Lesson 18
Luke 15; 17

Luke 15

Many years ago a friend, Bruce Jorgensen, convinced me that it is important to read the parables of Luke 15 together. He did that by reading them aloud as if they were a small drama. His reading took them as responses to those at the dinner, responses that build on each other and culminate in what we call the parable of the prodigal son.

Consider the setting that Luke gives us in verses 1–2 and then imagine Jesus telling each of these parables in response to what happens in those verses: he hears the Pharisees and the scribes complaining because he eats with sinners, so he tells the parable of the lost sheep. Evidently they don’t understand his point, because he immediately tells another parable, that of the lost coin. I imagine a silent pause after the first parable, with Jesus waiting for the Pharisees and scribes to respond. But they seem not to understand the second one either, so he tells them a third, more complicated parable, the so-called parable of the prodigal son. Try duplicating Jorgensen’s reading for yourself by reading the parables aloud in that way. Does that way of seeing them change your understanding of them?
**Verses 1–2:** Why would the publicans and sinners have come to hear Jesus? Why does it bother the Pharisees and the scribes that Jesus eats with publicans and tax collectors?

**Verses 4–7:** Why does Jesus use the figure of the shepherd so often? Are scriptures such as Isaiah 40:11 and 56:11 relevant? Would the Pharisees have seen a connection to such verses?

How is this parable a response to the murmuring of the Pharisees and scribes? If they understood what he was saying about himself in this parable, how would the Pharisees and scribes have reacted?

Do you think that verse 7 is hyperbolic, exaggerating the joy felt for the recovery of the lost sheep? If not, why doesn’t this verse suggest that it is better to be a repentant sinner than one who never needed to repent?

**Verses 8–10:** Why would the woman have to light a candle to find a lost coin during the day? What would have made finding it difficult?

Who did Jesus intend the shepherd to represent to the Pharisees and scribes in the previous parable, and what does he intend the parable to teach them? Who does the woman represent? Is the lesson of the second parable the same as that of the first? Another way to think about these questions: what do the Pharisees and scribes fail to understand when Jesus tells them the first two parables? Do verses 7 and 10 explain how these parables are related? Do they tell us what the Lord wanted the murmurers to understand? If so, what is that?

**Verse 11:** What do you make of the fact that Jesus begins this story telling us that it is about *two* sons? What does
that suggest about the name we usually give it, the parable of the prodigal son? As you read the story, think about how focusing on both sons rather than only one may change its meaning.

**Verse 12:** What is the young man asking for? Under inheritance practices of the time, how much of his father’s estate would the younger son receive?

In response to the son’s request, the father gives both of the sons their inheritance. What does this mean for the father?

The word translated *riotous living* is also used in Ephesians 5:18, where it is translated *excess*; Titus 1:6, where the King James translators have *riot*; and 1 Peter 4:4, where we also find *riot*. How is the second son spending his money?

We often imagine that he spent the money on immoral activities. What evidence do we have for that? In our own context and time, what kind of spending would count as riotous or excessive?

**Verses 14–16:** How does the famine figure in this story (verse 14)? Is it the cause of the younger son’s repentance, for example?

When asked to recount this story from memory, those from poor countries almost always include the famine in their retelling while those from wealthier countries seldom do. What might that say about how we listen to and understand scripture?

What does it mean to say that the second son joined himself to a citizen of the country where he was (verse 15)?
How would Jesus’s audience (verses 1–2) have responded to the idea that this young man has taken the job of feeding swine?

Does verse 16 say that he wanted to eat the carob husks that they fed pigs, but no one would let him? Or does it say that he wanted to eat the husks because no one would give him anything else?

**Verses 17–19:** “Came to himself” is a literal translation. What does it mean to come to oneself? What does it mean to be away from oneself? Have you ever been away from yourself? How did you come back? What does coming to oneself have to do with repentance?

What does the son remember about how his father treats hired servants? What does that tell us about the father?

Why does the son rehearse what he is going to say to his father? How has he sinned against heaven? How has he sinned before (“in the presence of”) his father?

**Verses 20–24:** What would the father have to have been doing to see his son while the son was still a great way off? What does this suggest about what the father has been doing? How long has the father been waiting for the son to return?

The word translated *compassion* could also have been translated *pity*. What is pity? When is it appropriate, and how is it related to compassion? How does Jesus portray the father as responding to seeing his son return?

Why doesn’t the son finish the little speech that he has prepared for his father?
Does the father treat the returned son as he would a hired servant?

How does he explain his joy in verse 24? How does that answer the Pharisees’ murmuring?

Is the explanation also a reference to Jesus’s coming death and resurrection?

Is there any sense in which Jesus has become, metaphorically, a prodigal son? If so, what inheritance did he take and spend excessively?

Whom would Jesus have expected the prodigal son to represent in the Pharisees’ understanding?

