

The Wisdom of Christ
Parable of the Two Sons
Luke 15:11-32

Note:

Much of the information in this study, especially the cultural observations, was taken from Kenneth Bailey in his books *Poet & Peasant* and *Through Peasant Eyes*. Both would be wonderful for additional reading.

Expectations:

1-2 hours of prep work (reading the parable, answering the questions and preparing to discuss your findings and create a plan for real life application)

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Suggested Homework:

- 1) Print out these studies or have a way of filling them out and accessing them on your phone.
- 2) Read Luke 16:1-8 before completing this study. When you finish the study, reread the passage again.
- 3) Complete the following questions after the introduction.
- 4) Come to the group with 2-3 observations from the text/study and 2-3 ways you need to apply the lesson.
- 5) Read the parable three times this week. As you read through it, connect it to your experience of God's grace and seek to focus on that this week.
- 6) Meet with another member of the group to discuss issues of accountability and growth this semester.

Introduction:

DISCUSS: Share something you've been learning recently.

DISCUSS: What does it mean to be at the mercy of someone/something?

Review:

Background for Luke: The original reader- Written to Theophilus, a patron who wanted to know more of Jesus Christ. Luke compiled Luke and Acts as the answer to how the Church got started and who Jesus was.

Purpose: **Luke's purpose is to show that Jesus is the Son of Man, who came to save the world through his death.** The parables we will study this semester will articulate different parts

of that main thrust- the Son of Man's sacrificial death for all as Savior. The Son of Man is a distinctive title of note as well. It comes from Daniel, Son of *Man* focuses on the unique ONE of mankind who ultimately fulfills God's purpose of being the visible representative of the invisible God and in the process redeems the rest of humanity. There is only one OF US who has fulfilled God's plan. There is only one OF US who redeems us. And those who by faith express their solidarity with the SON OF MAN will also be redeemed to fulfill God's purpose for humanity. Luke contains a distinctive approach to humanity in the book (as noted below), and consequently an emphasis on Christ's humanity as the human Messiah.

Audience: Luke is writing specifically to Theophilus, and more broadly to Gentiles, especially those who are disenfranchised or ostracized by society. **Luke wants those people to know that the Son of Man cares for and died for them.**

Luke shows particular attention on the oppressed, unfavored and gentile recipients of Jesus' ministry, such as Samaritans, women, Romans, gentiles, children, tax collectors and other non-religious elites. Luke wanted to show that Jesus is the Son of Man, come to save all.

Review Questions:

- 1) Summarize the main point of Luke's gospel in your own words.
- 2) Describe the person Luke is trying to teach?

As a reminder from the first lesson, here's the section on Inverted parallelism:

Inverted Parallelism

In the inverted parallelism, the **middle term or section is accentuated**. The reason why an author includes an inverted parallelism is to draw our attention to the middle feature. This is used commonly in Luke and helps us to understand the meaning of the overall discourse. This is seen below in the whole of the Jerusalem travel document, but it is easier seen at first in small examples. Look for common words (I will italicize this when I give you these). Once again, the goal is that you know what an inverted parallelism means, that the **middle term or section is accentuated**, not necessarily that you can now find them on your own.

My silly example of an inverted parallelism

- A I love eating Chocolate chip *cookies*
B Their *chocolate chips* are delicious
C My tummy is filled with *warmth* when
D I think of my mom and the times she made them for me
C' I am *warmed* by the memories as
B' The *chocolate chips* melt in my mouth
A' and the *cookies* are eaten.

Text: Luke 15:11-32

- 11 And He said, "A man had two sons.
A 12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.'
So he divided his wealth between them.

- B 13 "And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living.
- C 14 "Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished.
- D 15 "So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.
- E 16 And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.
- F 17 *But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger!*
- F' 18 *I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight;*
- 19 *I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."*
- E' 20 "So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.
- D' 21 "And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'
- C' 22 "But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet;
- B' 23 and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;
- A' 24 for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate.

Text: Luke 15:11-32 (continued)

- 25 "Now his older son was in the field,
- A and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.
- 26 "And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be.
- B 27 "And he said to him, 'Your brother has come,

and your father has killed the fattened calf
because he has received him back safe and sound.'

