

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
April 24, 2016

Lesson Text: Luke 15:11-24
Lesson Title: Reconciling Faith

Introduction

This lesson comes from a setting in which Jesus is engaged in instructing all who would hear (Luke 14:35). The opening verse of Luke 15 tells us “*publicans and sinners*” drew near to hear our Lord’s teaching. “*Publicans*” were tax collectors working for the Roman government. They were hated by all the people. “*Sinners*” refers to lowlife criminals and immoral people in Israel. “*Publicans and sinners*” were the worse of the worst in that day. On this occasion, they gathered “*to hear Jesus*” (Luke 15:1).

The “*Pharisees and scribes*” began to grumble because Jesus associated with this type of sinful people (Luke 15:2). The “*Pharisees and scribes*” were the religious leaders of the day. They were self-righteous. They were far too holy in their own eyes to be around “*publicans and sinners*. ” They believed you earned your way into God’s kingdom by living moral on the outside. Love, mercy, and grace was not a part of their vocabulary. It was all about law and living acceptable on the surface.

In this atmosphere Jesus presents three stories to his listening audience. The first is the story of the lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7). This story reveals the rejoicing in heaven when the lost is found. The second story is the story of the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10). This story illustrates the same principle of the lost sheep story, from a slightly different angle. In the first story, it was the anguish of the sheep which was prominent; in the second, it was the grief of the distraught woman, whose sorrow was turned to rejoicing when the coin was found. In both stories something was lost and found, and someone rejoiced.

The story of the lost son has the same general purpose as the first two stories. God’s attitude toward lost things is significant in all three stores. The length He will travel to secure the lost and the joy it brings Him is the whole point of these three stories. There is celebration in heaven over finding one lost sheep, one lost coin, and one lost son. These three stories teach us much about the heart of the heavenly Father.

The story of the lost son and the elder brother struck a nerve with the “*Pharisees and scribes*. ” Everything for them was about the outside and how things looked. Jesus’ story was designed to bring the religious elite to reality. He wanted them to think about a father, a son, and an elder brother. Life is

about more than appearance and making people think you are something when you are not. This story was about a real father and two real sons. It is about genuine reconciliation and forgiveness.

The Rebellion of the Son (Luke 15:11-16)

Verse 11-12

“And he said, A certain man had two sons: And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.”

The simple statement, “A certain man had two sons” sets the stage for one of the most remarkable stories our Lord ever uttered. It was a common story, in which a man had lived to see his two sons grow to maturity. His heart was close to theirs, and their welfare was important to him. Up to the present, life had been normal. Then came the shocking demand from the son.

The rebellion begins with an insensitive request from the younger son, “Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me.” “Father” is a respectable title but what he is asking is totally disrespectful. The son wants his inheritance before his father dies. He is tired of the restraints of home. He did not want his “portion” in order to expand the family farm or manage the family business. He wants nothing to do with the “father” or what the “father” has.

Note: Sin begins in the heart and is manifested in the desires to live your life independently of God.

The rebellion continues with an incredible reply from the father, “And he divided unto them his living.” We are a bit surprised that the father, apparently willingly, disposed of the family possessions to a degree which enabled him to give the younger son his share of the value, cash-in-hand. The father loved this boy so much that he gave him “freedom to choose.” God will let you “go your own way” if that is what you desire.

Keep in mind the “*Pharisees and scribes*” are listening to Jesus tell this story. They must be seething on the inside by now. According to their standard of living, this father should have flatly refused his sons request and possibly even slapped him across the face for humiliating his father in public. But the father in Jesus’ story is a different kind of father. He is a father the religious elite know little or nothing about.

Verse 13

“And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.”

One wonders what all transpired during the “many days” prior to the son “gathering” his inheritance and eventually leaving. Perhaps the father offered words of wisdom and counsel. We might assume the elder brother looked on with disdain, sniffing at the younger brother’s treatment of the father. Finally, the young son “took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.”

The son went to “a far country” so he could be as far away from his father and home as possible. He wanted to be away from personal accountability and responsibility. The Pharisees wanted to live their own life as well. They lived life unaccountable to anyone but themselves. Once the son found a comfortable place, he “wasted his substance” with “riotous living.” “Wasted” comes from a Greek word that means “he blew it!” He lived a life without restraint, loose, unconnected to anything of value. Life without the heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, is a wasted life.

