

100 Key Texts Study #7

Luke 15: 11-32

Background:

Each of the gospels has distinctive emphases, just as you and I would have if telling the same story. The gospel of Luke emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit, Jesus' outreach and acceptance of the marginalized, affirmation of the role of women, extension of the ministry to the Gentiles, the importance of prayer, and more.

Luke claims to be written as an explanation to one Theophilus, whose identity remains unknown to us. It is a Greek name and, since Luke emphasizes the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (and in the book of Acts, tells that story), it may have been written with a Gentile audience in mind. The word Theophilus, though, means "friend of God" and so some have said his identity is a symbolic one, referring to all sympathetic readers.

All of the gospel lessons contain parables. Many of Jesus' parables are told in all three synoptic gospels, but some are unique to Matthew and Luke. (To see a chart which compares Jesus' parables in all four gospels, follow this link--<http://www.centuryone.com/parables.html>). Luke chapter 15 consists of three parables about lost things. The context is this: Jesus welcomed tax collectors and sinners, resulting in "grumbling" by the religious authorities. "This fellow welcomes sinners, and eats with them!" Jesus then tells three parables to the point that God seeks to save those who are lost.

The first parable relates the story of the shepherd who leaves the 99 in the wilderness to go in search of the lost sheep. It ends with the punchline: "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than ninety-nine righteous persons who need not repentance." This parable is also found in Matthew, but not in Mark. John uses the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd extensively.

The second parable relates the story of the woman with ten coins who turns her house upside down searching for one lost coin. It ends with the punchline: "I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." This parable is unique to Luke.

Finally, Jesus tells the parable of the lost (or prodigal) son, which is also unique to Luke. Although the story is much more complex, the themes are consistent with the other two parables and represent a rebuke of the scribes and Pharisees.

The Text:

Read the story of the prodigal son three times. The first time, focus on the role of the lost son in the story. The second time, focus your attention on the role of the father in the story. The third time, focus your attention on the role of the stay-at-home son in the story. Although the story is likely very familiar to you, did you notice anything new in your reading?

Consider these questions:

- Why is the younger son's request unusual and insensitive?
- What does it say about the father that he granted the request?
- Why was it *especially* insulting for the younger son to have to feed pigs?
- Read v. 17-19. What seems to be the younger son's motivation in returning to his father? True repentance? Self-interest?
- How does the father react to seeing his son? Does he wait for the son to recite his "confession?" Why not?
- Compare the father's banquet plans with Jesus' interpretation of the other parables of the lost (sheep, coin) in 15:7 and 15:10. What is going on here?
- The word "prodigal" means wasteful. In what way was the younger son wasteful? Who else could be termed wasteful in this text?
- Why is the older son angry with his father?
- Note the way he describes his brother in v. 30.
- What does verse 31 say to the Pharisees and scribes grumbling against Jesus? What does verse 32 say to the tax collectors and sinners listening to Jesus?

Applying the text:

- Have you ever been lost and not known it? And then—only later realized that you were lost? How did it feel?
- Have you ever been hungry, without a job, without direction, in trouble? How did it feel? What did you do?
- Have you ever experienced grace and mercy you did not deserve? A kind of overwhelming, shocking grace? Tell that story. What happened? When? Who showed you amazing grace?
- If you are a parent, have you ever had concerns about your child's selfishness? Have you ever been worried that your child is "lost" in the spiritual sense of the word?
- Have you ever had the sense of your child coming back to you? How did that feel? How did you react?
- Have you ever felt like the older brother, the one who is responsible, steady, and faithful, but gets none of the credit?
- Have you ever resented the attention another person is receiving? Why? Who?

- What does this text tell us about the nature of God?
- Tell the story of an occasion when you were extremely happy for another person and simply rejoiced with them.

Re-telling the Parable

- Tell the parable in the first person, as if you were the younger brother.
- Tell the parable in the first person, as if you were the older brother.
- Tell the parable in the first person, as if you were the Father.
- How do these three tellings differ?
- Imagine what the parable would sound like if you:
 - a. were from the developing world, where you struggled with hunger and malnutrition.
 - b. the sibling of an alcoholic who kept asking for money and help from his parents.
 - c. in jail, awaiting sentencing for a felony.
 - d. dying of a terminal illness.
 - e. had just won the lottery.

For your prayers this week: O prodigal, merciful God, you came to seek and save the lost. Help me to see where I am lost and reach out to me, pull me back under your wings as a mother hen gathers her chicks. Return me to your fold as a shepherd gathers his sheep. For I am lost and cannot find my way. By your cross and resurrection, destroy that which is self-serving in me and raise me to a new life with you. Free me from jealousy and envy that I may serve others in need and rejoice when all is well with them. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Looking ahead:

During the next five weeks, we will look at some of the important miracle stories in the Bible. For the week of February 28-March 6...read Luke 9:1-17. For the week of March 7-13, read Matthew 14:22-36.