C 28 "But he became angry and was not willing to go in;
and his father came out
and began pleading with him.

D 29 "But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving
you
and I have never neglected a command of yours;
and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends;

D' 30 but when this son of yours came,
who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes,
you killed the fattened calf for him.'

C' 31 "And he said to him, 'Son,
you have always been with me,
and all that is mine is yours.

B' 32 'But we had to celebrate and rejoice,
for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live,
and was lost and has been found.'"

A' (Missing?- If this passage followed the apparent format, it should include the Son coming in to join the feast or repenting).

QUESTION: What does the formatting accentuate? (hint: look to the middle) What are the two points of focus?

QUESTION: In light of the second chiasm, what is significant about the omission of the second son's action?

Cultural background:

--Please highlight two sentences in this section you found particularly interesting or that helped your understanding of the parable.

The Son's Inheritance:

As we delve into this brilliant story of redemption, it is imperative that we understand the depths of sorrow the young man enters. Part of understanding this is even in understanding what this young man's demand of inheritance communicated both to his father and the community in which he lived. In claiming an inheritance to a father who had not yet died, the son is casting a deplorable insult onto his father. If you will recall the expression "bury my father" as it was discussed previously in these studies,

you will remember that it was an expected honor for a son to bestow on his father to care for him until his passing. The son is expected to refrain from any ventures he might endeavor to take until his father has passed and he is able to choose his path for himself. A son doesn't do anything that would shame his father or disagree with his judgment. Yet we see this son's attitude is that of demanding he be allowed to follow his own whims and leave.

There is a further insult again in the son's request because he not only seeks to remove himself from the father's authority, but is expressing his wish that the father were dead so he could enjoy his share of the family property and resources. This is extreme even in our culture, where the notion of a father is not so great as the Middle Eastern father. **The patriarch was the center of everything. To shame him was the greatest shameful act one could commit.** A father hearing such a verbal abuse from his son would usually beat his son or send him into hard labor to teach him a lesson. The patriarch would never endure such a treatment. The listener in Jesus' day would already be surprised at not only the son's comment, but the lack of anger or punishment from the father, not to mention the fact that he does what the son requests!

Worse still is what the son will do with his inheritance. Honoring one's father in the community is an important consideration in the Middle East. Dishonoring a father to his face is one thing, but disrespect in the community is a far greater evil. It says in verse 13 that "not many days later" the son gathered up his things and left. What the inheritance would have consisted of is mostly land. For this son to scrounge up his possessions infers that he sold his land in only a few days. If you will recall from a previous study, the sale of land was a long and difficult process, often taking months to reach a decision. This hasty sale would have required the young man to badger all those nearby and harass them until he could find a buyer for his property, bringing all the more shame on his family. Even if the price for his property was fair (he most likely sold the land for far less than its worth so he could take his money and leave), his haste demonstrates how spiteful his insult and departure is intended to be. Insult upon insult is being heaped upon the father, yet without retaliation. This is a truly odd scenario, one which still captivates our attentions today, but would have done so even more in the day it was spoken.

The Son's Humiliation:

What follows next is the sad tale of the lad's ruin. The young man goes into a far away land and squanders all he has. This son then must employ himself at the hand of a local resident. This is a terrible humiliation for any Jew for several reasons, many of them tied to the foreigners. For a Jew, to receive kindness by the hand of a foreigner was even widely scorned. There was a great national pride and even in the way they refer to themselves and gentiles. The word gentile means a "non-Jew." They didn't think in terms of ethnicity, skin color, land of origin. They thought in terms of Jew or non-Jew. For this young man to be reliant and subservient to any foreigner would have been thought a great disgrace by the Jews hearing this tale. Not only does his servitude bring shame but even the manner in which he wasted his possessions. The older brother bitterly ascribes his activities to being promiscuous, the initial description being wasteful. Either is especially scorned by a Jew when done in gentile territory. He has now taken resources from within the community and taken them to the pagans. He has shamed not only his family but his culture and race.

