***Vol. 5***

*Session 4*

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Introducing the Study

Jesus’ fame began to grow. Crowds began to form as people anticipated encountering the One who taught with an authority no one had ever experienced and who performed such marvelous signs and wonders. But Jesus was never arbitrary in His words or His deeds. Everything He said and did served the greater purpose of revealing Himself as God’s chosen Messiah, the Savior of the world.

**What do Jesus’ miracles reveal about His identity and character?**

Jesus’ ministry generated amazing popularity, but it created just as much controversy. One of the reasons was that Jesus associated with people who were considered to be outcasts and therefore off limits to religious people. Instead of shunning these people as the religious community expected, Jesus welcomed them and even positioned them as positive examples in His teaching. Jesus wanted everyone—from the greatest to the least—to understand that God was on a mission to seek and to save the lost and that He was overjoyed with any sinner who came home.

**How can unexpected characters in stories serve the purposes of the storyteller?**

Setting the Context

**What is the relationship between words and deeds?**

Jesus taught with authority backed up by His miracles, but what was the substance of that teaching? While Jesus taught on a variety of subjects, several themes were repeated in His teaching as He traveled throughout Palestine.

One unique characteristic of His stories was His use of unexpected heroes. Instead of positioning religious Jewish men at the center of His stories, Jesus often held up Gentiles, women, or even children as having characteristics that should be emulated.

Furthermore, Jesus emphasized the role of the heart in His teaching. The religious system of the day was oppressive for the people, and to make matters worse, the religious leaders took advantage of loopholes and lived in open hypocrisy. But when Jesus taught, He cut through the external obligations and focused on the heart.

One more distinct component to Jesus’ teaching was His use of parables, a common form of teaching in Judaism to communicate rich meaning through memorable symbolism. Jesus, however, said that He taught in parables not because they were easy to remember but because teaching in parables actually separated those who were His disciples from those who weren’t. “Parables of the Kingdom” (p. 47) recounts the kingdom significance of some of Jesus’ parables.

**How would you summarize the main themes of Jesus’ teaching?**

CHRIST Connection

The Pharisees and scribes criticized Jesus for His practice of welcoming and dining with sinners. The stories Jesus told in response to their criticism focused on God’s joy over sinners coming to repentance and illustrated His mission on earth. The God who seeks and saves the lost is Jesus, the Savior whose search and rescue mission is accomplished at great personal cost to Himself.

Continuing the Discussion

**With whom do you identify in Jesus’ story of the prodigal sons—the older or younger son? Why?**

**In what ways is this parable representative of the gospel message?**

***As a group, read Luke 15:11-13.***

**Why was the son’s request so shocking?**

**What does the son’s request reveal about our sin? What does the father’s response reveal about the character of God?**

An inheritance is given only after someone dies. When the younger son asked for his share of his father’s inheritance, he was declaring that his father might as well be dead—all he cared about was his money. The father would have been dishonored and disgraced by such a request. But the father responds in a way we would not expect. Even though he was surely pained by his son’s rejection, he responded with love and grace.

***As a group, read Luke 15:17-24.***

**When was a time in your life that you found yourself in a similar situation as the son?**

**What are some of the ways the father might have responded to his son coming home?**

**Where do you see the gospel in his response?**

This young man went from the penthouse to the pigpen. He squandered every penny of his inheritance, and so, he set out for home, hoping that his father would take him back as a servant. But that is not what the father did. He took back the young man who had rejected him so coldly and celebrated his return. The father’s response is amazing. In this passage, we see the beauty of a father’s love, the power of a father’s grace, and the joy of a son’s return. This is how God treats everyone who comes home. When the lost are found, God rejoices and celebrates. But that doesn’t mean everyone shares in His joy.

***As a group, read Luke 15:25-32.***

**Why is the older son angry? Does his anger surprise you? Why or why not?**

**What does this interaction with his father reveal about how the older son sees himself?**

The older son was just as lost as his younger brother—he just didn’t realize it. Where his younger brother was unrighteous, this son was self-righteous. What self-righteous people tend to do is look at the unrighteous and wonder how they could possibly get right with God. But they look at themselves and fail to see why they need to get right with God.

MISSIONAL Application

Record at least one way you will apply the truth of Scripture as one who has experienced the compassion of the loving Father through the gift of Jesus.

