

(T) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series, you will have the opportunity to learn how to understand and teach the parables of Jesus Christ. By using *the guidelines for interpreting parables*, two teachers will study **the parable of the lost son** in Luke 15:11-32. This is a parable concerning GOD'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE LOST IN GOD'S KINGDOM. As you listen to this programme, make notes in a notebook or record the programme.

(S) Let us read Luke 15:11-32. "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

(T) Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come', he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and was found.' "

(S) **POINT 1. UNDERSTAND THE NATURAL STORY OF THE PARABLE.**

The parable of the lost son has four parts. Let us take turns to explain the true-to-life elements of the story of this parable.

Part 1. The lost son's departure 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 of Deuteronomy 21:17, one-third of his parental estate would be his when his father died. The younger son did not want to wait, but wanted his portion *now*. Therefore, probably a considerable part of all of his father's possessions 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 estate. 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.

(T) Part 2. The lost son's life in the distant country. The younger son was utterly foolish in his conduct. He had taken everything he possessed with him and 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 pigs that were considered 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! 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!

(S) Part 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 or had not written him off! Instead, his father had again and again been on the lookout for him.

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 also say that his father should make him as one of his hired men (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 freeman 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*, but now became *spiritually alive*. He was *spiritually lost*, but now was *spiritually found*!

(T) Part 4. The lost son is mercilessly rejected by his brother. This part of the story belongs completely to the parable. It contrasts the older son's attitude to the father's attitude. Jesus wanted to make very clear that while the penitent son was warmly welcomed by the father, he was mercilessly rejected by his older brother. Thereby Jesus commended the father's attitude and condemned the older brother's attitude. Note the following:

The older son became *angry*, because he was thinking in terms of what is fair and just, 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 discontented older son had served in a spirit of slavery all his life. He probably lived strictly according to the law, but without joy and without deep satisfaction.

The older son was *self-righteous*, claiming that he 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 *to me* you never gave, but *to him* you kill the fattened calf. 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. The penitent son had squandered his own property, because the father had already given it to him as his share of the inheritance.

Finally, 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 his 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!"

(S) **POINT 2. EXAMINE THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT AND DETERMINE THE ELEMENTS OF THE PARABLE.**

What is the context of this parable?

The setting is found in Luke 15:1-2. At a previous occasion, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law had complained to Jesus' disciples about Jesus' attitude towards tax collectors (Luke 5:29-30). Now they criticised Jesus himself for associating with tax collectors. 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; 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. In the light of their

clean-food rules, they regarded eating with them as outrageous (Lk 5:30)! Jesus often 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.

The story is contained in Luke 15:11-32.

The explanation or application is contained within the story, particularly Luke 15:20-24 and 32.

(T) POINT 3. IDENTIFY THE RELEVANT AND IRRELEVANT DETAILS OF THE PARABLE.

Jesus Christ did not intend every detail in the parable to have some spiritual significance. The relevant details are those details in the story of the parable that reinforce the message of the parable. Therefore, we should not ascribe independent spiritual significance to every detail of the parable.

Which of the details in this parable are really essential or relevant?

Jesus himself explains the parable as describing on the one hand how God welcomes a repentant sinner and on the other hand how the religious leaders of the Jews rejected him. Therefore, only the father and the two sons represent particular persons. The father symbolises the heavenly Father, the God of the Bible in all his yearning love. The God of the Bible not only forgives a penitent sinner's sins, but also blots them from his memory and restores the gifts that he had stripped from him.

(S) The lost son in his penitent return indicates the penitent sinner, certainly including the tax collectors and sinners, who had found in Jesus their Saviour and Friend, and were now eagerly listening to him. It describes the situation of every sinner who becomes disgusted with his own condition and returns to the grace of God.

(T) The older son clearly points to the self-righteous Pharisees and teachers of the law, who mercilessly rejected such people. It shows the maliciousness and perversity of those people who disparage God's mercy towards lost sinners. All the other details in this parable are not given any particular meaning and only serve to make the story very interesting. We should therefore not try to allegorise the other details in the parable.

(S) POINT 4. IDENTIFY THE MAIN MESSAGE OF THE PARABLE.

The parable of the lost son teaches about *God's attitude towards the lost*.

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

Seeking to save the lost is a foundational characteristic of God's kingdom. The people in God's kingdom follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ and go out to seek and to save the people who are lost. They are not envious of God's great joy over the repentance of people who have lived very sinful lives in the world.

(T) POINT 5. COMPARE THE PARABLE WITH PARALLEL AND CONTRASTING PASSAGES.

There are *three parables* in Luke chapter 15. How do they 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 lost: how he seeks them, brings them back and rejoices in their genuine conversion.

(S) POINT 6. SUMMARISE THE MAIN TEACHINGS OF THE PARABLE.

Let us take turns to summarise the main teachings or messages of the parable.

First. The main teaching of the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coins and the lost son 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.

(T) Second. These parables tell us what God wants us to be and to do. We Christians should also go out and seek the lost, joyfully bring them to God, and warmly welcome the repentant sinners into our fellowship and lives. Christians should avoid becoming like the Pharisees, who resisted God's welcome of the lost.

(S) Third. Although the older son harboured attitudes of condemnation and rejection, his father did not condemn or reject him! This parable is a mirror in which we may discover our own attitudes towards other Christians. In certain situations, we Christians also harbour attitudes of criticism, condemnation or rejection of others, instead of reaching out to help or save them! There may be Christians who are 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. But we should not become like the older son and condemn or reject such Christians. Also they need to be loved and discover the love of God for both the lost and the self-righteous! Also we Christians need to get rid of our remaining attitudes of condemnation or rejection of other Christians.

(T) Fourth. The parable of the lost son does not mention the death of Jesus Christ. The father simply accepted the returning lost son. However, this does not mean that God will forgive people without the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ! Although this parable does not mention the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross, no one will be forgiven and reconciled to God without believing that Jesus Christ died for his sins, because in Hebrews 9:22 and Romans 3:21-25, the Bible clearly teaches that without the death of Jesus, there can be no forgiveness of sins. Every religion without the cross of Jesus Christ fails to save people from their sins!

(S) **ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK**

First. Preach, teach or study this parable together with another person or group of people. Next week we will study the parable of the Good Samaritan. As preparation, please read Luke 10:25-37.

Second. See the workbooks "Go and preach God's Kingdom and www.dota.net

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to "Discipleship training on the air".