

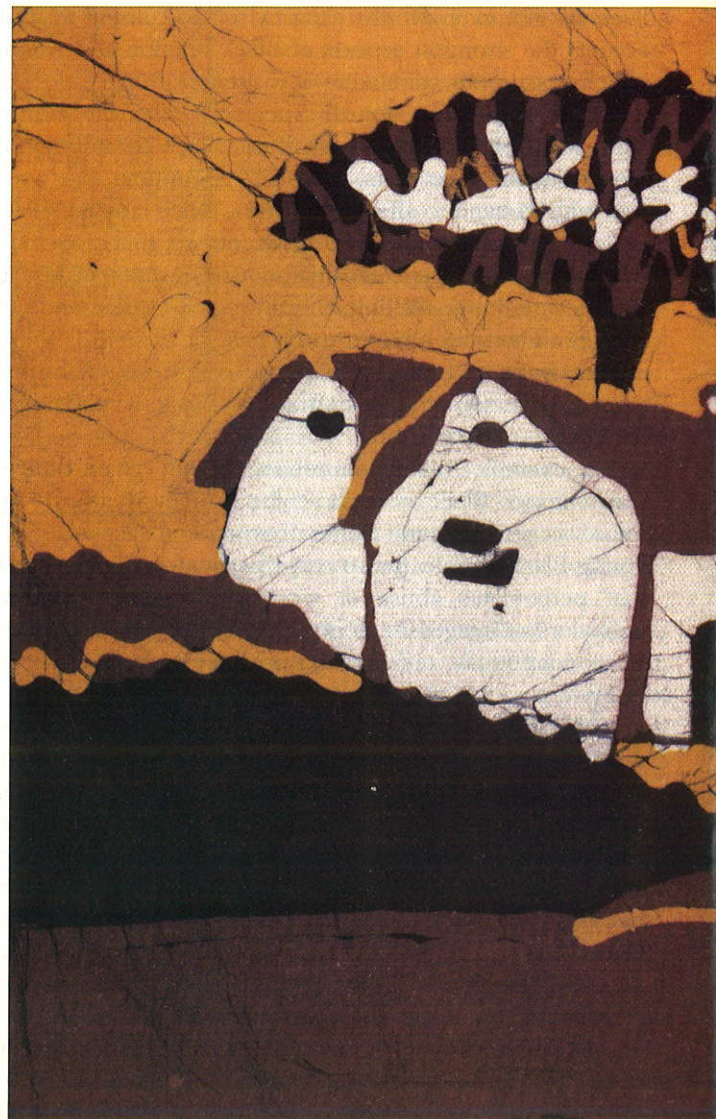
The Prodigal Embrace

Christ
frees us
from
obeying
the rules

RIDING HOME FROM CHURCH when I was six years old, I looked disdainfully at people mowing their lawns. I had learned that Christians did not work on Sunday. I don't recall anyone at church actually telling me that people who mowed their lawns on Sundays were reprobates, but I viewed them that way. Not only did they perform forbidden tasks on the Lord's day—they obviously had not gone to church. This provided me a clear, concrete way of labeling some people as non-Christians.

At the age of six, I was already involved in an important function of religion. By observing those who mowed lawns on Sunday, I could draw a neat line between those who belonged to my religion and those who did not. Religion gave me the security of knowing that I was "in."

Pharisees did not have lawn mowers, but they, too, had a number of ways to draw lines between themselves and "sinners." One major distinction was in the eating of meals. The Pharisees bought food only from those who tithed. They also tithed the food they bought. They carefully followed rules to purify themselves and the food. To ensure the purity of



the meal, sinners were excluded from the table, and the Pharisees were careful to provide clean clothes for non-Pharisee guests.

Jesus came into a society of clearly delineated religious and social boundaries and blurred them. He shocked sinners and tax collectors by inviting them to share a meal with him, and he frustrated the Pharisees by refusing to operate by the system's rules.

If Jesus had refused to eat with the Pharisees, then he would have merely redefined the in-out boundaries, showing how the lines were drawn improperly. But Jesus ate with tax collectors as well as Pharisees. He demonstrated that the line-drawing itself was wrong and refused to enter into the game of boundary drawing and separation. In doing so, he called the entire system into question.

WHEN THE PHARISEES grumbled about his inclusion of "sinners," Jesus responded with three parables—the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son.

The parables of the sheep and the coin make two points. First, when something that has been lost is found, celebration is in order. Second, the "lost" are a priority. Sheep and coins that are not lost do not demand the effort of those

that are. Jesus says that he needs to seek the lost, the sinners. He invites the Pharisees to recognize this need and to rejoice with him when sinners have repented.

The parable of the prodigal son builds on these themes of seeking and celebration. Yet it goes further to challenging the Pharisaical distinction between righteous believers and sinners. While the parable reflects the reality that one group adhered to the law and another ignored it, there is no clear-cut dividing line between the groups.

In the parable, the younger son starts his waywardness by seeking his inheritance. Although the concept of dividing an inheritance before death would not have shocked the listeners, the fact that the son asked for it would have. Those hearing the story would interpret the son's request as a wish for his father's demise. People of that time would also recognize that the elder brother was no model son. He should have refused to accept his portion in protest. Custom also demanded that he take on the role of reconciler between his father and brother. Yet he remained silent.