Verse 14

“And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want.”

We are mercifully spared the details of what happened to the son in those first few weeks away from home. Away from his father and the security of home, his money melted away like snowflakes on a hot day. In a short time, “he had spent all.” A lifetime of work by his father had been blown in a few weeks. Such is always the consequences of life away from the father.

“Spent all” are sad words indeed. The son is bankrupt and alone. Just when it seemed all was lost, God’s providence meets him. A “mighty famine” arose in “that land.” Not just any “land,” but “that land” where the son had chosen to live. God is working in a place where this young man should not be! His money was gone. His fair-weathered friends were gone. He was “in want.” That means he was unable to meet the needs of the time.

The Pharisees must have been thinking to themselves, “Serves him right. The smart brat deserved to die after the way he treated his father.” You see, the Pharisees do not understand the nature of this boy’s father! In spite of everything against the prodigal son, the providence of God was working for him!

Verse 15-16

“And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.”

One would need to be a Jew to understand the depth of degradation which the words of verses 15-16 imply. The Jewish people of Jesus' day would have had the same attitude toward pigs as modern day Muslims. This was not a good job for a Jewish man to do.

The son had to leave his luxurious lifestyle, probably sell his clothing or any assets he had, and "join himself to a citizen of that country." "Joined" means "glued." He had to get a job with the people who lived there. His job was "to feed swine." One can imagine his thoughts and feelings as he goes out for his first day of work feeding pigs!

"And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him" are sad words indeed! He was a half-starved foreigner with nothing in a strange country. He became so hungry that even the seed-pods of the trees the pigs ate tasted good to him. These were coarse pieces of a tree that contained some sugar. They were usually eaten by the poorest of the poor.

"No man gave unto him" is a touching statement. For a time, he had everything and people all around him. But now he has nothing and no one. Having "no man" was worse than having no money or food. Sin degrades, humiliates, and ultimately abandons.

The Realization of the Son (Luke 15:17)

Verse 17

"And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!"

The Pharisees are waiting for Jesus to say, "Herein lies the message of my story. You should never disrespect your father and squander your wealth. If you do, you will end up like this son." Instead, Jesus continues the story with six striking words, "And when he came to himself." This is the beginning of the son's repentance and return home.

"When he came to himself" means he is thinking about who he is, how he got there, and where he stands. He knows he is "perishing with hunger." He is accurately assessing his situation. That is the beginning of true repentance. When a sinner truly assesses his spiritual situation and sees himself as he really is, there is nowhere to turn but to the heavenly "Father." When this boy left home he left with the intentions of getting as far away from home and any memory of his father as possible. Now, the first thing that comes to his mind is his "father."

He thinks about his father's "servants" and "bread." Here is where Jesus emphasizes the boy's father. Remember, the Pharisees are still listening. The son remembers his father had "many hired servants." These were day workers who lived from one day's wages until the next. He had seen his father work these men and pay them at the end of the day so they could feed their families. The son remembered his "father's servants" had "bread enough and to spare." That means his father was a generous father and employer who paid his "servants" more than required. They left his father's field with more than a day's wages.

Why is this an important fact for the listening Pharisees to hear? According to Leviticus 19:13, the wages of a hired servant were protected under Old Testament Law. The Pharisees would have known the law. Jesus wanted them to know the "father" in this story was a "father" who went beyond the law! If the father of a prodigal son is gracious to total strangers in giving them "bread enough and to spare," think how much more he would be gracious to one of his own?

The Resolve of the Son (Luke 15:18-19)

Verse 18-19

"I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants."

Many months before the son made a choice to ask for his inheritance and leave his home and father. Time proved that to be a bad choice. Now he makes another choice. He says, "I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee..." He is ready to place himself at the mercy of his father. He admits he has "sinned against heaven, and before his father." He is not holding back anything. His sins rose to the very heights of heaven and extended to the very father who brought him into the world. True repentance starts with a recognition of sin!

True repentance is also linked to faith. The son says, "I will arise and go to my father..." The Pharisees are thinking, "Amen. Go home boy and crawl like a dog and beg your father to forgive you." The son is thinking, "My father should never take me back but I know my father. I trust his goodness and love."

