

Luke 15: The Prodigal God

Introduction

One of the main themes in the Gospel of Luke, which is not found in the other Gospels, is Luke's emphasis on the "marginal" people of Jesus' day. These "marginal" people included Gentiles, women, the poor, the lame, tax collectors, and "sinners." These so-called sinners were the ordinary people who were excluded from the religious community. However, they were attracted to Jesus, and Jesus, to them. The Pharisees considered Jesus' relationship to "sinners" to be inconsistent with a rabbi that Jesus seemed to be. Thus, Luke 15 includes an incident of the Pharisees' criticism of Jesus about this. This is how the story begins.

Read Luke 15:1-2 and Proverbs 1:10-16, 13:20, & 14:7.

1. Do you find any bases in these verses in Proverbs for the Pharisees' criticism of Jesus?
 - a. What is the danger that Solomon saw in associating with sinners and foolish people? Who would influence whom?
 - b. In what way was Jesus influencing the "sinners" that the Pharisees saw? See Matt 9:9-13.
 - c. Compare the characteristics of the Pharisees and the "sinners."
 - d. Of what value did the Pharisees place on these "sinners"?
2. In Luke 15:3-7, Jesus presents the parable of the lost sheep. In Luke 15:8-10, Jesus presents the parable of the lost coin. In Luke 15:11-31, Jesus presents the parable of the lost son. What is a parable?

Read Luke 15:3-31.

- a. How do these parables relate to the context of the Pharisees' criticism of Jesus?
- b. What do these parables say about the heart of God?
- c. Compare each of these parables to each other.
 - a. What is similar in each of them?
 - b. What is in the first two parables that is not included in the third?
 - c. What is the significance of this omission?
- d. Considering the parable of the lost son:
 - a. Who are the main characters in the story?
 - b. Why is this parable often referred to as "The Parable of the Prodigal Son"?
 - c. Not considering our texts ("The Prodigal God" and "The Cross & the Prodigal") what teachings do you recall about this parable? Where has the emphasis usually been placed?
- e. What is the definition of "prodigal"?
 - a. Why does Keller use this word to describe God, when we usually think of this word as a negative term?
 - b. What did it cost God for bringing us into his family, the Church?
- f. According to Keller, whom do the three main characters represent?
 - a. What kind of person is the younger brother?
 - b. What kind of person is the elder brother?
 - c. Who does the father in the story represent?
- g. Notice that Bailey, believing the father represents Jesus, differs with Keller, who suggests the father represents the Heavenly Father. How can these two views be reconciled? See II Cor 5:19.
- h. How is the younger brother alienated from his father?
- i. How is the elder brother alienated from his father?
- j. What two groups of people are listening to Jesus tell this parable?
 - a. Which group is represented by the younger brother?
 - b. Which group is represented by the elder brother?

- c. Which group is alienated from Jesus, and which group is not?
- d. Then, to which group is Jesus primarily addressing the parable?
- e. What plea does the parable convey to the Pharisees?
- k. Describe the Pharisees. How were they blind, narrow, and self-righteous? See Matt 15:10-14 & Matt 23:13-39.
- l. In what ways can religious people be offended by this parable?
- m. Consider some of the "sinners" that came to Jesus. Why did they like him?
 - a. See John 4:27-30, 39-42.
 - b. See Luke 7:36-50.
 - c. See Luke 19:1-9.
- n. What is it about the Church that unchurched people do not like?
 - a. How do unchurched people view us?
 - b. How do we view them?
 - c. As individuals in the church, what can we do to change these views?
- o. What can we do to reflect the attractiveness of Jesus?
 - a. To "sinners"?
 - b. To religious people?
- p. On page 19 Keller wrote, "If our churches aren't appealing to younger brothers, they must be more full of elder brothers than we'd like to think." Do you agree with this? Why?
- q. Of the three main characters in the parable, with which one do you identify? Why do you think so?

Act 1, Scene 1 – The Shocking Request

This is where the cultural values of the Middle East begin to help us understand the effects of the request of the younger son.

