

THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

LUKE 14:12-15:32

It was Thanksgiving Day 1985, Scott Macaulay faced the holiday all by himself. His mom and dad had recently divorced. *“Nobody was talking to anybody,”* he said, *“I was looking at a pretty rotten Thanksgiving.”*

But Scott had an idea. He took an ad out in his local newspaper. It read, *An invitation to Thanksgiving dinner for the first twelve people to RSVP.* He figured there were at least 12 folks as lonely as him who had nowhere to go on Thanksgiving. And he was right.

Scott's Thanksgiving feast went so well he repeated it the next year and every year since for the last 33.

Today, Scott hosts a free Thanksgiving dinner for often 100 guests. Everyone who RSVPs is welcomed. Scott's son, Walter, is the designated turkey carver.

And over the years, Scott has fed widows, homeless people, and college kids who can't make it home. He's had infants attend, *celebrating their first Thanksgiving,* and elderly attend, *celebrating their last Thanksgiving.*

Once, a woman, who was living in her car, parked on the street and waited until everyone had left before she came in for dinner... One year, two people crawled under the table to eat. No questions were asked, they were just served... Scott recalls the man who had recently lost his wife. After dinner, the fellow strapped on an apron and helped Scott wash the dishes...

One of Scott's favorite memories was the year his mom came. She was dying of cancer and said she just wanted to be with family. Scott's dad also came that year. Scott recalled the scene, "I can still see them, sitting on the couch together, holding hands, years after their divorce." Scott has countless such stories.

His Thanksgiving feast has become a tradition in his hometown. And it stands out as a beautiful illustration of how Jesus described God's Kingdom in Luke 14...

In verse 12, Jesus is at a dinner party. "Then He also said to (the Pharisee) who invited Him, "When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid." Each year, Scott invites *folks with nowhere to go*, versus this Pharisee who invited *people who could reciprocate the invitation*. **If you give only to get, you're not giving at all.**

Sadly, a lot of what's called "*Christian fellowship*" is back scratching. **You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.** How often do we invite folks into our circle to really enlarge it, instead of just recycling relationships?

Jesus says, "But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just." When you throw a party, make it a Kingdom party. Rejoice with folks who don't have many reasons to rejoice, and God will see to it you get invited to the party that counts.

“Now when one of those who sat at the table with Him heard these things, he said to Him, “Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!”

Then (Jesus) said to him, “A certain man gave a great supper and invited many, and sent his servant at supper time to say to those who were invited, ‘Come, for all things are now ready.’ In ancient times, an invitation to a party was in two phases. The initial invite was received well in advance, but on the day of the event, the host alerted his guests as to a specific time.

“But they all with one accord began to make excuses.” Between the initial invitation and “*the day-of alert*”, there had been distractions - stuff had come up.

The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it. I ask you to have me excused.’ I read about the elementary school principal who collected excuses from kids who were absent.

Here was his favorite, “Dear skool: Pleas exkuse Johnny from being absent October 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, and 33.” Signed, “Cincerely, Johnny’s dad.”

It’s been said, “The man who is good at coming up with excuses is seldom good at anything else.” Here, a man is alerted that it’s party time, but he says he needs to survey a tract of land. It’s a pretty lame excuse.

“And another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to test them. I ask you to have me excused.’” As with the land, this guy has already bought the oxen, so *what’s the hurry?* Why the need for a test drive all of a sudden? And

“Still another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' He sees this wife every day, he can't slip away for a few hours? *Here's a guy too focused on the family!*

And here are three excuses for putting off Jesus that are still popular today: **business, possessions, family.**

In their right place, all three can be good, but you can make an idol out of anything - a piece of ground or business, a few oxen or a new car, or even your family.

And all three were excuses not to come to the party.

“So that servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house, being angry, said to his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in here the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind.' And the servant said, 'Master, it is done as you commanded, and still there is room.'” Fed up with excuses, the Master decided to invite folks who'd appreciate his invitation.

Rather than the rich and famous, he sent out invitations to *“the poor and the maimed and the lame and the band”* - people who aren't welcomed at much.

