

SUMMARY

As the travel narrative continues, Jesus teaches about life in the kingdom of God, how precious it is, and how life is lived there. Jesus also speaks of what it will cost to enter the kingdom. In this section we find some of Jesus' most famous parables including the Mustard Seed, the Great Dinner, the Lost Sheep, and the Lost Sons.

BASIC BIBLE REFERENCES

Luke 13:18-35
14:1-35
15:1-32

WORD LIST

Kesassa Ceremony



Life in the Kingdom of God

The Kingdom Comes

Begin with **13:18-21**. The parables of the Mustard Seed and of the Yeast make the same point. The phrase *It is like* (verses 19 and 21) really means “It is the case with the kingdom as with . . .” The kingdom is not being compared to the tiny seed or the bit of yeast, but to the great tree and the huge mass of leavened dough that result from them. The image of a great tree with birds making *nests in its branches* is a familiar symbol in the Old Testament (see Ezekiel 17:22-24; 31:6). It represents a great empire that shelters all people. God will produce his great empire, the reign of God, and all peoples will be at home in God’s love. The growth of the tree is owed to no human agency. God will produce the growth. The kingdom is guaranteed because God will bring it to fruition.

A woman puts yeast in *three measures of flour*, which is equivalent to just over a bushel. This would make enough bread for one hundred people, far more than the typical three or four loaves a woman usually baked at a time. The idea of the yeast leavening a bushel of dough and the mustard seed becoming a tree bring an eschatological flavor to these parables. We are dealing here with divine realities. Again, the results do not depend on human agency; leavened dough rises inevitably. So it is with God’s reign; it will come without our help. God is the agent behind it.

Doors, Narrow and Closed

Now read **13:22-30**. In this section, Luke has put together several sayings of Jesus to form one unit. Jesus is asked to respond to the question *Lord, will only a few be saved?* which was not an unusual question in Jesus' day. The question of the number to be saved at the Last Day was debated in late Jewish literature. In 2 Esdras 8:1-3 the answer is: "The Most High made this world for the sake of many, but the world to come, for the sake of few . . . ; many have been created, but few will be saved" (Goodspeed translation). Jesus answers only with a warning about the narrow door, which should probably be understood as an encouragement to discipline and a deep desire for God's will.

Then there is the symbol of the closed door marking that time when it will be too late to make a decision to repent and enter the kingdom. The door into the kingdom will be shut. It will not be reopened for those who claim to have an acquaintance with Jesus. In fact, such acquaintance condemns them, for they heard the gospel from him and did not respond. Note that in this parable the Lord of the house is Jesus: *We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets*. The warning here is the same as the one in the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids in Matthew 25:1-13. The day is coming when it will be too late to make a decision. The critical time, therefore, is now.

There is a banquet going on in that house with the closed door. In Jesus' parables a meal, party, banquet, or feast always is a reference to the kingdom of God. Table fellowship with God is the greatest party of all, the one thing to aim for, the glorious fulfillment of all creation. But to those who have not repented, who have not responded to the gospel represented in Jesus' ministry, the door to the banquet is shut. And for those in Israel who did not respond, what could be worse than watching not only the great patriarchs of Israel enter the banquet, but Gentiles as well: *Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God*. Verse 30 is a floating saying found in several places in the Gospels. Only Luke uses it to contrast Jews and Gentiles.

Laments Over Jerusalem

Not all Pharisees were hostile to Jesus. Several invited him to dinner to listen quite honestly to his teaching. In Acts 15:5 Luke reminds us that some Pharisees had become believers. Read **13:31-35**. In this passage, a group of Pharisees comes to warn Jesus about Herod Antipas' death threats against him. Jesus asks them to get a message to Herod for

him, a harsh message. In Jewish literature foxes were destructive. In Greek literature they were crafty. Whatever Jesus meant by *fox*, it was clearly not a compliment. Jesus instructs the Pharisees to tell Herod, in essence, that his threats will have no effect at all on his work. The message ends with what might be sarcasm. Jerusalem, the holy city, had long been the place where God's servants had suffered for God's message.

