

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. Peter Ollerhead

Clusters of Parables: Luke 15

Our talk this morning, the last in the series based upon some of the parables taught by the Lord Jesus during His earthly ministry, is centred on Luke 15. Here we can read about the Prodigal Son, which must surely be one of the most well known of all the stories in the New Testament. Actually, the chapter contains two other parables, both about lost possessions, a sheep and a coin. Taken together, these parables illustrate God's seeking love for the lost. Though, as I have stated, I am primarily concerned with the three parables in this chapter, I ought to mention that many of the stories, and much of the teaching, between chapter 15 and chapter 19, is unique to Luke, and illustrates the Lord's regard for the rejected persons of His day.

If we are to interpret these three parables of chapter 15 correctly, we must pay attention to the first two verses which state: "Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them."

From this passage we notice that there are two groups of two, one of which, the Pharisees and scribes, don't seem to have much respect or time for the other group made up of publicans and sinners. Perhaps we ought to define the people that make up these groups, as it helps to interpret the parables correctly.

The Pharisees regarded the latter group of publicans and sinners with great displeasure because they did not have the same zeal for the Law. Barclay, in his commentary on this passage, states that "sinners" were known to the Pharisees as "People of the Land", and Pharisaic regulations considered that giving a daughter in marriage to a "sinner" was akin to feeding her to a wild animal. Contact with "sinners" was to be avoided at all costs, as such links would defile them, and so deep was the hatred that they, the Pharisees, looked for the destruction, and not the salvation, of the sinner.

Publicans, on the other hand, were collectors of tax, or revenue, on behalf of the Romans. This usually meant extortionate practices making them extremely unpopular and despised members of the community. For the Pharisees this hatred of fellow Jews, who collaborated with the occupying power, was exacerbated by the fact that a publican was considered as ceremonially unclean, owing to his regular contact with Gentiles.

It can then be readily understood that when the Lord Jesus ate at the same table with such people as publicans and sinners, then His message and mission were scorned and disdained. Any suggestion that He was the promised Messiah was ridiculed in the face of His ignoring the traditions and practices of the Pharisees. As has been noted already, the welcome for those rejected, that was offered by the Lord, is particularly marked in this section of Luke's Gospel. Other incidents that could be cited are the beggar and the rich man in chapter 16, the ten lepers in chapter 17, and the parable of the Pharisee and the publican in chapter 18.

The parables in our chapter illustrate the truth of God's concern for the lost in a very dramatic way. The first of the stories is about a lost sheep and it can be found between 15:3-7. I shall just quote only verse 4 to begin with: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?"

This illustration would strike a note in the hearts of many of those who listened to the Lord on that far-off day. They would be aware of the dangerous, yet responsible, task of shepherding in the hills of Judea. Each shepherd had the duty of care for the whole flock that could belong to the village and not always to an individual. If a sheep wandered away, it had to be searched for, as the shepherd would never think of leaving it alone in the wilderness.

The Lord, through this story, is illustrating the fundamental Christian truth of God's concern for the lost and neglected. This is the first point that I want to emphasise, because the New Testament states time and again, that God loved us long before we loved Him. He sought us of the fullness of His love: the first move was always from God. 1 John 4:10 states: "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

Verse 14 of the same chapter adds a little more: "And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world."

From these verses, as well as others that we have not the time to read, we realise that the movement to rescue sinful man originated with God.

The second general point I wish to make about the parables is contained in 15:6-7: "And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance."

From such verses we can appreciate that Jesus is teaching that God seeks out those that are lost and ignored by the world at large, and rejoices when they are found.

Some Christian poets have used this parable as a basis for hymns. One of the most meaningful applies the work of the seeking shepherd to the Lord Jesus at Calvary. Late in the nineteenth century, Elizabeth Clephane wrote the hymn that included the lines:

*"But none of the ransomed ever knew
How deep were the waters crossed;
Nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed through
Ere He found His sheep that was lost.*

*Lord, whence are those blood-drops all the way,
That mark out the mountain's track?
They were shed for one who had gone astray
Ere the Shepherd could bring him back."*

This places before us the depth of the suffering that the Lord Jesus endured for your salvation and mine. Finding and rescuing the lost was no light matter, as far as the Lord was concerned.

