



Parables in Luke: Simple Stories with a Deeper Meaning

Six Bible studies to enrich your life.

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Bible Studies in this series

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<p>Power of Prayer – 6 studies on the power and help that we receive in prayer. Follow the saints in their prayers and learn from them how valuable prayer can be for you.</p>	

Introduction

Everyone likes a good story. The parables of Jesus are found in the synoptic gospels and form about a third of his teachings in the bible. In this study are several of the parables from the Gospel of Luke. While the stories seem simple at first and record events common in everyday life, there are deeper meanings to every parable. It was often Jesus' way of making a teaching memorable and relatable to the people who He taught. Instead of always giving a discourse on a topic, he related the message to their lives and gave them something to think about as they recalled the story again and again. Some of his parables were a response to a question that was asked or a situation that brought a teachable moment. Other parables like the ones in Luke 15 are grouped together with a common theme that Jesus uses to teach us many aspects of a deep truth. In every case, Jesus was a master story teller that engaged the people.

While we need to learn the culture of the Jewish people to grasp the deepest aspects of the parables, the stories are still simple enough that a child can follow their basic message. The challenge for us is to dig into the stories so we can learn the application for our lives. The parable of the Good Samaritan is about a fulfilled life for us as much as about helping others. The parable of the rich fool is about the meaning of life. The parable of the great banquet teaches what makes us important to others. Each of these parables and the others has lessons for life that the pages of this Bible study will help you learn so that your life can be filled with the joy of being a child of God and living with His values. Jesus wants us, as much as the disciples and original hearers, to learn from His wisdom contained in the parables so that we live different from the world and have the blessings of Godly living.

The application of the parables in your life will rely on your willingness to trust the Lord to care for you and your willingness to see the ordinary things of life in a new light. It will be easier to be the priest who walks by the man beaten up on the Jericho road or the self-righteous brother who is angry at the love shown to a "worthless" brother. Such actions will rob you of many of the joys that come with the Christian life. They will take away your value to the Lord or to others. Approach each of the parables as an object lesson for your life. Learn the lessons and let them enrich your life. These are not another group of rules for Christian living as much as an opportunity to think differently and be freed from the selfishness and pride that will keep you from being who God meant you to be. Find yourself in the characters of the parables and sometimes in the group that Jesus taught so that you can have the wealth of the kingdom of God as your very own.

Table of Contents

The chapter title, text, and theme

1. **Helping people makes me happy** (Luke 10:25-37) - A fulfilled life begins with loving God and loving others
2. **An eye to eternity** (Luke 12:13-21) - A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions
3. **Humility gives value** (Luke 14:7-15) - What makes us as important to others is not a success, but value.
4. **The parable of the Lost Sheep** (Luke 15:1-7) - The lost sheep want to come back
5. **A rebellious brother returning to freedom** (Luke 15:11-24) - Real freedom is living in Christ
6. **The (self) righteous brother** (Luke 15:25-32) - The self-righteous rob themselves of joy.

How to use this Bible study

Each of the six chapters contains an introduction to help you get the big picture and is followed by thirteen questions to help you dig into the truth. The questions will help you understand what is going on and apply it to your own lives. The leader's guide provides answers for the questions that can be used in a Sunday Bible class or a small group. In a small group setting, you may find it helpful to copy the four-page leader's guide for each person. There are also student guides provided in the back of the book. In a large setting, it may be easier to copy those guides so that each of the members of the class has a student guide for personal use. Notice that there are also three questions at the end of each lesson that can either be discussed as you meet together or assigned for people to think about in the coming week.

My prayer is that you and the members of your group or class can grow through these studies. The answers in the leader's guide may challenge you to find deeper meaning and application for your lives. Life as a Christian can be difficult. It becomes even more difficult as we try to actively serve our Lord in ministry. The lessons that Jesus gave to help His disciples as they began the ministry of the new church are still important for us today. They can provide strength and help with our fears. As you study, realize that many of the questions have no single answer but are meant to help people find God's help in your trials. If you need to take more than one week per lesson, do so and enjoy the discussion and the learning.

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May the Lord bless you as you learn and grow in His grace.

1. Helping people makes me happy

Luke 10:25-37

Big Idea: A fulfilled life begins with loving God and loving others

The expert in the law asked a question that plagues a lot of people. He has studied all the Jewish law but is uncertain of his salvation. He believes that he keeps all of the Jewish law, but something is missing. Jesus sends the scholar back to the Bible, where the answer was apparent all along. If you want a fulfilled and happy life, love the Lord and love your neighbor as yourself. The answer, however, makes the man squirm and so he tries to limit who is my neighbor, but Jesus in the parable will not let him put on such a limit. Loving the neighbor requires time just as the Samaritan interrupted his journey. It means spending your resources as the Samaritan gave his own money and pledged more for the man's care. Finally, it requires effort as the Samaritan treated the man's wounds and transported him to an inn. Loving our neighbor is costly, but scripture shows how important it is.

Having received salvation from the Lord, we need to understand why salvation is ours. We need to have the purpose of filling the hole that is there in everyone's life. The first purpose is to be close to the Lord so that you can feel His affection and respond with love to the Lord. God becomes the bedrock in your life who makes you feel safe and loved. You can depend on Him in the toughest of times. The second purpose is loving others because that is one of the best ways to serve the Lord. If I have a friend and help his children, he will view that as helping him because he loves his children as much as his own life. Loving the other children of God is a way to love God because He cares about His other children. It may not always be simple and may be inconvenient at times, but it is the purpose of every Christian to care for others. It is also our blessing since those who help often give support to us when we need assistance.

Such love and care for our neighbor are possible because we know that God will continue to care for us. The Samaritan lived under God's protection as he cared for the man on a dangerous highway. He gave of the money and time that the Lord had given to him to help another in need. We trust the Lord and give more than a kind word in passing or a promise to pray for those in need. God has given us the task of sharing His love with others as He has shared that love with us. Service can be our greatest joy as we can change lives and participate with the Lord in helping others. We need to see our service as something we do for the Lord, giving Him the chance to lift someone so that they can succeed. The Christian faith is not to make life easy. Its purpose is to bring salvation and meaning to our life.

1. When has someone gone out of their way to help you?

I remember a fellow pastor who helped me out the day that my youngest child was born. It was time to go to the hospital, but I had a funeral scheduled that day. I called several pastors before Pastor John agreed to help me out. He would take care of the funeral so I could be at the birth of my child. I didn't have to disappoint the family who had gathered nor incur the wrath of a wife. I had the chance to support my wife and see the family later that day after the funeral and give them comfort. Let the group tell of extraordinary things that others have done for them.

Read Luke 10:25-37

2. Verse 25, 27. What question does the man ask of Jesus? What answer does he already know from scripture?

The expert in the law asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" If honest, his question was to find out what the teacher thought it took to be part of God's kingdom. He felt that he had to do something to have the blessings of that kingdom. Ironically, he knows the answer. Love the Lord and love your

neighbor. Put God first above all other things and let the love you have for God spill over into the love you have for your neighbor. Even when you know that the cross of Jesus saves you, you can have a hollow feeling. You have a nagging feeling that you are still missing something. You are missing a purpose. Why have I have been saved? I have salvation, but I am missing the joy that I should have in Jesus. The parable is about our purpose as well as about making the sacrifice to help someone else.

3. Verse 27. While we know that salvation comes from the cross, what causes people to feel empty and doubt their salvation?

We know that salvation comes from the cross, but having been saved, we often don't know what to do next. The expert's law points to two things that bring blessings to every Christian's life. You love the Lord with all your soul. There is real joy in being so close to the Lord that you feel His love every day. There is confidence that tomorrow will be good because the Lord is at your side. The second blessing comes when you start having the Lord's heart, and you love others because you know that He loves them. Because you know that the Lord will take care of you, you are willing to use some of the things that the Lord gives each of us to help others. Loving God and loving others gives you a purpose in life. These are not rules like "Pay your taxes" or "Wear a seatbelt" that someone forces you to do. Loving God is a prescription for a better life that will give you real joy.