Often churches like to plant themselves in hip, upscale neighborhoods. They target the wealthy, and affluent, and sophisticated. Whereas, Jesus swings the doors of God's Kingdom open to *the down and out...*

It reminds me of a Boston couple who planned an expensive wedding and reception. They rented the city's classiest hotel. All arrangements were made, when at the last minute the groom bailed, *got cold feet.*

Because of the hotel's strict reimbursement policy, the bride stood to lose the lion's share of her money, so she decided to go through with the reception party.

Her first step was to change the menu to "boneless chicken" in honor of the ex-groom! Then she invited the homeless shelters and rescue missions in Boston.

On this night, waiters dressed in tuxedos served hors d'oeuvres to bag ladies and panhandlers. People who normally ate half-gnawed pizza feasted on chicken cordon bleu. Vagrants sipped champagne, and street people ate wedding cake. Everybody danced into the night to big-band melodies. I'm not sure she realized it, but the jilted bride gave us a glimpse into God's heart.

Verse 23 continues, "Then the master (concerned about the fact there was still room) said to the servant, 'Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.'" Notice the operative phrase. God's chief desire is "that My house may be filled." God's top priority is a full house.

And if the first invitees are uninterested, comb the "highways and hedges" for the misfits and oddballs!

"For I say to you that none of those men who were invited shall taste my supper." The excuse-makers who wanted rain checks will never get in. Nowhere in Scripture does God guarantee you a second chance.

Please, whatever you do, don't put God on hold, and expect Him to be on the line when you're ready to answer. Isaiah 55:6 reads, "Seek the LORD while he may be found." The day will come when it'll be too late.

Verse 25, “Now great multitudes went with Him.” And apparently, it was too many. He thins out the crowd.

And He turned and said to them, if anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.” These were hard words then, and they’re hard words now. That’s why we need to really understand what Jesus is saying...

Certainly, He’s not advocating a literal hatred for family. Here Jesus uses a literary device, **hyperbole, or exaggeration for emphasis.** He’s saying, “If you want to be My disciple, your love for Me should be so strong it makes your love for anyone else look like hate.”

Jesus tolerates no rivals. Other relationships can be important to us, but our love for Jesus should tower over all other connections. He should be paramount.

“And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.” Crosses were well known in the Roman empire. Crucifixion was used to express Rome’s mastery over people. It was total subjugation of an individual’s will to the will of Rome.

And this is what Jesus means to “*bear the cross.*”

If I want to be a disciple *or follower* of Jesus, it takes an unreserved surrender of my life to Him. My plans and my desires become secondary to His will for me.

We should realize any belief that does not command the person who holds it, is not a real belief. It might be someone

else's belief that intrigues me - that I find interesting - but it has to command me to be mine.

So before you follow Jesus make sure you're ready for the commitment... *Have you counted the cost?* “For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it - lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.’” *You don't want to be embarrassed, do you?* Don't make a rash commitment you're unable to fulfill.

Verse 31, “Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace.” We need to think it through, and **count the cost of surrender!**

I read where the American Planning Association says that 90% of all construction projects exceed their initial estimate. There are cost overruns. It usually costs more than you think, and that's true of following Jesus.

Some people make rash promises, and they never follow through. They're guilty of a fair-weather faith that fizzles over time. Don't let your emotions get played, or let some preacher tug on your heartstrings, and force you into a commitment you don't really want to make.

This is NOT the kind of commitment Jesus desires.

Jesus wants sincere followers. Following Him is the best move you'll ever make, but first, think it through. Count the cost it could require. *For there is a cost...*

Someone defined "commitment" as "the willingness to be unhappy for awhile." This occurs in everyone's Christianity. There are moments that due to your surrender, you suffer a sense of loss - or obedience to God creates unpleasant circumstances. Christianity isn't 24/7 bliss, nothing but warm fuzzies. It can be a tough row to hoe. And a Christian has to count the cost!

Thomas Huxley said, "It doesn't take much of a man to be a Christian, but it takes all there is of him." Jesus gave all He had, to take possession of all that we are.

