

Parables

In our last lesson we focused on Luke 14, Jesus' teaching that we should associate with all kinds of people and should have friends among outcasts. At the end of Luke 14, in verse 35, Jesus said simply, "He who has ears to hear let him hear." Luke gives no indication of what anybody thought or said, or whether anybody agreed, or praised Him. The silent ending seems to indicate that they didn't really understand what He was saying. This relates to a technique of biblical interpretation called "uptake." When a person says something and another person who is there responds to it in a way that shows he gets the point, or that he is troubled or has questions, uptake has occurred. Jesus tells the parable in Luke 14 about associations, and the Pharisees' response in Luke 15 shows that uptake has *not* occurred.

In Luke 15:1, we see Jesus associating with tax collectors, and allowing sinners to gather around Him. The Pharisees mutter about the fact that Jesus welcomes sinners and allows them to eat with Him. He had just finished saying that we're suppose to associate with outcasts; who would be a better outcast than a sinner? But the Pharisees didn't really hear the parable. So they criticized His actions. Jesus gave them an answer in three phases. First, Jesus explained why He associated with sinners. He said, "Suppose one of you had a hundred sheep and at the end of the day, you came back and had 99. Wouldn't you look for the lost sheep? Yes, you would. So I'm just looking for lost sheep." To make the point even more clear He said, "There is rejoicing in heaven when one sinner who repents comes to faith, much more than over 99 righteous persons who don't need to repent. I'm looking for sinners."

Second, Jesus told another parable, the story of the lost coin: "What woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.'" Jesus told this story to show them that He was looking for lost things that are valuable—for lost sinners. He also pointed out that there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over every sinner who repents. A good shepherd would seek a lost sheep; a good housewife or homeowner would seek a lost \$100 bill.

Third, Jesus told the story that we've come to know as the parable of the prodigal son. It is truly the parable of the lost sons because there are two sons who get lost in this particular parable. We know the first son very well; we call him the prodigal, or the unrighteous son. He is tired of life at home, tired of the farm, tired of its predictability. So he asks his father to give him his share of the inheritance, which is like saying, "Dad, it's too bad you're not dead yet. But let's pretend you are: Give me the money now." Then he leaves with his money and sinfully abuses his inheritance. In verse 12, the Greek word that is used for the property is *he ousia*, coming from *ho bios* (think of the word "biology"). The father divides his property, literally his life, like our word "livelihood." This isn't just *some* money; this is what he has developed and earned and saved throughout his life, and it's what he needs to live on in the future.

The son takes that money, squanders it in wild living and is soon left with nothing. Then there is a famine, and he is in physical need, need that is so great that the only occupation he can find as a Jew is swine herding. So low has he sunk that he looks at the food that the pigs are eating and longs to eat it. No one gave him anything. Finally, he saw what was truly going on, and he came to his senses, as the NIV says. The literal Greek translation would be "he came to himself," he sees things as they really are (verse 17). He sees two sides of the situation. First, he realizes that even the hired hands in his father's household have food to spare whereas he is starving to death. But he also realizes that his problem is not simply one of a lack of food. He says, "I'm going to set out to my father and say, 'Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son; let me be like one of the hired men.'" We see here that he understands he has sinned against God and against man. So with this

picture of true repentance he comes to himself. He sees things as they are and resolves to change. He sees it not simply as something that's burdensome to him, not just something he's suffering, but as an objective misdeed, and he goes to his father.

The father sees him coming from a distance and welcomes him. The welcome is extravagant. This isn't obvious to most Western readers, but the extravagant detail is that he runs. In that society a dignified head of household did not run; if he ran he would have to tuck up his robes, showing his underclothes. Yet, the father doesn't care. He sees his son, runs to him, and kisses him hard. Actually the Greek words can be translated, "he kissed him up." And furthermore, it says he fell on his neck. Then the son starts to present his words: "Father, I'm no longer worthy to be called your son; I've sinned against heaven and against you." The son only gets halfway through. He says, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I'm no longer worthy to be called your son," but the father doesn't even let him go on to the next phrase of, "make me like one of your hired men." Or if he says it, the father overrules. In the next scene he is returned to his place as a son. The father tells the servants to bring the best robe and decent clothes for his son. He says that sandals should be put on his feet. In that day, slaves and the poorest of the poor went about barefoot, so sandals made one's status clear. The son is given the ring, which would be the signet ring. The father tells the servants to bring the fattened calf, so they could celebrate because his son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.

When people teach and preach this parable, they usually call it the parable of the prodigal son, and very often they stop at this point, for a good reason. The reason is that Jesus has now answered the Pharisees three times about His reasons for associating with sinners. Answer number one: Wouldn't a shepherd seek a lost sheep? Answer number two: Wouldn't a woman seek a lost coin? Answer number three: Wouldn't a father welcome a lost son? The answers were: Yes, yes, yes. So the Pharisees were wrong, and Jesus was right.

But Jesus was not only interested in seeking lost people like the lost sinners, and He was certainly not only interested in seeking to prove the Pharisees wrong. He actually wanted to win the Pharisees too, if possible. So He tells the second part of the story. In part two, there is a self-righteous son, and this son overhears the party. He wonders about it, pulls a servant over and asks what's going on. The servant tells him that the brother is back, healthy, safe and sound and that they've slaughtered the fattened calf for him. The older brother refuses to take part in the party, and the custom of the day would certainly require him, out of love but also as the older brother, to participate and possibly even lead in the festivities, but he won't enter. So the father goes out and pleads with him. Notice the language that the father and the son use with each other in verse 28. The father went out and pleaded with him and then the son gives his father an answer. He says he has stayed at home, working for him, always following orders and never got as much as a young goat to celebrate with his friends. He wanted to know why when the other son who squandered everything comes home, that he received such a warm welcome. The second son thinks it's not fair.

