

KINGDOM.

LESSON 17

1	PRAYER
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Group leader. Pray for God's guidance through his Spirit, for awareness of his presence and for listening to his voice. Commit your group and this lesson about preaching God's kingdom to the Lord.

2	SHARING (20 minutes) <i>[QUIET TIMES]</i> PSALM 1, 2, 5 and 8
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Take turns and share (or read) from your notes) in short what you have learned from one of your quiet times with God out of the assigned Bible passages (Psalm 1, 2, 5 and 8). Listen to the person sharing, take him serious and accept him. Do not discuss what he shares. Take notes.

3	MEMORISATION (5 minutes) <i>[THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH]</i> (5) EPHESIANS 3:20-21
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Review two by two.

(5) The glory in the Church. Ephesians 3:20-21. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations for ever and ever. Amen.

4	TEACHING (85 minutes) <i>[THE PARABLES OF JESUS]</i> THE LOST SHEEP and THE LOST SON
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**The parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15:1-7
and the parable of the lost son in Luke 15:11-32 are parables about
GOD'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE LOST IN GOD'S KINGDOM.**

"A parable" is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It is a true-to-life story or illustration designed to teach a spiritual truth. Jesus used the commonplace and the events of everyday to illumine the mysteries of the kingdom of God and to confront people with the reality of their situation and their need for renewal. We will study this parable by using the six guidelines for studying parables (See manual 9, supplement 1)

A. THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP - in the Gospel of Luke

Read Luke 15:1-7.

1. Understand the natural story of the parable.

Introduce. The parable is told in figurative language and the spiritual meaning of the parable is based on that. Therefore we will first study the words and the cultural and historical facts of the background of the story.

Discuss. What are the true-to-life elements of the story?

Notes.

Shepherding. Jesus travelled from region to region in Palestine and often passed through areas where shepherds were tending their sheep. A flock of sheep grazing around a shepherd was a very familiar sight. People knew the responsibilities of a shepherd. His responsibilities were to lead the sheep out to green pastures and quiet waters where they could graze during the day, to protect them against lions, bears, wolves and thieves, to carry the lambs and to seek the lost sheep and bring them back to the flock.

Carrying a sheep. The typical Mid-eastern fashion of carrying a sheep was to place it over his shoulders, with its stomach against the back of his neck and its four feet tied together in front of his breast.

2. Examine the immediate context and determine the elements of the parable.

Introduce. The context of "the story" of the parable may consist of "the setting" and "the explanation or application" of the parable. The setting of the parable may state the *occasion* for telling the parable, or describe *the circumstances* at the time of telling the parable. The setting is usually found *before* the story of the parable and the explanation or application is usually found *after* the story of the parable.

Discover and discuss. What is the setting, the story and the explanation or application of this parable?

Notes.

(1) The setting of the parable is contained in Luke 15:1-2.

At a previous occasion, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law had complained to his disciples about his friendly attitude towards tax collectors and sinners (Luke 5:29-30). Now they criticised Jesus himself for associating with such people. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law, despised tax collectors, because they regarded all of them as greedy, extortionists and traitors of Israel. They also looked down upon “the sinners”, who were all people of bad reputation. They were people who did not even try to live according to the standards established by these religious leaders of Israel. The religious leaders regarded association with tax collectors and sinners as “contaminating”. They regarded eating with them, especially in the light of their clean-food rules, as outrageous (Luke 5:30)! But Jesus associated openly with these people. He even chose the tax collector, Matthew, to be one of his disciples. The tax collectors and other sinners were in their turn not slow to recognise the difference between Jesus’ attitude towards them and that of the religious leaders. So, they regarded Jesus as their friend and they often gathered around him to listen to his teachings.

(2) The story of the parable is contained in Luke 15:4-6.

Jesus made use of the familiar sight of a shepherd with his sheep to teach what must be done when a human being threatens to perish. The question is, must a lost sheep be ignored, neglected, despised or must it be sought and found?

(3) The explanation or application of the parable is contained in Luke 15:7.

