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## Misrepresenting God

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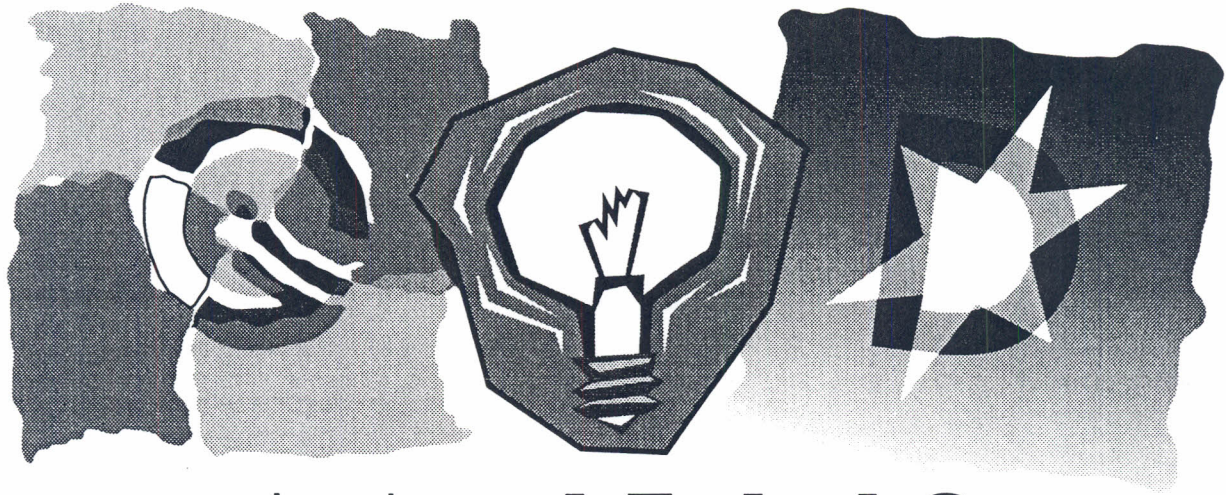
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# Misrepresenting



## Luke 15:1-10

By James Street

While I have no way of knowing for sure, I would think the most difficult part of being God is dealing with the ways people misrepresent you. I think of all those people who blame God for their own failures. I think of Adam, hiding in the garden, slinking around behind the bushes, searching for just the right leaf to cover himself, and pointing to God: “The woman *you put here with me*—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate” (Genesis 3:12).

I think of people who misrepresent God by somehow making God responsible for their stupidity. I think of a man I saw on CNN who stood beside his wrecked dream home, the one he built only a few hundred feet from the ocean, and how he chalked up the destruction to the last hurricane, which he called “an act of God.”

I think of all the humorous, supposedly “harmless” misrepresentations of God. I see the latest Frank and Ernest cartoon depicting God as bearded, balding, and befuddled as he watches his earth. I am reminded of the commercial that shows a housewife in her kitchen being shaken to the foundations by the booming voice of God because she dared use another drain cleaner than Drano. And I wonder whether such familiarity with God may in some way contribute to our contempt for God.

I do not know, but I would think that the hardest part of being God is having to put up with all of the ways in

which human beings misrepresent you. And I would think that what makes that doubly difficult is that you have gone to such ends to reveal your character. God used the Law, the nation of Israel, the words of the Prophets, the Christ, the church, and the scripture to display the divine nature to us, and yet we persist in misrepresenting God.

Jesus, the Son of God, contended with misrepresentations throughout his ministry. Many of these misrepresentations came from those who ordinarily were so careful and so precise to “get it all right.” The scribes and the Pharisees seem to have gone out of their way to paint the most inaccurate portraits of Jesus.

One time the scribes and Pharisees noted how the tax collectors and “sinners” flocked to Jesus. They saw them lean forward and strain to hear every word Jesus spoke. And they said, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:1-2).