Jerusalem's crisis hour was upon it; the time for decision had come, and Jerusalem went about its business unheeding. Jesus' lament has in it real sadness for a city he loved. The words of verse 35b are almost identical to the words the crowds will use on Palm Sunday.

More Table Talk

Read **14:1-14**. The healing of the man with dropsy is initiated by Jesus himself. It is an occasion not only for mercy, but for instructing the Pharisees. Here it is Jesus who raises the issue of working on the Sabbath. The scribes and Pharisees do not answer, probably because they know the answer which they cannot refute, but which they do not like. Jesus reminds them of the instruction in the Law that allows work in the case of an emergency. He apparently sees the alleviation of human suffering as an emergency. Love for others in the kingdom of God overrides all objections. The Pharisees do not speak at all in this passage.

People have sometimes dismissed verses 7-14 as nothing more than clever words on table manners. These present sayings have no more to do with good table manners than the Parable of the Sower has to do with agriculture. The saying about choosing places at the table is a parable. The reference to a wedding banquet is a clue that what Jesus is talking about is the kingdom of God. Here, then, is a warning to the proud who think that their good behavior, their keeping of the Law, entitles them to a choice place at the messianic banquet. It is a call to beware of self-righteousness and to cultivate a humble spirit in God's presence. Jesus can see from the guests' behavior at dinner (*When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor . . .*) that they have not even begun to look at themselves as God sees them. They are full of pride and arrogance. It is often in the small actions of everyday life that people divulge their true natures.

Jesus has a warning for the host as well as the guests. It is an injunction to use dinner invitations as a way of recalling God's graciousness to all of us, we who can never repay. The instruction to invite social outcasts to lunch is the complete reverse of what a Pharisee

would do. This is a list of precisely those people a Pharisee would never dream of inviting. Just so, the host who is himself invited to God's banquet—the kingdom—is a complete social mismatch who can return only gratitude. Life in the kingdom turns human values upside down.

The Parable of the Great Dinner

The parable in **14:15-24** again illustrates the importance of understanding the social customs of the time in order to be able to get the point of the story.¹ The issuing of invitations in ancient, and in some places modern, Middle Eastern societies is not at all like the issuing of invitations in the West. There an invitation is issued only a day or two in advance. The closer to the event the invitation is accepted, the more the guest is bound by courtesy to attend. The host will slaughter a fairly large animal for a banquet and must be sure of the number who will attend, since there is no way to preserve leftover meat. When the dinner has been prepared, those who accepted the invitation are called to come. The meal is ready, the guests are obligated, the party will now commence.

Now the excuses begin, and one and all they are outrageous and insulting. The first excuse is the purchase of a piece of land. In the first place, no one would enter into such a contract when he had already accepted an invitation to a banquet. But secondly, no one in his right mind bought property sight unseen. The purchase of land was a very carefully thought-out venture. The potential purchaser would literally go over every square inch. He would know exactly where the water was; he would find out who had farmed it in the past and what the yields had been. The thought that someone had purchased property and Now had to see what it was like was an obvious lie. Jesus' listeners would have been shocked at the insult to the host.

The excuse in verse 19 is even more insulting. Again, the purchase of something so expensive and so important as a yoke of oxen took all day to accomplish. In many markets a small plot of ground was furnished so that potential buyers could try out a pair of animals. The buyer might try different combinations of oxen to see how they pulled together, to match their strength, to see if they could pull straight. The excuse that a man had bought untested not one yoke of oxen, but ten animals, is akin to our saying: "I've bought half a dozen cars.

¹ Background material for the parable of the Great Dinner and the parables in Luke 15 is again from Kenneth Bailey's "New Perspectives on the Parables."

Now I have to go see what kind they are and whether they are new or used.” The lie is so obvious as to be a great insult.