"Not long after, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country, and there squandered his wealth in wild living" (Luke 15:13). The son left quickly not only because he looked forward to adventure, but because



he probably felt uncomfortable in his hometown. Asking for the inheritance and selling his inherited land no doubt caused many in the village to disapprove of him.

Later, when he found himself a starving hireling feeding pigs (a job of such religious impurity it must have bothered even a wild-living believer), the younger son contemplated returning home. He doubtless remembered the ostracism of the village, but his situation was desperate enough to risk the reception of both his father and the village.

He recognized that his father had no obligation to help him. He had already received, and wasted, all he could expect from his father. But he hoped his father would at least hire him.

His return would have been conspicuous. Typically, farming communities of the era constructed the houses at the center of town with the fields surrounding them. He doubtless returned walking down "Main Street," past the staring, taunting eyes of the villagers. His father was "filled with compassion for him. He ran to his son." We think nothing of the father running, but in that culture, men wore flowing robes, and they did not run. To run was humiliating, a detail surely not lost on Jesus' listeners.

THE FATHER demonstrates his love and acceptance in a number of ways: an embrace, a kiss, a robe, a ring, sandals, and a verbal naming of relationship ("this son of mine"). Then, interestingly enough, he shares a meal to communicate acceptance. This powerful demonstration of persistent love is rightfully used to show the deep forgiveness God offers us.

The parable could have ended there. And yet it is designed to illustrate more. When the older brother returns from the fields, he is surprised to discover the celebration. A servant tells him of his brother's return. Angry, he refuses to take part in the party, and when his father entreats him, he retorts: "Look, all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son, who has squandered your property with prostitutes, comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!" (15:29-30).

The oldest son's refusal to enter the house is a serious transgression of social code. At such a banquet, he was expected to move among the guests, offer compliments, and make sure everyone had enough to eat. Just as we save our family arguments until the guests leave, the older son

should have entered the house, performed his role, and resolved the problem with his father in private later. His refusal gave his father grounds for anger and punishment of his public insolence. Instead, the father entreats the son to join them. "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we have to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:28-32).

For the second time that day, the father bears public humiliation and demonstrates unexpected love. His oldest son's response is curt, bereft even of the title of respect his reprobate younger brother used to address his father. The

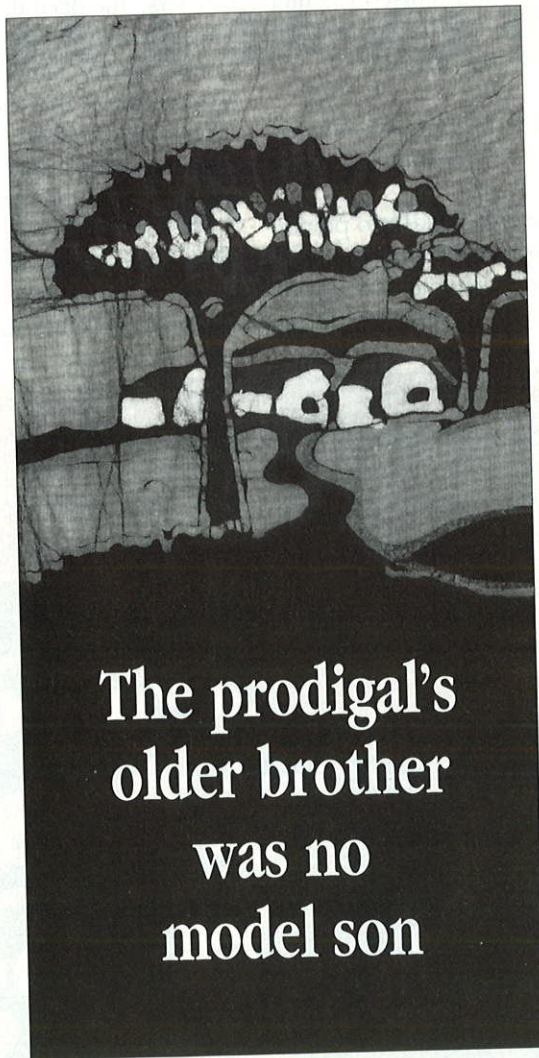
older son uses language that places him outside the family unit, referring to himself as a slave instead of the heir, calling his brother "this son of yours." Even as he speaks, he demonstrates disregard for his father and their relationship.

The father persists in his vision of restoring their relationship. He uses a title, points out that all he has belongs to this son, and reiterates the relationship between the two brothers: "this brother of yours was dead and is alive again." While the father could well have ordered the son to enter the house, put on a good face, and fulfill his mandated role, and while the son probably would have acquiesced, the father seeks a son, not a servant. He wants him to join the celebration as part of the family.

Jesus did not tell us what the older brother did. How did he respond to this love? In effect, the ending poses a question for the listening Pharisees. Jesus, like the father, neither ignores the Pharisees nor reacts to them in anger. He pleads with them to join the celebration.