Of course, they were correct in that assessment. Jesus did eat with the hated tax collectors and sinners. He did show them hospitality. The scribes and Pharisees misrepresented Jesus not in fact, but in tone. “How can this man be who he claims to be? Indeed, how can this man even be thought of as a decent rabbi when he welcomes and dines with such riffraff as this?” The scribes and Pharisees could not imagine a good rabbi doing such things. How could



they imagine the Messiah living this way? “Certainly God does not bless the work of a man who surrounds himself with such ‘no-accounts’! Why, God would be careful of the company he kept!”

The scribes and Pharisees had no difficulty seeing themselves in the company of God!

Jesus was never one to pass up an opportunity to correct such misrepresentations. Jesus seemed to go out of his way to display a God willing to disrupt a well-ordered worship service (Luke 4:16–29; 13:10–17). He showed a God who placed more emphasis on healing the sick than on maintaining decorum at the supper table (Luke 14:1–14). Why, at times Jesus depicted a God who can be rather rollicking, if not downright rude, by the world’s standards; a God who does not mind disrupting the self-serving order of our lives.

So when Jesus heard these scribes and Pharisees misrepresent him, he told a couple of stories designed to set the record straight. He asked his hearers to consider a conundrum. “Suppose a man has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?”

Everyone, including the scribes and Pharisees, nodded.

“And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home and calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’” Again everyone nodded. A few smiled. “Sheep are important. Valuable creatures to a shepherd. I could see a shepherd doing that. Couldn’t you see that? Oh yes, I could see that.”

“Well, I’m telling you,” Jesus continued, “in the same way, there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one *sinner* who repents than over the ninety-nine righteous persons who ‘do not need’ to repent.”

“What? I thought we were talking about sheep,” the scribes muttered.

“And what did you mean by that last crack?” said the Pharisees.

“Or, suppose a woman has ten drachma, each one signifying about a day’s wages cleaning rooms at the Holiday Inn, and she loses one. Does she not get out a flashlight and look under the couch? Doesn’t she get a broom and sweep everywhere? Doesn’t she toss cushions and lift lamps and look under rugs until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Now the text does not say as much, but I can assure you that Jesus’ words, like all of the words of God, did not return to him empty. You could see the eyes of the publicans light up, and you could see the toothless smiles of the sinners spread across their faces. And you could see by the way the scribes and Pharisees turned up their noses that they smelled something foul. To sinners, the word of Christ is good news, and they know it. But to scribes and Pharisees, that the news is good is not so obvious.

The stories Jesus told to correct the misrepresentations of the scribes and Pharisees presented a God they would have found offensive. Psalm 23 notwithstanding, depicting God as shepherd in that day would have been a little risky. After all, shepherds, albeit an important part of the economy of the day, were by virtue of their occupation chronically unclean. To say that God was like a shepherd, at least to those scribes and Pharisees, would have implied that God was something of a dumpster-diving rag-picker.

And to compare God to a woman! Well, that was just wrong. Why, those scribes and Pharisees remembered their morning prayer: “I thank you Lord of heaven and earth that you did not create me a Gentile or a slave or a woman!” And, of course, would have implied by that how glad they were that God himself was also not a Gentile, slave, or woman.

As if it were not enough to compare God to second-class citizens, Jesus went on to claim that this God really loves the riffraff. Why did the shepherd go after the sheep? Because the shepherd valued his sheep. Because of the joy of recovering that which was lost. Why did the woman search so diligently for the coin? Because she placed such value on that money. And why did she rejoice with her friends when she found it? Because of her joy in recovering that which was lost.

But then the old Pharisee might have held up his hand and said, “Now wait a minute there, Jesus. I thought God loved righteous folks. I thought God preferred to be among the self-made, the self-disciplined, the self-possessed; the ones who are able and willing to get themselves up in the morning and do what needs doing. God punishes sinners but loves the righteous.”