The second parable in this trilogy concerns a woman and ten coins. It is often thought that the coins were part of her dowry worn as a head-dress. If that were so, then just one of the collection of ten coins would have a value beyond monetary worth. From details of the story, the point is demonstrated that the lost coin has a value to the woman that involves effort and determination to find it. Again, the second point is that there is shared rejoicing when it is found. This restates the conclusion, noted in the previous parable, where the Lord says that there is joy in the presence of the angels over one sinner that repents. This was presenting a picture of God, to the Pharisees, that was far different to the one they envisaged. To say that it was different does not sufficiently emphasise just how different and radical to their traditional thoughts. A God who welcomed the repentance of the outcasts was very far from their understanding. This latter point of repentance is important to note. It is not being said that God would accept all regardless of indifference and evil living. It is rather, that He is looking for those who show by signs of repentance that they are willing to return.

The third and best known of the parables concerns the lost, or prodigal, son. It has a context that is familiar to some parents today, though the immediate details concern a first century land in the Middle East. The opening words of the story, in verses 11 and 12, sufficiently illustrate the callousness and selfishness of the younger son: "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."

How many of us have wished to throw over the traces of parental restriction before we were wise enough to face the pressures and temptations of the wider world? This story has been repeated time and again to the detriment of parents and off-spring. The details of the story might not mirror the actual elements of leaving home in today's society, yet the end result of wasting one's substance, whether capital, intelligence or prospects in vain pursuits, is. There are parents who wait vainly for news of well loved sons or daughters who have gone away without leaving a contact address.

The parable illustrates the depths to which we can sink when our resources are squandered, and we begin to experience the famine. For the younger son of the parable, the situation is portrayed in a very graphic manner, as verses 14-16 show: "And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. 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."

That last sentence illustrates the depths of the degradation to which the man, who had left home with such youthful eagerness and yearning only a short time before, had now sunk. He was now reduced to feeding pigs, an unimaginable and filthy task for a Jew. Pigs were considered unclean as Leviticus 11:7-8 inform us: "And the swine, though he divide the hoof, and be clovenfooted, yet he cheweth not the cud; he is unclean to you. Of their flesh shall ye not eat, and their carcase shall ye not touch; they are unclean to you."

Not only was the young man a now a swineherd, he even longed to eat the same food, indicating that he could hardly sink any lower.

At this low point of depravity and shame, a flame of hope is ignited in the young man's heart as is shown by the words, "And when he came to himself", in verse 17. Many commentators suggest that these words carry the thought of repentance, a thought that is further established by the son's rehearsed speech that follows in the succeeding verses: "he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and 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."

Repentance is not an aspect of human behaviour that could be illustrated in the previous two parables concerning a lost sheep and a lost coin. This would signal that the Lord has included another element that is essential to the relationship between God and man, making this parable show an additional truth to that of the previous two. The depth of the son's genuine repentance is expressed in his desire to be a hired servant. No thought is entertained of resuming his former relationship of son, rather is it to join the lowest rank of day labourers. This is important, for all through Scripture the thought of repentance is never very far away from man's approach to God. A quote from Job 42:5-6 will clarify my point: "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

Other verses could be cited as evidence, from both the Old and New Testaments, to further clinch this point, but time forbids.

We return now to the general theme of all three parables, that of the welcome for the lost and missing. There is a lovely picture of God, as revealed by Jesus, in verse 20: "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."

