



LESSON 16

Luke 15:1-32

Information for Teacher

This lesson focuses mainly on the third story in the assigned text: the parable of the lost son.

Most in your class will know this story for the *encouragement* it brings at the thought of God running to us when we repent and turn to him. While the image certainly holds true, this lesson is going to propose that we ought to read ourselves as the *older brother*. Your class may bristle at that, but remind them that Jesus is talking to the Pharisees (the good religious folk) here. There's more info on the context and reason for this interpretation later in this lesson.

The lesson will briefly hit the first two stories on the way to looking at the third one in depth.

Please don't shy away from explaining the hard truths from this passage. There is both encouragement and warning to be found in today's text.

Opening Discussion

- *What is the most valuable thing you've ever lost?*

Introduction

Jesus is in the middle of teaching. Perhaps the events in chapter 15 happen directly after the events of the previous chapter. If so, Jesus has just finished teaching large crowds about what it means to be a disciple. Now, some tax collectors and sinners are gathering to hear, and the Pharisees are not happy about it.

The Biblical Text

Luke 15:1-7 (Lost Sheep)

- Jesus is continuing to teach, and now **tax collectors** and **sinners** are gathering to hear him.
- The **Pharisees**, evidently already there, are not happy. They say, "This man **welcomes sinners** and eats with them."
- **Every story Jesus is about to tell is in response to this statement by the Pharisees.**

- In other words, Jesus is now going to explain why it is important to eat with tax collectors and sinners, even though the Pharisees disapprove.
- Jesus tells a story about **lost sheep**:
 - If you have a hundred sheep but lose one, you would still go out and **look for that one**, leaving the ninety-nine behind.
 - When you find this lost sheep, you **rejoice** – even calling the neighbors.
- Jesus hints at his **broader point** when he says, “There will be **more rejoicing** in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”
 - In this statement, the **tax collectors and sinners** are the “**one sinner**” and the **Pharisees** are the **ninety-nine “righteous persons.”**
 - In other words, the **Pharisees ought to be rejoicing** that these tax collectors and sinners are being taught the truth!

● *Do you have any disagreement with this story? Is it accurate?*

Luke 15:8-10 (Lost Coin)

- Jesus tells another similar story:
 - A woman has **ten silver coins** but loses one.
 - Obviously, she would search carefully for the **lost coin**.
 - When she finds it, she would **rejoice** and call her friends.
- Again, Jesus tells the Pharisees that God and the angels **rejoice when even one sinner repents** (and by implication, the Pharisees ought to be rejoicing too, instead of being critical).

● *Do you have any disagreement with this story? Is it accurate?*

Luke 15:11-32 (Lost Son)

- The third story is longer and features an important different element. Jesus tells a story about a lost son now:
 - A man had **two sons**.
 - The younger one asks for his **inheritance early**.
 - This is basically saying, “I can’t wait for you to die.”
 - This younger son travels far off and **squanders his inheritance** quickly on wild living.
 - A **famine** comes and he gets hungry.
 - He goes to work for a **pig farmer** feeding pigs.
 - He remains **hungry** during this work.
 - He “**comes to his senses**,” realizing that his father’s servants are well-fed while he is going hungry.
 - He will tell his father he has **sinned against heaven and him**.
 - He is **no longer worthy** to be a son, but maybe he can be a hired **servant** so he can at least eat.
- Our tendency to read ourselves as the good guy hurts us when we read the **parable of the lost son**.

- We see the images of the father running to his wayward son and think, “Boy, how great that God will run to get me when I come to my senses and turn back to him.”
- Let’s remember the context for Luke 15, where Jesus tells these **three stories of lost things**.
- The chapter begins this way: “Now the tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them’” (Luke 15:1-2).
- **Everything Jesus is about to say is in response to this charge.** The Pharisees are offended that Jesus would associate with these “lost” people.
 - So Jesus tells a story about a **lost sheep** (15:3-7). The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine safe sheep to go look after the one who is lost, because **lost things are important**.
 - He tells a second story about a **lost coin** (15:8-10). The woman leaves her nine safe coins to find the one that is lost, because **lost things are important!**
 - He tells a third story about a **lost son** (15:11-32). A father has two sons, a safe one and a lost one. The lost one goes away, spends away his inheritance and lives a bawdy lifestyle, and then returns home. The father is ecstatic and runs to greet him. But the safe, older brother is mad, thinking the father’s welcome embrace is unfair. But the safe brother is wrong! **Lost things are important!**
- Jesus tells the first two stories with his audience quietly nodding in approval. But when he ends his third story, his message is clear: **“You (Pharisees) are the older brother! Quit worrying about my eating with tax collectors and sinners! Lost things are important!”**
 - The **older brother** is a **new element** in this story (as opposed to the previous two) so we ought to **pay more attention to his character** rather than just relegating him to a secondary lesson.
 - **The older brother is the point of this story.**
- This parable in Luke 15 is **not about a God who runs to greet his wayward children**. It’s about God’s people who **get mad when God shows attention, love, and compassion to “lost” people** – in this particular instance, tax collectors and sinners.
 - If you want to hold to the interpretation that says this is a heart-warming story about a God who takes us back, how is that an answer to the Pharisees’ charge that “this man eats with tax collectors and sinners”? It is not.

- **Name some ways this story is similar to the previous two.**
- **Name some ways it is different.**
 - ***This story features repentance (whereas the sheep and coin didn’t – and really couldn’t – repent).***
 - ***This story features an additional character: the bitter member of the un-lost.***
- ***If you didn’t know how Jesus wrapped up this story, do you think you’d side with the older brother?***
- ***How does this story speak to our concept of “fairness”?***
- ***How can God be “just” and still accept someone whose lifestyle is like the prodigal son’s (and not treat the older brother any better)?***
- ***In this story, where do you place yourself?***

- *If you're a church-going person who worships regularly, you are the older brother. So his is the attitude you have to watch for. (We are so reluctant to ever see ourselves as anyone but the hero or good guy in these Biblical stories.)*
- *Have you ever been upset at someone's decision to be a disciple of Christ (or to return to being a disciple)?*

Application

- *Why seek and love the lost?*
- *What was the Pharisees' definition of repentance? How does that differ from Jesus' definition?*
- *The story of the prodigal son features God's "offensive grace." How do we become people who are not offended when God shows grace?*
- *As we see God's great desire for the lost, how might that change how we spend our time and money, both individually and as a church?*
- *What is your reaction to the joy expressed by each person (shepherd, woman, father) upon finding the lost thing?*

Next Week's Text

Luke 16:1-31