

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF LUKE – PART SIXTEEN

In chapter 14 we have seen a series of stories from Jesus about dinner parties. Each pictured a different attitude which hinders us from enjoying the intimate fellowship with Him which He wants our Christian life to be. The Pharisee who invited the Lord to dinner was unhappy about Him healing on the Sabbath. He would have denied the Creator the opportunity to meet the need of a desperately sick man. Then there were the guests at the dinner who assumed that they were the most important people at the table. The reality is that we can only have a relationship with Him when we see our total unworthiness to be in His presence. Jesus urged us rather than inviting to dinner those to whom we have an obligation or who, we hope, will reward us in future, to welcome the needy from whom we will gain no advantage. He told another parable about how the would-be guests regarded possessions, status or family as more important than knowing Him. In their place He sought, through His servants, the most needy who, He knew, would be hungry and eager to come. Adding all these messages together the worry most people have is 'If God is sending me to so many needy people, how will I have the resources to meet their hunger for help?' The simple answer in the final part of this chapter is that He will pay the bill for dinner. The cost of building the tower or paying the army, the resources and the strength, is met not by us giving something up, but by Him.

Chapter 15 gives us three joyful dinner parties by way of contrast. These three stories were provoked by yet more grumbling behind His back from the Pharisees who did not approve of the company He was keeping. Each story made the same point but added a further dimension.(15:1,2)

In the parable of the hundred sheep, one of which wandered off and got lost, the message is plain. The shepherd was Jesus Himself,(Jn.10:14) or the servant available to Him.(IPet.5:2-4) We are quite clearly the sheep who have a great capacity for going off in our own way and getting into trouble. He came into this world to seek and find us, to lay us on His back on which He carried the cross for our sin, and to bring us into a relationship with the rest of His sheep, the Christian church. Nothing was too much trouble to Him in saving us from our own foolishness. He wants the whole church to celebrate one sinner being rescued. Nothing should be more important to us than rejoicing with Him. Our joy with Jesus on earth when this happens is only a taste of a much bigger celebration going on in heaven at such a miracle.(15:3-7)

The second story seems at first sight just to be repeating the same message except this time the shepherd has become a housewife and the sheep is a coin. But on reflection there is more to it. While a sheep can be blamed for getting lost, a coin cannot be held responsible for how it becomes misplaced. The fault must lie with the woman who in the Bible can be used as a picture in one of two ways. She may be the faithful bride of Christ,(Rev.21) or the unfaithful harlot.(Rev.17) Both are symbolic of the church who may be faithful or unfaithful. If we are faithful we will treasure carefully those whom the Lord has entrusted to us. If we are neglecting our responsibility, one of the consequences may well be that those for whom the Lord wants us to care, slide away from the fellowship in which they should be nurtured. The religious hypocrites who gave Jesus such a hard time, all too often drive others away from Him, and then blame them for not being interested. Notice the steps the woman had to take to find the coin. First she lit the lamp and then she swept the house and finally she searched. The light of Jesus needs to be switched on again in and among us. There is much cleaning up to do as we come back to the cross. Now we are ready to search for the lost. Again she threw a party because one silver coin had become so precious, as one lost person restored is so important to God. The parallel party

was going on in heaven where the greatest rejoicing takes place when just one person trusts Jesus.(15:8-10)

The third story of the man with two sons is famous as the parable of the Prodigal Son. That title misses the point of the story. The illustration focused first on the younger son, who wants to go off away from his father's house and spend his inheritance. Today we would picture him heading off for the big city and the night clubs intent on 'doing his own thing'. What he failed to understand was that the blessing which came from his father could only be lasting if it was enjoyed in the presence of the father. We make the same mistake in supposing that we can enjoy the goodness of God without God. Very quickly he learned the hard way that once he had nothing to give, his 'friends' melted away. In the absence of Social Welfare he had no alternative but to take the only job going which involved caring for pigs, which meant living with the pigs and like the pigs. Pigs in the Bible were unclean, being full of disease, and represented rejection of God.(Matt.7:6; II Pet.2:22) One day in the pig sty he realized how crazy he was, became desperately homesick and could not wait to return to his father, being prepared to become just a servant in his father's household.

He returned home as fast as he could go, no doubt rehearsing his speech to his father on the way. All that was unnecessary because the father was already on his way to meet him, and welcomed him home unconditionally. He only had opportunity to get out a simple apology. A celebration dinner was prepared, new, clean clothes were laid out and no doubt there was a real bed to sleep in for the first time for ages. I am sure his mother played a major role behind the scenes!

The real point of the story comes in the final scene when the older brother returned home from work and wanted to know what all the noise was about. When told of his younger brother's return he was outraged just as the Pharisees had been at the beginning of the chapter by the company Jesus had been keeping. The father gently reminded him of how thrilled he was at his younger son's return but at the same time hinted at his real problem. All these years the best of his father's estate had been available to him but he did not seem to have been enjoying what could have been his. This is the problem of the religious person who supposes that doing the Father's work, as he sees it, is what brings God's approval but fails to enjoy his Father and all that He has made available to us in Jesus Christ. The parable therefore is really about the Pharisaical Son.(15:11-32)

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Who are the steward and the rich man in this next story? How can a spiritual steward squander the Master's possessions? Why do people do this? Why is it so damaging to the work of God? What do wheat and oil picture in the New Testament? What is the warning to the unrighteous steward? Is the master really commending him? How does this story follow from all the dinner parties of the last two chapters?(16:1-13)
2. What did Jesus say was the real problem with Pharisees? How had they missed the point of the gospel? Weren't they the ones upholding the law? Why did Jesus throw in a comment on divorce at this point? Was Jesus banning divorce and remarriage for Christians? What did this section have to do with the dinner parties?(16:14-18)
3. What does this story tell us about heaven and hell? Why do people go to one or the other? Would miracles keep people away from hell? If not what does save people from hell? How did this story round off the series of dinner parties?(16:19-31)