



guide to prayer and study | week of October 10, 2021

daily readings from the Gospel of Luke with reflections from N. T. Wright

MONDAY 10.11.2021

Read: Luke 12:35-59 <https://bit.ly/3mJIHU9>

Reflect: Jesus' teaching about not worrying is balanced here by his warning that we should be alert. ('Be alert,' says the bumper-sticker; 'We need more Lerts.')

To rub the point in, he invites us to imagine ourselves going to bed at night but expecting all the time that there might be a burglar on the way.

Jesus was getting Israel, and the world, and his followers, ready for great events that were still to come. Everything he was doing was about launching a project, the work of God's kingdom. One day that kingdom will come to birth full and fresh, and all that Jesus has been doing will be seen as the necessary groundwork for that new moment.

But ... as with the burglar, nobody knows when it's going to arrive! So the characteristic Christian poise is to be alert, to be ready, like servants waiting for the master of the house to come back from a late-night party. There are two different dimensions to this challenge.

First, let's imagine ourselves as part of the gaggle of Jesus' followers, moving around Galilee with him and wondering where it's all going to end. Here we are, watching him heal people, sneaking into parties where he's hanging out with people who desperately need his help, hearing him teach about God's coming kingdom when the powerful and arrogant will be overthrown and the weak and poor will be raised up. And, as we try to pray the prayer he's given us, we wonder when it's all going to happen. 'Your kingdom come...'? Wish it would hurry up.

'No,' says Jesus, 'you need to learn to wait. That's part of the point. You need to grow up in your trust of God. Learning to wait is part of the deal.' 'Lord,' we say, 'give us strength and patience – but please hurry up anyway!' 'No,' he says again, 'you've got to be like servants prepared to wait through until the small hours. What matters is that when God does what God is going to do, you're ready.'

And then, one day, it happens: Jesus is arrested, tried, executed; and we're in a panic. The burglar has come and we were asleep... But then, three days later, Jesus is alive again, and he's the true king, and a whole new world has begun.

Pray: *Lord, give us patience, and the courage to wait and watch and be ready to perceive your kingdom when it comes on earth as in heaven.*

TUESDAY 10.12.2021

Read: Luke 13 <https://bit.ly/3iMqrbG>

Reflect: True prayer is always humble. By definition. True prayer means recognizing that God is God and that we ... aren't. It also means doing something inexplicable in terms of the present world of

space, time and matter: it already says, 'I believe in someone who is there, who is my Lord, even though I can't see him.'

So learning to pray means learning to abandon pride. It's easy for those of us who have been brought up as Christians, churchgoers, in a supposedly 'Christian' country, to imagine that we are, as it were, Jesus' natural followers; that we can coast along and get there all right whatever happens. These stern warnings should send us back to our prayers, back to our knees, back to humility and trust. We cannot presume. We dare not.

Jesus had to make that exact point to his contemporaries. Like John the Baptist before him, he had to warn them that they couldn't assume that being children of Abraham meant they had an inside track, 'a backdoor to heaven' as one of today's Jewish teachers has put it.

Jesus doesn't tell them, in this passage, what they must positively do. He merely warns them against presumption, and tells them that there will come a time when the people who thought they were 'automatically' part of God's people will find they're outside, while plenty who never imagined they'd have anything to do with the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will be inside.

The shocking warning to the insiders is matched by the surprising grace towards the outsiders. That fits exactly with the constant theme we've found, for instance in the Beatitudes and Woes: blessings on all the wrong people, woes on all the right ones! That puts the pressure on those of us who might assume that we are the 'right' ones: to recognize, both in how we pray and what we pray, that everything we have, everything we are, is a gift from God, and that neither we nor anybody else deserve it.

Prayer like that will be humble. It will be a sigh of relief. We don't have anything to prove, anything to earn.

Pray: *Thank you, Father, for your generous love. Help me, today and every day, to trust in you, not myself.*

WEDNESDAY 10.06.2021

Read: Luke 14 <https://bit.ly/2YENL3L>

Reflect: This is another time when you want to put your hands over your ears, as Jesus says some of the harshest things you've heard from him yet. Really, you think, if this was all he said, nobody would ever follow him! Hating your family, giving up your possessions, carrying your own instrument of torture – what on earth is he going on about? Most Christians in today's world, and I suspect a good many of Jesus' own hearers, try to avoid or ignore this kind of stuff.

That would be a mistake, albeit a natural one. Let's think about what Jesus was up against.