**Verses 25–27:** We have here the second half of the story, about the second son. The story does not end at verse 24.

Whom would Jesus have expected the Pharisees to understand the second son to represent?

Why does the second son call a servant to find out what is going on in the house rather than go in and find out for himself? Who was the owner of the house at the time the son sent the servant to find out?

**Verse 28:** Why is the second son angry? Why won’t he go into the house?

How does the father deal with the son’s anger?

**Verses 29–30:** Is it true that the father has not given the older son anything?

Do you think it is true that the older son has never transgressed one of his father’s commandments?
Is it likely that he has had these feelings about his brother before? If he has, would that have violated his father’s commandments?

The older brother says that the younger one has used up the father’s money “with harlots.” Should we be at least somewhat skeptical about what the older brother says about the younger? Why?

Verses 31–32: When the father says “all that I have is thine,” of what is he reminding the older son?

Compare verse 32 to verse 24. Why does Jesus have the father repeat this? Does this parable answer the Pharisees’ murmuring differently than the previous two do? If so, how so?

Luke 17

Verses 1–6: What gives the sayings in these verses unity? Is it the theme of causing offense and strengthening faith?

Verses 1–2: In the King James Version, offences translates a Greek word that means “stumbling blocks.” The word offend translates a word that means “cause to stumble.” If you insert “stumbling blocks” and “cause to stumble” into the appropriate places in these verses, does that change their meaning for you? If so, how?

Who are the “little ones” to whom Jesus refers in verse 2? Is he speaking of children or of followers, his children? Or is he speaking of some other group?

Verses 3–5: In verse 5 the apostles ask Jesus to increase their faith. What about the teaching in the previous several verses has made them ask for this?
Can one person strengthen the faith of another? How?

Verse 6: Wouldn’t this have rubbed salt into the wound the apostles felt because they need more or stronger faith? Why would the Lord do that?

In context, what is the point of this short parable?

Verses 7–10: Is what Jesus says in these verses a continuation of his response to the apostles’ request in verse 5? If not, what motivates this teaching? If this does respond to their request, how does it do so?

What is the point of this parable? Is it anything besides what we see in verse 10: no matter how much you do what you are commanded, you will still be an unprofitable servant? How can that teaching possibly be part of a gospel of hope? If we can never do anything more than our duty, where does the value of our work come from?

Compare Jesus’s teaching to that of King Benjamin in Mosiah 2:21–25, 3:19, and 4:5–7, 11–16. Does King Benjamin’s longer sermon help us understand Jesus’s teaching? How?

Verses 11–19: Is this story related to the parable in verses 7–10? How is it relevant that the leper who gave thanks was a Samaritan?

Verses 20–21: Why would the Pharisees have asked Jesus when the kingdom of God would come (verse 20)? What do you think they thought would bring that kingdom?

What does Jesus mean when he says that the kingdom doesn’t come by observation (verse 20)?
What does it mean to say that the kingdom is within us (verse 21)? Does that mean that the answer is “The kingdom of God is already here, in you”? How could the kingdom of God be within those who were opposed him? Or is Jesus speaking only to the disciples here? How would you decide who his audience was?

Some have translated the Greek phrase we are looking at as the King James translators did: “within you.” Others have translated the phrase as “in your midst” or “within your grasp.” How does the meaning of each differ? Which of those translations seems most likely to you? Why?

**Verses 22–23:** Can you explain verse 22? The translation is straightforward. There is nothing to be cleared up by looking at another possible translation. But the meaning is not clear. What does it mean to say that there will be a time when the disciples will long to see one of the days of the Son of man, but they won’t see it?

Why would they long to see a day of the Lord’s reign when the kingdom is already within them, in their midst, or within their grasp?

What are those hypothetically speaking in verse 23 responding to? Why shouldn’t a Christian pay attention to those who proclaim that they see the events of “the days of the Son of man”?

**Verses 24–27:** How are the various things that Jesus says in verses 24–27 unified? Do they have a common theme?

What point is the Lord making with his reference to Lot in verses 28–31?
How did Lot’s wife seek to save her life (verses 32–33)? How is she a type of those who seek to save their lives?

**Verses 34–37:** In verse 37, what are Jesus’s disciples asking when they say, “Where, Lord?” What are they trying to figure out?

Verses 24–36 focused on how quickly the day of the Son of man will come. In verse 23 Jesus warned against listening to those who would tell them where to see that day. Does that say anything about the disciples’ question in verse 37?

Luke uses the generic term for body here, but the Greek of the parallel verse in Matthew 24:28 uses the word for a corpse, so we can assume that is what Luke means by the word body. This appears to be a variation of the same saying that we find in Job 39:30 which, speaking of the eagle, says “where the slain are, there is she.”

How is this enigmatic saying of verse 37 a response to the disciples’ question? In the context of this discussion of the second coming, what might the body stand for? The eagles? Is it relevant that the verb is passive, “will be gathered” by some agent rather than “will gather” themselves?