

## UNIT THREE: JESUS

### SESSION TWELVE: JESUS' TEACHING

#### **Summary of the Twelfth Session of the Course**

#### **Topics:**

- Parables and how they work
- Grace
- The power of forgiveness
- The danger of self-righteousness
- The false doctrine of reward and punishment and the fallacy of merit
- The unfinished story in the parable of the Prodigal Son

#### **The Three Parables in Luke 15**

The preparation for this session had been to read the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Luke, which contains the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Prodigal Son. Luke introduces the parables by telling us Jesus is being criticized by the Pharisees and scribes for associating himself with the wrong people: “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

All three parables follow the same teaching method, although the third is much more complex than the first two. Today, we call this method the “argument from lesser to greater.” First, Jesus presents a situation (the lesser) in which the choice to be made is clear to most of his audience. For example, a good shepherd should leave 99 sheep on the hillside to search for the one that has wandered off. Sheep are valuable, and the loss of one is not to be taken lightly. A good shepherd knows his responsibility and will not let his sheep be lost one by one. He will care about the one that is lost, even though he still has 99 safe and sound. His decision to go out and look for the lost one and his joy at finding it are both to be expected. The lesser situation is clear. The greater situation is not so clear to Jesus’ audience at all, but he argues it is even more to be expected and should be quite clear to them – if they know God. The logic is this: if a shepherd can be expected to go out and search for the one sheep that is lost and not be content to have the remaining ninety-nine, should not God be expected even more clearly to search for the person who is lost? Surely, a shepherd does not love the sheep as much as God loves the people! How could that be? So, if a shepherd rejoices at finding a lost sheep, surely God rejoices far more (there is more joy in heaven) at the restoration of a lost person.

By using this method of teaching, Jesus draws his audience into his parable and secures their agreement with his logic before taking them to the greater situation of God's grace. He leaves his legalistic opponents looking as though they care less about people than shepherds do about sheep, but I think he is also challenging them to care much more about people than they do. I don't think he is content merely to defeat them by discrediting their objections to his ministry but truly wants to move them to change their minds. I believe the conclusion to the Prodigal Son supports this idea. There, Jesus tries to persuade all the *older brothers and sisters* (the legalists) to overcome their resentment and celebrate with God the return of the lost.

Is pity for a sheep good but compassion for a sinful person bad? The legalists would say Yes, because the person has God's commandments and is to be judged by his or her obedience. A sheep is too stupid to be judged and can only be pitied, but a person having the commandments and failing or refusing to obey them is to be condemned. Jesus rejects this logic because, for him, God's love overrides objective, impersonal judgment. His disagreement with the legalists is fundamental for both. To them, God's holiness and justice in judgment override any thought of God's love or compassion. They see his ministry to sinners as a cheap soiling of God's holiness, a compromise with evil, and a disgrace to the name of God. For them, goodness should be rewarded and unrighteousness punished. They see Jesus as encouraging sin, not overcoming it. In their scheme, forgiveness should be reserved for people trying their hardest to keep God's commandments, not given to people who have never seemed to care about keeping the commandments at all.

By eating with sinners, Jesus is uniting himself with them in a communion well-understood in his society. Because he is a teacher of torah, of the things of God, he is also uniting God's name with these sinners. Jesus teaches us to pray that God's name will be held holy (hallowed), but obviously he means something different than the hallowing of God's name by keeping it from the sinful. For Jesus, restoring the lost and forgiving the sinful do, indeed, hallow God's name. The basis of all his thinking is God's love for the people. God wants them back, more than a shepherd wants his lost sheep back, a poor woman her lost coin back, or even a father his lost son back.

The legalists would argue (and still do) that Jesus compromises the commandments of God and renders obedience to them unnecessary and even foolish. Why obey if disobedience will get you just as far? Such is always the argument against grace (unmerited love and undeserved mercy). For the legalists, obeying the commandments is the means for obtaining *merit*, and merit is the currency for securing God's favor and approval. For Jesus, obeying the commandments is a free way of responding to God's love and mercy. Merit has nothing to do with it. There is no merit in God's eyes. "No one is good but God alone," as Jesus tells the rich man who calls him, "Good Teacher."

Nothing seems harder for human beings to understand and accept than grace. Jesus understands nothing else. He lives by grace and sees no other way to live. His opponents see only merit: people should get what they deserve. Within the merit system, there is some room for mercy, but only for those who try very hard to obey perfectly and fall a little short. They earn even God's mercy by trying hard. They live under the doctrine of reward and punishment. Jesus rejects it. For

him, God is not committed to punishing the sinners and rewarding the righteous; God is committed to loving both and restoring both to genuine life in the household of God.