Personal Study 1

**Selfishness leads to rebelling against the Father’s goodness.**

***Read Luke 15:11-13.***

The drama of the three parables in Luke 15 (lost sheep, lost coin, and lost son) is heightened by what had prompted Jesus to tell them. The religious leaders were complaining that Jesus was welcoming sinners at His table. If He were righteous, He would not do that. Jesus did not offer a defense, but instead He shared these three stories.

The first two stories seemed innocent enough. A man loses a sheep, leaves his flock, finds it, and celebrates. A woman loses a coin, sweeps her house, finds it, and celebrates. Jesus’ point is that God cares for every lost sinner and that He is seeking them out and celebrates when any are found. But then Jesus begins sharing the third story—a much longer story—and it becomes apparent that Jesus is including some pointed details.

This third story begins with a terrible request. In the culture of Jesus’ day, it was normal for sons to assume that upon their father’s death, they would receive an inheritance from the family’s assets and property. But in Jesus’ parable, the younger son demanded his portion prematurely—before the father’s death. Today’s equivalent would be a teenager spitting in his dad’s face and screaming, “I want you dead!” Asking for the inheritance early insinuated that the son couldn’t wait for his father to die. He wanted the possessions his father could give him now, even at the expense of their relationship.

A bigger shock follows—the father gave the younger son what he asked for. In fact, he actually gave both his sons their inheritance (“to them,” v. 12). In those days, the older son would be expected to build a bridge between the father and the younger son and avoid public humiliation. But instead of trying to restore the family’s fellowship, the older son silently took his double portion of the fortune. There was neither outcry against the younger brother’s action nor passionate defense of the father’s honor. The older son pocketed his inheritance, stayed home, and stayed quiet.

Jesus was painting a picture of two types of lost people. The first is openly rebellious—the “in your face” sin of the younger son. The younger son’s request epitomizes the enormity and consequence of human sin. “God, we want what You can give us, but we don’t want You!” Consider God’s gifts: His beautiful creation, the social order He has established, the institutions of family and government. But just as the younger son wanted to profit from his father without continuing the relationship, we often love these blessings without loving God. We savor the creation and snub the Creator.

Second is a more subtle type of sinner—seen in the older son. He represents someone who appears to be near God but is actually far away. He’s the church member who wants God’s blessing but could care less about God’s name being honored or about being an agent of reconciliation. He doesn’t care about his father or his brother—only about himself and what he can get out of the situation.

Jesus’ dramatic parable continues with the younger son converting his newly obtained property into cash. When the disgraceful deed was done, the prodigal son headed off to a far country, where he squandered all his wealth in reckless living. The boy wasted his money and life, so when the famine came, he wound up desperate. Jesus described him going and hiring himself out to one of the citizens of that country. The original language uses the phrase “glued himself to” or “joined himself to someone in that country,” a description that reveals the son’s despair.

Outwardly rebellious sin eventually leads people to squander their lives until they are at the mercy of whatever they have glued themselves to: drugs, alcohol, casinos, sex, music, TV, pornography, relationships, career. We become addicted to something or someone we think will provide hope, but instead, the addiction brings enslavement.

**What are some common examples of ways we might squander the good gifts of God?**

**In what ways does squandering God’s gifts lead to slavery instead of freedom?**

Personal Study 2

**Sorrow leads to relying on the Father’s goodness.**

***Read Luke 15:17-24.***

The son had gone to the far country with great aspirations but all he had was soon reduced to nothing. After squandering his inheritance, the son found work for a Gentile. Working for a foreigner was one thing; feeding pigs was another. For a Jew, the pig was the most despised and unclean of animal of them all. Jesus’ audience must have bristled at such a terrible picture of this younger son’s sin and no doubt agreed with the son’s assessment that he was no longer worthy to be a son. But it was in the middle of poverty and disgrace that the young man came to his senses. He remembered that his father was a good man who cared for his servants. He couldn’t return to his father as a son, but what about returning as a servant?

Earlier, this son had wished his father were dead. He had publicly humiliated the family’s name and honor, sold off his precious inheritance for cash, and deserted the village. He had foolishly squandered all the money and then wound up working for a pagan and craving the food of an unclean animal.

But through it all, the father never stopped loving his child. He never stopped longing to see their relationship restored. He dreamed of them talking, laughing, and spending time together again. Time and time again, his eagerness to see his son drew him to his front yard to stare into the distance looking for his son to return.

Jesus said that on the day when the father saw the son at the edge of the village, he pulled up his robes and ran to him. In Middle Eastern culture, running was considered shameful. An honorable man pulling up his robes and running down the road would be like a father running down Main Street in his pajamas one morning while neighbors watch the spectacle from their porches drinking coffee. It was undignified. Low class. A man of stature never pranced around in public!