To be sure, God loves everybody. But I guess God sort of figures that if you can attain to your own righteousness, then you don’t have much need for him. You might say God gets real excited when he finds someone who needs him.

Do you see why the publicans’ eyes lit up and why the sinners smiled? They did not think anyone cared for them. Why, the very presence of the scribes and Pharisees al-



ways reminded them of their place. They assumed, with “those in the know,” that God prefers the company of the elite. They had no idea that God prefers the company of the lost. What joy they felt in hearing that the angels rejoiced when the shepherd-God bore upon his shoulders the one who was lost. How ecstatic they felt to learn that the woman-God held in her hand one coin which had been lost.

And do you see why the scribes and Pharisees looked as if they had smelled a skunk? Jesus exposed their self-righteous rags and, in effect, told them that if they intended be found, they had better get lost!

To those who believed God to be as elitist as they were, Jesus portrayed a God who looked more like a second-class citizen. To those who thought God preferred the fellowship of the found, Jesus displayed a God who partied with the lost. But not only that—Jesus went on to show God as a God of joy.

Now I cannot say for sure, but I would guess that if you asked a scribe or Pharisee to describe God in twenty-five words or less, you would not find the word “joy” in his description. “Severe?” Perhaps. “Stringent?” Maybe “Authoritarian?” I suspect so. But “Joyful?” I doubt it. People whose whole lives are built around their own capacities to make themselves have a hard time understanding the joy of God in finding the lost.

But Jesus seems very clear that the God whom he knew as “Abba” was indeed a God of joy. A God who, for the joy of the find, goes in search of the lost. This God is a shepherd who rejoices (and that in the company of the joyful) when he finds the lost lamb. This God is a woman who parties with her neighbors when she finds one lost coin even when she still had nine others to spend.

God’s joy is what makes repentance possible. When you are lost and yet somehow come to realize that God comes looking for you when s/he could just as easily have left you lost, you cannot help but repent. For this God is not a God who demands that you “get yourself together” before s/he will come looking for you. This God comes looking for you *when* you are lost, lost and nothing but lost. What does a sheep know about being lost? Does a quarter tucked deeply beneath the cushions of the couch have any idea of its condition? Of course not. God comes looking for us when we do not even know we are lost. “While we were yet sinners Christ died for us!”

So one day when we are just minding our own business, something happens. Through some word, some act, some seemingly trivial circumstance, we are lifted up and carried home. But why? Why does God feel such joy in finding us?

Because God loves us.

Many of us grew up with images of God as an angry God just waiting to obliterate us in the fires of hell. Some of us grew up believing that the whole point of the Christian faith is to make us feel guilty—or for us to use to make someone else feel guilty. Some of us grew up believing that the point of Christian faith is to make us ashamed.

Now, I’m here to tell you there is something to be said for guilt, especially when we are guilty. (And we are!) And there is something to be said for shame when we ought to feel shame. (And sometimes we should!) And there is something to be said for remembering the anger of God.

But there is also something to be said for the God who loves us so much, who values us so much, that for the simple joy of finding us s/he would go out and hunt for us. There is something to be said for the God who, having found us, bears us home on God-broad shoulders.

*“What wondrous love is this!”*

Jesus would have the scribe and Pharisee among us—indeed, the scribe and Pharisee *within* us—to know that God is not the God of the elite or the self-made. God is not the God of those of us who would stand off to the side and pass judgments on sinners as if they were somehow other than ourselves. God is not the God of those who would judge themselves righteous by the distance they keep from those they would deem unrighteous.

God is the God of the lost. God is the God of the outcast. God is the God of those who know themselves as hopeless. God is the God who, in embracing us, longs for our embrace.

The scribes and Pharisees “misrepresent God.” God would not “associate with publicans and sinners.” But Christ, who does, says otherwise. And if we would truly be known by this God, this Christ, we must find ourselves among the lost—that is, if God would be *our* God.

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