3. Identify the relevant and irrelevant details of the parable.

Introduce. Jesus did not intend every detail in the story of the parable to have some spiritual significance. The relevant details are those details in the story of the parable that reinforce the central point or main theme or lesson of the parable. Therefore, we should not ascribe independent spiritual significance to every detail of the story of the parable.

Discover and discuss. Which of the details in the story of this parable are really essential or relevant?

Notes.

The sheep. Throughout the Bible, “a sheep” is a symbol representing a human being. This is because there are so many resemblances between the relationship of a shepherd with his sheep and the relationship of God with his people. Sheep have the tendency to go astray (Isaiah 53:6), but they also have the ability to follow the shepherd they know (John 10:5). Sheep are helpless against their enemies and absolutely need the help of their shepherd (John 10:11-13). The “lost sheep” is certainly a relevant detail and represents any person who is lost in sin.

The ninety-nine sheep. Jesus interprets them as “righteous persons who do not need to repent”. This is therefore a relevant detail. Interpreters have interpreted the ninety-nine sheep as “the faithful members of God’s covenant people”, who have grown so much spiritually that they do not go astray anymore. For example, people like Timothy. They have done this on the assumption that God rejoices over them, although he rejoices “more” over the newly converted sinner.

However, the original Greek text only has the word “than” and the comparison must be interpreted either as “more than” or as “rather than”. Because Jesus contrasts the ninety-nine with the one who repents, the meaning of verse 7 must be that “God rejoices over one sinner who becomes converted *rather than* over the ninety-nine self-righteous people.” Like in Luke 5:31-32, Jesus is thinking of the self-righteous Pharisees and teachers of the law and all their followers. They regarded themselves as righteous in God’s eyes because they were trying hard to keep the law and therefore did not have any need of “the doctor”, Jesus Christ, who came to seek and to save the lost. They were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else (Luke 18:9). Only this explanation does justice to the introduction of this parable in Luke 15:1-2. The ninety-nine sheep represent those who criticise Jesus for associating with the tax collectors and sinners. They were “righteous” only in their own estimation, but certainly not righteous in God’s eyes! Compare John 9:39.

4. Identify the main message of the parable.

Introduce. The main message (central theme) of the parable is found either in the explanation or application or from the story itself. From the way Jesus Christ himself explained or applied the parables, we know how we should interpret parables. A parable normally has only one main lesson, one central point to make. Therefore, we should not try to find a spiritual truth in every detail of the story, but instead look for the one main lesson.

Discuss. What is the main message of this parable?

Notes.

The parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15:1-7 teaches about “God’s attitude towards the lost people in God’s kingdom”.

The main message of the parable is the following. “God the Father’s yearning love for lost people causes him to seek and to find them. He rejoices over even one of them who repents and is converted.”

God does not neglect to search the lost people as the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were doing. He does not search them half-heartedly, as a hired hand might have done. No, he searches a lost person persistently until he finds him!

Seeking to save the lost is one of the fundamental characteristics of God's kingdom. The genuine people in God's kingdom follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ and go out to seek and save the people who are lost.

5. Compare the parable with parallel and contrasting passages in the Bible.

Introduce. Some parables are similar to one another and can be compared. However, the truth in all the parables has parallel or contrasting truth taught in other passages of the Bible. Try to find the most important cross-references that help us to interpret the parable. Always check the interpretation of a parable with the direct clear teaching of the Bible.

Read Psalm 23; Isaiah 40:11; Ezekiel 34:15-16.

Discover and discuss. How does what each of these Bible passages teach compare to what this parable teaches?

Notes.

God is like a Shepherd. He leads his sheep to green pastures and quiet waters. He guides them over the rough mountains and through the deep ravines. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart. He gently leads the sheep that have lambs. He himself searches for the lost and brings back the strays. He binds up the injured and strengthens the weak.

B. THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SON

Read Luke 15:11-32.

1. Understand the natural story of the parable.

Introduce. The parable is told in figurative language and the spiritual meaning of the parable is based on that. Therefore we will first study the words and the cultural and historical facts of the background of the story.

