

Living in God's Kingdom

Lesson 5: Coming Home

Notes for the leader: This is the fifth in a series of lessons about "Living in the Kingdom." This lesson focuses on the parable of the Lost Son and on the Father's willingness to accept anyone who comes to him in repentance and faith..

Introduction

Probably the most famous of all the parables Jesus used to teach people about the Kingdom of God is the Parable of the Lost Son (or the Prodigal Son). This was one of a group of three parables he told to the "religious elite" people who were complaining that he was spending his time with "low-life scum" instead of with the good, religious people like them.

You need to remember a few things about the various groups of people mentioned in this parable. The first group, the **Pharisees**, were **super-religious** people, who had taken a vow to live their lives by perfectly following the smallest details of the Jewish religious law. The second group, the **tax collectors**, were Jewish people who worked for the Roman government, collecting Roman taxes from their own people. Everybody hated them, first, because they were considered traitors who were working for the Roman oppressors, and second, because most of them were dishonest. The Romans had an interesting tax system. They gave each tax collector a quota – how much he was supposed to collect and turn over to them – and whatever he collected beyond that quota was his business. Most of the tax collectors took advantage of this system in a big way, collecting much more than they were supposed to. The third group, the "**sinners**," were not exactly what we would mean by that term today. These were Jewish people, mostly poor people, who did not follow the Jewish ceremonial and religious laws. In many cases, they were too busy working or hustling (honestly or dishonestly) to have time for all the ceremonies and restrictions of the ceremonial Law. In their minds, that was a hobby the rich Pharisees could afford to play with.

Luke 15:1-32

Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Then Jesus told them this parable:

"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?

And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'

I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

"Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says,

'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.'

In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.

He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!

I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'

So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.

For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.

So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.

'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.

But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

" 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 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.' "

Let's look at these three stories and think about who Jesus was talking to and what he was trying to tell them. The first few questions look at the stories themselves. The last question focuses on the "deeper meaning."

***Notes for the leader:** Hand out copies of the Small-Group Discussion Questions to each person. Depending on the size of the group, have them break into small groups of four to ten. Make sure that each group has a capable leader, who can keep the discussion moving and well-focused. Make sure the groups understand how much time they have. 15 minutes should be a minimum. 20 minutes is better. Give each group a time warning three or four minutes before they need to reassemble as a large group, so they can bring their discussion to an orderly conclusion.*

Follow-up Discussion

***Notes for the leader:** The main purpose of the follow-up discussion is to make sure that each small group has grasped the main ideas of the study. You can skim quickly through the answers if it seems clear that everybody understands them. If not, pick a group that "got it" and have them explain the answers.*

If circumstances permit, it's a good idea to walk around and listen to each group discussion so that you know who "got it" and who didn't.

1. Why was Jesus telling these three stories? Who was he talking to? What was going on?

The **Pharisees** were complaining that Jesus was hanging around with low-life scum, **the tax collectors** and **sinners**, instead of righteous, religious people, the way a good rabbi should be doing!

2. In what ways are all three stories the same?

In every story, something got **lost**, someone was **looking** for it, it was **found**, and there was a **celebration**.

3. In each story, why was the person looking for the lost thing?

It was **important** to him or her. It was **valuable**. They **cared** about it.

4. In each story, what happened when the lost thing was found?

There was **rejoicing**, and a **celebration**. **Family and friends joined in** and celebrated.

5. In what ways is the third story different from the first two?

The first two stories are about an animal and a coin. These things didn't **choose** to get lost. But the third story is about a young man who **decided** to go off on his own **and live his life his way**. This was a terrible "slap in the face" to his father. The son was telling his father, "**I can't wait for you to die! I want my inheritance now, so I can live my life, my way!**"

The father **allowed him to make this choice**. He didn't go after him and force him to come home. Instead, he **waited** and **watched**, day after day.

The son made a decision to come home. And the father was waiting for him.

Finally, there is a new character in the third story, unlike anyone in the first two: an older brother, who **resented** what his brother had done, and **refused to celebrate** when he returned.

6. What do you think is the "deeper meaning" behind these stories?

Who does the **son** stand for? **Lost sinners** ... all of us!

Who does the **father** stand for? **God**, who gives us the freedom to make choices, right or wrong... who is waiting for us to "come to our senses" and return to him to ask forgiveness. Who is **waiting to forgive us**, if we confess our sins.

So who does the **older brother** stand for? The **Pharisees**, who, instead of **rejoicing** that sinners were being saved, were **complaining** about what Jesus was doing.

Some Bible teachers have suggested that this story could be called "The Parable of the Two Lost Sons." They point out that the younger brother **realized** he was lost and came back to his father to repent and confess his sin. The older brother was **proud of himself** and didn't think he needed forgiveness.

