

Love in Difficult Times

Lesson for March 5, 2023

Unit I: Called from the Margins of Society

Scriptural Background: Luke 15:11-32

Printed Text: Luke 15:11-24

Key verse: *The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'* (Luke 15:21, NIV)

A young man had secretly misappropriated several hundred dollars from his employer. When the shortage was discovered, he was called to the office of the senior partner. Immediately he knew he would be fired and would have to go to prison. When asked if he were guilty, he replied he was. Then the executive surprised him. "If I keep you in your present capacity, can I trust you in the future?"

"Yes, sir, you surely can. I've learned my lesson," was the employee's reply.

"I'm not going to press charges, and you can continue your present responsibilities," said the employer. "I think you ought to know, however, that you are the second man in this firm who succumbed to temptations but was shown leniency. I was the first. What you have done is done.

The mercy you are receiving I received. It is only the grace of God that can keep us both." The grace of God. The love that God has for each of us what keeps life going. Our lesson this week concerns the grace, the love, the mercy of God. It is about our God and how he accepts us; receives us and loves us.

Key Terms

1. **Gentile** – Person who is not Jewish. The word stems from the Hebrew term *goy*, which means a "nation." The term Gentile doesn't really describe who someone is, but rather who they are not – a Jew. A Gentile is one belonging to any nation or people group other than the Jewish people group.
2. **Parable** – A simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson. It is a succinct, didactic story, in prose or verse, that illustrates one or more instructive lessons or principles. It differs from a fable in that fables employ animals, plants, inanimate objects, or forces of nature as characters, whereas parables have human characters.
3. **Prodigal** – One who spends or gives lavishly and foolishly. : one who has returned after an absence.

Lesson Background

Ancient testimony is unanimous that Luke (“the beloved physician,” Colossians 4:14), penned the third Gospel. Luke dedicated his works to “most excellent Theophilus” (literally “lover of God”, 1:3; compare Acts 1:1). This designation, which may be a nickname or a pseudonym, is accompanied by a formal address (“most excellent”), possibly signifying that “Theophilus” was a well known Roman dignitary, perhaps one of those who had turned to Christ in “Caesar’s household” (Philippians 4:22). It is almost certain however, that Luke envisioned a much broader audience for his work than this one man.

Luke expressly stated that his knowledge of the events recorded in his gospel came from the reports of those who were eyewitnesses (1:1-2), strongly implying that he himself was not an eyewitness. It is clear from his prologue that his aim was to give an ordered account of the events of Jesus’ life, but this does not mean he always followed a strict chronological order in all instances.

Chapter 15 is a collection of three parables highlights the lost among us: a lost animal (sheep), money, and a child (son).

They include two living creatures and one object of exchange necessary for living. Jesus deploys the parables because of the Pharisees and their scribes in his audience who object to Jesus’ regular and intimate association with so-called “sinners and tax collectors.” Yet if the Pharisees and scribes view “sinners and tax collectors” as lost, then all the more reason they should celebrate rather than complain about the time Jesus spends with them (verses 6-7).

Jesus has come to call to repentance those who recognize they are spiritually ill to the degree that they need a physician (5:31), and to raise the consciousness of the self-righteous who think they have no need of repentance. Some Pharisees and their scribes fail to see their own lostness.

People who only do good toward and love those who love them must change course and learn to love those they perceive to be enemies and “tax collectors and sinners” (6:32-36). Some Pharisees publicly demonstrate piety but are greedy, wicked, hypocritical, and neglect the justice and love of God (11:39, 42-43).

Perhaps the many times Jesus eats with the Pharisees and their scribes demonstrates both their comradery and his concern for their lostness (5:27-30; 7:36; 11:37-38; 14:1). We should rejoice that “sinners” like us are welcomed in the company of Jesus, who facilitates repentance. Sometimes or too often Christian identity is predicated on the ideological and theological construction of a group of people we can perpetually and consistently identify as “other” or “sinners.” We identify ourselves based on who we believe or convince ourselves we are **not**; we are not *them*. Christian white supremacy and nationalism, for example, makes such claims. “Sinners and tax collectors” are a problem for certain Pharisees and scribes at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem where he will be crucified (5:29-32; 7:33-50; 9:51).