Discuss. What are the true-to-life elements of the story?

Notes.

The parable of the lost son has four parts:

(1) The lost son departs from home. The younger of two brothers became tired of staying at home. Like many other young people ever since, he desired to be free from parental restraint. He was convinced that when he was alone by himself, away from the eyes of his parents, he would be able to do whatever he wanted, and his "freedom" would make him "happy". In order to carry out his plan, he needed money. He probably knew that according to the law (Deuteronomy 21:17), one-third of his parental estate would be his when his father died. The younger son did not want to wait for this to happen, but wanted his portion *now*. Therefore, probably a considerable part of his father's estate had to be sold and converted into cash. The younger son probably did not consider how this would affect his father and the rest of the family. His attitude that his freedom would be better for him than the loving care and advice he constantly received from his father must have deeply grieved his father. After the division of the estate the younger son set off to a distant country, to a place far from his parental home.

(2) The lost son lives in a distant country. The younger son was utterly foolish in his conduct. He had taken everything he possessed with him. He had left nothing behind to fall back on, if his plan should not work out and he should return home. In this distant country, he squandered all his possessions until he had nothing left! To aggravate his situation, a famine arrived, and now he could not even expect help from anyone else! Finally, he hired himself out and was sent to care for pigs. A Jew caring for unclean animals was humiliating and degrading. In the evening, the pigs were probably fed by others. They were given the pods of the carob tree to eat. Although he was hungry, nobody gave him anything to eat.

Finally, "he came to his senses"! This means that he began to reflect on all that had happened since he left home and on the question whether he himself was not, perhaps, to blame for what he was undergoing. He thought about the fact that while even his father's day-labourers had plenty of food to eat, he was hungry. Realising his humiliation, hunger and homesickness, he came to the conclusion that his departure from home was not simply unwise or a practical error, but definitely "a sin" (an event that mist God's goal for his life)! It was a sin not only committed against his father, but above all against "heaven" (that is, against God)! In his penitence, he realised how ungrateful, how selfish, and how foolish he had been!

(3) The lost son is warmly welcomed by his father. Many pious resolutions are never carried out. But this young man did what he had resolved to do. He returned home. The distance was probably long, he was weak and the journey was difficult. But he persevered! In the mean time, his father had not forgotten him and had also not written him off! Instead, his father had again and again been on the lookout for him hoping on his return.

When his father saw him in the distance, he had compassion for him. He ran to him, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The father sympathised with him, that is, he clearly saw how tired and wretched his son was and he interpreted his son's return in the most favourable sense. He realised that his son had repented and felt sorry for what he had done. Although in that part of the world it was not considered dignified for an elderly man to run, this father ran! So eager was he to welcome his lost son! He threw his arms around his son, indicating that he had already granted forgiveness to his son. And he kissed him as a sign of his affection and complete acceptance back into the family.

The lost son confessed his sin against God in heaven and against his father. And he acknowledged that he was no longer worthy to be called a son of the father. He had intended to say that his father should make him as one of his hired servants (Luke 15:19,21), but his father never gave him a chance to say it!

So boundless was the father's joy and so all-out his forgiveness that he wished to have his son to be treated as an important person! "The best robe" was a status symbol, "the ring" was an indication of authority, and "the sandals" showed that he was a free man and not a slave. "The fattened calf" was only slaughtered on special occasions when a special guest arrived. There followed a jubilant celebration! The father's words in verse 24 must be interpreted in a spiritual sense (Ephesians 2:1; Luke 19:10). The younger son "was spiritually dead and became spiritually alive. He was spiritually lost and was spiritually found!"