4. Verse 29. What question does the lawyer ask when Jesus' response makes the lawyer feel uncomfortable? How does he try to justify his actions in light of his answer from the Bible?

Correct answers often make us squirm. The words have convicted the expert in the law of scripture that he has just so wittingly quoted. We all want to know how to fill that hole in our lives, but we don't like the answer. His attempt to make it less uncomfortable is to try to define neighbor narrowly. If the neighbor is just the upright Jew at his synagogue, the expert will feel a little more comfortable. Jews hated gentiles and Jews who did not keep the Mosaic Law. Surely the teacher would allow the expert to love only those who were upright like he felt he was. One has the feeling that he could think of a lot of gentiles and wicked Jews that he did not want to love.

5. Verse 29. Who do you feel uncomfortable serving, and why do less than perfect people make you feel uncomfortable?

Like the expert in the law, there are many people that we find hard to love. I will make enormous sacrifices for my friends and my family. I already love them and genuinely care about their future and their struggles. Sadly, there are others for whom I find it hard to make sacrifices. I struggle with the street beggar of the big city or the person who comes begging for money at my church when his liquor-filled breath. I find it hard to care about people who have lost their homes from a tornado or hurricane. It is also hard to get upset about people's problems in cultures that I don't understand. To be honest, I need to grow in this area as much as the law expert. Let the group share who they feel comfortable with and who makes them feel awkward.

6. Verse 31. What are the responses of the priest and the Levite to the man who has been robbed? Why do you think they acted the way that they did?

The priest and Levite passed by on the other side when they saw the robbed man. There are many reasons that they could have done so. They may have thought the man was dead and were concerned about contact with a dead body, which would have defiled them and rendered them unable to participate in worship. They might have been afraid that it was a trap and that a robber hiding among the rocks would mug them if they helped the man. The point is that the men who were obligated by their office to help others refused to help. The people who the victim should have expected to help didn't take the time even to look to see what they could do.

7. Verse 31. What is the cost of not helping someone that crosses your life?

While we often focus on the sacrifices that we might make if we help someone, some costs come from not helping people when we should be merciful. The initial loss is our reputation with the community. A church that does not support its community or come to the aid of others in a natural disaster loses the chance to show God's love. People will think that selfish people like the priest or Levite in the parable fill the church. Second, we lose the chance to touch a life for Jesus. It may be a family member or friend who just needs a helping hand or a friend who listens to get over a hump in their lives. Third, you may lose the chance to make a new friend who will one day be able to help you. That casserole that you take to the neighbor or the young man that you mentor may end up being a special friend. While we don't look for benefits when we reach out a helping hand, they are often there.

8. Verse 33f. What three investments did the Samaritan make in the life of the robbery victim?

The Samaritan made three significant investments with the injured man. He invested his time as he interrupted his journey to provide treatment of the man's wounds and care for him over the next few days. He also spent resources as he used the wine and oil out of his food stores and pledged money for the man's care at the inn. Finally, he gave his effort. It would have been easier to pay someone to care for all the man's needs, but the Samaritan personally bandaged the wound, placed the man on his donkey, and made arrangements for his care. All of us would make those sacrifices for a friend in a minute, knowing that the friend would do the same for us. There is no hint in the story that the Jewish man paid the Samaritan back for anything. Talk in your group, which of the investments would be hardest for you to make.

9. How do you find the people that the Lord wants you to help? How does the Lord help you find such people?

As you study this parable, you may be feeling that you should be merciful but don't know where to start. Like the Samaritan, we need to just open our eyes to the opportunities that the Lord puts across our path. I am sure the Samaritan didn't get up that morning with the idea that he needed to help someone today. He just saw a need and reached out to help. God provides opportunities to us regularly; we just need to open our eyes to see them so we can help. It might be a crying coworker who you help with a tissue or a drink. It might be a neighbor who has lost their spouse who you rake the lawn, send a card, or bring food for them. We often think that we have to solve the problems in remote nations or set things right in our workplace. Usually, God calls us to help one person and do simple acts of kindness that may open the door for more significant ministry.

10. Verse 34. What can we learn from the practical things did the Samaritan focuses on for the robbed man?

He bandaged his wounds with oil and wine as salve and disinfectant and then took the man on his donkey to an inn where he could recover safely. Notice that the Samaritan simply did what he could and what seemed needed. He didn't try to sew up the wounds like a doctor or even get a description of the bandits. Most of the people that God puts across our path have ar needs. You just have to look and listen. You may get a clue from the red sobbing eyes or the story that they tell. We may think that we have to change the world or address underlying problems. Usually, what we have to deal with first is simple needs. If we have an opportunity later and feel comfortable helping with more profound matters, we can deal with deeper issues later.

11. What if someone needs some form of help that we can't give to those in need? What can we do for them in those situations?

We often worry about what we can't do instead of just doing what we can. We may not be able to help with world hunger, but we can provide a meal for someone we meet. We may not be able to fix a broken

marriage, but you can lend a listening ear. In the process, you may smile at someone who is hurting or touch a heart because you cared. Focus on what you can do instead of what you can't. Look for things that you can do instead of dismissing the situation and doing nothing. God will bring circumstances in which we can help. It is also OK to say that you are unable to help someone whose problem is too big or requires skills or resources that you do not have.

12. Verse 36. What does this story teach us about being a neighbor?

Often the question is not who is my neighbor but instead to whom can I be a neighbor. A neighbor didn't have anything to do with race or geography for the Samaritan. The priest and Levite were racially neighbors and could easily have lived closer to the robbed Jew than the Samaritan. It was an opportunity that made the man a neighbor. Like the Samaritan, we have to keep our eyes open for people who need help and have the courage to help them out. Realize that you can't take care of every person who has needs around you. Your task is to find one or two who you can help and be a neighbor to them, letting God take care of others' needs through neighbors He will send for them. In one sense, we are all neighbors to those in our community. Reach out and care so that you may be God's blessing to the world.

13. Who is God calling you to be a neighbor in your life? Why might that be a blessing to you as well as them?

As your group has talked about neighbors, consider who the Lord continues to put across your path. It might be someone at church or work. It might be a friend or someone you see in the neighborhood but never have the opportunity to stop and chat. Neighbors are all around us, and often caring gives us the chance to make new friends with whom you can share the love of the Lord. We trust God to care for our needs, and that frees us to care for the needs of others. Take time to discuss who God continues to bring into your lives.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 If you could ask Jesus a question today, what would your question to the teacher be?

Deep 2 What does it feel like when someone shows mercy on you? How is that a motivation to show compassion for others?

Deep 3 If a Good Samaritan came to your town, what problems would he address? What needs do you see that you can help others within your community?

2. An eye to eternity

Luke 12:13-21

Big idea: A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions

It was all about the money. The young man's father had died, and the brothers were arguing about who got what share of the inheritance. The man asked Jesus to make his brother give him his rightful share. Jesus refused to do so since, as long as the brothers were greedy, there would be no satisfactory settlement. He took advantage of the request to teach a parable about greed. A rich man suddenly gains abundant wealth and begins plans for a lifetime of ease. Suddenly, the man dies, and Jesus calls the rich man a fool since he ignored his relationship with the Lord. The parable speaks to the problem of greed and encourages us to think about how we can get the most advantage from the blessings that the Lord gives us. How do we use our abundance for the Lord and others?

Money still makes people do funny things. I have experienced adult children fight over the inheritance of their parents, leaving lawyers wealthy from the fight and a family shattered. I have watched a person win the lottery and lose all their friends who think that their "rich buddy" should spend his winnings on them. In our society, money is often king bestowing prestige and ease on those who have it and jealousy on those who do not. Such thoughts forget the Lord, who is the one who blesses us with every good gift that we have. They also put personal ease, which can be taken away in a moment over making a difference in the world. Our challenge is to get the most benefit out of the blessings that the Lord gives us. We want to take the money we have and have something that even death can't take away.