- a. What is shocking about the younger son's request?
- b. Consider the costs:
 - a. What did the younger son's request cost the father?
 - b. What was the cost to the younger son?
 - c. What was the cost to the elder son?
- c. What incentive did the elder son have to remain silent at the younger son's request and departure?
- d. What did the community expect the father to do in response to the younger son's request?
 - a. In contrast to the cultural expectation, what did the father do, and why did he do it?
 - b. What point did Jesus make by including this request in the parable?

Act 1, Scene 2 – The Younger Son's Plan

- a. According to the parable, what was the result of the younger son's independence from his father, his family and his community?
 - a. For a Hebrew man, what could be worse than the condition in which he found himself?
 - b. What dangers did he face by staying away from his home?
 - c. What were his only alternatives?
 - d. What hope did he have by staying away from his home?
 - e. What dangers would he face if he chose to go back home?
- b. What plan did the younger son compose to solve his problems?
 - a. How would he face his father, his family and his community?
 - b. What was he willing to accept upon his return?
 - c. What was the motivation behind his plan? Who would benefit from his plan?

Act 1, Scene 3 – The Father’s Reception

- a. How is God’s grace defined by the father’s reception of the younger son?
 - a. What is indicated in the parable by the fact that the father sees his younger son from a distance?
 - b. Who took the initiative of the younger son’s restoration?
 - c. What do you think about the father’s compassion that is in contrast to the younger son’s shocking request?
 - d. Why did the younger son not finish his planned speech?
 - e. What expectations and terms did the father require of the younger son in order for him to be restored to himself the family and the community?
 - f. What limit is evident in the father’s grace?
 - g. If grace and forgiveness are related, what is the cost of forgiveness?
 - h. What adjectives would you use to describe God’s grace?
- b. What is “cheap grace”?
 - a. “Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession.... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.” (“The Cost of Discipleship” by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1937.) Also, see Rom 6:1-2.
 - b. Did Jesus include repentance in the parable? If not, why not?

Act 2 – The Cost of Grace and the Elder Son

- a. How is God’s grace defined by the father’s outreach to the elder son?
 - a. In terms of the Middle East cultural values, what did it cost the father to reach out to the elder son?
 - b. In telling this parable, how did Jesus display grace to the Pharisees and teachers of the Law?
 - c. Why did the elder son not respond to his father’s grace?
- b. What is the elder son’s argument?
 - a. Why does he think he is right?
 - b. Why is he wrong?
- c. How did the elder son benefit from the younger son’s departure, and how did he suffer loss at his return?

Some interpretation:

- a. How is the Cross and the incarnation evident in the parable of the two lost sons?
 - a. Why is it important to find evidence of the Cross in the parable?
 - b. Why is it important to find evidence of the incarnation in the parable?
 - c. What is the evidence of the Cross in the parable?
 - d. What is the evidence of the incarnation in the parable?
- b. What was the cost of God’s grace?
- c. Where do you see freedom of choice and/or predestination in the parable?
- d. If the father in the parable represents God, how is he described there?
- e. In what ways are people today in broken relationship with God?
- f. In view of the behavior of the two lost sons, how should we respond to God’s grace?
- g. How should we practice or exemplify God’s grace to others?

THE PARADOX: Rebellion by being good.

“Act 1” and “Act 2” presented by Tim Keller refer to two ways people try to find happiness and fulfillment:

- The way of self-discovery – illustrated by the younger son.
- The way of moral conformity – illustrated by the elder son.

The sins of the younger son are obvious: breaking the moral laws. However, the sins of the elder son are not so obvious, and studying them, Keller has presented a paradox: sins by keeping the moral laws. How can this be true?

