

## Luke 15A

- Today we begin Chapter 15 of Luke
  - There are few if any chapters of the Bible more familiar to Christians and non Christians alike than this one
  - And just as has been the case for the previous two Chapters of Luke, most of the content of this chapter is completely unique to Luke's gospel
    - Which is really quite remarkable when you consider the power and impact of this chapter and of it's hallmark feature – parable of the Prodigal Son
    - It's so amazing to me to think that the other three Gospel writers
      - Two of the writers were Apostles themselves and the third was a protégé of the Apostle Peter,
    - These three writers overlooked arguably this, the greatest of all the parables
      - When they first heard it, wouldn't it have stuck with them like it does us today?
      - Nevertheless, God in His wisdom left it to Luke to record this parable
        - A man who never met Jesus in person
        - The only Gentile author in the New Testament –
        - Perhaps there is something in this fact
        - Or perhaps it was that Luke simply had the strongest interest in parables – 20 unique parables
- But as we study this remarkable chapter, we face at least a couple of challenges
  - First, we need to fit the events of Chapter 15 into the larger canvas of Luke's Gospel
    - To understand why Luke places these events here, or even why they were included at all

- To see it as part of the larger Gospel story rather than just an isolated story we learned in Sunday School
- Secondly, we need to find a way to come into the events of this chapter from a fresh perspective
  - For both the teacher and the student, it can be difficult to learn when the material is so well known
  - So we want to take our time and work to understand the circumstances and events portrayed in the three parables that comprise Luke's
- I should also state upfront that in my preparation to teach this parable, I have tried to come into the text in a fresh way, looking to the Holy Spirit to guide me to the answers I sought
  - Yet I realize that few other places in Scripture have inspired as much good teaching as has the Prodigal Son
  - Yet only a fool would ignore so much helpful teaching
    - And not wanting to be a fool, I decided to consult other's teaching on this parable to a far greater degree than I usually do,
    - And I am indebted to many other gifted teachers for the insight I received from their exposition of this text
- With that, let's begin with the first few verses of Chapter 15 of Luke

[Luke 15:1](#) ¶ Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him.

[Luke 15:2](#) Both the Pharisees and the scribes *began* to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

[Luke 15:3](#) ¶ So He told them this parable, saying,

[Luke 15:4](#) "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?

[Luke 15:5](#) "When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.

[Luke 15:6](#) "And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!'

[Luke 15:7](#) "I tell you that in the same way, there will be *more* joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

- Perhaps the first question we should ask as we approach this text is to consider how it connects to what came before it
  - And actually, without going past verse 1, we get our answer, at least in part
  - Verse 1 of Chapter 15 tells us that all the tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus to listen to Him
  - Why is this significant?
    - Well, consider what Luke just detailed a little over one chapter ago
    - He left the reader with the stunning news that Jesus had been rejected by the very group He came to liberate from sin
    - And now that He has declared them to be an evil generation due judgment, where does He go next with His message?
  - Then add to this the last comment He makes at the end of Chapter 14
    - Jesus says in verse 35 that any would-be disciple will have ears to hear His message
      - In other words, there are still going to be those who hear Him and believe the message
      - Even amidst the crowd of scoffers, and hard-hearted Pharisees, there will yet be a receptive audience for His words of life
  - And now at the beginning of Chapter 15, Luke begins to explore who was the audience for Jesus' message
    - Sure enough, Jesus' message is received by sinners and tax collectors
      - The spiritually needy outcasts of Jewish society
      - Those who had no other hope
        - Certainly they could not hope in themselves
        - They didn't have self-righteousness to fall back on
        - And of course, that was to their advantage