Thomas Nelson was one of 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence. He supported American troops in the Revolutionary War, buying munitions for Washington's army. Ironically, in the battle of Yorktown, British Commander, Cornwallis, made Nelson's house his headquarters, partly because he knew Washington wouldn't fire on the mansion out of loyalty to his friend.

But when Nelson saw what was happening, he insisted Washington attack and rain fire down on his own home. America won the war, but Thomas Nelson's mansion was destroyed. *Nelson had counted the cost.*

And you and I are asked to do the same. Jesus instructs us in verse 33, "So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple."

For "Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is neither fit for the land nor for the dunghill, but men throw it out." In His Sermon On The Mount, Jesus told His followers, "You are the salt of the earth." Christians are the spice of life. We flavor the world around us with grace and truth.

Yet like salt, we can lose our saltiness. We can grow bland. Our commitment becomes dull. It loses its edge. We can get complacent. And stop acting on our faith.

And salt that's lost its saltiness is worthless. It no longer influences and impacts people... Jesus closes the chapter, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

Once, two high-brow, uppity pastors were asked to speak at a gathering on the other side of the tracks.

But when they arrived, they walked into a room full of drug addicts, and prostitutes, and street people. Both these pastors had prepared sophisticated lectures.

The first man turned to his colleague, and said, "I'm in trouble. My sermon won't work with this crowd."

The second pastor admitted, "I'm in the same boat."

After thinking for a while, the initial pastor whispered, "I'll tell you what we should do... I'll take the prodigal son out to a far country, and you bring him back home!"

The point being, every heart can resonate with *The Parable Of The Prodigal Son*. You can't be conscious of your sin, and not be moved emotionally by this parable. No other passage conveys as convincingly the role of God as Father and the hope of His forgiveness.

Yet the story of the Prodigal Son is just one parable in a set of three. Luke 15 also speaks of **a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son.** We'll tackle all three...

Verse 1, **"Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him."** There was something about Jesus that attracted the outcasts and sinners.

In contrast, author Phillip Yancey writes about His followers, **"Somehow we have created a community of respectability in the church, so that the down-and-out who flocked to Jesus when He lived on earth no longer feel welcome. How did Jesus, the only perfect person in history, manage to attract the notoriously imperfect?"** The answer is real, risky, far-reaching love!

Once, a child from Chicago walked miles across town, in the cold, to attend D.L. Moody's Sunday School. Someone asked the boy why he traveled so far when other Sunday Schools were closer. The little guy replied, **"Because they love a feller over there!"**

And this is what the prostitutes, tax collectors, and militia members all sensed in Jesus - **they knew He loved them.** Jesus was able to touch a sinner's heart.

Today, church leaders attempt to touch hearts by being *relevant*. The idea is to play the sinner's musical style - speak his language - identify with him culturally.

But what really captures a person's heart is the knowledge he's loved. What made Jesus so attractive and appealing to sinners *was and is* His amazing love.

And the Jewish leaders recognized this magnetism. “The Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” These Jews didn’t get love. Judaism was all about law, not love.

Sadly, the Jewish religion had nothing to say to sinners.

To become a part of their household, you first had to clean up your act, and earn your place, and pass the rituals. Sinners were left on the outside looking in.

The notion of a God who went out of His way to love and search for lost sinners and restore them to His family was unheard of among the Jews. That’s why the three parables in this chapter were so revolutionary...

“So (Jesus) spoke this parable to them, saying: what man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?”

A shepherd once explained how a sheep gets lost. *He nibbles his way into trouble.* He just moves from one tuft of grass to another until he's through the fence, and has lost his bearings. Disaster begins as a distraction. He wanders away because of **foolishness**.

And likewise, people stray from God down the same slippery slope. They inch away. At the time, their slide seems imperceptible. They walk away in baby steps.

Like falling asleep on a float in the ocean. When you wake up you’ve drifted too far from shore to get back on your own... Thank God, there’s a lifeguard or a shepherd. Jesus loves the lost person to such an extent He leaves the herd to fetch the one lost lamb.