He was announcing God's new way of running things. He was telling God's people that everything up to now had been preparation, but he was starting the real thing. And the hardest task for someone doing that is to persuade people to give up the preparatory stages they've become so comfortable with.

What were those preparatory stages? For Jesus' people, ancient Israel, there were two stages in particular: family and land. Israel was identified as Abraham's family, a single ethnic unit. (True, some people came in from outside, like Ruth in the Old Testament; but they were still basically a people defined by family identity.) And they were also identified as the people who lived in a special land: that beautiful but highly contested small country in the Middle East. Again, by the time of Jesus more Jews lived away from the land than in it, but they all knew that was their real home. That was their ancestral possession, and woe betide anyone who compromised with it.

Family and possessions: the two things Jesus now says you have to give up. God's people are being redefined, and these identity markers won't matter anymore. Cling onto them, and you'll be like people keeping the curtains closed when the sun has risen. That was night-time; this is daytime.

Jesus' challenge, then, comes to all of us at the point where we are tempted to settle down and be comfortable with the way things are. 'No,' he says, 'that would be like someone wanting to build a tower, or fight a battle, without thinking out what's involved' You need to think through, to pray through, what it's going to mean to be a follower, a learner, a disciple. You don't want to be left high and dry when God's kingdom goes forward and you turn out to have settled for something less.

Pray: Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order, used to pray this prayer:

*Lord, teach me to be generous,
Teach me to serve you and you deserve:
To give and not to count the cost,
To fight and not to heed the wounds,
To toil and not to seek for rest,
To labor and to ask for no reward,
Save that of knowing that I do your will.*

THURSDAY 10.07.2021

Read: Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32 <https://bit.ly/3Dyhrib>

Reflect: 'We just had to have a party!' That's the main point of this story. Jesus had been challenged about the parties he was having, and the company he was keeping at them, and he responded with this spectacular story. Let's go to one of those parties and see what it was all about.

We sneak in at the back and find things already in full flow. A bit of a rough crowd, it seems – the sort of people you'd probably avoid in the street, some of them scruffy, some of them a bit too suspiciously well dressed. (How could they afford clothes like *that*?) Somebody's obviously been hard at work cooking, because there are delicious smells coming from a back room and people keep emerging from the kitchen with more dishes. And there are flagons of wine and everyone is helping themselves ... and in the middle of it all we spot Jesus himself, relaxed and easy, reclining as people did on a couch beside the table, chatting to the man beside him, occasionally flashing a smile at the serving-girls bringing more food, or waving to a newcomer who's heard there's a party and has pushed his way in.

Occasionally we hear snatches of what Jesus is saying. Something about the first being last and the last first. The man he's talking to looks surprised; he wants to believe it but isn't yet sure he can.

But at the back of the crowd, where we're standing, there are other voices. What on earth is he up to now? Isn't he supposed to be a prophet? Isn't he telling people about God's kingdom? Doesn't that mean being holy, not messing around with the rabble? And if he's teaching people to call God 'Father,' doesn't he know that sons are supposed to obey their Father's commandments? He's just a glutton and a drunkard like them – and the scriptures warned us about teachers like that!

Eventually Jesus looks up, and glances around the room towards the whisperers. The talking dies down as people wait to see what he's going to say. All right, you want to know why there's a party? You want to know how it is with fathers and sons? And out it comes: a masterpiece, one of the greatest stories ever told, echoing the ancient stories of those other ill-starred brothers, Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, and particularly Esau and Jacob. The son who runs away in trouble and comes back to find resentment. But all with a new twist. Something new is going on, right here, right now, and a party is the only possible response. 'Resurrection' is happening right under your noses, and you can't see it. 'This my son – this your sibling – was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.'

Pray: Imagine you are at a party like the one here. It's happening in the local pub. One of the regulars has just had a very good win on the horses. He's invited all his friends, and all the other regulars, for a really good evening.

There is Jesus, right in the middle of it all. He turns and looks at you, standing by the door. 'Yes,' his eyes seem to say, 'and what about you? Come on in and join the fun.'

Talk to God about how that makes you feel, and what it makes you think.

FRIDAY 10.08.2021

Read: Luke 15:4-10 <https://bit.ly/3oV6QtI>

Reflect: So: what was it about the sheep that was so special? Was it the shepherd's favorite? Was it a young lamb he'd always treated like a pet? Did it have a particular bleat that he could always pick out when he listened to the flock, and would always make him smile when he heard it? Did it have a particularly fine woolly fleece, which he knew would fetch a good price at the next shearing? No. None of those. There was only one thing about the lost sheep that drove the shepherd to go looking for it. And that was simply the fact that it was lost. Nothing more, nothing less.