The three parables share a common structure: (a) something or someone considered valuable is characterized as out of place or lost, (b) it or he is found, brought, or returns home, (c) the owner, friends, family, and neighbors celebrate that what was lost is found. A relationship is restored. Common language and themes are: lost (*apolesa*), home (*oikos/oikia*), found (*euron*), friends (*philoi/philas*), neighbors, community celebration, and joy over one sinner who repents.

In the first parable a certain human (*anthropos*)¹ discovered that out of one hundred sheep, one strayed from the fold. Thus, he leaves the ninety-nine together in the wilderness to bring the other one home (*oikos*) (verses 3-6). The one lost sheep drifted from the fold and thus is in greater danger. Home should be a safe place for those that stray and those that stay. When the shepherd finds the one lost sheep, he calls his friends (*philoi*) and neighbors—his community—together to celebrate (verse 6). Community is a place where we can lose and recover, without judgment.

In the second parable, Jesus asks what woman who earned ten drachmas, representing ten days of labor, would not light a lamp, take a broom, and frantically sweep the entire house (*oikia*) to find the one missing drachma (verse 8)? That one drachma equals a day of hard labor. When she finds it, she summons her sister friends (*philas*) and neighbors to celebrate with her (verse 9). The money is what she needs to remain sheltered or feed her household. She and her family will suffer if the coin remains lost.

The physical and spiritual are experientially connected. The personal is political; the domestic and public are interconnected, as some of the Pharisees and their scribes' critique of Jesus' dinner company demonstrates (for example, 5:27-30). The woman with the lost coin, unlike the father whose son left home, is not wealthy. The woman cannot risk that the coin will show up on its own. Her wellbeing and that of her household depends on retrieving the lost coin. The lost ones in our homes and in our global neighborhoods impact all of us. If we cannot see our lostness as connected with the lostness of others (economically, spiritually, physically), we will likely work less diligently for a quality of life, justice, and love for others.

Lesson in Depth

I. The Dishonorable Son (Luke 15:11-19)

Give me the portion of goods that falleth to me: A shocking request, tantamount to saying he wished his father were dead. He was not entitled to any inheritance while his father still lived. Yet the father graciously fulfilled the request, giving him his full share, which would have been one-third of the entire estate, because the right of the firstborn (Deuteronomy 21:17), gave the elder brother a double portion.

This act pictures all sinners (related to God the Father by creation), who waste their potential privileges and refuse any relationship with Him, choosing instead a life of sinful self-indulgence.

We can see in this the fact that God has made us a free agent. If it is our will to leave, He will not stop us. God wants our love and loyalty because we desire to give it, not because we are forced too. This son really wants to do his own thing. He rebels against authority at home and wants to be his own boss.

Gathered all together: The prodigal son evidently took his share in liquid assets and left, abandoning his father, and heading into a life of iniquity.

Riotous living: Not merely wasteful extravagance, but also wanton immorality (see verse 30). The Greek word for “loose” means “dissolute,” or “wasteful,” and conveys the idea of an utterly debauched lifestyle.

This journey here is like the journey we take through life. Some people, like the older brother, never wander into a life of sin. They are saved at a very early age and remain a Christian all their lives. This is not true with the young brother. He wants the things of the world and follows that way of life, never thinking of loyalty to the father. We all have an inheritance; some of us lose it by choosing the world.

When he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in the land: The son was completely to blame for the wasteful, foolish living and spending. He was not to blame for the severe famine, but was afflicted by it nevertheless.

He began to be in want: Driven by hunger and need, the son accepted work that was unacceptable and offensive to any righteous Jewish person because swine were unclean under the law (Leviticus 11:7).