(4) The lost son is mercilessly rejected by his older brother. This part of the story belongs to the parable. It contrasts the attitude of the older son to that of the father. Jesus wanted to make very clear that while the older brother mercilessly rejected him, the father warmly welcomed the penitent son. Thereby Jesus condemned the older brother's attitude, but commended the father's attitude. Note the following:

- The older son became *angry*, because he was thinking in terms of what was fair and just (the law), while the father rejoiced in the return of the repentant sinner. The father graciously went outside to the older son to plead with him to do what is right (Genesis 4:6-7), that is, to also welcome his repentant brother.
- The older son was a *man-pleaser*. He described his relationship with his father as "slaving for him all these years". The older son was discontented and had served his father in a spirit of slavery all his life (cf. Galatians 1:10).
- The older son was *self-righteous*, claiming that he had never disobeyed his father's orders. But he did not realise that more than a mere outward obedience was expected from a son.
- The older son was *jealous*. He said, "You never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends," but "you kill the fattened calf for him". He forgot that the father had already assigned two-thirds of the estate to him and would gladly have given him anything reasonable.
- The older son *rejected* his brother. He did not say "my brother", but instead said "this son of yours"!
- The older son *twisted the truth into lies*. He accused his brother of squandering "the father's property". But he forgot that his younger brother had squandered "his own property", because the father had already given it to him as his share of the inheritance.
- The older son was a *slanderer*. He spoke in a very denigratory way of his brother, as spending time "with prostitutes".

But in spite of the older son's complaints, the father did not change his attitude or decisions! He repeated to the older son what he had said to all his servants, "This brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." Therefore the only right and proper thing to do is to celebrate! He said, "We *had* to celebrate and be glad!"

2. Examine the immediate context and determine the elements of the parable.

Introduce. The context of "the story" of the parable may consist of "the setting" and "the explanation or application" of the parable. The setting of the parable may state the *occasion* for telling the parable, or describe *the circumstances* at the time of telling the parable. The setting is usually found *before* the story of the parable and the explanation or application is usually found *after* the story of the parable.

Discover and discuss. What is the setting, the story and the explanation or application of this parable?

Notes.

(1) The setting of the parable is contained in Luke 15:1-2.

It is the same as that of the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin in Luke 15:1-10. See the parable of the lost sheep in the Gospel of Luke.

(2) The story of the parable is contained in Luke 15:11-32.

(3) The explanation or application of the parable is contained within the story.

The explanation is particularly Luke 15:20-24 and 32.

3. Identify the relevant and irrelevant details of the parable.

Introduce. Jesus did not intend every detail in the story of the parable to have some spiritual significance. Parables are not allegories. The relevant details are those details in the story of the parable that reinforce the central point or main

theme or lesson of the parable. Therefore, we should not ascribe independent spiritual significance to every detail of the story of the parable.

Discover and discuss. Which of the details in the story of this parable are really essential or relevant?

Notes.

(1) Treating the parable as an allegory (allegorising).

Some interpreters have come up with the following ways of allegorising the parable. Because their interpretations cannot be deduced from the context, they must be rejected:

Clement of Alexandria (150-216) interpreted the parable as follows: “The best robe” represents immortality, “the ring” represents glory, “the shoes” serve as a ladder and chariot carrying him towards heaven, “the fattened calf” is Christ, the Lamb of God, and “the feast” is the Lord’s Supper.

Richard C. Trench (1807-1886) interpreted the parable as follows: “The best robe” signifies the imputation of Christ’s righteousness or represents the sanctity of the soul, and “the older brother” signifies the Jews in the apostolic age who would not take part in the great festival of reconciliation with which the Gentile world’s reception into God’s kingdom was being celebrated (cf. Ephesians 2:14-15; 3:2-6).

False teachers claim that atonement of sins is unnecessary. They say that this parable teaches that God can forgive a person without the sacrifice of atonement of the Mediator Jesus Christ. They say that people only need to return to God. However, the Bible clearly teaches: “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22; Romans 3:21-25a)(cf. John 6:28-29).

(2) Interpretation of relative details:

Jesus himself explains the parable as describing on the one hand how God welcomes repentant sinners and on the other hand how the religious leaders of the Jews rejected them. Therefore, only the father and the two sons represent particular persons.