Following the rule of three, Jesus saves the worst insult to the host for last. The guest says, *I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come*. This is not even a polite response. There is no apology. But worse than that, he has mentioned a woman (the verse in Greek reads “married a woman”). Middle Eastern men very often even today will not mention their wives or mothers in conversation with other men, and certainly not ever to a servant. It is not chauvinism so much as respect for the woman’s privacy. The marriage, moreover, is certainly a lie, for no village could have both a banquet and a wedding feast at the same time. Each host would want all the leading citizens at his feast. Two feasts at the same time in a village of 150 to 300 people simply did not happen. In addition, he could never have accepted the banquet invitation if he had been about to marry. This is the most flagrant and insulting of all the lies. What the guest really means is, “I’ve got someone in the back room. Go away.” A Palestinian audience would have been thoroughly shocked.

It is no surprise that the host becomes angry. Since every reference to a banquet in Jesus’ parables is a symbol for the great party that is life in the kingdom of God, the host here is God. The insulting, would-be guests are the Pharisees and those others who, by their religion, have accepted the invitation to the banquet. Now, however, when called to the great feast of God, their lame, insulting excuses about Sabbath observance and complaints about their dinner companions are as insulting as the excuses of the guests in Jesus’ parable.

The order goes out from God to bring *the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame* to the party. These are the outcasts of Israel whom Jesus has called. The order is obeyed, but still there is room. The servants are sent *into the roads and lanes*, out beyond Israel to the Gentiles.

A note of explanation is necessary concerning verse 23. It was on this verse that the rationale for the medieval Inquisition was based: *compel people to come in*. In the Middle East of the first century, status was very important. If a person of lower status was invited by his better to a social event, he had to make a great show of his unworthiness saying things such as, “Oh, no, I couldn’t. It’s so kind of you to offer, but I’d be totally out of my depth. I simply couldn’t.” The would-be host would have to counter with all kinds of begging and cajoling in order to convince the guest that the host was not merely being polite. A host might all but drag a guest into the house.

As in 13:28-29, those who would have been guests are outside, and the despised are honored guests. Here is another crisis parable as Jesus warns the religious to stop making foolish excuses before it is too late.

The Cost of Discipleship

In contrast to the warning not to be left out of the banquet, the next section contains warnings by Jesus to count the cost of discipleship. What will it cost to become a follower of Jesus? To enter the kingdom of God? The answer is “Precisely everything.” Becoming a disciple is not a step to be taken lightly, for it will change every relationship we have. Read **14:25-33**. The most precious relationship most people have is with their families. But even this relationship cannot supersede loyalty and love to God. If it does, it becomes an idol. God is first or not in the picture at all.

The word *hate* in verse 26 has confused many readers. In Matthew the phrase is *loves father or mother more than me* (10:37a). The word “hate” cannot mean here what it does in the sentence “I hate you!” That would contradict the rest of Jesus’ teachings about love of neighbor and caring for the members of one’s family. We are also called to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. We cannot both hate and love ourselves! It may be that hate is a Semitic expression here meaning to be detached from another, so that when it is necessary to choose, God’s kingdom will always come first. At the most, it may be hyperbole for the sake of shocking contrast. Without love for God all other loves, even love of family and self, degenerate into self-centeredness, manipulation, and idolatry.

The twin parables of the Tower Builder and the King Preparing for Battle are both warnings not to embark on the way of discipleship until one understands exactly what it will cost. This is no place for the faint-hearted. Those who make the decision give up everything but discover that they have lost nothing.

Read **14:34-35**. The saying about salt may seem out of place. But if disciples are like salt, then a disciple without devotion to Christ is like salt without saltiness; it is nothing.

Lost and Found

The three parables that constitute chapter 15 share a common theme: God’s joy over the safe return of God’s own lost children. Read **15:1-7**. In Matthew’s version of the Lost Sheep

(18:12-14), the parable is addressed to Jesus' disciples. In Luke it is addressed to the Pharisees and the scribes, where it has become a defense of the gospel and Jesus' ministry. The shepherd in Jesus' day might have been part owner of a flock or someone hired by the village to watch their collective flock. The shepherd is responsible for the flock. Jesus here is making a subtle comparison with the Pharisees and scribes, who are responsible for God's flock.

