

10 - JESUS RECEIVES SINNERS: THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO HIS ENEMIES

MISUNDERSTANDING THE MISSION

The Jewish leaders had totally misunderstood the mission of the Messiah. As they studied the Hebrew Scriptures (Genesis – Malachi), they focused on the prophecies that referred to the Messiah coming as a conquering King and setting up His government on earth. (For example, see Psalm 2; Isaiah 2:1-4; 9:6,7; Micah 4:1-5).

They passed over the prophecies that spoke of the Messiah as the Lamb who would die for the sins of the world. (For example, see Genesis 3:15; Psalm 22; Isaiah 53; Daniel 9:26).

The Jews hated being ruled by the Romans and anxiously waited for the Messiah to come and deliver them. Their focus on a political deliverer led them to misunderstand their mission as a nation.

God had told them, “You shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5,6).

The Jews were not “above all people” because they were better than others. They simply had a special mission. They were chosen to be a kingdom of priests to lead everyone to know the true God. A priest had the role of representing God to the people and bringing people to God.

Unfortunately, the Jews lost sight of their mission and looked down at the Gentiles, publicans, and sinners. Gentiles included everyone who was not a Jew. Publicans were tax collectors who cooperated with Rome and often took advantage of others. The “sinners” were people who outwardly broke the laws as interpreted by the Jewish leaders. They all were considered condemned by God. So when Jesus mingled with these people, the Jewish leaders were sure that He could not be from God.

EATING WITH LEVI AND HIS FRIENDS

1. Read Luke 5:27-32

A. Who did Jesus invite to follow Him? (27)

B. What was the response to the invitation? (28)

C. Why did Levi invite people to a feast? (29; see also Mark 2:15)

D. What question did the Jewish leaders ask Jesus' disciples? (30)

E. How did Jesus answer them? (31, 32)

F. How does your heart respond to the answer Jesus gave?

G. What leads people to repentance today? (Romans 2:4)

WINNING THE HEART OF ZACCHAEUS

2. Read Luke 19:1-10

A. How did Jesus communicate love, acceptance, and forgiveness? (5)

B. How did Zacchaeus respond? (6)

C. What did the people complain about? (7)

D. How did Zacchaeus respond to Jesus' offer? (8; Numbers 5:6,7)

E. How does Jesus describe His own mission? 10

F. How would you respond if Jesus said He wanted to stay at your house? (See also John 14:23; Revelation 3:20)

G. Is there something specific you need Jesus to save you from?

H. Would you like to cooperate with Jesus in His mission today?

In these stories we learn the gospel according to Jesus' enemies – Jesus receives sinners! What they thought was bad is actually the greatest news of all. When we realize we are sinners, these stories can encourage us to receive Jesus' love and acceptance.

These stories also illustrate how “the goodness of God leads [us] to repentance” Romans 2:4. Both Matthew and Zacchaeus were drawn by the goodness and grace of God. Jesus took the initiative to reach out to them, just as He took the initiative to come to earth to save us from sin.

We often think of Zacchaeus as the one who was trying to see Jesus. While this is true, it is also valuable to notice that Jesus was seeking for Zachaeus. Jesus told him, “The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” Luke 19:10.

LOVING THE LOST

3. How did Jewish leaders complain about Jesus in Luke 15:1,2?

“This Man _____ and _____ with them?”

In response to their criticism, the Bible says, Jesus “spoke this parable to them, saying...” Luke 15:3. The word parable is singular. Jesus tells three stories, but they all have the same message in response to their complaint. Jesus assures them that He came to seek and save the lost.

4. Read Luke 15:4-7 – The parable of the lost sheep

A. Who do the 99 sheep represent who do not need to repent?

____ All of the heavenly angels and worlds that have never fallen.

____ The people in the church who have already repented.

____ The scribes and Pharisees who didn't see their own need.

____ All of the above, for different reasons.

B. Why is the Shepherd anxious to search for the one lost sheep when He still has 99?

C. Have you ever felt like a lost sheep? When and Why?

D. What was it like?

E. Have you ever experienced the joy of:

a. Being found by the Shepherd? If so, what was that like?

b. Celebrating with someone who has been found?

c. Being used by the Shepherd to find someone who is lost?