Verse 5, “And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.” The shepherd doesn’t even make the wayward sheep walk on his own... He carries the sheep on his shoulders. And rejoices all the way home.

The other night two of my grandsons climbed up on a wall at my house. I heard my son’s rebuke, “You climbed up, now you can get down.” It’s a good lesson to learn. *Don’t put yourself in trouble you can’t solve.*

But thankfully, this shepherd didn’t take that attitude.

Jesus rescues formerly lost sheep, even when they can’t save themselves. He carries us out of trouble.

“And when (the shepherd) comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!’ I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.”

The Jewish Pharisees had an adage. “There is joy before God when those who provoke Him perish from the world.” Whereas Jesus played off their quotation to express God’s true heart! The opposite attitude is true. *“There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.”*

Verse 8, “Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?”

A sheep gets lost through *foolishness*, but you lose a coin by **carelessness**. When a Jewish woman got married, she

wore a headdress decorated with ten coins. The coins were the equivalent of her wedding ring. And to lose a coin was a major catastrophe!

This woman accidentally loses one of her silver coins. And when she realizes it's missing she frantically sweeps the house in search of the valuable item.

“And when she has found it, she calls her friends and neighbors together, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I lost!' Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Heaven throws a party when just one sinner repents... *horns sound, confetti falls, balloons soar* - it is Times Square on New Year's Eve. **[Audio and Animation]**

And we should also get excited when a new believer repents. I love it whenever I give an altar call, someone responds, and we all clap. That's what heaven is like.

Joy explodes in God's heart when the lost are found.

Verse 11, “Then He said: **"A certain man had two sons."** Take note, this story is introduced by the mention of **two** sons. We usually focus on the prodigal or rebellious son - but we'll find that a second son also plays a crucial, strategic role in Jesus' parable.

“And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.' So he divided to them his livelihood. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together...” The kid brother is moving out. He's tired of the old man's rules.

It's time to become his own man - live his own life.

And he “journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living.” The word translated “prodigal” is “wasteful.” He wasted his life.

For a season, this young man financed the porn shops and brothels in the far country in which he lived.

He ran up a huge bar tab. He partied hearty. He wasted not only his wealth - but his health, mind, and spirit. At fling’s end, he was a shell of what he’d been.

Verse 14, “But when he had spent all (and it was probably a sizable amount), there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want.” His wastefulness and a slumping economy simultaneously hit their peak. He’s out of money, and can’t get a job.

“Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.”

In our culture, I’m sure slopping hogs is embarrassing enough, but for a first-century Israeli, with high hopes of success, you can’t imagine a more humiliating job. The Law of Moses forbids Jews from eating pork.

This was not what this young man and his family had in mind when someone told him he needed *to bring home the bacon!* “And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything.” Notice the last line, “no one gave him anything.” Hey, while the guy had lots of money he had plenty of friends. But when the funds dried up, so did his posse. The life of the party was now on his own.

It's been said, "Only after you hit rock bottom are you willing to look up." That was the case for the prodigal.

Verse 17 is the turning point, "But when he came to himself." Finally, he comes to his senses. Reality hits!

"(The young man) said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants."

When the boy came to his senses, he remembered his father. Folks who worked for his dad were treated like kings compared to his own deplorable conditions.

"And he arose and came to his father." His logic echoes Romans 2:4 where Paul tells the Romans that "the goodness of God leads you to repentance."

When this bad boy recalled his father's kindness, he humbled himself - he did an about-face - and he headed home. *He would take his chances with dad!*

And as a side note, here's an example of baseball in the Bible, "the prodigal son made a home run."

It's interesting, the Jewish Talmud also told the story of a prodigal son who returned home. This son came hoping his dad would restore him as a son. And though the dad took him back, it was as a servant, not a son.

Thus, in the minds of the Pharisees to whom Jesus was speaking, a sinner could be forgiven, but he forfeited his right to be a son and to enjoy the blessings of His Father. Full son-

ship was out of the question. It was reserved for Pharisees, not sinners.

But that was not the portrait of God Jesus painted...