Some readers of the Bible might quibble when I stated that the figure of the father is a picture of God by claiming that a parable is not meant to identify every detail with a Biblical truth. This may be so, yet I would claim that the picture of the forgiving and seeking father, presented by this parable, is not at variance with the New Testament revelation of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. John in his first epistle writes that: "And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world." (1 John 4:14)

One of my favourite hymns has a line that sums this up:

*"The Father's love, the source of all,
Sweeter than all it gives,
Shines on us now without recall,
And lasts while Jesus lives."*

We believe that the Father, in His love, provided the returning sinner with a pardon based upon the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus at Calvary. If Christians recognise the figure of a pardoning and loving God in the father of the prodigal son, it is certain that Pharisees would not.

The portrayal of the return of the erring son has some vivid and delightful touches. Two points stand out, that of the father seeing him when he was a great way off, and then running towards him in welcome. If, as some claim, a father in that culture would not run in welcome, then it only serves to heighten the impact of the main point of all three parables. This is that God has joy when that which was lost is found.

When the details of the story are considered, we notice that the younger son was not allowed to take up his suggestion of being a hired servant. In verses 22 and 23 we read: "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:"

The ring would represent his authority as a son of the household, the robe would denote that he was the guest of honour at the homecoming celebrations, while the sandals signified that he was a free man and not a household slave, or a hired servant. All of this would point us to the great truth of the welcome that awaits those who return in

repentance to our great God. No wonder that these verses, in Luke 15, are often referred to as the parable of the loving father and not the prodigal son.

It is not possible to use this parable to indicate that the sinner's salvation depends upon repentance alone, as a parable can't depict every angle of God's redeeming love. The whole Gospel must include a belief in the identity and work of the Lord Jesus. Acts 16 tells the story of the earthquake at Philippi, and verses 30 and 31 recite the question of the jailer, along with Paul's answer: "[The jailer] brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house."

We have already emphasised the fact that it was God's redeeming love that provided the salvation, before we were ever aware of the necessity of such redemption.

It is possible to leave the story there and ignore the ending where the elder son comes upon the scene of merry making with anger and self-righteousness. His carping complaint was that his years of faithful service had gone unrewarded. Verses 28 and 29 give a sorry picture of the elder brother's relationship with his father: "And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and entreated him. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:"

The elder son displays the same attitude as the Pharisees in not rejoicing over the prodigal's return. We must not fail to notice that the father's attitude was the same towards both of the sons. When he saw the prodigal returning he left the house to welcome him, while verse 28 says that he went out to plead with the elder son when he would not enter the family home.

The elder of the sons seems to be sorry that his brother had returned. Nor does there seem to be much warmth or respect for his father. It could be said, with truth, that his attitude was far different from his father's, and that his years of service were performed out of cold duty. Notice also that he seemed to disown his brother in verse 30: "But as soon as this thy son was come, which devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf."

He speaks of the returning penitent as his father's son, whereas in verse 32 his father gently reminds him that it was his brother who had returned to the family home. How easy it is for us to take judgmental attitudes, even towards fellow believers whom we feel have done disservice to the cause of Christ. Sometimes we reject those that God would welcome just because they do not fit our preconceived pattern. We find it far more difficult to accept and pardon people in our own assemblies and churches than we do the members of a hypothetical congregation of sinners and seekers. We need to behave towards each other in the church as our God and Father did to us when He sent His Son to be the Saviour of the world.

Finally, the story ends with the lovely words, in verse 32, that emphasise the welcoming love of the father. "It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found."

I wish to quote that verse again only this time from the New International Version: "But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

This version, by the use of the words 'had to', stresses the necessity of celebrating the return of the prodigal in a way that can't be missed. The Lord was showing in this collection of three parables that our God and Father, in His great love for the world, really welcomes those who come to Him. It is not some distant deity, unmoveable and without pity, that dwells in the vastness of heaven, rather One who, as the Apostle John could write, is love. No wonder the same apostle could add that they who are born of God need to show this love to one another. May we all seek to demonstrate that touch of grace that empowers us to love, welcome and rejoice with all those whom God is drawing to Himself!

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