The parable wants us to look at the eternal benefits that our possessions can make. Greed looks at temporary things and causes people to miss what is important. The rich man in the text has such an abundance that he has no place to put it. He could have used it to help others. One of the few things that we can take into heaven is a Christian relationship. Those we befriend with our time and possessions in this life can spend eternity with us in heaven. It might be a fellow Christian you help provide for in a tough time or someone who uses your possessions and comes to know the gospel. This action surely pleases our heavenly father, who considers the help that we do for others as a gift that we do for Him. Serving others and having a relationship with the Lord opens up our lives and gives it purpose. Our life becomes more than the sum of our possessions. Our life builds treasures in heaven and friendships here on earth.

1. What did you argue about with your siblings as you grew up? Who usually won the arguments?

Let the group share their family arguments. When we are younger, we might fight over toys. We get to high school, fight over who friends are, or who stays up or plays their music loud. Even when we become adults, we tend to have arguments over lifestyle and how our siblings are raising their children. It might also be fun to ask how their parents dealt with the sibling rivalry that often comes about.

Read Luke 12:13-21

2. Verse 13. What was the man's concern and what did he want Jesus to do for him?

Both this younger brother had an older brother who was withholding his portion of the inheritance, or the younger brother thought he deserved a larger share. According to Jewish law, the older brother got two-thirds of the estate, and a younger brother would only receive a third. One would suppose that if there were more than two brothers, younger brothers would split the third among themselves. It was common for Rabbis to help settle legal matters, but Jesus refused because he knew that no answer would solve the

real problem, which was the greed of the two brothers. The hearts had to be right if they were to find an actual settlement.

3. Verse 15. What is the deeper issue with the man's request?

Jesus knew that the real issue was greed. The brothers were not satisfied with what was reasonably theirs; they wanted more and more to be truly satisfied. Too often, possessions determine the value that we have. I have a Lexus, and you have a Chevy, so I must be better than you. I have a four-bedroom home with a swimming pool, and you just have an old two-bedroom house, and so I must be better than you are. Jesus says that life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions. Too often, possessions own us instead of adding to our life. Ever known someone who owned a boat and who spent more time taking care of the vessel than using it on the lake? As we will soon see, the key is what we do with the possessions to improve life for those around us and our community.

4. Verse 15. What signs of greed show up in a person's life, and how do they affect them?

Greed can be a terrible master for some. People will work long hours and drive themselves ragged to have some possession that they don't have time to enjoy because of their long hours of work. Families can be destroyed when children argue about an inheritance, and the lawyers they hire get more of what parents left than the kids. Play the lottery and win and watch all your friends want their share. Soon, you avoid all these friends or are separated from them as you buy a bigger house and become a very lonely person. Greed is never satisfied. You thirst for more and more of the things you believe give you prestige or power just to find out that others have more than you do. We all need and should seek out particular basic needs but will never be fulfilled by having an abundance of possessions.

5. Verse 17. What problem is the rich man facing? What is his answer to the challenge, and what does that say about him?

We may think that an abundance of possessions means that we have no worries, but the rich man had a new problem because of the wealth. We may credit him as a shrewd businessman. He tore down the barns he had and built bigger ones so that nothing of the bumper crop would go to waste. While there was nothing wrong with his celebration of good fortune, his thinking was too narrow. He thought only of what he could do to preserve the harvest for himself and not what he might do for others with the excess. In verses 17-19, he uses some form of the first person pronoun about ten times. Here is a selfish man who has no thoughts for his workers, his community, or God. Building barns was not wrong, but his motivation for construction was to live a life of ease. Could he at least have thought of his workers who were so instrumental in bringing in the harvest?

6. Verse 17. What challenges would you face if you were to receive a large inheritance?

Most of us think of an inheritance as our time to indulge in things that we wanted that we never could afford before. We want to take the vacation of a lifetime, put an addition on the house, or buy a boat or a camper. Those are all excellent things, but they are all about you. At the very least, we should be thinking about giving a tithe of this extra money to the Lord or others. It is not money that we earned or that we would have missed if we had never received it. It is better to use the abundance to help others. We might even find that there are blessings to giving some of the money away. Give a quarter of the money to your church to start a new ministry or pay down the church debt, and people will not be so eager to think that you owe them a portion of your new-found money. Use the money to help people in the community, and you could end up with new friends and a new sense of purpose. Get past rewarding self with funds that come your way and find that you may give yourself more joy by giving it away wisely than you would by acquiring more property.

7. Verse 19. What does the rich man think that God wants him to do with his wealth?

One wonders if he ever considered God as part of his plans. The text says, “I’ll say to myself,” which shows that he has left both God and others out of his life. His focus is not on eternity but on the pleasure that he can have from this new-found wealth. He believes that riches would bring security and a comfortable life in the future. He is also charting a course for life without purpose. You can only enjoy sitting in a hammock enjoying drinks with umbrellas for a short time. Just look at the kids complaining on a beautiful summer day that they are bored because mom and dad have to work and can’t take them out to the beach or the park. God did not create us to live a life without a purpose. Some retirees find that they have more happiness by volunteering their time for a good cause rather than just sitting at home.

8. Verse 19. What alternatives can you think of just to take it easy to do with your money that would be more pleasing to God and helpful to others?

If you want to have pleasure, do something that you enjoy for others rather than doing things just for yourself. I have found that the key is to invest yourself as well as your money. Giving a large amount of money for a church or a local hospital can be great, but the fun usually stops when they cut the ribbon for the new hospital wing. How about giving money to a soup kitchen to provide meals with the stipulation that you get to be a volunteer who serves the food. How about providing enough money to fund a bookmobile program for the public library and volunteering to check out the books for kids in neighborhoods across the city. Money offers opportunities for doing something meaningful, and the more you invest your time and talents in the project, the more fun you will have out of your money, and the more you will please God as you serve others in His name.

9. Verse 20. What is the flaw in the rich man’s plan? How had he forgotten God?

The significant flaw that the man had was that he is not in control of life. The bounty of the fields was not his own. Just ask any farmer what the difference is between a great harvest and a poor one. He will tell you that you can do all you can, and then it is up to the Lord and the weather. The rich man also didn’t realize that his life was his own. For all of us, the future is not under our control. Think of the person who retires with plans to travel to Europe but spends most of his retirement dealing with a heart attack, stroke, or bad knees. God is in control of everything in our life. We need to thank Him for every blessing that comes to us and ask for His help in dealing with every setback. He has a grand plan for us if we are willing to listen and place ourselves in His hands. Even the setbacks in life will not deter the opportunities that God wants to put in front of us to serve and to enjoy a life of purpose in Him.

10. Why is it tough for us to accept that life is temporary and beyond our control? How does such a belief change how you manage your possessions?

We believe that we control our future. Watch the commercials on television. They boast that they can manage your finances regardless of what the market does. Any fool knows that they can’t control if the market goes up or down. Medicine promises cures and a better life for anyone who takes their pill or undergoes their procedure. While there is nothing wrong with having a financial advisor or going to a doctor for medical help, the truth is that only God can control the future. He has given us the antidote for death called eternal life. We don’t have to worry about when our hour comes. God has it handled. We also don’t have to hold so tightly to our possessions because we believe that God will provide. Those who give to others find that the Lord provides for them. He often offers more for the generous because they become the conduits of His supply for those in need. Trust the Lord, and you will be generous because God has your life in His hands.