The parable of the Lost Coin repeats the parable of the Lost Sheep. In Hebraic thought and teaching, two examples are always better than one, and the third drives the lesson home. The Lost Coin, however, adds to the contrast by making the lesser loss (the coin) an inanimate object. Can a coin be worth more than a human being? Should joy at the recovery of a lost coin be greater than joy at the recovery of a lost person? Does God love a person less than a woman loves a coin?

The coin is a day's wage for a day laborer in that society. It will buy a day's food. So, this woman is not wealthy, but she is well-off by some standards because she has enough money for ten days sustenance. Jesus teaches people for whom his prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread," has literal significance. He calls upon them to live by faith even as they live in the way we call "hand to mouth." I asked whether the woman was hurt by the loss of one of her ten coins. The group agreed she was hurt by it. Is God not hurt by the loss of a person? The self-righteous (Jewish or Christian, then or now) see God as above being hurt by the loss of a sinner; to them, God is justified and even glorified by the punishment of the sinful (even their eternal damnation). Jesus said, No. Rather, God is hurt by the loss of a person. To God, that person is a son or daughter missing from the family table, and no justification of judgment or punishment relieves the grief of that loss. Legalists cannot abide the thought that God grieves the loss of a sinful person; Jesus cannot see God any other way.

## **Merit**

The concept of merit is key to the false doctrine of reward and punishment. Merit is moral and religious credit built by good deeds and piety; it is earned and can be measured. Merit deserves recognition and reward. I recalled for the group a conversation I had with a rabbi about the issues that divide Jews from Christians. He saw the Trinitarian issues: the divinity of Jesus, Son of God, and God the Son. I suggested that far beneath those issues lay one more basic: merit. For Protestant Christianity (at least, officially), no one can possibly have merit in God's eyes. There is no merit before God. There can be no such thing. We cannot build moral, religious, or charitable credit with God.

We discussed my initial reactions to the title of Rabbi Kushner's book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. I said that my first question was, "Who are these good people?" My second question was, "How bad do I have to be before it is okay for bad things to happen to me?"

If God were truly the one making bad things happen to bad people while making sure only good things happened to good people, wouldn't compassion for the suffering be a sin? The compassionate would be interfering with the just punishment of sinners by God and so promoting godlessness and disobedience (which is exactly what Jesus' opponents believe he is doing). If the world runs on a strict system of retribution (wrongly called "justice"), then everyone gets what he

or she deserves, and it would be sinful to intervene by helping the person being justly punished. Few Christians today would accept this idea as I have stated it, but many agree with it, anyway. So, they distinguish between the deserving sinners and the undeserving sinners, just as George Bernard Shaw sarcastically distinguishes between the deserving poor and the undeserving poor.

No one deserves life; it is God's gift to us. No one deserves God's love; it is also God's gift. Love cannot be deserved. Love and merit are incompatible. Grace is love undeserved and forgiveness unearned, and grace is the way of God.

## **The Prodigal Son**

The parable of the Prodigal Son has two parts, the story of the younger son and the story of the older. Which part speaks more personally to a particular individual depends upon that person's own perception of his or her need for grace.

By law, the oldest son in the family inherits two-thirds of the estate. In this parable, the younger son cannot wait for his father to die to get his inheritance; he wants to go off on his own right away. So, he asks his father for his inheritance early, and his father complies by turning the younger son's share into cash and giving it to him. The relationship between father and son has now been completed and effectively terminated, just as though the father had died. Ironically, the son is the one who becomes "dead" and must be restored to life.

The young man leaves the county and enjoys a life of partying, until his money runs out. At the same time, the land enters a time of famine. So, this young Jewish man finds himself feeding pigs (the premier unclean animal) and even wishing he could eat some of their food. Jesus is showing us a man who has hit rock bottom. He has left his family and his people, wasted his life and his inheritance, and now he stands impoverished in the midst of pigs and wishing he could share their food (an ironic form of breaking bread and so bonding with someone).

He "comes to himself," meaning to his senses. The servants in his (former) father's household have enough to eat and decent living conditions. So, he devises a plan and even prepares a speech: "Father, I have sinned against heaven (God) and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." With that speech in mind, he turns homeward.