Jesus continues His story, “But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.”

Years ago there was a popular Christian song entitled, “The Day God Ran.” It noted how God is never in a hurry. The Almighty walks, He rides, He even sits. But here is the only place in the Bible where God runs.

And why would God ever run? His heart propels His feet to move whenever He sees a prodigal son or daughter humble themselves and come home to Him.

Even when the son “*was still a great way off, his father saw him...*” Implied is that the Father was looking, and waiting, and hoping, and praying for his son to come home. It’s evidence of love’s longings.

Imagine this young man walking down the road - *his head is down, his feet kicking dirt, he’s rehearsing his apology, he’s hoping his father agrees to meet him.*

What a shocker, to see his dad running down the long driveway. And before he can get a word out of his mouth, dad grabs him in a huge bear hug and smothers him with affection... And this is how God responds when one sinner repents and comes to Him.

See it too from the son’s side. *What relief in his face!*

Verse 21 “And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.’” *He’d practiced this speech for days, but the father interrupts him...*

“The father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet.’” The family ring was a symbol of son-ship. Jesus is making the point that this father isn’t merely hiring a servant, he is restoring a son and heir.

Then the father says, “And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’

And they began to be merry.” Just like in heaven when a sinner comes home to God, a party breaks out.

It reminds me of the Sunday School teacher who quizzed his class. “Boys and girls, who was sorry when the prodigal son returned home?” One little boy surprisingly shouted, “*the fatted calf,*” which is correct, but the answer the teacher expected is in verse 25...

“Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.” *Why didn’t he go into the house to see for himself?* It could be that he had anticipated this happening. He knew his father’s heart.

“And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed

the fatted calf.' But he was angry and would not go in." He ends up pouting on the porch!

"Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him." Sadly, this older son had lived in his *father's house*, worked his *father's fields*, eaten at his *father's table*, but had never embraced his *father's heart*.

In real life, the Pharisees were the elder brothers.

They were proud of how they served so diligently and refused to indulge in the evils of the Gentiles, yet in truth they were self-righteous. They were trying to earn God's love and obligate God to their agenda.

Religion attempts to make God our debtor. Do this and do that, and God owes you - when in reality, God owes no one. Our only hope of salvation is to fall on our knees, admit our sin, and trust in His grace.

I believe the elder brother understood his father's extravagant love, but was critical of it. In his mind, the father's love isn't fair. Grace and mercy aren't fair.

He refused to see his own sin and focused only on the sin of his kid brother. *Why was his brother getting what he hadn't earned?* He stood in judgment of God.

And in verse 29 the elder brother verbalizes his complaint, "So he answered and said to his father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your

livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.” And I hope you feel this boy’s bitterness. His words reek with bitterness.

Notice, he doesn’t say, “*my brother*” - it’s “*this son of yours.*” His heart is so full of self-righteousness, pride, and judgment there’s no room for grace toward his brother! *Little does he know his own need for grace.*

“And (the father) said to (the older brother) - *and here’s God’s heart, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.'*”

One commentator writes, “In this chapter, there are four lost items - a sheep, a coin, a prodigal son, and his elder brother. The first three are obviously lost. The fourth is lost and doesn't know it. He's the tragic one. He doesn't have any awareness of his lostness. He has never strayed or broke the rules, and yet he missed out on the gift of the father's extravagant love.”

Understand, you don't have to be an alcoholic, or a compulsive gambler, or a criminal to be a prodigal son.

The "*far*" in the "*far country*" isn't measured in miles, but in the degree to which you've separated yourself from the grace and mercy of God. You may've lived your whole life in a Christian family, and in the confines of the church, but if your heart is cold, and arrogant, and self-righteous, and judgmental - something is desperately wrong. *You my friend, are an elder brother!*

The younger brother was *unrighteous*, but the older brother was *self-righteous*. And both separate a person from God. For some of us, it's time to stop looking down my nose at other sinners, *and admit I am one too.*

Confess your sin. Humble yourself. Turn to God.

Here's some really good news, *our Father God desires that you join the party! Make sure you RSVP!*