1. Are there only two kinds of people who exhibit one of either of these two ways, or are there other ways people attempt to achieve happiness and self-fulfillment?
2. When does going beyond custom and convention to pursue self-actualization and personal goals become sin? See Luke 9:23-26.
 - a. What was the essence of the younger son's sin?
 - b. What is the custom of Western culture regarding the pursuit of happiness and self-fulfillment? What does the US Declaration of Independence say about it?
 - c. How do you define happiness and fulfillment?
3. When does going beyond custom and convention to pursue self-actualization and personal goals become a virtue? See Rom 12:1-2 & Matt 6:8.
 - a. To what standard of custom and convention should a Christian conform?
 - b. What criteria should a Christian use to pursue happiness and self-fulfillment?
4. What are the dangers of trying to fulfill the requirements of expected Christian behavior?
 - a. What could possibly be wrong with living a moral life, being obedient to the laws of God and man, having self-discipline, and working hard?
 - b. Is it possible to rebel against God by being good? See Matt 7:21-23.
 - c. Have you ever felt that you deserved a good and prosperous life because you are a good, clean-living Christian? What is wrong with this attitude?
5. The elder son in the parable claimed he always obeyed and served his father.
 - a. What do you think was his motivation to do so?
 - b. What problem resulted from his good behavior?
 - c. What was the essence of the elder son's sin?
6. Describe the relationship that each son had with the father. What was different, and what was similar?
7. Which of the two approaches to living (described above) is more dangerous? Why?
 - Break the rules and set your own course.
 - Keep all the rules and save yourself.
 - a. How do both of these ways result in alienation from God?
8. The relationship between the two sons illustrates there is a clash between life-styles – traditional and progressive. How have you observed this clash (polarization) between groups in the following arenas:
 - a. Church and denominational issues.
 - b. Politics. (*Please be brief!*)
 - c. Family values.
 - d. Business.
 - e. Cultural values.
 - f. What attitudes are displayed in such polarization, and how can we avoid them?
9. Keller, in "Both Wrong; Both Loved" states, "The gospel of Jesus is not religion or irreligion, morality or immorality, moralism or relativism, conservatism or liberalism. Nor is it something halfway along the spectrum between two poles – it is something else altogether." If that is true, what is the gospel of Jesus? For one example, see Luke 18:9-14.
10. In what way does Jesus' concept of sin go beyond the conventional ideas of it? What should we do about it?

Redefining "Lostness"

1. Using the Parable of the Lost Son in Luke 15, Keller defines two conditions of lostness.
 - a. Excluding what Keller has written, how does the Bible describe lostness?
 - b. Are there only two ways for people to be lost?
 - c. Why would Keller think it is necessary to redefine it?

2. Describe the younger brother's way of being lost. How was it plain to him?
3. Describe the elder brother's way of being lost.
 - a. What were his motives for being obedient to his father?
Keller quotes a story by Elisabeth Elliot. How does this story illustrate his motives?
 - b. What words did the elder brother use to describe his service to his father in Luke 15:29?
 - c. What causes work or service to be mindless, slavish and empty?
 - d. In contrast, how can a motivation of love make work meaningful and a joy? See I John 4:18
4. Considering our relationship with God and other people, should being good payoff in some way? What were the consequences for his obedient living?
5. Describe his resulting attitudes in Luke 15:28-29.
 - a. How are his resentment, anger and superiority expressed?
 - b. How is his competitive comparison to his brother a means to achieve self-significance?
 - c. How is his pride expressed?
 - d. Why are these attitudes a self-made prison?
6. What does the lostness of the two brothers have in common?
7. Keller introduced the term, "elder brotherish." Who does this term describe?
8. What are the signs of an elder brother spirit?
9. What are the causes of an elder brother spirit?
10. What are the consequences of an elder brother spirit?
 - a. For ourselves.
 - b. For younger brother types we contact.
11. What can we do to avoid being "elder brotherish"? See Heb 12:2-3, John 13:34-35, Rom 12:9-16 and Phil 3:4b-11.