When the young man's father sees him in the distance, he sets off toward him on the run. One commentator notes that middle-aged Oriental men did not run – it was undignified. This father runs and throws his arms around his younger son, who starts the prepared speech but is not given time to complete it. The father is too excited to listen to speeches. He immediately sends his servants to bring three gifts symbolic of the son's new status as a free, adult man in the household: sandals (slaves went barefoot), a ring, and a robe. The father has no thought of using his son's disadvantage to control him, punish him, or put him in his place. He is overjoyed: "And get the

fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”

Is it hard to understand that a father would love his son that much? For some people, it is. For others, not. Here, the argument from lesser to greater becomes more complex, because the first (lesser) situation is not obvious to all. Yes, a shepherd will go after a stray sheep, and a woman will sweep for a lost coin, but will a father actually forgive and restore a son who has treated him so badly? Though still on the human-to-human level, we are approaching the grace of God. This parable takes us beyond what might be reasonably expected. Yet, how many parents can understand this father and would love the opportunity to welcome back a grown son or daughter who has been lost to them? Also, how many stubborn parents would miss the chance if they had it? Nonetheless, the argument from lesser to greater still holds, because God’s love is greater than even extraordinary human love.

The older brother’s story is more pointed. He is the good son who stayed home and did twice the work because his younger brother had gone off to party. Now, he returns home from the fields to hear the sounds of partying in his own house. When he learns that the party is being given to celebrate the return of his younger brother and that his father has had the fattened calf slaughtered for the event, he becomes furious and refuses to enter the house.

The father comes outside to speak with his older son and reason with him, but the son does not follow his father’s reasoning. All these years, the older son has been working like a slave, and never did his father offer him so much as a kid to have a party with his friends. Then, he refers to his brother, not as his own brother, but as his father’s son – “this son of yours.” He denies his relationship with his younger brother.

Unfortunately, the older son is right: he has worked as a slave, even though he is the son and heir. When his father tells him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours,” he is speaking the truth literally. This son, however, thinks as a slave thinks and lives as a slave in his own house. He is the embodiment of the legalist who spends his or her life trying to merit God’s favor when he or she already has God’s love. Not only does this man deny his relationship with his brother, but he also lives in denial of his relationship with his father.

The father tries to tell his older son why they are celebrating. “Your brother” was lost and has been found, was dead (to us) and is alive again. What greater cause could there be for a party?

### **The Unfinished Story**

We never know whether or not the older brother is moved by his father’s explanation or his joy. Does he reconsider his position and go into the house to celebrate? We don’t know. Why are we left with the unanswered question? In real life in Jesus’ immediate situation, it remained unanswered. Would the keepers of the law reconsider their position and rejoice with Jesus at the

restoration of sinners to God, or would they hold out for reward and punishment? The answer comes in the plot to get rid of Jesus and in his crucifixion. The legalists will not tolerate grace. People should get what they deserve – that is their stand. So, they give Jesus what they believe he deserves for misrepresenting God, degrading the commandments, and sully the purity of Israel.

Jesus' parable draws us in. How does it make us feel? Do we empathize with the younger son, the father, or the older son? Where do I stand personally on the question of grace versus merit when it affects human relationships? The more I believe I have merit, the more likely I become to empathize with the older brother and resent grace offered to people who seem to me undeserving. People define their personal merit in various ways. For some, merit means moral or religious capital built up by good living and piety. For others, merit means success, prestige, and, perhaps, charity toward the less successful and prestigious. However I may define it, I believe my merit deserves recognition and reward. If I have merit, I don't need grace.

The person who knows and feels his or her own need for healing or forgiveness will more likely empathize with the younger son and hear the parable as good news. The one who aches inside because of alienation from a loved one or formerly close friend may empathize with the father. The person who resents life for not giving him all he or she deserves will empathize with the older brother. So will the person fixated on rules and law, whether that person feels virtuous for having kept them or guilty for having broken them. Some people can't accept grace even when they know they have little merit that entitles them to reward. For them, I suppose, the story of the younger son is not finished either. Will he be able to accept his father's unconditional love, or will he punish himself by living as a slave no matter what his father says or does? We did not discuss this last possibility because I didn't think of it until I was almost finished writing this summary, but I believe accepting grace can be a big problem even for some people who do not feel virtuous, successful, or deserving in any way. Some pride (even if that pride is presently feeling shame) may keep the person from grace, or maybe it's just a stubborn legalistic spirit that judges others and self harshly, but something can block the way. Accepting ourselves as loved can be very hard.