11. Verse 21. How does Jesus summarize the parable, and what do you think His words mean?

Those who store up things for themselves like the rich man have no guarantee that they will keep them or enjoy them. God calls people fools who spend their life building empires here in the world while disregarding their relationship with the Lord. One remembers the parable of the rich man and Lazarus

(Luke 16:19-31), where another rich man dies and loses all the good things that he built up in life. The poor beggar died and suddenly had everything. Lazarus was rich toward God and would spend eternity in comfort as the Lord took care of his needs. Those who forget the Lord have the illusion of good times and self-importance but never have the blessings and love of God or others' friendships. Their possessions will own them and rob them of the joy that they can have as they share the abundance that they have with others.

12. What does it mean to be rich to God?

It means acknowledging everything that the Lord does for you and showing thanks to Him by using the abundance of our gifts for others. Even the poorest Americans have plenty compared to most of the world. We who are middle class can use our wealth to upgrade phones and cars or to help a friend or provide for a ministry at church. When we are rich toward God, we recognize that He is the giver of our blessings and that we want to use them to help others. It also means to grow in faith so that you live your life according to his values and character. Drawing closer in life to the Lord gives gifts that no one can take away. No one can take away the peace that comes with daily prayer or the relationships that come through Christian service. Being rich toward God is developing a relationship with Him that will change your life and your attitudes in life. It will bring joy instead of worry and peace when the world around you is crumbling.

13. What is one step you could take to be rich toward God, and how might it be a blessing to you?

The answers to the questions so far have already given a couple of examples. What I have found valuable in life is to give of yourself as well as your money. Being rich toward the Lord is a blessing when you give of yourself so that you draw close to God and feel His love, draw near to others, and make the friendships we all crave. Money is a tool that God has given for us to care for your needs and your family and use the excess to do ministry to others. Money is never an end in its self. Even the rich man thought that the money would bring him pleasure and ease. Think about the money that you have after God takes care of your needs. What could you do to help one other person or ministry with that resource? How could you involve yourself in that ministry to enjoy the blessing that your riches have meant? Take it small and find something that you enjoy, and you will find purpose and joy that the rich man missed.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 When have you been like the rich man in this story? Have possessions brought you lasting happiness?

Deep 2 Have you ever had a time when you funded and worked on a project that brought you a lot of joy? Why was the project so much fun?

Deep 3 If you knew that the Lord was going to provide for all your needs, what project would you like to take on today for others?

3. Humility gives value.

Luke 14:7-15

Big idea: What makes us as important to others is not a success, but value.

In Jesus' day, a dinner party was arranged at U shaped tables with the host sitting at the top of the U. The further that you were from the host, the lower your status at the banquet. Jesus noticed guests grabbing seats close to the center to seem more important and receive other dinner invitations. He uses this as an opportunity to teach the disciples and the host about humility. To the disciples, he warns about taking the better seats lest you find yourself asked to give up your seat for someone more important. Take the lower seat so that the host will sing your praises and have you move up to a better place. Let others sing your praises. If you have value, let others share your worth. To the host, Jesus tells him to invite others who can't return the favor. Don't just do good things to those who can repay the favor because many will not repay the kindness. Show your generosity by humbly inviting others simply because God has been good to you.

Many people in our world want to be part of the most prominent church, drive the most expensive car, or have the most elegant clothes. We want the world to take notice of us and think that we are unique. Those who brag about themselves are missing something. What makes us special to others is not our home, clothes, or a fancy car. We are unusual because we have value. We are the people who don't need to brag about ourselves. Others have felt our kindness or seen our talents, and they give us honor like the host does when he asks the man to take a better seat. Self-promotion is dangerous because someone might put us in our place and cause us embarrassment. The humble are comfortable in who they are and usually are slow to compare themselves to others. If someone does compliment them, they take it as an honor because they have made a difference in someone else's life. They are people of value because they are more concerned with helping others than promoting themselves.

Life is about serving others and creating value. Humble people are not doormats to others. They are people who quietly serve and care for others. Others remember their service and sometimes recognize it. If it isn't acknowledged, it doesn't matter to them because the joy was helping others around them just as the Lord continues to help them. These are people who care more about what the Lord thinks of them than whether they are getting praise from their peers. They feel good about themselves for the things that they do for others and the love of Jesus that they show in their lives. When others do lift them for their works, they accept the praise and look for other ways to help them. Honor is fleeting, but the person who continues to help others will be valuable to their friends and family.

1. What formal dinner party have you been to that stands out to you? Did you have a good seat or a bad one?

The wedding reception for my cousin Christa stands out to me with more than a dozen pieces of silverware at each spot and a live band playing during dinner. Luckily, they had seated my brothers and our wives together on one table so that it didn't matter that we were a long way from the head table. We had a lot of fun and wondered what we were going to do with all that silverware. Let the group talk about dinners that were special to them. Did the location matter, and why? Did they get a place near the head table or with a good window view at the restaurant?

Read Luke 14:7-15

2. Verse 1. What is the setting for the parable?

Jesus had earlier been invited into the home of one of the Pharisees (Luke 7:36f) when a sinful woman wept at his feet and poured perfume on them. Her actions bothered the Pharisee, and Jesus used it to teach

about repentance. At first, it seems odd that a pharisee would invite Jesus to his, but it may have been so that they could watch Jesus and trip Him up on one of his answers. Jesus seems oddly comfortable on this occasion. He knows the real character of those who would try to bring Him down and seems very willing to come into the “lion’s den” so that He might have the opportunity to teach people and bring them closer to God. Jesus used this opportunity to inform the disciples and the Pharisee about humility.

3. Verse 8-9. Why is it not wise to take the best seat in the house? What is the danger in doing so?

The best seats are for those with the highest value and not the greatest ego. Jesus saw people grabbing the seats closest to the U-shaped table’s center and thus closer to the host or guest of honor. The host reserved such positions for the most prominent people invited to dinner. The Pharisees in Jesus’ day were notorious for grabbing such places of honor. Jesus says the danger is that the host may ask you to give up your seat for someone who was genuinely honorable. When you got up, the only places left would be seats at the far end of the table with people who were of lower stature than you were. Jesus’ point is that those who seek honor in the kingdom of God will be disgraced. The Father must give honor since God will not honor those who seek to honor themselves.

4. Verse 8. How vital are position and self-promotion in our society? Why is our place in life so important?

Self-promotion is rampant these days. At the national level, politicians, business people, and entertainers all have people whose job is to make the influential people look better. Even the common men and women have to make sure that everyone knows about our new car or promotion so that others think of them highly. Some of these people are so eager to talk about themselves that they seem to scream, “please make me feel important!” Sadly, there is a feeling that we have to justify our place at the big table. We may even find ourselves with others where we feel like we don’t belong. Let the group talk about instances where they experienced someone trying to make themselves seem important.

5. Verse 10. What benefits can come with humble choices, according to Jesus?

Wise people let others sing their praises. They will sit at a spot or gather with a group of people who may not be as significant as they are. They can have a casual conversation and never feel like they are out of the league or that someone is going to take their place. They may even be the one that others look up to and admire for their accomplishments. Occasionally, they may find the host moving them up to a better place and dismissing one of the proud people out of their seats. The host will honor them in front of the entire banquet. If the host does not elevate you to a “better” place, you have the realization that just being invited was honor enough. The humble feel good about themselves and don’t need to prove anything to others.

6. Verse 10. What qualities and attitudes do you think that it takes to be a humble person?

The humble person is comfortable with who they are and who God made them. They don’t feel the need to prove anything. At the banquet, they would be the person who sits back and enjoys the evening and the people around you. If the people are impressed with you, that is fine. If no one is impressed, that is OK because it was not necessary to impress anyone. Humility lets others speak of your best qualities. You are a person of value who has character qualities that others want to be around. You are a quiet servant who helps others as an expression of honoring God and responding to the many good things that the Lord has done for you.