Jesus asks what any reasonable, self-respecting shepherd would do if he were to be so careless as to lose a sheep. He then goes on to give the answer: he will leave the ninety-nine with his assistants and go off into the wilds searching for the sheep until he finds it. And when he does, he is so full of joy that the lost is safely found, that he is willing to walk all the rocky way home with a fifty-pound sheep on his shoulders. The clear implication for the Pharisees and scribes is that they, the shepherds of God's flock, have lost sheep right and left and have not even tried to bring them back. And when Jesus goes out to do their job for them, they do not rejoice, they complain! But God rejoices, and that rejoicing defines life in the kingdom of God. Later rabbis would discuss whom God loved better, the repentant sinner or the righteous. They usually decided on the righteous. Jesus differs radically.

The Searching Woman

Next read **15:8-10**, the second parable on the theme of God's searching love and joy at the sinner's return. Jesus uses a woman as the symbol for God, something extremely unusual in Judaism. He refuses to be bound by cultural strictures that seek to devalue any person or group of people.

The woman has lost one of ten coins (*drachmas*), probably from her wedding headdress. The coins represent her dowry. All ten would be worth about ten days' wages. The amount is significant for her, but not great. It is the sentimental value that is important and the fact that the coins are hers. She sweeps carefully *until she finds it*. There is no question of her giving up. When it is found she, like the shepherd in the preceding parable and the father in the parable below, gathers the community to celebrate the occasion. The return of the lost is a reason for God's people to celebrate (*rejoice with me*) just as the company of heaven rejoices.

The Lost Sons, Part 1

In **15:11-24**, we probably have Jesus' most famous parable. The title "The Prodigal Son" is misleading, for there are two lost sons in this story. This double parable most fully defines what Jesus means by sin, repentance, grace, and joy. As with the two preceding parables, the Lost Sons speaks of God's joy at the return of the lost. Life in the kingdom of God is once more defined.

Again, this parable is informed by the culture. In verse 12, the younger son does something that is apparently not recorded in any ancient or modern Middle Eastern literature when he asks his father for his share of the inheritance. What he implies is, "Dad, I can't wait for you to die." A Palestinian patriarch would have been expected to disown a child who said such a thing. It is an unheard-of thing to say. But, says Jesus, the father gives the son what he wants, which is to be independent of his father—made possible by the father's money. This son has not broken the law but rather has radically broken his relationship with his father. He wishes his father were dead.

The younger son liquidates his assets and leaves his father's home with the cash. The *distant country* would be a Gentile land. He then loses everything in expensive living. The listeners would expect him to find the nearest Jewish community in order to get help since he is unwilling or unable to go home. But the son hires out to a Gentile pig farmer. Pigs were unclean animals in Judaism. This detail shows how far the son has sunk. He feels cut off not only from family but from his community's religion as well.

When he comes to his senses, he prepares a classic statement of Jewish repentance. In Judaism repentance took three steps: 1) to compensate for what has been lost; 2) to confess the sin publicly; 3) to prove sincerity by a period lived apart from the family. So the son plans for all three. 1) He will confess: *Father I have sinned against heaven and before you . . .* 2) He will compensate his father for the loss: *. . . treat me like one of your hired hands;* and 3) He will live apart from the family for a time, since hired hands lived in the village, not at their employer's home. He believes that repaying his father the money he lost will square things, which only shows his youthful ignorance. He does not even think about how he will repay the father's pain, shame, and sleepless nights of wondering if his son is dead. There is no way he can repay his father.

In first-century Jewish culture the son would also have worried about the “kesassa” ceremony, which is later documented in the Talmud and in other writings. In this ceremony, the father filled a large pot with burnt corn, beans, and raisins. Then he broke the pot outside in front of his door and proclaimed publicly, “My son is cut off from his people.” This would act like the “shun” of the Pennsylvania Dutch, which removes a person from religious and social community ties. Out of respect for the father’s wishes, no one in the village would then have anything to do with the son. He would not be spoken to. No one would give him a job. This ceremony would be carried out when a family member lost property to the Gentiles, as the younger son has done.

