

## **LIVING THE RELATIONSHIPS CHRIST CAME TO REDEEM**

### **(3) MARY: WHY ACCEPTANCE IS THE KEY**

Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:18-19

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(Loosely inspired by John Ortberg's book, *Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them*, Zondervan)

December 11, 2011

#### **PROLOGUE**

For Advent, I thought it would be instructive to pick some key Christmas story characters and then reflect on their lives using some of the ideas from John Ortberg's popular book, *Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them*. Already in this series we have examined two important facts: 1) God wants us to be connected to him and each other; and 2) We do not know how to do that in any kind of normal, healthy way. We may think of ourselves as normal and assume others should be as well. But we are not normal. No one is.

So how do people who are not normal, develop healthy relationships with God and others? A good place to start is with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and to consider why acceptance is the key.

#### **SCRIPTURE**

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, {27} to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. {28} And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." {29} But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. {30} The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. {31} And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. {32} He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. {33} He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." {34} Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" {35} The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. {36} And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. {37} For nothing will be impossible with God." {38} Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her (Luke 1:26-38 NRSV).

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. {19} Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly (Matthew 1:18-19 NRSV).

## **INTRODUCTION**

The angel Gabriel came to Mary of Nazareth and the first thing he did was call her “favored one.” If this had happened in modern times, he may have said something like, “Aren’t you the lucky one!” But however he said it, what he said next seemed to indicate that Mary was neither lucky nor favored. She was going to be an unwed mother-to-be in a culture that was decidedly down on that sort of thing. Odds were she would lose her fiancé, be shunned by society and live out her days in poverty.

Mary could have turned bitter over this turn of events but she did not. Instead, she had an attitude of acceptance. She accepted God’s claim upon her life and she had an open and accepting spirit toward others as exemplified in her treatment of Elizabeth. Here then is a pattern that can be helpful for us in our relationships. The Apostle Paul tells us:

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God (Rom 15:7 NIV).

## **1. THROW AWAY YOUR STONES**

The first step toward acceptance of others is to throw away your stones. There was an incident that took place as Jesus was teaching near the temple (John 8:1-11). The teachers of the law and Pharisees brought before him a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. Their intention was to set a trap for him which would cause him to become unpopular with the crowd and fall into disfavor with the Roman authorities. John Ortberg comments on this incident:

So they accuse this woman in an attempt to put [Jesus] on the spot and gather material against him. They do not have much joy in life, but they do find delight in accusing people they don't like. . . . At any rate, they bring her before Jesus: "She was caught red-handed. The law is very clear – stone her. What do you say?" They think to themselves, We've got him now. If he shows mercy, we get him for being soft on the law; if he says, "Stone her," the crowds will never forgive him. In addition . . . he would be in trouble with Rome.

Here is this woman-trembling with guilt and fear, wishing she could die, believing she is about to. But her accusers don't even see her. All they can

think is, "We've got him now." They stand there, with stones in their hands, just waiting for the word. Before we go on, before you judge them too quickly, let me ask you a question: Have you ever held a stone in your hand?

Of course, Ortberg is not referring to a literal stone. The "stone in the hand" refers to judgmental thoughts, self-righteous attitudes, impatient words, and bitter resentments. Have you ever held a stone in your hand?

Judy Larson tells about a time when she had a kidney stone and eventually she successfully passed the stone. Strangely enough, a few months later, her husband also passed a kidney stone. After his recovery, she went out of her way to remind him, "The Bible says, 'let she who is without sin pass the first stone!'"

Now Jesus did say *something* like that. He said, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone" (cf. John 8:7). It was his way of unmasking hypocrisy and a judgmental attitude. After he said it, the accusers began to go away, starting with those who were older.

Who among us is without sin? No one. So let's get rid of our stones. Let's learn to accept each other as Christ has accepted us.

## **2. ACCEPT GOD'S ACCEPTANCE OF YOU**

An important part of accepting others is accepting God's acceptance of us. Ortberg makes a troubling observation:

I have been in the church my whole life. I love the church. But I wonder sometimes: 'Why do churches produce so many stone throwers?'

Why indeed? Perhaps it is because stone throwers have never really accepted God's acceptance of them. They think they can't get to heaven unless they are "good enough." So in order to try to feel good enough they are quick to condemn those whom they believe are not so good. But this does not work. We cannot earn God's approval.

Christmas is associated with giving presents to one another. But in the hustle and bustle of the season we are liable to forget that God is the ultimate gift giver and everything we have we owe to him. We are like the college student who couldn't get home for Christmas, so he sends a set of cheap cuff links to his father with a note reading "Dear Dad: This isn't much, but it's all you could afford."

In this passage from Luke 1 the phrase "highly favored" renders a Greek word (kecharitomene) which has the same root as the words for "Greetings" (chaire), and

"favor" (charin, vs 30). Mary is "highly favored" because she is the recipient of God's grace. A similar combination of words occurs in Ephesians 1:6--"his glorious grace ... which he has freely given us." The grace in view here is that which is given all believers apart from any merit of theirs. Mary has "found favor with God" (vs 30); she is a recipient of his grace (vs 28), and she can therefore say, "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (vs 47).

The Apostle John puts it this way, "[It is] not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the means by which we are forgiven of all our sins" (1 John 4:10). And elsewhere we read, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16 NIV).

If you asked people if they believed that God is a God of mercy and grace, many would say yes. But they may not understand what they are agreeing to. For you see, mercy means NOT receiving what we DO deserve, namely, judgment. Grace means that we DO receive what we do NOT deserve, namely forgiveness and eternal life. The coming of Christ reveals to us that God is indeed a God of mercy and grace. And accepting God's acceptance of us makes it easier for us to accept others.

### **3. RADICAL ACCEPTANCE**

Accepting a person is not the same as approving everything the person does. Jesus accepted the woman who was brought before him but he also said to her, "Go and sin no more." Acceptance does not mean that an abused wife has to tolerate whatever suffering her spouse dishes out. Nor does acceptance of a person mean we refuse to confront that in them which could harm others and damage their own soul.

On the other hand, acceptance means more than just putting up with someone – there is no healing in that. Getting rid of our throwing stones is a good start. But people need more than just someone who will tolerate them. They want someone who will value them. Ortberg says:

Acceptance is an act of the heart. To accept someone is to affirm them that you think it's a very good thing they are alive. We communicate this in a hundred ways, but the most powerful way is to listen with patience and compassion.

Our actions can give life or destroy it. We have the ability to offer acceptance and love or judgment and condemnation. Mary chose the way of acceptance and love. May this be our way as well.

Jesus' acceptance is free and undeserved but it is also demanding. If we fully examine

our acceptance we will find ourselves in a new way of life. The same grace that frees us from the past seeks to keep us free in the future.

Here then is an amazing thing that Jesus teaches us. Radical acceptance does what judgmentalism, and condemnation, and self righteousness could never do: produce a changed life! Ortberg adds:

Imagine what might happen in your little world and my little world if we were to adopt the way of Jesus. What if we were to cease ever again attacking people's worth or holding them in contempt? Imagine becoming known as one who will never pick up a stone.

### **CONCLUSION**

Paul Tournier was a brilliant thinker and writer, perhaps the most influential Christian therapist of the twentieth century. Doctors from around the world traveled to his home in Geneva, Switzerland, to learn from him. "It is a little embarrassing for students to come over and study my 'techniques,' he once said, "because they always go away disappointed. All I do is accept people."