Luke 15A

• Today we begin Chapter 15 of Luke
  
  o There are few if any chapters of the Bible more familiar to Christians and non Christians alike than this one
  
  o 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
        o A man who never met Jesus in person
        o The only Gentile author in the New Testament –
          o Perhaps there is something in this fact
        o 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
  
  o 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
  o 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 know
    ▪ 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
  o Yet I realize that few other places in Scripture have inspired as much good teaching as has the Prodigal Son
  o 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 verse 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
  
  o And actually, without going past verse 1, we get our answer, at least in part
  
  o Verse 1 of Chapter 15 tells us that all the tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus to listen to Him
  
  o 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?
  
  o 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
  
  o 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 unresponsive to Jesus’ message

- So Luke presents Chapter 15 to make the case for why:
  - God would dare welcome into His family these unworthy sinners
  - While hiding His 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
  o 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
  o 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
  o But to those who are like the Pharisees
    • Those who believe they deserve God’s favor
    • To those who are sure they are on 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
  
    o And that’s the second thing to note about Chapter 11

      ▪ 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
  
    o 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

    o 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 valuable 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

  o God see value in his flock and has love for them

  o 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

  o 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

  o Until He succeeds in finding it and returning it to the fold

  o 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.

  o 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
  o 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
  o They couldn’t yet understand how God might see people in this way, as something worth saving
  o So, Jesus takes a step closer to home with the second parable

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
  o 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
  o 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 coins 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
  
  o It means more to her than simply a day’s wage
  
  o 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

  o When the missing piece in God’s family is found, the collection is complete so to speak

  • As is God’s joy

  o 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
  o The story is usually called the prodigal son because the protagonist in the story is a son who squanders his inheritance
  o That’s what prodigal means: wastefully extravagant
  o 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
  o 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
  o 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
  o 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
  o 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
  o 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,
  o The son’s statement also means he has no interest in the father’s business or in the father’s name
  o 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
  o 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
  o He gave the son the freedom he demanded
  o 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
o But because he saw no other way to restore His son to Himself

• And so this is where our story ends today
  o The Pharisees unable to see why God shows favor to sinners
  o Jesus teaching how sinners are a thing of value to God and worthy of being counted, of being found and restored
  o Of a story where a rebellious son longs to distance himself from a Father’s authority
  o And a patient father willing to grant the son his distance so He might ultimately preserve the relationship