Before he reaches the village, all the son’s fears evaporate. There is no kesassa ceremony. The father (who has apparently been watching every day for a glimpse of his lost son) runs through the village to greet his son. This would have been a great humiliation for the father. Older men never ran; it was considered shameful. The father’s humiliating act diverts the hostility of the community from the boy. The son makes a statement of repentance worthy of a follower of Jesus: *Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.*

There is no question of repaying the father or of a testing period. Instead the father reinstates the son into the family instantly with the signet ring and the robe. The banquet will reintroduce the son into the community. He is totally restored, having done absolutely nothing to earn it. He is restored to his father only because the father loves and accepts him. Note that the son’s repentance does not make the father love him. The father has always loved him. The boy’s repentance opened the way for him to see his father’s love. The father’s acceptance will make the son acceptable to the entire community. The reference to the banquet is, as always in Jesus’ parables, a reference to life in the kingdom of God.

The Lost Sons, Part 2

Continue on with **15:25-32**. The story of the second son, the older boy, makes this a double parable. Jesus introduces the older son at the very beginning of the story. It is interesting to note that when the younger son demands his share of the inheritance, the older son takes his, too. *He divided his property between them.* We would have expected the older son to refuse it.

The actions of this older son in the second half of the parable show what is in his heart. If you heard the sounds of a party coming from your house, you would almost certainly run in to see what the good news was. Not the older son. He seems suspicious and lacking in trust. He stops outside and asks what is going on. We would expect him, as the older son and a loving brother, to have been worried about his little brother's fate. It becomes obvious that the news that his brother is alive is of no interest to him at all. Instead this grown man stands in the street, in full view of a courtyard full of guests, and pouts. He greatly insults his family by refusing to take his place and welcome guests into his family's home. Any Palestinian father would have been expected either to ignore the son (until the guests had left) or to punish him publicly in order to save face as patriarch of his family. This father does neither. Again he does the unthinkable, the shameful. He leaves his guests and goes out to beg his rude son publicly to come to the party. By so doing, the father saves the older son from being shunned by the village for his despicable behavior.

For the second time in the same day the father sacrifices himself for the sake of his sons. But whereas the younger son was deeply moved by his father's display of love, the older son further insults his father where the guests may hear. He does not address his father with a proper title, and then shows what he thinks of their relationship. He feels like a slave doing his duty, not like a son acting as a partner in the work. *I have never disobeyed your command.* He has kept the Law, but he does not love the father. *My friends* denotes that his friends are not the friends of his family. He calls his brother *this son of yours*. Arabic scholars have seen in this speech the older son intentionally writing himself out of the family.

The father's response now must surely be to take a stick and drive the man off the property. That is what the guests and the hearers of the parable would have both expected and approved. But again, the father humiliates himself, sacrifices himself in order to save his child from himself. He makes a tender and loving speech to the older son using the Greek word that means "dear son." The father begs the son to be joyful and to come to the banquet.

In this parable sin is redefined not as the breaking of the Law (*I have never disobeyed your command*), but rather sin is the breaking of a relationship with God. Repentance is redefined as acknowledgment of one's inability to repay the debt. Salvation is simply the grace of a loving father toward his totally undeserving children. The father's willingness to give himself for them is great beyond imagination. So far from earning our way into the kingdom of God, the Father is begging us to come in. It is only our refusal to forgive others that keeps us out of the messianic banquet of joy.

The parable is open-ended. Will the older son drop his superior attitude, ask his father's forgiveness, throw his arms around his brother and join the party? Jesus leaves the question open because it is the Pharisees, the older brothers, those lost within the Law, who must finish the story. And beyond the Pharisees, it is for all who see themselves as religious to finish the story.

FOR FURTHER STUDY AND REFLECTION

Memory Bank

1. Luke 15:8-10, the Lost Coin

Research

1. Use a Bible dictionary to find out more about Herod Antipas, the ruler who wanted to kill Jesus (Luke 13:31, 32).

Reflection

1. In the *Resource Book* read again the discussion of 14:25-33. What does it mean to give up everything?
2. Does your congregation have a way of finding the "lost" of your community? How well do you rejoice when one of the lost comes into your church on a Sunday morning?
3. In the parable of the Lost Sons, one is lost while he keeps the Law, one while he does not. With which son do you have more in common?
4. Many people connect repentance with punishment—what the younger lost son anticipated. What does Jesus say is the result of repentance? What part does punishment play?