7. Verse 11. What does Jesus say is the value of humility?

Humility means never having to impress others to feel good about yourself. It is not having a low opinion about yourself or your gifts. It is the freedom to stop thinking about your value at all. Jesus knows that you can’t take the honor, and earthly fame will not last. God gives the only real recognition. We feel good

about ourselves because God has shown us that we are loved. That is why the humble can take the lower seat. They sit back in a dog eat dog world and just enjoy who God has made them and the opportunities that the Lord gives. Being so humble is especially hard if you are one of the many people who are people pleasers. Instead of letting your value be based on others' opinions, let your value come from the way you use opportunities to serve anonymously and the realization that the Lord is happy with us when we serve others for Him.

8. How does service create value and real honor while self-promotion does not do so?

Humility is about serving others and creating value. Those who honored themselves at the banquet did nothing for others and may have found that others resented them for being seated where they didn't belong. Humble people quietly serve others without any thought of getting a return from it. These are the people that others love and remember. As they help people, again and again, they are soon loved and remembered. The humble servant is the person that others remember years later and are the ones that others will find ways to help them if they need them because of the help they have given others. Self-promotion is soon forgotten, but a tender act of service makes you someone who is valued and loved by others for ages.

9. Verse 12. What advice does Jesus give the host?

Jesus may have been invited so that the host could watch him (v.1), but it was Jesus who watched the host. It is a sign of how confident the Lord is that he would turn to a prominent Pharisee and give him advice. Here, too, Jesus advises on humility. He tells the host not just to invite people who can return the favor. Jesus tells him to ask the poor and crippled so that your generosity may imitate the generosity of the Lord to you. In that way, people may see the love and mercy of God through you. Such people often seem of little value to the world and those of power. Jesus was calling the Pharisee to be humble and invite some of the poor as well as family and friends so that everyone could enjoy the banquet. The text looks forward to the great heavenly banquet in which God invites all men and women regardless of their station in life.

10. Verse 12. Why is it a blessing to do something for those who can't repay you?

Jesus knew that the host had invited the guests for two reasons. Either to pay them back for the kindness that they had done for him or to put them under his debt so that they would pay him back for his generosity. To do something for people who can't repay you frees you from the disappointment of not being compensated for your kindness. You never have to keep score or feel upset that your charity didn't somehow benefit you. You are free to do something kind at the moment and feel good about yourself and the act of kindness. You also know that your heavenly Father will be pleased by your willingness to mirror His love and mercy. You also may find that others see your act of kindness and see you as a person of value who they want to be near.

11. Verse 14. In what way will the host and others who are kind to the less fortunate to be repaid?

Being honored by others is more gratifying than praising yourself. Being valued by the Lord is the best honor of all. In the practice of the Pharisees, the idea of inviting those of lower stature was preposterous. Yet, Moses' law commanded the Jew to do just that thing (Deut. 14:28-29, Deut. 26:11-13). God's people were to be generous as God had been generous to them. It would remind them how God had been good to them and teach them to appreciate what the Lord had done for His people. It would also create a community among the believers (Acts 2:42f) to help everyone in their time of need and draw others into the kingdom of God. The Pharisee as one who thought that he knew God should be an example of God's love and not an example of self-promotion.

12. Helping others, instead of seeking honor makes no sense to our culture. What benefits could you have by making humble choices?

Honor often is equated with success and value. Those who seek their recognition seldom seem satisfied with what they have achieved. The man who sits at a high table often wants to be at the head table next time. Such honor seeking can become the purpose and the destroyer of their lives. Humble choices can't fail, for they have no ulterior motives. There is no guarantee of reward, and thus there is no feeling of despair when no reward comes. There is just the joy that God has placed in our hearts at doing something good for others. There is also the joy that occurs when the Lord gives to us so we can provide for others. The Lord continues to provide for us so we can provide for others. The Lord continues to give us value in others' eyes that we can't achieve for ourselves. When you are humble, the pressure is off trying to make yourself valuable. God has already given you value that will grow every time you act as His ambassador of love and help.

13. What does this parable teach us about value instead of honor?

Humility may be tough for people-pleasers, but I think that Jesus has at least three lessons for us in this parable. First, what others think of us matters less than we think. Some people will never be pleased, and we shouldn't worry so much about what others think of us. Second, we need to care more about what God thinks. Is our life showing others how loving God is by our service? We need to promote God and not ourselves. We want others to learn about him from us. Our service pleases God and brings benefits from the Lord as we serve others. Finally, I will feel better about myself if I build value by helping instead of self-promotion. Serving makes others think highly of me. They remember the good things that I have done and show that I am a person of character worth remembering and knowing. While humility is tough in this pompous world: it is a blessing to us, the Lord, and the people around us. Honor may be fleeting in this world, but God honors those who have been His servants for eternity.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 How do status and self-promotion get in the way of loving and caring for others?

Deep 2 How would you benefit by being humble and helping others that you know without a thought of being repaid?

Deep 3 How valuable do you feel to yourself and God? What act of kindness could you do this week to make you feel happier and give you self-worth?

4. The parable of the Lost Sheep

Luke 15:1-7

Big Idea: The lost sheep want to come back

The tax collectors and other sinners surrounded Jesus. They may not have been ready to believe and follow Jesus, but many wanted to hear more. Surrounding them was a group of Pharisees who were amazed that Jesus would associate with such people. They were lost and even hopeless. Encouraging them to be part of the kingdom was wrong because they would pollute God's holy kingdom. The parable shows how much God wants the lost. This passage is a new concept for the Jew. Here, we see God seeking the lost and not just forgiving those who came to Him. We also see how much God and all of heaven rejoice when a single sinner comes to faith. God cares, and so should we.

God still calls us to reach out to the lost. They will be messy. They will have broken relationships and bad habits that make them hard to be around. Often, they are people who don't have a strong moral compass because Jesus is either new to them or part of their distant past. Many of them didn't mean to get away from the church—they just drifted away with busy jobs and busy lives. The crisis came, and they suddenly realized that they didn't have the support of God and friends that they once did. Like the sheep in the text, they need someone to come after them because they don't know their way. That needs to be us. Like the shepherd, we need to seek them and find ways to not be awkward on their doorstep or over the phone. The payoff is that there will be a great joy for them and you if you can bring them back.

The world is a scary place. Being a lost sheep is like being the kid lost on a school field trip. When people come and look for you, it feels good to be back with the fold. God and the angels rejoice over the lost being found because they know the cost of being lost. The church and the lost sheep rejoice, too, as new friendships are made, and God can help both of you through each other. The Pharisees didn't want to be shepherds, for it is hard to reach out to the lost. Sometimes you get doors slammed in your face, and you ache for those who used to come to church but somehow wandered off. The payoff is the rejoicing. It just feels good to see someone who was lost come back to church. It feels good for them, and it feels good to have made a new friend and know that God is pleased because you reached out and began searching for someone you missed. The lost sheep isn't lost anymore.

1. How did you feel the last time you lost your car keys? What did you do to find them, and why are they so important?

I was losing my car keys so much that I have gotten in the habit that I only set the car keys down on my bedroom dresser. I don't know if that is a sign of aging or what, but it became necessary. The car keyring has the house key, the work key, and a host of other keys. Even though I do have a second car key, I need the other keys. Take time discussing in your group what it is like to lose your keys and how you frantically search for them. Discuss where you might put them so you can always find them and still have the discipline to put them there.

Read Luke 15: 1-7

2. Verse 1. Who gathered around Jesus to hear His teaching? What do you think drew them to Him?

The tax collectors and other sinners gathered around Him. These would have been people excluded from the temple and the synagogue. Jesus welcomed them and treated them kindly. He also taught that the wealthy should invite the disabled and the lame (Luke 14:13) and help people of all sorts of illnesses. They may not fully trust Jesus or give Him their allegiance, but they want to hear more. Life for them was rough, and they were eager to hear God's plan and mercy for them. These were the people that Jesus had

come to reach. The crowds responded to the love and kindness that they saw in Jesus. Unlike the Pharisees and other leaders, Jesus did not put on airs but was glad to sit with them (Luke 14:10).