The parable communicates love and forgiveness to the tax collectors and sinners who could identify with the shame of the younger son. It assures them of God's embrace. But for the Pharisees and teachers of the law, it was a challenge to recognize the negative effects of the lines they drew—on themselves and on others. Whether they accepted the embrace waiting for them is not certain.

WITH HIS ACTIONS and his teachings, Jesus made it clear that he did not support the prejudice and condemnation that goes with drawing lines. He also attacked lines because such barriers led those excluded by them to misunderstand God. These lines communicate that human



behavior, not God's grace, is the foundational issue of faith. They tell us we must act a certain way to get "in."

For those inside the lines, who accept the notion that because of their efforts they are separate, holy, and in good standing with God, the temptation to resist God's grace is even greater. Their own security dulls them to any present need for that grace.

Recent scholarship has redeemed the Pharisees a bit, showing that they had sincere aims based on a balanced theology. But the intangible power of religion took advantage of their human desire for security and clear definition and caused them to turn their faith into religious code and to draw damaging, exclusive lines.

The distinction between faith in God and participation in religion is a critical one. Religion is rooted in human efforts to obtain God's favor and to achieve status and acceptance with other humans. Christian faith is rooted in God's action. Religion is humans reaching up to God. Christian faith, as seen in the parable of the prodigal son, is God coming down to humans. Religion depends on rules and boundary lines to separate and define. Christian faith offers love and acceptance.

Like the Pharisees, evangelicals like myself possess a theology based in God's grace. In reality, however, we also draw religious boundary lines. We must look critically at how we draw them and why, and at whether they are Christ's intent.

SINCE PASSING JUDGMENT on my lawn-mowing neighbors at six years old, I have progressed. In high school, the lines I drew gave me clear confirmation that I was "in." In contrast to those around me at work and school, I did not cheat on tests, steal on the job, drink, dance, swear, smoke, or do drugs.

When I met some Christians who drank and danced at college, however, I faced a dilemma. My defined religion told me that these people could not be Christians. In other ways, though, I recognized their faith to be more mature than my own. I had to either change my definition of a Christian or refuse to accept these friends as Christians. I opted to enlarge my definition. I returned home and challenged my parents and the traditions they represented as legalistic.

In the next seven years, I encountered ways other Christians were off the mark. I embraced new expressions of Christian discipleship: simple lifestyle, total commitment, gifts of the Spirit, and commitment to social justice. I thought I had come a long way from high-school legalism until I sat in a Bible class and watched the teacher put my life on the board.

He drew a line that angled uphill: "Many evangelical students see their life as a progression from the legalism of their youth to a more mature Christianity which stresses issues of lifestyle, justice, and explores authentic Christianity. It appears that they have moved forward." Then he drew a circle and wrote *legalism, simple lifestyle, freedom to drink, and issues of justice* at different points. "They move along, but they are not going anywhere. They just exchange one legalism for another."

I had used my "broadening" of faith perspective in the same way I used the legalism I was born into: to draw lines between myself and others. My Christian religion now included concern for the poor, realization that those who consumed alcohol (and even Catholics) could be Christians, a critical attitude toward U.S. foreign policy in Central America, and a whole new understanding of the meaning of the kingdom of God.

My beliefs had changed, but I was as firmly in the grasp of religion as ever. I had torn down one house and built another that looked so different I never realized that the foundation was the same.

IN ONE SENSE, I was worse off than in my youth. In high school, I knew only the religious code I had been raised on, and I called that code faith. In college, I began to see the difference between faith and religion, recognizing elements of legalism. But believing I had put legalism and religion behind me made it even harder for me to recognize how I had now taken valid aspects of biblical faith and made them into a religion.

Jesus did not shun all elements of Jewish religion. He spoke in synagogues and went to the temple. Jesus' radical attack on religion lay in his indifference to religion. He deflated the force of religion not by shunning religious activity, but by refusing to let religious boundary lines have authority in his life. He ate with both the righteous and the sinners. He refused to grant religious practices and customs a great deal of importance and certainly did not see them as the only, the right way, to God.

Like Jesus, we should treat religion with certain indifference. Ironically, if we instead seek to come clean of religion and do away with it, we remain in its control. The very struggle to become clean in that way is itself religious.

Jesus did not ask the Pharisees to come clean of religion, but rather to join the prodigal and recognize anew their fundamental need of God's mercy. The cornerstone of religious codification is self-righteousness. To admit that one is not righteous and to ask for God's mercy releases the grip of religion. God's loving embrace allows one to live free of the pressures of religious boundary lines. Erasing these lines opens the possibility of greater community. With God, there is room at the dinner table for Pharisees, tax collectors, and sinners.

In that Bible class, my eyes were opened and I saw how deeply in need of God's mercy I was. I recognized that I am welcomed into the kingdom by God's initiative, not my own.

Like the prodigal, I can fall into the embrace of God.

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The batik on pages 12 and 13 was designed and hand-made by young women working with **INTER-MISSION**, an evangelical organization based in Madras, India. In addition to batik work, the women are trained in sewing and tailoring for local orphanages.