The True Elder Brother

What We Need

1. Keller wrote, "It is not the repentance that caused the father's love [for the younger brother], but rather the reverse." Do you agree? See I John 4:19 (KJV), John 3:16, Eph 1:4-6, and Eph 2:4-5.
 - a. Who took the initiative to bring us into saving faith?
 - b. In what ways did the parable illustrate the principle of God's initiating love?
 - c. Why do the most religious and moral people also need God's initiating grace?
2. What is repentance?
 - a. What does the younger brother need to do in order to repent?
 - b. What does the elder brother need to do in order to repent when he is essentially a good person? Repent from what?
 - c. In either case what must we turn from, and what must we turn to in order to repent?

Who We Need

3. Compare the elder brother in the parable to the True Elder Brother.
 - a. Who is the True Elder Brother?
 - b. What was the undone obligation of the elder brother in the parable when his lost younger brother left his family?
 - c. What did our True Elder Brother do to bring us into his family?
 - d. What would have been the cost to the elder brother in the parable to bring his younger brother back into the family?
 - e. What was the expense to our True Elder Brother to bring us into his family? See Phil 2:6-11 and Isaiah 53:3-9.

Redefining Hope

Our Longing for Home

1. Keller wrote, "The memory of home seems to be powerfully evoked by certain sights, sounds and even smells. But they can only arouse a desire they can't possibly fulfill." Do you agree?
 - a. What are your favorite memories of the home where you grew up?
 - b. Did you ever go back to see what it is like there now?
 - c. What were your expectations, and what did you experience?
 - d. What does your home mean for you now?
2. In Middle East culture, what was the value of home, according to Ken Bailey?
 - a. What did going home mean for the younger son in the parable?
 - b. What did he hope would happen when he got there?
 - c. What were his fears about what would happen when he got there?
3. For all practical purposes the younger son was in exile as a result of his actions. In what way does the story of the younger son represent a pervasive Biblical theme?
 - a. What other accounts of exile in the Bible run parallel to the parable?
 - b. What conclusion can we make about this pervasive Biblical theme?

The Difficulty of Return

1. What has been the historical hope of Israel regarding the theme of exile?
 - a. When Jesus announced "the Kingdom of God," what did the people of Israel expect?
 - b. In what ways is "the Kingdom of God" greater than what they expected?
2. Why is the human race in a state of exile?
 - a. What is "home" for the human race?
 - b. What is the difficulty for returning there?
3. In what ways did Jesus experience "homelessness"?
 - a. How did the cost of His homelessness overcome the difficulty for us to return home?
 - b. What does "home" mean to you as a Christian?

The Feast at the End of History

1. What will be the occasion for celebration? See Isaiah 35 & Rev 19.
 - a. In what ways will the celebration be a homecoming?
 - b. Who is invited to the celebration?
 - c. Who will be there at the celebration?

The Feast of the Father

The Feast of Salvation

1. What is the connection between Communion that we celebrate today and the feast at the end of history?
2. What does the feast in the parable illustrate about what it means to live a life based on His saving work?

Salvation is Experiential – "Taste and see that the Lord is good." (Psalm 34:8)

1. What is the difference between believing in God's grace and mercy, and experiencing them?
2. What takes us beyond objectively believing that God loves us to subjectively and experientially sensing the reality, the beauty and the power of His love?

Salvation is Material

1. Why should we believe that the material world matters?
2. What evidence do we have that indicates God's intention to renew the material world?
3. In what way should we be involved in expressing God's love for the material world?

Salvation is Individual

1. As individuals how should we grow spiritually in wisdom, love, joy, and peace?
 - a. What does it mean to feed on the Gospel, digesting it and making it part of ourselves?

- b. How does our understanding of Jesus' work of salvation motivate us to do good works?
2. How can understanding the cost of God's grace profoundly reshape our lives? See Matt 13:23.

Salvation is Communal

1. What assets in a Christian community help the people in it to know Jesus better?
2. How has the loss of Jim Bruhn and Don Gates affected the community of our small group?
3. What will we share together at the Feast at the End of History, and what will be on the menu that we share together here and now?

References:

1. Keller, T. *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*, 2008. Riverhead Books, NY.
2. Bailey, K. E. *The Cross & the Prodigal: Luke 15 Through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants*, 2nd Ed. 2005. IVP Books, Downers Grove, IL.