3. Verse 2. Why did the Pharisees grumble about Jesus? Why were they displeased with what Jesus was doing?

The Pharisees took an elitist view of who would enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus, by his association with the masses, threatened to pollute the pure group of pious people. Jesus also undermined their selfish ways (Matthew 23) as they concentrated on external rules while He talked of the heart and the internal power of sin (Matthew 5-7). Jesus must have been a puzzle for the Pharisees. They found it hard to deny His miracles and perhaps some of His teachings, but He did not act the way that they thought He should have, and He associated with people who pious people avoided fearing that their evil character might rub off. In their minds, since Jesus couldn't see the truth about these outcasts, He was guilty by association.

4. Verse 2. How does the church view outsiders with less than perfect lives?

It is often hard for us to see people's worth the same way that Jesus does. The new convert is often messy. They often have been divorced or have problems with their families. They still swear or are strapped for cash because of bad decisions. They are rough around the edges because they haven't grown up with God's moral compass. They may have hearts of gold, but their lives are tarnished around the edges, and you may be afraid of the bad habits that they could teach your kids. I have had people visit the church looking like they were part of a motorcycle gang or came in with hair dyed green and later orange. They started a little rough but became terrific friends and members. Let the group tell their own stories and share why Christians are often afraid of the less than perfect visitor.

5. Verse 4a. What problem exists for the shepherd in the parable? Do sheep deliberately get lost?

The shepherd counts his sheep, possibly at the end of the day, and finds one is lost. Some say that no creature strays more than sheep. They see a green patch of grass just beyond the flock and head for it. They move to another patch barely in eyesight. Soon, they look around and don't see the rest of the sheep. It is significant to realize that the sheep strayed because of foolishness. It is why sheep in the Middle East need a shepherd. The religious leaders had no problem seeing the tax collectors and sinners that surrounded Jesus as lost sheep but never saw themselves in that image. We know that all have sinned and gone astray (Isaiah 53:6), but Pharisees saw themselves as righteous people who did not need a Savior. In reality, both require a shepherd and a savior.

6. Verse 4a. What do you think causes people to drift from the church? How do some get lost even though they never intended to do so?

Like sheep, many who get lost are people who get distracted. They take a job that keeps them from regularly going to church. They get involved in kid's soccer or boy scouts. They begin to work on a master's degree or buy a boat or RV so that other things take up weekends. Most that I know don't deliberately run away. They just got busy and one day had a crisis in which they needed Jesus and found that they were outside the church. They looked around and felt awkward coming back. They have an empty feeling in life and may even long for the joy and past friendships when they were regularly attending church. If they do come back, they may not stay long because churches change, and they find it hard to fit in.

7. Verse 4b. Why must the shepherd seek the lost sheep instead of just waiting for them to return?

The problem for sheep is that they usually can't find their way back when they are lost. Think of wandering off the trail in one of the National Parks in the United States southwest. You look up and wonder if the path and civilization are to the front, back, left, or right. You are smarter than sheep, and you still can get easily lost. At that moment, you are like a sheep away from the flock. The shepherd will

go looking because he was responsible for each sheep. If one was missing and not found, he often had to pay for it unless he could prove that a predator killed the sheep. You would leave the 99 in a sheep pen with either another shepherd or a dog to protect them and go and find the sheep knowing that it couldn't find its way by itself. God looks for the lost in the same manner. Realize that God's concept of seeking the lost was a new idea for the Jews of Jesus' day. God actively searched for the Lost.

8. Verse 4b. Why is it hard for people who drift from the church to find their way back?

Most churches expect that if they hold the door to their church wide-open, the lost will walk right in. It often doesn't happen that way. People often wracked fear rejection, while Satan will find many ways to distract them so that they don't make it back. It takes someone to make a call or visit them before they come back. Like the shepherd in the parable, you have to go after them and bring them back. As a pastor, I know how hard that is for clergy and laypeople. Satan keeps you busy so that you don't have a night free to call on them. You have to find a way so that they don't feel overwhelmed with guilt when you appear on their doorstep. You have to figure out ways to "carry them back" kicking and screaming, so they get back into the habit of going to church. It is hard, but often I have found that people wanted to come back because they missed what only the Lord could give.

9. Verse 5. How does the shepherd react when he finds his lost sheep? What does it say about the value of each sheep?

Lost sheep are valuable. When the shepherd finds the sheep, he rejoices. The shepherd even carried the sheep on his shoulders to ensure that it got back safely, and the flock would now be whole. In the parable, there is a fourfold joy at each person who returns to the Lord. God, the good shepherd, rejoices that what was lost has been found. The person who returns to the church often experiences the joy of having salvation once again. Those in the church who are the friends and neighbors rejoice that the lost sheep returns. Even the angels in heaven rejoice, for they understand even better than we do what salvation has brought to this lost sheep. All of that happens for one sinner who was lost because each person has a value. We often look for numbers gained and percentages of increase in the church. God looks to each person and sees the value that they have in His eyes.

10. How does your church react when someone who is lost returns? What are some ways that you could welcome the missing home?

My personal experience is that I am excited for a time, but the joy wears away as church activities and new members keep you from taking time for people who have recently joined. We celebrate them and honor them for a moment and then soon forget about them. I like what some churches do in that they assign someone to mentor and befriend them. They ask someone to sit with them in the church service to make them comfortable with the worship style. They pair them up with someone in a church ministry, so they don't feel like strangers and have a purpose. They make sure that they invite them to activities that are suited to their personality and needs. That takes time, but it has benefits. What are some ideas that you have for making new people feel welcome? If you have been a new person recently, talk about your struggles and how church people helped you through them.

11. Verse 7. Jesus ends the parable by speaking of the joy in heaven over repentant sinners. How do His words relate to the sinners and the Pharisees?

His audience consisted of sinners who were lost and knew it and Pharisees, who never felt lost. There would be great rejoicing in heaven if any of the outcasts before Jesus heard the message and became a child of God. Sadly, many of the Pharisees were looking for ways to attack Jesus because they didn't think that they needed him. They were the self-righteous people who kept all the rituals, festivals, and rules that often brought no joy in their lives. Some of the religious leaders did come to faith (Acts 6:7), but their piety often made that difficult. In our times, it is often ironic that those broken down by sin are more open

to the salvation of the gospel than those who think that they have their lives together and don't need a savior or anyone in the church to help them.

12. How do you think people feel when they return to church after a long absence?

Picture a child who got lost on a school trip and has now been found. The world is a scary place, and being back with your class instead of wandering at the zoo or in a museum is a comforting thing. Many lost Christians who return to the church will tell you the same thing. It is nice to be back. It is nice to have a Lord that you can pray to and friends who will help when life gets rough. It doesn't mean that you can't get distracted again. Life gets busy, and there are a lot of distractions. Yet, the better fed a sheep is, the less likely that they will drift from the flock. It might be helpful to picture yourself as a sheep who has been lost and now is found. What feelings do you have? What would you miss most if you couldn't go to church for three months or a year? That picture might help you take a step beyond your comfort zone so that you start thinking about those you haven't seen in a while and make an effort to reach out to them so that they can come back to the Lord as well.

13. What does this parable say about Jesus' feelings about the lost? What does it say about the mission of the church?

To understand the love that Jesus had for tax collectors, all you have to do is look at the stories of Matthew (Matthew 9:9-13) and Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). It was Jesus who reached out to both of these men. They felt the love of Jesus so much that Matthew invited all his "sinner" friends to a dinner with Jesus. Jesus loved sinners, and so must we. America is filled with former Christians who have gotten sidetracked with the busy culture. They permeate our neighborhoods, schools, and families. Some may not be open to the message of Jesus, but many feel empty as they hit crisis times in their lives. As we take time to listen to them, we may find that they will listen to us and let us talk about how Jesus has been such a blessing in our lives. The church still has a mission to reach the lost, for there are many around who are just waiting for someone to seek them out because they can't find their way home.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 Who is missing from your Sunday worship that you haven't seen in a while? Do you have any idea why they are missing?