5. Read Luke 15:8-10 – The parable of the lost coin

A. Have you ever lost something that was valuable and irreplaceable?
How did you feel about the loss? What did you do?

B. What message is Jesus trying to teach through this story?

6. Read Luke 15:11-32 – The parable of a father and two sons

A. How are the two sons portrayed in the story at the beginning?

Older son _____

Younger son _____

B. How are the two sons portrayed in the story at the end?

Older son _____

Younger son _____

C. What attitude did the father appear to have toward each son?

Older son _____

Younger son _____

7. Do you identify with anyone or anything in these stories? Why?

8. What did Jesus hope the leaders would learn from these stories?

9. In the following box, chart the significant events in your life.

Beginning with your birth, chart the significant events in your life that relate to your journey with God or away from Him. Events that drew you closer to God, put higher. Events that led you away from Him, put lower. Connect the dots with a line. Share your story with someone else and listen to theirs as well. Pray for each other.

Walking With or Toward God

Birth		Present
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Walking Away From God

10. What has drawn you closer to God?

11. What has tended to pull you away from God?

12. How have you seen God working in your life?

THE PARABLE OF THE FORGIVING FATHER, THE REPENTANT SON AND THE ANGRY BROTHER

This story is one of the most well known and loved stories in all of the Bible. It is often called the story of “The Prodigal Son.” A Dictionary defines prodigal as extravagantly wasteful.

It is a fitting title, for much of the story is about the younger son following his foolish fantasies and squandering his money until it was all gone. Poor and hungry, he offered himself to a farmer taking care of pigs, not even earning enough to feed himself. Neglected, forsaken, and desperately discouraged, he “comes to himself.” Reality sets in. He realizes how foolish he has been. “The Prodigal Son!” It is a fitting title.

The story could also be called, “The Forgiving Father.” For a major part of the story is about how loving, patient, and forgiving the father is. No matter what his sons did or said, the father continues to respond with graciousness and tenderness, along with wisdom and strength. “The Forgiving Father” would be a fitting title.

But then there is another aspect of the story that makes me wonder if the story should actually be called, “The Angry Brother.” In fact, when you look at the context and see who Jesus was talking to, it seems that this was the major point that Jesus wanted to drive home.

“Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to [Jesus] to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, ‘This Man receives sinners and eats with them’ So He spoke this parable to them” Luke 15:1-3.

The Pharisees and scribes were angry. How could Jesus be so loving and kind to tax collectors, people who had cooperated with the Romans and taken advantage of their fellow Jews? They had sold out to the enemy and Jesus was receiving them.

How could Jesus eat with sinners, people who were clearly immoral? How could He associate or help people with diseases and disabilities? Weren't they under the curse of God from having committed great sin?

The story concludes with the angry brother left outside, trying to decide what he should do. Should he forgive and celebrate that his brother has come home or should he stay away in order to communicate, "This is not right!" What should he do? What did he do?

There is so much meaning in this story, it seems appropriate to call it "The Parable of the Forgiving Father, The Repentant Son, and The Angry Brother."

It is easy to identify with the younger son. It seems that we have all experienced the inner desire to live as we please, to do whatever we want to do whenever we want to do it. There is something within us that is attracted by a life of ease. However, we soon realize there are consequences for being lazy or for doing something that is wrong.

Growing up in a wealthy home with servants to do much of the work, the younger son must have felt his father was a little too demanding. And when the younger son failed to fulfill his responsibilities, the discipline applied by his father must have seemed a little too harsh. Instead of learning from discipline, receiving his father's love and taking on responsibility, the son began to focus on negative thoughts.

"My father is the problem. He must lay awake at night thinking up things for us to do to make our lives miserable. If only I could get away from here, then I would be happy. If only I could figure out a way to live on my own, then I could really enjoy life."

“If only I could get away from my dad. He’s the one who makes life miserable around here, always telling us what to do, when to do it and how it should be done.”

“Sometimes I just wish he was dead. I know I shouldn’t feel that way, but I’m just being honest. If he really was dead, then I could.... Wait a minute. That’s not a bad idea. Why didn’t I think of that before?”

“Dad, there is something I would like to ask you. You know you have always said that this is a family business. And when you died, it would pass on to us kids. I know you were trying to make us feel as if we are part owners so we could take our responsibility seriously. But I’ve decided that I don’t want to stay around here. I want to establish my own life and do my own thing. I would like to have my portion of the inheritance now. I’m an adult now and I want to live on my own.”

