, then cut it down! Our God is the Father of ...*one more chance*. He is not prepared to write-off anyone. Such is God's love for each of us.

Luke then narrates the first Sabbath incident, of healing a lady crippled by an evil spirit, double bent over for 18 years. The Lady was enjoying hearing God's word being read and discussed, and worshipping Him. She didn't ask to be healed, but God's compassionate love is such, **He touched and healed her**. What was her response? **And HOW she praised God!**

Jesus is attacked by the leader of the Synagogue for whom the sanctity of the Synagogue is more important than the human struggle for dignity, a struggle which continues to this day and demonstrates misplaced loyalty. Our struggle should not be to preserve the magnificence of the Church and Cathedral at the expense of human suffering. *This dear woman, says Jesus, a daughter of Abraham, has been held in bondage by satan for 18 years. Isn't it right for her to be released, even on the Sabbath?*

Our struggle is to recognise God at work, to whom every moment of everyday is as precious, and every person even more precious and valued in God's sight. Buildings are important, they are places where we exercise the ministry to which God calls each of us, but God calls us to join Him as He releases people from bondage to an evil and destructive spirit, and we work alongside, helping to restore that person back into fellowship in society and with God.

This is the Character of God, that none should be lost, all should be "saved" for the day of the great banquet, to celebrate the end of evil and welcome the eternal kingdom of God, where death does not separate us from God.

This is Jesus' message in the second Sabbath account (14-16). God's great welcome banquet is open to all, irrespective of social, religious and economic standing. Everyone has a place at the table with their names written on each place setting. Many will choose the demands and cares of life to absent

themselves. Others filled with their own importance, will try and force their way into the Banquet; some will be told, *the order at this Table is, the last will be first and the first will be last*. Others who claim to know the host having eaten and drunk with Him while He taught on their streets, will be rebuffed, *I don't know you or where you came from ... get away from me!*

The pinnacle, the climax of Jesus' narrative is chapter 15 when he addresses the Pharisees and Scribes who voiced their objection to the attention Jesus gave to sinner and tax collectors, and ignoring them, the high and mighty in religious and polite society. What follows is Jesus' stinging response to their claim.

Jesus sets up the main story of, *A man had two sons*, with two mini-parables, using two figures in society who were not given due respect: shepherds and women. A shepherd with 100 sheep, loses one. The Shepherd know every sheep in his flock, and knows when one is missing, who has gone walkabout and is lost in the world. The Shepherd goes out to look for the one sheep, **UNTIL** he finds it!

A woman with 10 silver coins, can't find one and search for it all over her house, **UNTIL** she finds it! Both celebrate finding that which was lost, one valued sheep in the world, and one valued coin in its own house.

A man has two sons, the younger moves out into the world and is lost to the Father, the elder stays at home and is also lost to the Father, never personally experiencing the Father's love. The one lost in the world, remembers the love in his Father's house and makes his way back, but the Father does not want to hear his repentance, sincere as it was. He wants to celebrates, because *the son who was lost and presumed dead, is found and is alive!*

We are left to ponder on the outcome of the elder son, also lost to his Father in his own home. Did he **really** not know His Father's love, only knew Him as an order-giver and task-master? Jesus leaves the story unfinished, unresolved because those of us who are lost in God's house, need to discover God's

compassionate, generous, self-giving love, that central part of God's character without which we really don't have a relationship with Him!

I can only imagine, there would have been a long pause at the end of chapter 15, before the start of 16, *Jesus then turned to His Disciples and told them this story*, of a corrupt manager who was adding his commission to every sale. When he was caught, he called the buyers and reduced their indebtedness to the Master by wiping out his commission, leaving no trace of his corrupt deeds. The corrupt manager thought this would buy him friends who will look after him when he loses his job.

Jesus does not commend the corrupt manager's actions; he encourages His listeners, *use your worldly wealth to benefit others and make friends. Then, when your possessions are gone, you will be welcomed into eternal homes.*

This principle ties into the final section of chapter 16. It draws on Jesus' earlier comment to the host of the Sabbath meal, *When you invite people to meal, you do it because they will invite you back. What if you invite people who cannot invite you back, the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. At the resurrection, God will reward you (for using your wealth to give those less fortunate, a taste of Heaven before they got there).*²

There was a certain (extremely) rich man, perhaps someone known at the time, or someone in the past, but someone Jesus knew well. The Pharisees would have perked up hearing Jesus describe the rich man as someone not dissimilar to themselves!

Jesus closes this discourse with a narrative (not a parable!) about the outcome of the choices we make in this life. The rich man chose to ignore poor Lazarus. He chose to allow scraps from his table be sent to Lazarus, because he was not worthy of the delicacies on his table.

² Luke 14:12-14

In a sense, the rich man enjoyed heaven on earth, without a thought of sharing his worldly riches to give an unfortunate person, a taste of heaven on earth. His choice of ignoring a person so poor, whose body sores were licked by dogs, resulted in the Father saying, *I don't know you - get away from me*, and he ends up in the *place of the dead*, while Lazarus is carried by Angels to sit beside Abraham at the great heavenly banquet.

God is not against people with great wealth. Jesus narrates this story to make the point, the decisions we take today, have eternal consequences. To nurture or reject, the poor, the marginalised, the sick and those living with disease among us, is the consequence of whether we love God with all our heart, soul and mind, and our neighbour as ourselves, or not!

The problem with “the certain rich man” was, his attitude and lack of any pathos towards Lazarus was so deeply ingrained, he continued to refer to him as somebody who could be sent on errands - *send him to cool my tongue! I am in such anguish in these fiery flames!* , and begging Father Abraham to, *send him to my father's home to warn my five brothers so they don't end up where I am!*

So where does this leave us?

We have a choice. We can believe God is good. All the time. In doing so, we admit there are things we might never understand, things we can't reconcile in our humanness. Releasing our need-to-know-all, will lead us to God's peace.

Or we can see the pain and suffering in this world, and decide God must be unkind and against us. But then, that would be contradictory to what Scripture tells us about God.

The starting point is to trust in God's character by not wrestling with what we can't know, because we musn't.

If we assign to God, character-traits that are against what the Bible says is true, we will eventually pull away from God and end up worshipping an idol of God, created in our minds and embedded our hearts.

I don't understand why God hasn't come into this world and swept it clean, but this I know, one day He will. Until then, I pray I may know our Father God, enjoy His compassion and love, and bask in His faithfulness.

God's character is to be faithful to those who love Him, know Him a little and want to know Him more.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me trust You in greater measure today. I know you are faithful, and I want to be faithful to You, only You!

I want to experience Your Compassion and Your Love, that I can declare and share this experience with others who know you and want to know you more.

In Jesus' Name

AMEN