Deep 2 What could you do for someone who returns to the church to make them feel more comfortable on Sundays and give them a purpose?

Deep 3 What would you miss most if you suddenly could not be with other Christians and worship the Lord? Why is that so important to you?

5. A rebellious brother returning to freedom - Prodigal son A

Luke 15:11-24

Big Idea: Real freedom is living in Christ

Remarkably, the younger son seeks freedom, and he gets it. He is tired of the old family rules and thinks that he knows better than his father. Give me my money and leave me alone. He is abandoning his father's values until the money runs out, and people abandon him. The most helpful moment in the story is "when he comes to his senses." The veil comes off his eyes, and he sees things as they are. Then he does something that shows maturity. He admits his sin and humbly goes home to be a servant in his father's house. He realizes that freedom was the life that he had with his father. He doesn't just say he was wrong; he is willing to follow that feeling up with action. Imagine the joy that the father has at hearing the humble confession of his son. The son has finally grown up and is ready to return with obedience and a desire to take responsibility for his life.

We have seen people chafe over God's rules in the way that the son is upset with his father's rules. They struggle because God is too strict or don't want anyone telling them what to do. Sadly, those who live in rebellion from God are in a nightmare that will always catch up to them. They destroy their lives little by little as they abandon God's values and mercy. Live stupid, and you pay the stupid tax for rebellion has its own rewards. Only when they hit bottom, do some realize what they have done. They recognize that they are not free since rebellion has imprisoned them to their urges and robbed them of the future. Some show maturity by coming back to the church and to the Lord. They want the mercy and freedom that only God can give. Some expect God to punish them and are surprised at the love and forgiveness of God. Our heavenly Father is waiting for them and will help them rebuild broken lives.

I can't help but think of the new beginning for the younger son. He wanted just to be a servant. The father restores him as a son. He is now free to develop into the man that his father always wanted him to be. Those who return to the Lord have a new beginning and a sure hope. The past is forgiven, the present will be lived in personal growth and God's potential for us, and the future is certain as God brings opportunities and promises eternal life. The fool thinks that God holds them back. Yet, real freedom comes as we live with God. He frees us from the control of the world and our sinful desires. He gives us the chance to become the person that we were meant to be. As we live in the Lord, we have more opportunities from God. We have character and values that will make us useful to ourselves and others. The good news of this parable is that it is never too late during life to come back to the Lord so you can have his restoration and freedom.

1. Who was the wild child in your family? How did they get along with the other kids?

I don't know that my family had a wild child, but we all did express our independence in one way or another. We all decided to go away for college, and only one of the four of us has spent his life within a half-hour of my parents. Like any group of siblings, we love each other and had things that got on each other's nerves. Let the group talk about who was the wild child in their families. If they are willing, let them share some stories from their families.

Read Luke 15:11-24

2. Verse 12 What is the son's request? What do you think motivated his desire?

According to Jewish law, an elder son received twice as much as other sons (Deut. 21:17). It was legal for a younger son to ask for his share, but it was not a loving thing. It was as if you wished your father dead. He may be tired of the old family rules and thinks that he knows better what is right for him. He may have just been enticed by the world and the enjoyment that it offered. He seems to have wanted a time of fun in

a faraway country where he squandered his wealth in wild living (verse 13). He shows a disregard for others in the family and is quick to abandon them.

3. Verse 12 What does rebellion look like in the church? Why do you think people leave God?

Sadly, we have all seen people chafe over God's rules like that. Raised in the church, they don't want to be in worship every Sunday or have to listen to what God says is right or wrong. The church is too strict as it preaches abstinence before marriage or the sin of swearing or drunkenness. God needs to loosen up in their thoughts. Sadly, they start trying to tell God what to do. They rewrite their faith and morals to suit their ideals. If God disagrees, they leave the church and try to live their life according to their values. Like the prodigal son, they think that they know what is best for them better than God. Others get disappointed in God because God didn't insulate them from all the troubles that people typically experience in life. They had a closer family member or friend die and blamed God. They lost a job or went through a tough patch of life. Faith becomes a relationship where God is to make life easier rather than our desire to trust and follow God in all things.

4. Verse 14 What happens to the younger son as he lives this new lifestyle?

Life in the far country was not what he expected. He began by living a wild life spending freely on whatever he chose. It had all been part of the plan, but it soon became a disaster. His money was quickly gone, and his friends left him because they loved his money more than they loved him. Famine came and made things worse. His life fell apart, and soon he abandoned the values that he had been taught to survive. The only job that he could find was contrary to his social position and his religion. I am sure that he thought that he would find himself and enjoy life away from his father and family. Instead, he lost himself and his dignity and began to feed pigs who were eating better than he was.

5. Verse 17 What does the younger son finally realize about the choices that he made? What does He resolve to do?

The most hopeful sentence in the story is "when he came to his senses." The veil has come off his eyes, and he sees things as they are. He realizes how urges and emotions have shackled his life. He realizes that freedom was in the life that he had with his father. It was like one who awoke from a nightmare. His sense of values was out of balance, and he had robbed himself of all dignity. He reflected on his life back home and realized that the servants had food to spare while he was sitting there starving with the pigs. While the motivation was hunger, pride could have trapped him so that he never thought about going back. Instead, we see full repentance in the words he plans to say to his father. He is not worthy and has sinned. His heart yearns to repent of his pride and is willing to accept the life of a servant.

6. Verse 17 What can be the result of abandoning God? What finally causes people to realize that they need God?

Often those who live in rebellion are in a nightmare that always seems to catch up with them. The rebellious do as they please and refuse to listen to the Lord. In the process, they destroy their lives little by little. Live stupid, and you will pay the stupid tax for rebellion has its own rewards. Oddly, only when someone hits bottom do they realize what they have done. They begin to see the damage that their selfishness has caused and wish that they could go back to living with God's values and direction. Sitting in the dust of their lives, they realize that they are not free at all. Rebellion has imprisoned them to their urges and emotions and robbed them of their future with the Lord. They long to reconnect with those they love and with the Lord. They pray that the Lord can get you out of the mess they have made with their lives.

7. Verse 20 How does the young son show maturity? How will his life change because of his actions?

His vision being clear, he now gets up and acts. He admits his sin and humbly starts the long trek back to seek a servant's place in his father's house. Repentance alone without action would not have been helpful. He follows up the repentance with action so that repentance doesn't just become regret or remorse. It took maturity to swallow his pride and go back home so that he might have hope and real freedom. He didn't know how he would be received. He might get home and find that his father was still angry and would reject him. I think that he thought back on the kind of man that his father was, and that gave him hope that things would turn out well. His desire was just to be a servant and to set things right with his father.

8. Why are the words of repentance useless without actions?

Without actions, you will never see the hope or have the freedom. It is the alcoholic who regrets that he needs the bottle but never seeks help. It is the man who is having an affair who feels guilty for what he does but never can get rid of the mistress and confess it all to the wife. It is the person filled with pride who swears the roof will fall if they ever set foot into a church. They continue to be enslaved by their sin and may even be mad that God didn't somehow make things work as they lived in sin. You have to get up and get help. It may be to help with an addiction, or it may just be asking a friend if they will sit with you while you try to go back to church. The key is always the Lord. You have a sense that the Lord loves you and that He will accept you and be merciful to you. In your heart, you know that God treats His people better than you are treating yourself, and you want to return to have His blessings.

9. Verse 21 What does the son say when he sees his father? What do you think the father felt when he heard the words of his son?

"Father, I have sinned. . . I am no longer worthy to be called your son," are the younger son's words. In a moment, he would have everything that had been missing as he lived in rebellion. He would have clothes, family, love, and acceptance. He never said, "give me." He asked the father to "make him." He didn't come back with demands. He just asked to live in obedience so that he could take responsibility for his life. Imagine the joy of the father at hearing that humble confession. His son has grown up and has learned from the hard knocks of life. It had to warm his heart that the rebellious son was now ready to live his life with character and humility. The rebel who left bent on destroying himself has returned and is humbly prepared to build a new life of service. The child has become an adult. Just think of what he can become in the future.