- It was the pious, self-righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees and those like them in the crowd that left them unreceptive to Jesus' message
- So Luke presents Chapter 15 to make the case for why:
  - God would welcome into His family these unworthy sinners
  - While hiding Himself from the privileged religious establishment of Israel
    - And he begins by simply noting the chasm in the first two verses
      - The sinners and tax collectors (which is a general way of saying all the lowest in Jewish society) were receiving Jesus
      - And then in verse 2 the religious establishment is grumbling (murmuring among themselves)
  - Jesus, they say, is receiving and eating with sinners
    - What they are saying, in a sense, is that Jesus is giving them opportunity to be made whole in some sense without due penalty being paid
      - They were objecting to the way in which Jesus was willing to restore these people to a respectable standing in society by his associating with them
      - You see, the Pharisee's primary weapon against those who lived a life in open rebellion against the law and the rule of the Pharisees was to ostracize them from the rest of Jewish society
      - To shun them
      - Because Roman rule had limited their ability to apply the penalties of the Law
  - And here was Jesus removing the stigma that these people carried
    - He received them, it says, which means accepted them, even cherished them
    - And He ate with them, which is a sign of fellowship

- Can you imagine how this treatment impacted these dispossessed groups of society
  - They were receiving the thing they probably longed for the most – and the love of God led them to a true repentance
  - Rom 2:4 – the kindness of God leads to repentance
- So as we begin Chapter 15, we're immediately struck by the obvious tension that exists between the acknowledged and repentant sinners and the unrepentant self-righteous religious leaders
  - A tension created by how God views and responds to each group
    - His willingness to show mercy to the undeserving while overlooking the apparently worthy
  - Now, some of us can easily understand why God responds this way
    - It makes perfect sense to some of us
      - To those of us who have been in the shoes of the sinner
      - The one who has come to a recognition of his or her own unworthiness
      - The one who has been broken by the realization of how much our sin has wounded God
      - The one who is despondent knowing that there is nothing he can do to rescue himself from his predicament
      - To those of us who have turned from that predicament and turned to God's grace through Jesus Christ,
      - To us the contrast makes perfect sense
  - But to those who are like the Pharisees
    - Those who believe they deserve God's favor
    - To those who are sure they are in the "in crowd"
    - To those who feel they have worked for what they deserve

- To this group, the idea of God extending grace to sinners makes no sense
- The rules seem upside down, backwards, unfair, ridiculous
- So in response to the religious leaders and their inability to comprehend God's grace and mercy, Jesus tells three parables
  - And that's the second thing to note about Chapter 15
    - Once Jesus begins to teach in verse 3, it's all teaching through the end of the chapter
    - Three parables back-to-back, all intended to address this basic issues – the Pharisee's inability to comprehend how God could find joy in reaching out to the spiritually needy and broken
- The first parable sets the stage for all that follows
  - It's important, I believe, to note how Jesus begins the first parable
    - He says to the Pharisees – who are the audience for these parables – What man among you – or which one of you...
    - Jesus essentially places the Pharisees in the place of God
      - He says, you should be able to understand why God does what He does
      - You can understand why He acts the way He does IF you first appreciate what God sees when He looks upon these destitute and miserable and wretched people
  - If they could stand in God's place, and then look down on sinners, they would see what a shepherd sees when he discovers a lost sheep
    - First, it would have been easy for the Pharisees to identify with the life of a shepherd, though they themselves would never have lowered themselves to such a position
      - Shepherds were probably the most common occupation
    - Secondly, Sheep are a great example of sinners
      - Sheep are notoriously dim witted animals

- They prefer to remain in flocks and follow the herd
  - But they can absent-mindedly graze a distance away from the flock and the shepherd
  - Without the flock, they get lost and can stray into circumstances that are harmful
- And in thinking like a shepherd, the Pharisees could certainly appreciate why a shepherd would want to rescue the lost sheep
  - Sheep had real value to a shepherd
  - Shepherds had to watch their flocks carefully
  - They usually counted them at night, and if one was missing, they would go look for it, leaving the other sheep behind
- Jesus uses sheep and shepherds to teach the Pharisees that this is the relationship God has with His lost children
  - God sees value in his flock and has love for them
  - And He knows them all personally, individually
    - Even while the sheep is lost, he's still a sheep
    - He's still the property of the shepherd
    - Yet the shepherd must take action to reclaim the sheep from the world in which it is lost
  - And until the one lost sheep is found, the shepherd's joy is incomplete
- Likewise, as long as even one piece in God's mosaic of adopted and chosen children remains missing, God is relentless in pursuit of that missing piece
  - Until He succeeds in finding it and returning it to the fold
  - And when the one is found, there is joy over finding the one
- The finishing touch to the first parable is in how Jesus refers to the other 99.
  - These are sinners who have no need for repentance
    - This is actually a sarcastic reference to the Pharisees