Jesus warned his disciples to beware of the teachings of the Pharisees. If you want to see Jesus's most scathing condemnation of the Pharisees, read Matthew, Chapter 23. Jesus told his disciples that the **sinners** were actually **better off** than the **Pharisees**, because **they understood that they were sinners and needed forgiveness**.

Final Follow-up

Before leaving this lesson, there are a few important follow-up points to deal with about **repentance**, **confession**, and **forgiveness**, and how they relate to each other.

Repentance means literally to "**think again**" or to "**fundamentally change your mind.**" It means admitting to yourself that you are a sinner, that you have been headed in the wrong direction, that you desperately need to change. That is what the son did in Jesus's story.

Confession means admitting to God (and, sometimes, to other people) that you have been wrong, **that you have sinned, that you need to be forgiven.** In the story, the son confessed his sin, sincerely and explicitly, to his father.

Forgiveness, as we defined it in the third lesson in this series, **means relating to someone who has done you wrong as if it had never happened.** We said **that that is how God is willing to treat us if we repent of our sins** – if we admit them to ourselves, and sincerely want to change – and if we confess our sins to him, sincerely and explicitly. When the son did this, the father forgave him, and their relationship was restored.

Remember, though, **that if we confess our sins without really repenting**, without sincerely intending to change what we do, we are playing God to be a fool, **and we are only deepening our sin!** We will not receive forgiveness.

If we do not **confess our sins explicitly** – if we just say, "Please forgive all my sins," and stop there, it usually means that we are not really admitting to ourselves how we have sinned, and this usually means that we haven't really repented our sins.

These principles are basically the same whether we are seeking forgiveness and reconciliation with God, or with our wives, or our mothers or fathers, or our children, or a friend. First we must **repent**, and admit our sin to ourselves. Then we must **confess** our sins and **ask for forgiveness.**

God has promised that if we take these steps, he is "faithful and just and will forgive our sins." (*1 John 1:9*) With other people, there is no such guarantee. They may forgive us, or they may not. But if we follow these steps, we have done what God has asked us to do, and we can be confident that he has forgiven us. We can continue to pray that those we have wronged will forgive us some day, so that our relationships can be restored.

The final question to think about is whether **you have taken the steps the son took in the story.** Have **you** repented of your sins? Do **you** sincerely want to change? You can't do this yourself – you need God's help. Have **you** confessed your sins to him? Have **you** asked him to forgive you and be your savior and Lord? Are **you** willing to follow him to the best of your ability?

If your answer to these questions is **yes**, then you can become a part of God's Kingdom today, right now! **If you really mean it, pray this simple prayer. God will know if you're sincere.** He's waiting for you to do this, just like the father in Jesus's story.

Lord Jesus, I know I'm a sinner, and I want to change.

Thank you for dying for my sins.

**I ask you to come into my life as my Savior and my Lord,
and to change me into what you want me to be.**

Notes for the leader: Before the group leaves, make sure everyone has a copy of the "Take-Home Thoughts" handout. This will help them remember the things discussed in the lesson. Some of them may also use these handouts to explain the lesson to a cell-mate or in a letter they write to their families. You never know how far the lesson materials may travel, or whose life may be affected by them!

Small-Group Discussion Questions

Coming Home *(Luke 15:1-32)*

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3. In each story, why was the person looking for the lost thing?
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Take-home Thoughts About ...
Coming Home to the Father
(Luke 15:1-32)

One of Jesus's best-loved stories is "The Lost Son." This story (Luke 15:1-32) paints a wonderful picture of God's love for us, as well as the freedom He gives us to make our own decisions.

In the story, the younger son demands that his father give him his share of the family estate now, so he can go away and have fun. Although it breaks his heart, the father does what he asks. The son goes away, and parties until the money is gone. Then he realizes that all of his "friends" went away as soon as the money ran out!

The son makes a decision to go home and ask his father to hire him as a farm hand. In Jesus's story, the father has been watching every day for his son to return. When he sees him coming, he welcomes him back – not as a hired hand, but as a son.

Jesus is telling us that's how God is. He **gives us the freedom to do things our way**. But He's always waiting for us to make a decision, like the son did in the story: to **realize** that we have sinned, to **make a decision** to come back to Him, to **confess our sins** to Him, and to **allow Him to be the master** of our lives. **There's no sin that's so terrible that God can't forgive it** and welcome you back into His family and His Kingdom. If you want to, you can do what the son did in the story. **God knows what's in your heart**. He knows if you're sincere. If you are, **He will forgive you**.

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