The father. He symbolises the heavenly Father, the Triune God in all his yearning love, which seeks to save sinners. God not only forgives the sins of penitent sinners, but also promises never to bring their sins into remembrance again, not even on the last judgement day (Hebrews 8:12). And he restores the gifts, which he had stripped from sinners (the inheritance of all believers: eternal life, the new earth, etc.).

The lost son. He symbolises the situation of every sinner who becomes disgusted with his own sinful condition and returns to the grace of God. In the context, it certainly included the tax collectors and sinners, who had found a real friend in Jesus and were eagerly listening to his teachings.

The older son. He clearly points to the self-righteous Pharisees and teachers of the law, who justified themselves, and despised and mercilessly rejected tax-collectors and sinners. It shows the maliciousness and perversity of those people who disparage God’s mercy towards lost sinners.

All the other details in the story of this parable are not given any particular meaning and only serve to make the story very interesting. We should therefore not allegorise the other details (ascribed a specific meaning to them).

4. Identify the main message of the parable.

Introduce. The main message (the central theme) of the parable is found either in the explanation or application or from the story itself. From the way Jesus Christ himself explained or applied the parables, we know how we should interpret parables. A parable normally has only one main lesson, one central point to make. Therefore, we should not try to find a spiritual truth in every detail of the story, but instead look for the one main lesson.

Discuss. What is the main message of this parable?

Notes.

The parable of the lost son in Luke 15:11-32 teaches about “God’s attitude towards the lost people in God’s kingdom”.

The main message of this parable is the following. “While the religious leaders in Israel impatiently and irritably rejected repentant sinners, the God of the Bible warmly welcomed them into his kingdom. He still welcomes them.”

Seeking to save the lost is one of the fundamental characteristics of God’s kingdom. The genuine people in God’s kingdom follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ and warmly welcome repentant sinners into their hearts and into their churches.

5. Compare the parable with parallel and contrasting passages in the Bible.

Introduce. Some parables are similar to one another and can be compared. However, the truth in all the parables has parallel or contrasting truth taught in other passages of the Bible. Try to find the most important cross-references that help us to interpret the parable. Always check the interpretation of a parable with the direct clear teaching of the Bible.

(1) The three parables in Luke 15.

Discuss. How do the three parables in Luke 15 compare to one another?

It has been suggested that the sequence of these three parables is one of proportion: from the smallest to the largest: one sheep *out of a hundred* is lost; one coin *out of ten* is lost and one son *out of two* is lost. We do not know if this order has any significance. Nevertheless, the parable of the lost son is the longest and also the most touching.

The main thrust of all three parables is that they describe God's yearning love for the salvation of lost people. They teach how God keeps on seeking them until he finds them, how he brings them back, how he rejoices in every sinner that genuinely repents and how he restores their lives completely!

(2) 1 John 2:9-11.

Discuss. How does what this Bible passage teach compare with the parable of the lost sheep?

Your relationship to your brother shows who you really are!

C. A SUMMARY OF THE MAIN TEACHINGS OR LESSONS OF THE PARABLES ABOUT GOD'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS LOST PEOPLE IN GOD'S KINGDOM

Discuss. What are the main teachings or lessons of the parables about God's attitude towards the lost in God's kingdom? What does Jesus Christ teach us to *know* or to *believe* and what does he teach us to *be* or to *do*?

Notes.

(1) All people, especially the lost, should know the Father-heart of God.

The main teaching of these parables is that they show us who God really is and what he does to repentant sinners. God's yearning love for the lost causes him to seek them, find them and restore them. The three parables make it easier for every sinner to surrender his heart and life to God.

(2) Christians should develop a desire to win the lost.

One great lesson of these parables is that they tell us what God wants Christians to be and to do. Christians should also go out and seek the lost, joyfully bring them to God, and warmly welcome repentant sinners into their lives and church.

The parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15:1-7 and the parable of the lost coin in Luke 15:8-10 teach about "God's attitude towards lost people in God's kingdom".

The main lesson of these parables is the following. "God, who has his dwelling in the presence of an uncountable number of angels, seeks lost people (sinners) and rejoices over every single sinner that repents and turns to God."