To feed swine: This was the worst sort of degradation imaginable for Jesus’ Jewish audience; swine were the worst sort of unclean animals.

Would fain have filled his belly with the husks: Carob pods, used to feed swine but virtually indigestible for humans. In other words, the only reason he did not eat the same food as the swine is that he could not.

No man gave unto him: No one gave him anything: The misery of the prodigal son moves our sympathy. Yet his misery drove him to the good resolution described in the following verse. He could not even eke out a living by begging. His situation could hardly have been more desperate. Thus, he symbolizes the estranged sinner who is helplessly in despair. Sin and worldliness lead to desperation. Suddenly, he finds himself in serious trouble with no father to help him. He looks to the world for answers to the problems and winds up in even worse shape. The world has only selfish motives for giving him a job.

For a Hebrew to feed unclean swine would be a very degrading job. He was hungry, dirty, and had no one to look to for help. This is the way most of us are before we turn to the Lord for help.

Came to himself: In his misery the prodigal son was finally able to think clearly. Before it might be said that he wasn’t really himself and thought as another man; then he came to himself. In his rebellion and disobedience, he wasn’t himself. “In his years of riot he was not himself. It was not the prodigal who was the real man. The real man was the penitent, not the prodigal.” (Morrison)

In his clear thinking he didn't think of how to improve conditions in the pigpen. He didn't blame his father, his brother, his friends, his boss, or the pigs. He recognized his misery without focusing on it, and instead focused on his father. When his incessant sinning had left him utterly bankrupt and hungry, he was able to think more clearly in that condition, he was a candidate for salvation.

I will arise and go to my father: Jesus didn't say that the man thought of his village or his home, but of his father. When the son returned to the father, he also came back to the village and to the house; but his focus was on returning to his father. That is how we need to come back to God – to come back to Him first and foremost, before coming back to church or coming back to Christian friends.

Will say unto him: He carefully contemplated what he would say and counted the cost of his repentance (verse 19).

Sinned against heaven: A euphemism; meaning he had sinned against God. He not only realized the futility of his situation, but he also understood the gravity of his transgressions against the father.

And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants: This son has found no answers to his problems in this world. He has fallen about as far as you can go, and there is only one way left and that is up. We see a man with a repentant heart. He wants to confess that he has made a mess of his life and that he is willing to do anything his father asks to get back into good graces with him.

You know everything in the world is God's creation. We all belong to Him. It seems that nearly everyone has to hit bottom as this son did before they will repent and ask God into their lives. Here, this son is making the father his Lord, as well.

The lost son *demonstrated* the repentance Jesus specifically spoke of in the previous parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. After his misery, he thought completely differently about his father, himself, and his home. The son asked for two things: First, "Father, *give me*;" then, "Father, *make me*." Only the second request brought joy.

II. The Compassionate Father (Luke 15:20-24)

And he arose and came to his father: The prodigal first *thought*; but he didn't stop at thinking. He didn't just feel sorry and think about repenting; he actually did it.

"He did not go back to the citizen of that country and say, 'Will you raise my wages? If not, I must leave.' Had he negotiated he would have been lost; but he gave his old master no notice, he concerned his indentures by running away. I would that sinners here would break their league with death, and violate their covenant with hell, by escaping for their lives to Jesus, who receives all such runaways." (Spurgeon)

But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion: The father's love waited and never forgot. It was a love that fully received, not putting the son on probation. This was especially remarkable because the son had disgraced the family by his prodigal living. "The depth of the son's repentance is matched only by the depth of the father's love." (Pate)

Ran and fell on his neck and kissed him: The intensity of the father's reception was indicated by the fact that he **ran** (unusual for grown men in those cultures) and that he repeatedly **kissed him** (indicated by the original grammar, according to Morris). The father's eagerness and joy at his son's return is unmistakable. This is the magnificent attribute of God that sets Him apart from all the false gods invented by men and demons. He is not indifferent or hostile, but a Savior by nature, longing to see sinners repent and rejoicing when they do.

Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight: The son began to recite his prepared speech; yet it seemed that the father didn't even hear it. Instead, he commanded that the prodigal youth be treated like a son, and not like a servant. Note that the son did not get to finish his rehearsed words of repentance before the father interrupted to grant forgiveness. This pictures God's eagerness to forgive. We see here, the son repents with everything in him. He confesses that he is not worthy to receive forgiveness.

The father said: Without a single word of rebuke for the past, the father pours out his love for the son, and expresses his joy that what was lost had been found. Each of the father's gifts said something unique about his acceptance of the son:

Robe: Reserved for the guest of honor. The best robe the Christian can receive is the white linen robe of righteousness. It shows that we are in right standing with God. We receive it not because we deserve it, but because He loved us and forgave us.

Ring: A symbol of authority.

Sandals: These were not usually worn by slaves, and therefore signified his full restoration to sonship.

The fattened calf: Reserved only for the most special of occasions, a sacrifice or a feast of great celebration.

None of the four things brought to the repentant prodigal were necessities; they were all meant to honor the son and make him know he was loved. The father did much more than merely meet the son's needs. All this (verses 22-23) symbolizes the lavishness of salvation's blessings (Ephesians 1:3; 2:4-7).

Let us eat and be merry: It was a happy thing to find the lost sheep and the lost coin. It was much more happy to find the lost son. They had a wonderful party with special clothing, jewelry, and food. It wasn't just finding a lost son; it was as if he were back from the dead.

For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found: This son was dead in trespasses and sins and is alive forevermore. This is something to be merry about. We see in this ring that he is now family. We see in the shoes that he must walk in this salvation he has acquired as a free gift.

Lesson Summary

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is one of the well-known parables of Jesus and teaches us life lessons for a beautiful Christian journey.

1. **God is forgiving and merciful.** God rejoices when sinners, the lost, and backsliders return. Essentially, God doesn't hold our past against us, and He patiently awaits our return. *"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* (Romans 5:8)
2. **God's character and love is consistent.** Since the Old Testament, He has always made a way to show people his love. And God continued to prove this love by sending his only son, Jesus Christ. The father of the prodigal demonstrates God's love to his son.
3. **Christians can cause their own problems.** The prodigal son had a good life. He was well taken care of and had an amazing family. However, that wasn't enough for him. The son still chose to pursue the world rather than righteousness, family, and stability.
4. **God is enough.** The biggest lie that many people believe is that God isn't enough. They search the world for people, objects, and riches to fill their needs. However, each person will eventually realize, like the prodigal that all that glitters isn't gold.
5. **You can't earn God's love.** Ultimately, God's love isn't conditional. It doesn't change based on what we do versus what we don't do. However, similar to the youngest son, when we sin and rebel, we choose to go into a strange land that is outside of God's kingdom. But God welcomes us with open arms when we repent and return.
6. **The world doesn't satisfy.** The thing of the world can never satisfy our longings. For instance, lust cannot be filled by gaining what you desire. Instead, the emptiness within your soul can only be filled with a relationship with God.
7. **Without God, we can enter a spiritual drought and famine.** When the son left his father's house, he lived on his riches for a while, but then he ran out. Then he encountered a rough existence. Similarly, when we stray from the Bible and God's voice we enter into a spiritual drought. Our souls are in constant need and without God, we will become thirsty. Without God, our thirst will cause us to seek people, objects, activities, and money to make us feel complete.

The main message of The Prodigal Son is that it doesn't matter how far we stray from our Heavenly Father or how much we squander the gifts he provides, he is always delighted when we turn back to him. His unconditional love is waiting for us to return home where he greets us with open arms. Every lost child (a sinner, meaning all of us) who is found (turns to God) is cause for the greatest celebration.

Finally, to see total life transformation, we must come to the end of ourselves and we must awaken to our righteousness that Christ died for us to have in Him!