The father knew his younger son was not happy. He loved his son dearly and wanted the best for him. But no matter what he said or how hard he tried to show his love, his love was not received. It seemed like his son had built up an invisible wall of bitterness, resentment, and anger that shut him out.

As the father thought about his son’s amazing request, he knew he didn’t have to comply with it. However, his concern was not for his own wealth, but for his son’s heart.

“How can I reach him? How can I help him? Maybe, just maybe, this is the only way he will learn. By suffering from the consequences of his own choices, he might understand his own need and be open to my love.”

It would be a huge risk to let his son go. The temptation would be great for him to waste his money. Many people would love to take advantage of him and help him spend it. Others would be anxious to steal from him. There would be a great chance he would lose everything and maybe even be killed. Inside, the father agonized over the decision.

“If I say yes, will I ever see him again? Will my son ever want to come back if he does stay alive? If I say no, forcing him to stay would only lead him to harden his heart even more!”

After much thought and prayer, the father finally said, “Yes.”

The son couldn't believe his ears. This was a dream come true! An all expenses paid, lifelong vacation, free from all responsibilities. “I can travel, I can live it up, I can have fun. Why didn't I think of this before?”

Soon he was off to see the world. Jesus uses just one sentence to describe his actions:

He wasted his substance with riotous living. KJV

He wasted his possessions with prodigal living. NKJV

He squandered his wealth in wild living NIV

He squandered his estate with loose living. NASB

The Greek word that is translated – riotous, prodigal, wild, loose – is asotos. In the Greek, “a” is like our English “un.” It turns the meaning of a word into the opposite. For example, loved verses unloved.

Sotos comes from the word sozo, meaning to save or to heal. So the prodigal son wasted his wealth with un-saved or un-healthy living.

Today the world is full of prodigals: people willing to spend their time, money, and energy in all kinds of ways that are unhealthy – spiritually, physically and emotionally.

No one ever gets away with sin. Sinful lifestyles will always lead to painful consequences: financially, emotionally, physically, spiritually, socially or a combination of all of them.

Fortunately, we have a forgiving Father who loves us and reaches out to us no matter what we have done. In reality, we have all been

“prodigals,” for we have all sinned. We have all wasted our lives in some way with un-saved or un-healthy living.

The father genuinely loves his sons. When the younger son leaves, it is easy to read between the lines and see a father who thinks about his son, wonders how he is doing and hopes he will return. As he wonders and waits, he often looks in the distance to see if his son may be returning.

One day he does see him coming. He doesn't wait for the son to make it all the way back. He runs to meet him and welcomes him home. He doesn't say, “I told you so! It serves you right! Look what you have done to yourself!”

He's thrilled his son is back. With forgiveness and grace he embraces him. With a robe, a family ring and sandals, he communicates the loving message, “You are still my son.” Then he leads his household in a celebration, saying, “My son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” Luke 15:24.

The older brother returns. Curious about the music, he asks, “What is happening? Why all this music?”

One of the hired servants excitedly shares the good news. “Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf” Luke 15:27.

Instead of rejoicing, the brother gets angry and refuses to enter into the celebration. His father comes out and pleads with him.

“This is a day of rejoicing, please come in and let us celebrate together as a family.”

The older brother responds with anger towards his father and his younger brother. “Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as

this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him” Luke 15:29,30.

The father’s next words are powerful and significant. “Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found” Luke 15:31,32.

“Son, my love for you is not any less by my giving love to your brother. You are always with me. You are always on my heart. You are always on my mind. I love you. Nothing can take that love away. Your brother will not be a threat to your finances. All that I have is yours.”

“If all that we do with our wealth is hoard it and think about ourselves, we will miss out on what truly brings joy and meaning in life – being a blessing to others and serving others out of love.”

“It is right that we celebrate that your brother has come home. He was lost and now is found. Please come in and let us rejoice together.”

In Luke 15 the story ends with the brother remaining outside, refusing to celebrate his brother’s return. But the story doesn’t end there. As we continue to read the Bible, we learn that the “older brother” focused more and more on his anger, bitterness, envy, jealousy, dissatisfaction, and pride. The more he thought about his father’s actions and how “easy” his brother got off, the angrier he became.

The story “ends” with the older brother rushing into the “celebration,” seizing his father, beating and mocking him and putting him on the cross. For he represents those who complained, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

Both sons wanted their father dead.

One repented.

The other crucified Him.