"Seeking to save the lost" is one of the main characteristics of God's kingdom. The people in God's kingdom follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ and go out to seek lost people whom Christ may save.

(3) Faithful Christians should not resent the conversion of sinners.

The parable of the lost son in Luke 15:11-32 also teach that Christians should avoid becoming like the Pharisees (represented by the older son), who resisted God's welcome of the lost. Such Pharisees are still among Christians today. They resist God's welcome of all kinds of lost people, because they feel it is unjust that there is greater joy in the conversion of a bad person than over one who always tried to obey God's commands. They are envious of such people, possibly because they secretly desire to experience the sinful life of the younger lost son, or because they secretly desire to be God's most favourite son. Superficially seen, the lost man's sinful life-style may seem to have its attractions, but we must not fail to realise that he also had no assurance of salvation and had to forego the experience of God's nearness, support and daily grace (cf. Psalm 73). We must not forget that God said that the ungodly never experience peace (Isaiah 57:20-21), while the godly constantly experience God's goodness and fruitfulness (cf. Psalm 84)!

(4) Christians should get rid of all remaining attitudes of condemnation or rejection of other Christians.

The parable of the lost son in Luke 15:11-32 also teach the following. Although the older son harboured attitudes of condemnation and rejection, the father had not rejected his oldest son! This parable is a mirror in which Christians may see their own attitudes towards other Christians. In certain situations, Christians also harbour attitudes of criticism, condemnation or rejection of other Christians. There are Christians who may have become legalistic or self-righteous and may have lost sight of the fact that the message of the gospel is about God's love for the lost. These Christians are in another sense "lost". They lost the sense of God's love for repentant sinners. Christian must love other Christians and help them to show God's mercy and love to lost non-Christians and to legalistic and self-righteous Christians. Also we Christians need to get rid of our attitudes of condemnation or rejection of other Christians.

While the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15:1-7 teaches about "God's seeking love for lost non-Christians in the world", the parable of the lost sheep in Matthew 18:12-14 teaches about "God's seeking love for lost Christians in the world". The main lesson of the parable of the lost sheep in the Gospel of Matthew is the following. "God's revealed will is that not a single one of his sheep should perish (John 17:12). Ultimately every born-again Christians will be completely saved. That is why God also keeps on seeking Christians that have strayed away and leads them back to the fold."

“Seeking to save sheep that have strayed” is one of the fundamental characteristics of God’s kingdom. The genuine people in God’s kingdom follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ and go out to seek those people who have strayed from the Christian Faith and the Christian Church and lead them back to the fold.

5	PRAYER (8 minutes)	<i>[REACTIONS]</i> PRAYER IN RESPONSE TO GOD’S WORD
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Take turns in the group *to pray short* to God in response to what you have learned today.
Or divide the group into two’s or three’s and pray to God in response to what you have learned today.

6	PREPARATION (2 minutes)	<i>[ASSIGNMENT]</i> FOR NEXT LESSON
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(Group leader. Give the group members this preparation for at home in writing or let them copy it down).

1. Commitment. Be committed to make disciples, build the Church and preach the kingdom.
2. Preach, teach or study “the parable of the lost sheep” and “the parable of the lost son” together with another person or group of people.
3. Personal time with God. Have a quiet time with God from half a chapter of Psalm 10, 11, 14 and 15 each day. Make use of the favourite truth method. Make notes.
4. Memorisation. Daily review the series J. “The Christian Church”. (1) The nature of the Church. 1 Peter 2:5, (2) The activities in the Church. Acts 2:42, (3) The ministries of the Church. Ephesians 4:12-13, (4) The tasks of Church leaders. Acts 20:28, (5) The glory in the Church. Ephesians 3:20-21.
5. Bible study. Prepare the next Bible study at home. Romans 5:1-11. Make use of the five steps method of Bible study. Make notes.
6. Prayer. Pray for someone or something specific this week and see what God is doing (Psalm 5:3).
7. Update your notebook on preaching God’s kingdom. Include your notes on quiet time, your memorisation notes, your teaching notes and this preparation.