- They are actually in great need of repentance, of course, but Jesus is referencing their view of self
  - They view themselves as not having need of repentance
  - And this is why they find it so hard to understand why God rejoices over the sinner rather than over them
- What the Pharisees wanted Jesus to do was congratulate them
  - To fawn over them and their piety
  - To commend them for the strict lifestyle
  - And then condemn the others for not doing likewise
  - They wanted credit for their hard work at being religious
- So while the Pharisees could understand what it meant to be a Shepherd seeking a lost sheep
  - They couldn't yet understand how God might see people in this way, as something worth saving
  - So, Jesus takes a step closer to home with the second parable
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[Luke 15:8](#) ¶ “Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?”

[Luke 15:9](#) “When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!’”

[Luke 15:10](#) “In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

- As if to emphasize the value of these lost souls, Jesus changes both the nature of the example and the quantity
  - In this example, a woman loses a silver coin – or more specifically, they are drachmas
    - That's the word here in the Greek for silver coin
    - It's about a day's wage – not a tremendous amount of money
  - And to find the coin, the woman does some extraordinary things



- First, she lights a lamp
- Houses in Palestine traditionally didn't have windows, so it would be necessary to light a lamp even in the day to find something like a small coin in a dusty dark house
- And she sweeps carefully to find it
  - Because the floors were dirt and probably littered with pebbles or leaves, she had to sweep the entire house
  - Then she would separate the items she swept up until she found the coin
- But if the woman spent a long time looking, she could have spent a significant portion of the coin's value looking for it
  - Because the oil in the lamp was costly in itself
- So, the extraordinary effort the woman took to find the coin can't be explained entirely by the coin's intrinsic value
  - It means more to her than simply a day's wage
  - And in fact, Palestinian woman often wore a necklace of drachmas around their necks as a dowry or even their savings
    - So the coin completed a collection that had value as a collection – 1 of 10 where each one had significant worth in terms of the collection
      - Like a mint set
    - It's a case of the whole being worth more than the sum of its parts
    - And Jesus says its like that for God and his children
  - When the missing piece in God's family is found, the collection is complete so to speak
    - As is God's joy
  - And in both parables, the catalyst for joy in Heaven is a sinner's repentance
- There are some interesting parallels between these parables

- In both parables, the one seeking is a lowly members of Jewish society
  - Shepherds were the lowest class of society above only sinners and tax collectors
  - While women were generally regarded as having little or no value apart from their husbands
  - The parable suggested the Jews since the lost were sheep who had left the fold
  - While the second parable suggested the Gentiles, since the object was a Greek coin
- But in neither case did the Pharisees make the connection
  - They could identify with the shepherd's concerns for the sheep
  - They could identify with the woman's desire for her coin
    - But did they understand why God looks upon the lowly and forgotten of the world as worthy of effort and cost to be saved?
  - They could appreciate the shepherd's happiness at having found the sheep
  - They could appreciate the woman's happiness at having found her lost coin
    - But could they ever understand how God finds joy in restoring a desperate sinner to fellowship in His family
    - Undoubtedly no
- So without missing a beat, Jesus tells one more parable – The Prodigal Son
  - And as we begin this parable, I want to draw your attention to something you may have missed in all the times you may have read this parable in the past
    - This parable is misnamed
    - This is not a parable about a son
    - This is a parable about 2 sons – look at verse 11

[Luke 15:11](#) ¶ And He said, "A man had two sons.

[Luke 15:12](#) "The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them.