All right, it's only a story: part of the set of Jesus' this-is-why-we're-having-a-party stories. But, like most of Jesus' stories, this one connects with what goes on in people's heads when they respond to him. So many of us secretly assume that there must be something special about this person, or that one, that makes Jesus go looking for them. Some people, brimful of self-confidence, always assume that they are one of the special ones. Others, with low self-esteem, always assume that it's the other people who are the special ones, and that they're somewhere in the back of the flock, unnoticed and unimportant.

But the point is that every single sheep is important to the shepherd, and when any one of them gets into difficulties he is especially concerned for them. That is the truth that's so hard to learn, both for those with self-confidence and for those without it.

This story not only connects with the personal thoughts and feelings of those who hear it, but also with passages in the Old Testament, where the picture of a shepherd searching for straying sheep is an image of the coming Messiah, and even of Godself. That's why there's a party: God is looking for lost sheep, and when God finds them the angels sing for joy!

As they do, also, for the lost coin. This is a particularly powerful image for a woman, especially in Jesus' culture. The ten coins may well have been part of a special set, perhaps her dowry. (There is some evidence of brides wearing a special headdress that included such coins.) Anyway, once more it's a good reason to celebrate, to have a party.

There's a sting in the tail of these little stories, in case anyone should think (as some people do today) that the whole point is simply Jesus' desire to include anybody and everybody. 'There is joy,' he says, 'among the angels in heaven when a sinner repents.' Jesus as the 'Prodigal Son' doesn't stroll home, whistling a cheerful tune, confident that his soft-hearted old father will take him back in, so the people with whom Jesus was celebrating were showing that they wanted their lives to change. By welcoming Jesus, they were inviting him to do in their moral and spiritual lives what he did for so many physically. Jesus welcomed sinners; but by the time he'd finished with them, they weren't sinners anymore.

Pray: *Lord, help us to celebrate your welcoming love, and to be transformed by it.*

SATURDAY 10.09.2021

Read: Luke 16 <https://bit.ly/3AtMGJl>

Reflect: This parable carries a health warning: 'Do Not Try This At Home.' Remember, it is after all a *parable*; it isn't advice on how to run a household. But what is it a parable *about*?

Jesus' first hearers would have had no problem answering that one. In their world, a story about a landowner and his steward, or manager, was almost certainly a story about God and Israel. And, granted what Jesus had been saying about needing to sit loose to the traditional Jewish attachments to family and land, this would make a whole lot of sense. The nation of Israel, as a nation, is going to find that God's purpose is moving ahead in a new direction, as always intended; but if they have been faithless to that overall intention, as Jesus is constantly warning that they have been, then they cannot presume that they will be God's 'steward' for ever and ever.

So what are they to do? 'You must figure out', Jesus is saying, 'how to make friends wherever you can. You're going to need them.' There may be a bit of 'local color' at this point in the story, because the amounts the steward knocks off the bill for his master's clients may correspond to the amount of interest charged for such loans. Jews weren't supposed to charge interest at all, but many did, and the steward had discovered a way of making friends while putting his master in a position where he

couldn't charge him for dishonesty without admitting that he himself had been engaging in illegal practices.

That well illustrates the murky world you get into when you start playing around with money and property. Do one shady deal and others will follow as a way of hushing things up, and before you know what's happened you're in over your head and can't get out. That's the point at which, after the parable, Jesus turns to serious warnings. These are things we need to take very, very seriously. But how?

Jesus has some questions for every generation, for each of his followers. Questions about priorities. Questions about people poorer than you. How are you going to listen to those questions, and answer them truthfully?

Pray: Take a walk (in your imagination) to your bank. Take Jesus with you. Chat to him, on the way, about how much money comes in, how big your overdraft is, which loans you hope to pay off, and all that. He will understand; he and Joseph used to be in business, after all. But he still has some questions.

Then, when you get to the bank, sit down in a private room with your manager, with Jesus beside you. Get the full bank statements from last year. Talk through them with Jesus.

Are there points you're tempted to gloss over, or bits you wish had been deleted in advance?

Lord Jesus, make me faithful in little things and great things, so that I may be faithful to your gift to me also.