

LUKE – CHAPTER 15

PRAY

Spend a few moments together in prayer asking that you would be open to God's voice speaking through his Word today.

READ

Take time to read through Luke chapter 15

EXAMINE

We like the thought of God seeking out his lost sheep like a shepherd in search of the 1 in 100 not in the pen. Or we sympathise with the woman in pursuit of the 1 in 10 coins that are so valuable to her identity. And who doesn't like to imagine the Father running down the street to greet his wayward son; embracing him with a love that reflects our heavenly Father's longing for all of us to return to him. We love the parties in every part of this story, but whilst we enjoy *what* Jesus said in these parables we also shouldn't neglect to remember *why* Jesus said it.

The very sight of Jesus not just welcoming tax collectors and sinners but eating with them would have been scandalous to the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Respectable behaviour meant keeping proper company, particularly when it came to the meal table. We need to observe that Jesus sees eating with tax collectors and sinners as a sign of his friendship and acceptance of them. Their meals together were an expression of new kingdom relationships with Jesus, celebrated as though it was a new relationship with God. On hearing the Pharisees muttering their complaint at such a sight Jesus tells three parables. They're told as one story in three parts, and should be kept together when we read them. With each version of the same story the characters and context intensifies. For example, it commences with 1 in 100 lost (1%), to 1 in 10 (10%), to 1 in 2 (50%), and the relative value of each item becoming more and more personal, too.

1. The first telling of the story is of a hypothetical shepherd. But it's not just any shepherd. Take note of the wording – "suppose one of you..." The story is directed at the Pharisees and teachers of the law. They are immediately placed into the context of the story. Why? Well, we need some context. Read Ezekiel 34:1-6. What are the "shepherds of Israel" doing (or not doing) in that passage?

The shepherds are caring for themselves and not their flocks. They didn't seek out the lost or care for the sick or injured.

2. Jesus is calling the Pharisees and Teachers of the law shepherds and so reminding them of warnings like this passage from Ezekiel. How would they have been made to feel as a result?

They should be embarrassed that they weren't also dining with tax collectors and sinners, since they were a part of their flock. Instead they looked down upon them in judgment. Were they seeking them out? Bandaging their wounds? Caring for them? Rejoicing with neighbours when they are found? No! Whilst

the story of the lost sheep reveals something of the depth of God's love it is also a powerful rebuke of the selective love of the Pharisees.

3. Read to Ezekiel 34:7-16. What is God's response to these shepherds and what does he promise to do in their place?

God will remove them from their role and he will become the shepherd for the people in their place. He will search for the lost, bring back the strays, bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. He will shepherd the flock with justice.

4. Coming back to Luke 15, look now at the story of the lost son. Take note of the way the lost son refers to himself in verses 17-18. He wants to become a "servant" (same word as 'slave') of the father, he doesn't think he should be called a son anymore. Yet the father, on his return, doesn't even let him finish his prepared speech. He calls him "son" and celebrates his return. What does this reveal about God's love, forgiveness and grace?

God longs for the return of lost people and celebrates when they come home. Even if they stink of pigs, prostitutes, and self-pity. Jesus' dining with tax collectors and sinners is a sign that God welcomes all and celebrates their salvation.

5. Look now at the older brother's response. He too refers to himself as a "slave" (vs 29) even though he has had immediate and permanent access to the Father from birth. He too can see the sinfulness of "this son of yours" (he can't bring himself to say "my brother" anymore) yet cannot understand why the father would respond with such extravagant grace. Are there times we respond like the older brother? Do we wallow in self-pity when there are celebrations for a returning prodigal?
6. Consider the context of the chapter now. Remember why Jesus tells this story to begin with – in response to the Pharisees and teachers of the law muttering about his welcoming of sinners and tax collectors. Notice that the stories just end (vs 32). We don't know what the older brother does in response to his father's pleas. Similarly, we don't know how the Pharisees and teachers of the law responded (at least immediately). What impact does this "mic drop" ending have on the way the story is told?

The story is left in tension. We know how God responds to lost people – he dines with them. Will the Pharisees join with God? Will they return? Will they, too, be "found?" Will we? Will we join in the celebrating of lost people being found or wallow in self-pity outside?

REFLECT

1. Share your own "lost" stories with one another. What was it like to be found by God?
2. Are there any signs of the "older brother syndrome" in your life? What do you need to do about that?

IMAGINE

1. List three things that have really stood out from this study.
2. Without worrying about any restrictions, what would the church look like if those things were always present? You might like to consider this from a global or local perspective (or both).

PERFORM

1. What action can you take today (taking account of real world restrictions) that is a step towards that dream becoming a reality?

PRAY

Spend time in prayer for each other, particularly for the actions you've committed to.

For next week....

1. Long Slow Read (LSR). Read chapter 16 slowly over the course of week. You can do this as many times as you like.
2. Tempo Read – Read and reread Chapter 16 several times. Take note of verses/phrases/characters that stand out – e.g. Jesus, Holy Spirit, poor, women.
3. Repeats – Choose one verse to memorise. Repeat it many times throughout the day and over the course of a week or so. Meditate on the verse and pray it in and out. Repeat the verse many times throughout your day.