- This is a story about a man, the father of a wealthy estate, and his two sons
  - The story is usually called the prodigal son because the protagonist in the story is a son who squanders his inheritance
  - That's what prodigal means: wastefully extravagant
  - But that name ignores the antagonist of the story: the other son, the righteous son or perhaps the dutiful son would be a better term
  - In fact, if you count the verses of the story, the prodigal son's story is told in 13 verses, while the older sons' story takes up 8
  - So the parable is truly a story about two sons
- So the first son decides to ask the father for his share of the inheritance
  - By inheritance, the son literally means his portion of all the father owns in life
    - The portion of his father's estate that would legally pass to him upon his father's death
  - Under Jewish law, the older son was entitled to a double portion of whatever was due the rest of the siblings
    - So in this case, the older son would have received 2/3 of the estate while the younger received about one third
  - So this is a most remarkable request
    - The son is basically saying I wish you were dead
    - Or you are dead to me
      - It's a completely selfish, self-centered act
      - It shows no regard for the interests or wishes of the father
      - It is utterly disrespectful and shameful

- And since the father's wealth was wrapped up in his way of life,
  - The son's statement also means he has no interest in the father's business or in the father's name
  - He wishes to completely disassociate himself from the father
- This request is so brash and unprecedented that the only thing that could shock the audience more than hearing of such a demand was to hear the father's response
  - In an even more surprising move, the Father agrees to the request
    - The Father agrees to allow the separation the son requests
    - The story implies that without the Father's consent, the son's fall into misery could never have happened
    - That he would have remained behind in the family much like the older son
      - But had that been the case, consider for a moment what kind of relationship the Father would have had with that son
      - He would have been there in body but not in spirit
      - And the father would have him by his side but knowing all along that the son didn't want to be there and resented the father's control
    - Had the father simply kicked the son out penniless for his insurrection against his authority, then the son would have been destitute from the start
      - And from then on, he could have blamed the heartless father for his pitiful condition
- Rather than do that, the father did the one thing he could do if he wanted to preserve a chance for reconciliation
  - He gave the son the freedom he demanded
  - It's helpful to understand what must have been involved in Jesus' day for a Father to divide the inheritance in this way

- The inheritance was the family's wealth
  - Which meant it was the home, the land, the farm buildings, the equipment, the slaves, the servants, the animals
  - Everything the father owned
- So if the father was to truly honor this request, the father must first liquidate the family's assets
  - In that day, much as we do today, you could sell a future interest in something of value
    - So, the father could have found buyers willing to purchase the rights to the family property upon the death of the father
  - So the family would receive payment today,, but hold onto the property until the father's death, at which point the new owner would take possession
    - Because this was a future interest, it meant that the inheritance was sold at a discount
    - A future interest is worth less today – like a savings bond
  - So this son's demand for his inheritance amounted to a demand that the father liquidate his assets at a loss (a discount) and immediately give the younger son his third
- Knowing this makes the father's agreement even more remarkable in this story
- But remembering how all these parables were pictures of God's desire for repentance of sinners and His redemption of the lost
  - Then let's consider how this story up to this point represents the story of God relationship with his lost children
  - All those who will one day be redeemed, must begin as lost sinners
  - We are all like this son who runs away from God
- But in reality, it wasn't us who initiated the running away

- That distinction belongs to Adam in the garden
- Adam was the one who, like this son, decided one day that he wasn't willing to be under the Father's authority
- Adam decided that some portion of what belong to the Father should be his
  - And not content to exist with the Father in sharing the Father's wealth and abundance and provision
  - Adam demanded options, freedom, choices
    - And that demand took the form of disobedience
  - And in response to Adam's selfish behavior, the Father had three choices
    - He could have restricted Adam's ability to even break free
      - He could have eliminated the tree in the garden
      - Or put a fence around it or made the branches so high they couldn't be reached
    - Adam would have been unable to accomplish his desires, but his desires would have remained nonetheless
      - And the father would have still lost the loving relationship he desired
    - Or he could have reacted in anger to the act of disobedience and disrespect by giving Adam what he deserved for his behavior
      - But had God done that, Adam would have immediately perished and all mankind with him
      - Again, the Father would have lost the loving relationship He desired
    - So the final option for the Father
      - Permit Adam's demand to be met
      - Just as the father in the parable agreed to the younger son's demand
        - Not because he agreed with it

- But because he saw no other way to restore His son to Himself
- And so this is where our story ends today
  - The Pharisees unable to see why God shows favor to sinners
  - Jesus teaching how sinners are a thing of value to God and worthy of being counted, of being found and restored
  - Of a story where a rebellious son longs to distance himself from a Father's authority
  - And a patient father willing to grant the son his distance so He might ultimately preserve the relationship