Next, the son spoke, and his planned speech took on new meaning. Stunned by his father’s unconditional love, the son began to say his prepared words, acknowledging his sin against God and his father and rightly conceding he was unworthy to be a son once more. It was a speech he probably rehearsed many times, but one he never finished.

The son understood his unworthiness to be part of the family and to receive such love. He recognized the weight and depth of his sin and the shame and agony that he had put his father through. But now he was truly repentant! He no longer mentioned his plan to become a hired servant. He realized that the problem was never just about money, the inheritance, and all the squandered belongings. The true issue had always been the broken relationship, which had now been restored due to the father’s outrageous display of love and acceptance.

With probably the entire community watching the dramatic events, the father ordered that a robe, shoes, and a signet ring be brought to him. These were signs of acceptance and favor, of a welcoming back into the family. The father wanted his son and everyone else around to know that he and his son were reconciled.

See the heart of God—a father standing on his porch, waiting and watching for his lost child, and when he sees him, he runs toward him, taking the shame of the community upon himself. This is the picture of salvation—God the Son running toward humanity with arms outstretched, not only to embrace us but also to endure public shame and to take the nails reserved for our punishment.

**In what ways does the father’s treatment of his son go above and beyond what anyone expected?**

**In what ways does God’s treatment of us go beyond what we might hope for?**

Personal Study 3

**Self-righteousness leads to resenting the Father’s goodness.**

***Read Luke 15:25-32.***

The father’s embrace and acceptance of his son could have completed Jesus’ third and final story. To be parallel with the first two stories, it should have ended there. All three stories would have concluded with joyful celebrations. But Jesus had one more point to make in the final story of this triad. The older brother was lurking in the shadows.

The older son had not been mentioned since the beginning of the parable. The listeners that day might have thought Jesus was establishing him as the positive example—the faithful son. The son who stayed with his father. But that was not Jesus’ intention, hinted at earlier when the older son took his share of the inheritance too.

Now, when the older son steps back into the story, we find him not celebrating with his father, but criticizing him. In Jesus’ culture, any older son would have been expected to join the feast as quickly as possible. Instead, the older son stayed outside, choosing to murmur about the apparent unfairness of his father’s actions. The party was unworthy of his attendance. The son knew he was humiliating his dad, but he didn’t care. He became just as rebellious as the prodigal had been at the beginning of the story.

Jesus’ parable describes two types of sin—the outward rebellion exposed in the younger son and the inward pride and bitterness concealed in the older son. The gracious father responded to both his children with honor and love. But unlike the younger son, who fell with tears of repentance into his father’s arms, the older son simply complained.  His boasting about his faithful service revealed more than what is on the surface. He spoke about his father as if he were only a boss to be obeyed, not a father to be loved, and he was convinced he had been treated wrongly.

Notice also how the older son refused to call the younger son his brother. He said, “But when this son of yours came …” If the younger son had to understand repentance as accepting that he was truly his father’s son, then the older son had to understand repentance as accepting his younger brother as a true brother! And this is where the Jewish leaders most likely picked up on the point Jesus was making. The younger son represented the “sinners” Jesus was eating with. The older son represented them.

But we can’t miss how Jesus ended this parable either. He had just confronted the religious leaders for their pride and bitterness, but his message to them in this story was not one of condemnation, but an offer to repent and experience the Father’s love. He wanted his son to come inside so that the family would be whole.

The father then turned the focus away from possessions, works, and obedience. The father desired relationship: “You are always with me!” The issue was neither the faithfulness of the older son nor the reckless living of the younger one. Rather, the spotlight shone on the younger brother not because of anything he had done but because the father-son relationship had been restored.

Jesus ended the parable with a cliffhanger, leaving the audience waiting for the story’s resolution: Did the older brother go in and join the family celebration? The answer is left to the listener. You’re invited to step up onto the stage and act out the parable’s final scene. Will you enter the house of God and become a part of God’s family? Or will you stay out in the field, appearing close to God while you are actually far from His heart? Will you remain out in the field, focused on your works and actions without being concerned to have a true relationship with the Father? Won’t you come in? Won’t you become a part of the reason for celebration? The story’s grand finale lies in your hands.

**How can our good deeds be a way of walling ourselves off from relationship with God?**

**Are you more likely to see your Christian life as the drudgery of a servant or a feast for a son? Why?**