The tendency in our culture today is to identify too much with the older son. In our culture, the oldest child often has to work more and sacrifice more than the younger children in a family, so when we read the story of the prodigal son, we can certainly understand where the older brother is coming from. But this is not the first time we hear about a jealous older brother. It is something of a minor theme in the Old Testament. Consider the stories of Jacob and Esau, David and his older brothers, Cain and Abel, and the story of Joseph and older brothers. There was sort of a tradition throughout the ancient world that this was something that happened; that the older siblings were envious or jealous of the younger siblings and I suppose that still exists to some extent today too. Carefully consider the words of the older son. When he speaks to his father, he starts off with saying, "Look." He is already setting the tone with

language he wouldn't ordinarily use when talking with his father. Then notice what he says. He refers to his years of working for his father as "slaving." There are many other words he could have chosen, such as "serving" or "working," but he chooses the word "slaving." What does that imply about the father?

The implication is that the father has been a slave driver. The son says he has been slaving "all these years." He didn't consider it work or cooperation, or family building. He points out that he never once transgressed one of his father's commands. That is self-righteousness. Besides, he just broke one of the commands moments earlier when he addressed his father with "Look." He pities himself: "You never gave me a goat." He also exaggerates: "When this son of yours, who devoured your life with prostitutes, came home..." How would he have known that the younger brother spent his money on prostitutes? He hadn't even gone in to the party to speak with the younger brother yet. He doesn't know what he did. *We* know that he spent it wildly, but how would *he* know? We have the written account of the story, and we don't even know what he spent the money on. He disowns his brother, too; notice that he calls him "Your son," rather than "My brother."

The father is as gentle as the boy is rude. The boy says, "You do...look...behold, I've got something to tell you." The father responds by saying, "My son." He returns dignity for indignity. "My son" is literally "My child," because he's being a little bit childish. "My son, my child, you are always with me. You're not my slave. We've been together all these years. All that I have is yours. If you want a goat, if you want five goats, take them, it's all yours, but it was necessary for us to rejoice. This isn't an option. We had to do this because your brother—and he is your brother, not just my son—your brother was dead and has come to life again, was lost and has been found."

What happens at the end of the story? We don't know. If the passage said, "and then he went in," we would say, "Isn't that nice; what a happy ending." And if it said he didn't go in, we would say, "What a nasty guy." But it doesn't give any indication of how the older brother responds. We are left to finish the story. You can't point the finger at the other guy; you have to ask the question, "What would I do?" Then we have to remember what Blomberg said about parables and start asking: Who stands for what? Who does the father stand for? What is the father doing? Who does things like the father?

The father stands for God and also Jesus because Jesus seeks lost people and welcomes lost people to Himself. He is the divine figure. Who is the younger brother, the prodigal son, the unrighteous brother? He's the pagans, the sinners, the people Jesus has been eating with. This is still a story about the question, "Why do you associate with these people?" Who is the older brother? The Pharisees. Would the Pharisees agree with that? They *should* associate with the older brother, but they wouldn't because who wants to be like him?

Whenever we read a story or watch a movie we look, even unconsciously, for somebody to identify with. We begin to care about the hero or heroine, and get concerned when they are about to do something foolish or dangerous. We might even put the book down or turn the movie off, saying "I can't stand this anymore!" This proves that you have identified with the characters. You care about them enough that it upsets you. We said that the Pharisees should identify with the older brother. Would they? No, they wouldn't want to do that because who wants to be the jealous older brother? Who wants to be like Jacob's older sons to Joseph, or like David's older brothers to David? And yet on the other hand, who else is like them in the story?

Jesus tells the story in such a way that the Pharisees can say, "That's kind of like me, but it's not me." Of course this is exactly what they need and exactly what Jesus wants of them. He wants them to say, "I realize that I'm like that but I repudiate it; I want no part of it." That's Jesus' plan. The Pharisees have to

decide whether or not they will come in to the party. But this means coming into the place where the sinners are and that's what they don't want to do. This parable forces them to wrestle with this.

Fundamentally, then, the parable is about the love of God, the invitation, the willingness of God to fellowship with every kind of sinner. Both sons in the parable are sinners: the unrighteous son and the self-righteous son. They sin in different ways, just as in the Jacob and Esau story, Jacob is not better than Esau but is just bad in a different way. So, God will welcome every son who will come into His party. He welcomes prodigals who know they're sinners, who know they are in need of His grace. He welcomes them to Himself, puts His ring on their fingers, His shoes on their feet, His robe on their backs. And He will do the same for reputable, proud, repulsive, self-righteous people. The good news is that we're all welcome to the party. The one requirement to get into the party of God, the kingdom of God, is that you must be unworthy. The church is the only organization in which you have to demonstrate your lack of merit to join. It's the one place you must admit yourself to be a sinner and unworthy to get in. Do that and you're in. This is the Gospel of God.

In Luke 14 and 15 we have a series of reversals. The proud, rich, and self-righteous refuse to come in, while the ordinary, simple, humble, crippled, and blind are welcomed and are delighted to come in. They might be even more delighted to see how Jesus welcomes the prodigal. But there's a warning to the poor and the outcast that they not become proud that they're poor and outcasts. The parable ends with God inviting once more the rich and those who have status. Everybody is welcome. The rich need to recognize it, so do the poor. That's the invitation of God.

Too much emphasis has been put on the prodigal. The parable could more appropriately be called the parable of lost sons or the parable of the gracious father, because the parable describes a father who is unbelievably gracious to two sons. One son squanders his life, the other son is disrespectful, proud disobedient and complaining—but the father is gracious to them both. As in all the parables, the central figure is the God-like or Christ-like figure.