"And am no more worthy to be called thy son" is a reference to how he expects to be treated when he returns home. In accordance with Jewish custom, there was a funeral for this son when he left him. In their minds he was dead. That is why he is referred to twice by his father as "dead" (verse 24, 32). The son did not expect to be accepted as a son or live in his father's house. He was willing to be "one of his father's hired servants."

The Pharisees are probably applauding this part of the story. They like the idea the son is coming home and going to live in the bunk house with the servants. That is Pharisaic theology. That is the way sinners should be treated. They like the fact he will be punished and banished from any fellowship with the father or the family. That is good old-fashioned fundamental theology! The Pharisees love it. But Jesus is not finished telling the story about the father and his prodigal son.

The Return of the Son (Luke 15:20-24)

Verse 20-21

And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son."

The son did just as he said he would do. Apparently "his father" had been scanning the horizon for a glimpse of his son, whom he strongly felt would ultimately return. Fatherly love, is touching in its hope and willingness to forgive! The Pharisees knew nothing about this kind of father.

The scene of reunion was a tender one. The father was not repelled by his son's ragged clothing. The unwashed, hungry, and defeated son was his son, and this made all the difference in the world. He was home, this was all that mattered.

The father "ran" to meet his son. He took the initiative in this reunion and reconciliation. He "fell on his neck, and kissed him." In the culture of Jesus' day, it was not considered dignified for an older man to "run." It would have required him to lift up his long robe to sprint. Here is this father who has been mortally offended by this evil son, sprinting towards him in compassion and love to receive him.

The father's "kisses" were repeated "kisses." They were placed on the face and cheeks of the son without regard for the dirt or shame. The father is not reluctant, hesitant, or ashamed to identify with his returning son.

At this point, the Pharisees are seething once again. As far as they are concerned the actions of the father are as sinful as the actions of the son when he demanded his inheritance and left home. The Pharisees and scribes wanted this son shamed, not embraced and kissed. The law always wants judgment, never mercy!

The kisses of pardon from the father were interrupted by the well-rehearsed words of the son: "I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son." The father's words cut off the last part of the son's speech. He had no chance to ask a place among the hired servants.

Verse 22-24

"But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry."

Before the son's confession was complete, the father took steps to indicate full forgiveness and complete restoration. Notice the remarkable scene described here by Luke: the son is to have "the best robe," the elaborate robe worn only on special or stately occasions. Some writers suggest this "robe" may have been the one the son originally wore before his departure. He was to have "a ring on his hand." This was a signet "ring," indicating status and authority to do business for his father. "Shoes on his feet" distinguished him from the hired servants who were not permitted to wear sandals. In all of this, the father did not speak words of forgiveness; he proved his forgiveness by his actions.

The "fatted calf" was killed and the family began to "eat" and "be merry." Eating meat was not an everyday occurrence for Jewish families. It seems likely the father had fed this calf in anticipation of his sons return. In any case, the mood was festive and joyful. The father's "son" who was considered "dead," is "alive again." He was "lost" in the far country but now he is "found." Just like the lost sheep and the lost coin, he has returned to his appointed place.

Conclusion

In this passage, Jesus is confronting the Pharisees who have criticized Him for fellowshipping with sinners. He is saying to the Pharisees, "You understand that My receiving of these sinners is a picture of the Heavenly Father's attitude towards those who have strayed and yet have come to their senses and have repented and trusted in God again." The attitude of the Pharisees is an attitude which reflects their hearts are strangers to grace, that they themselves do not understand the spiritual need they have before God.

Jesus' message is not just for the Pharisees. It is for you and me. None of us deserve God's grace. When we are selfish in our attitudes towards those who receive it, we reveal our ignorance of grace. There were two prodigal sons in this story, one of them went to a far country, the other is the elder son who stayed home. One knew he was a prodigal, the other never knew. He was in a

household of a loving father, he was obeying him in all that he commanded, but he thought he deserved his father's favor and he never saw his sin.

Why does Jesus not tell us how the story ended? Because He leaves a door of repentance open to the Pharisees. He also leaves the door of repentance open to you and to me.

Amen.