Further, we find that the son sinks even further in the only work he can find. In the Middle East, the courteous way to refuse the help of unwanted, nagging beggars is to offer them a task that is so loathsome they will refuse. It would be difficult to imagine a more degrading occupation for a Jew than pig-herder, and if indeed this is the landowner's intent, he has succeeded in offering a deplorable position to this young man. Pigs were among unclean animals and to become their herder is an especially disgraceful position for a Jew to take.

The Son's Plan:

The son is in dire straits and hatches a plan to get him out of the miserable existence he's created for himself. This is the climax of the first son's story and when observed from the cultural standpoint, a gripping recital from the young man. An important facet of this pronouncement is the designation "hired

servant” the son seeks. There were actually three classifications of servants in the Middle-East, and it is important to ask what position he is actually requesting. The first class of servant is the bondservant or slave commonly described in Scripture. This individual was a part of the house and in many cases almost part of the family. Beneath them were lower class slaves, who were subordinates to the bondservants. They were also a part of the estate, but lesser so than the bondservant. The third class of servants was the hired servant. This class was disconnected from the other two in that a hired servant had no stake in the estate for which he was employed. He shared no gain from the success of the estate. He had no right to what was earned by the family and did not suffer when the estate fared poorly. He was a casual, disinterested laborer who worked when his help was required. Just like a mercenary who fights for a cause not his own and has no stake in the victory or loss is the hired servant. Because he is not connected to the estate, he is an outsider and would have been alone, not even being a true bondservant. This position solves his relationship problem both with his brother and his father. Neither person has to forgive this young man, nor are they required to share their successes or resources with him in the state of hired servant. This request squares things with his father in part because of the lowliness of the position he requests. He does not ask to be a bondservant or slave. His petition to be a hired servant indicates an acceptance of his loss of standing in the family and demonstrates repentance toward the father.

The last problem the son must deal with is the matter of the community. The village will hate him for leaving and most certainly seek to penalize him for his foolish and shameful behavior. Moreover, this young man has brought reproach to a member of their community, and by extension to each member. His shame is not a private matter between father and son, but a public issue. A revered tenet in Jewish teaching was repentance. His solution as hired servant fulfills this part of repentance also. The son was responsible for squandering his father’s goods, so his repentance is fitting. He will now labor with no access to a share, and will replenish many of the goods he so foolishly wasted. This will allow him to rejoin the community, if his father accepts his request.

This section of the story also appears in the center of a chiasm and highlights this change in thought as the central point of focus in Luke’s mind. **What defines this young man is a realization about the father and the decision to repent.**

The Father’s Acceptance:

As stated above, the community has every right to hold against the youth his dishonorable behavior. The village’s response would follow behind the father. If the father scolded his son, the town would gossip and slander him, possibly humiliating him publically. If the father beat this young man, the town would join and follow suit in their treatment of him. The one option that would have been unthinkable is the complete acceptance of the father. The first thing that we are told about the father is that he sees the son a long way off and runs to him. This behavior is inconceivable to a Middle Easterner. An older man never runs. If he has achieved any status of power or influence, he will deign to run. Running is what slaves do. Running is what important people *order* others to do. A man of affluence and prestige maintains his dignity always. Yet this father is so overcome with love for the son that he runs to him. In running to him, the father also protects his son from any ill treatment he may receive from the community before he may render his judgment. Now the village must follow the father’s example and unconditionally accept the son.

It is important mention once again that a feast which would be held in the community would have been extended to all who were in the surrounding area and of like social status (as seen in the Parable of the Great Banquet study). The fattened calf also indicates that at least fifty people would have been required to eat all of the meat from the animal. No refrigeration or preservation would be able to keep the uneaten food. It was understood that all from the community would come, and in their coming, they offered love and acceptance to the once wayward son. This further demonstrates how comprehensive the father’s love has been in restoring this son with the community.

The Unresolved Ending:

Answers: Spoiler Alert!

- 1) This parable is about our response to God: will we throw ourselves upon the grace of our Savior, or will we rebel and harden our hearts. Answers will vary.
- 2) Answers will vary. My intention is to ask which pattern is more consistent in your heart. Do you rebel more frequently externally or internally? Both sons rebel. Both sons shame their father. How they respond to him in the end determines their ending.
- 3) Answers will vary.
- 4) Answers will vary.
- 5) Answers will vary.