10. Verse 21 How do the words and actions of repentance change the future?

God always rejoices when his children return to him with humility and maturity (verse 9). The rebellious have come home and are open to the Lord's teaching as they humbly confess their sin. The school of hard knocks has taught them an important lesson. Freedom comes when you live in God's blessings and love, not when you try to live by your emotions and the world's values. A whole new world opens for those willing to follow the Lord and live with the abundance of His resources. The world has not chained you to its values that will destroy you. You can live God's grace and wisdom so that the Lord can work miracles in your life every day. You come humbly before God and expect from His promises that God will guide your days to have the future that He has planned for you.

11. Verse 24 What does the Father say, and how do his words show the essence of Christian freedom?

"This son of mine was dead and is alive again." The son who expects to have to beg for an audience from his father finds the father running to greet his son. One can only imagine how heavy his heart has been for these months or years. He loves his son and may not have felt whole without him. In his rebellion, the son who was dead and could have self-destructed himself is standing before him alive and asking for forgiveness. In Jewish society, a rebellious son was often stoned for bringing disgrace to his family and

village. As he wraps his arms around his son, the father's forgiveness shows his forgiveness and would shield the son from any retribution from others. The love and gifts show that the Father accepted his son back into the family. Here, with the Father, the son would find the freedom to do things that he never had in the world. The love of God is constant and welcoming. He alone can help us to be the person that we were meant to be.

12. What does the Bible teach us to expect when we humbly repent before God?

Those who leave the Lord need to think about all the promises that God has made in scripture. They need to think of God's character and our Lord Jesus in the Bible stories that they know. Like the son in the parable, it is God's character and actions that give us hope. We might expect wrath and punishment from God but will find that He gives love and forgiveness when we return. God is just waiting for people to come to their senses and return to Him. He knows the pain that their rebellion has caused them and is eager to bind their wounds and rebuild their lives. There will be consequences, often harrowing, of the disobedience, but He will wrap His arms around them and let them feel His love and promise to help them move forward on life's journey. If we have any doubts about God's grace, we only need to look at the cross where we see God's desire to give us salvation so we can be a child of God once again. In God's arms, we will find salvation and hope.

13. How is real freedom found in the Lord?

You have to believe that a new future awaits the younger son. The opportunities that he had lost were his once again. Now he would have the character and maturity to use them well instead of complaining about what he was missing. Those who return to the Lord have a new beginning and a sure hope. The past is forgiven by Jesus' blood so that they can be children of God whom God loves. The present will be better because we will live with God and have the opportunity to learn from God and receive His help and blessings each day of our lives. The future will be better because we have hope. God will guide the future now and has promised us a place in heaven after we die. The fool thinks that God holds them back and rebels against the Lord only to struggle to make life work. Real freedom comes as we live with our God. He frees us from the control of the world and our emotions, so we have a life filled with His love and His great plan.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 What do you think the father was doing while the son was away? What do you think God is doing when sinners live in rebellion?

Deep 2 What do you expect from God when you repent of your sins? Why do you think that God reacts like the father in the text?

Deep 3 How does living in the Lord give you freedom? How would you be in bondage without Him?

6. The (self) righteous brother – Prodigal son B

Luke 15:25-32

Big Idea: The self-righteous rob themselves of the joy of God's righteousness.

Everyone wants to be recognized and feel like they are valued. The older brother worked in the fields for the months or years while the younger brother played around. The party shows that the father values the younger brother, but did anyone notice the older brother's hard work or celebrate what he had done. He resents the love that the father shows on the younger brother and forgets what he has had for years that the younger brother missed. He has had a home with food and clothes to share. He is now the heir to everything that he sees around him. Sadly, his self-righteousness has created a chasm between the father and him. He feels excluded, and his anger will rob him of the joy and celebration that his father and brother share with family and friends. His pride robs him of all the good things he has.

It is easy to feel underappreciated at work or in the church. You are the steady one who always takes on the demanding projects at work and gets them done. You have taught Sunday school for a decade, and no one seems to notice. There is a celebration for the new members. Why don't they celebrate my years of service? There are days that even God doesn't seem to appreciate me. The church is lucky to have me. Like the older son, we forget all the joys that we have had because we have been part of the church. God has listened to your prayers and surrounded you with people who do care about you. His love has impacted your children and helped you through tough times at work and in your marriage. Your self-righteousness has made you drift away from the church and robbed you of others' joy. When you stand apart, you hurt yourself more than you hurt others.

The cure for pride begins with the Father's love. In the text, the Father came to the older son and pleaded with him to join in the festivities. It is evident that the Father loves his son and values him. In many ways, the older brother was as lost as the younger son. His heart is far away from home, and he has built up walls that separate him from the Father and others. He is like the Pharisees that Jesus is speaking to who also are far away from the Heavenly Father. When we feel unappreciated, we must return to God's love for us. One look at the cross tells us how much God values us. The church values its workers, and so does the Lord. I wish we did a better job of letting them know it. Until then, we need to see how our service to the Lord and others builds us. If we are not feeling the joy in one area of service, look for another where you can recapture the satisfaction you have been missing. Know that you are valuable to God.

1. How do you react when others mistreat you?

My response is to mope and stay away from the celebration of others when others forget me. In that way, I am like the older brother who stays away from the party that he thinks is unfair. I know others get angry when people forget them or see sinners destroying their lives, and everyone seems to believe that it is OK. Most of us will have times when we feel slighted by our bosses, family, and friends. Have an open discussion about such things, if possible. Jesus is dealing with the Pharisees in verse 2, who mutter about Jesus' welcoming of sinners. We often struggle with converts as they did. Loving them can be messy and uneasy.

Read Luke 15:25-32

2. Verse 28 What is the older brother's response to the celebration of his brother's return?

The older brother stands outside and refuses to come and celebrate his brother's return. Later he will not call the younger man his brother. He speaks to the father about "this son of yours" (v.30). In some ways, he is just as lost as the younger brother. His heart is in a far country removed from the Father's love and

character. While the father feels love for his younger son, the older brother would probably have been happier if the younger man never made it home. One wonders how he will manage now that the younger son has returned. Will he feel comfortable sharing his estate with someone who had wasted his inheritance? The younger brother is a threat to the faithful son.

3. Verse 29a What is the brother's complaint to the father? How does he express his importance compared to the younger son?

The older brother feels slighted and threatened. He had served all these months or years faithfully and not received any rewards. In his complaint, he speaks of his hard work and obedience. Undoubtedly, the farm wouldn't have functioned well all these years without him. Unlike the younger son, he has never brought disgrace to the family or his father. One feels the bitterness that the older son has harbored. He has served as it was his duty, but he never does so out of love. The father acts out of love for the younger son, but the older brother has only disdain as he considers himself a saint compared to his wayward brother.

4. Verse 29a What blessings have you enjoyed as a Christian for years that the new convert missed in life?

Self-righteousness leads us to think that God is lucky to have us. Who else would have taught Sunday school for these past fifteen years or been treasurer for the past decade? We believe that the church would have fallen apart if it were not for us. We forget what the Lord has given to us that the new convert has not experienced. God gave us values and character that have impacted our families and our life. We have felt God's comfort and help in answer to our prayers. We have had Christian friends who would have done anything for us. The new convert missed all those things in the years up till now. Yes, they now have salvation, but they have spent years outside God's love and blessings. Like the older brother, we often forget all the benefits we have had from our heavenly father while the younger sons around us have been struggling in the world by themselves.

5. Verse 29b How does the older brother express his hurt at this celebration? What is the real issue for him?

The older son had been out in the field working day after day while his younger brother was spending his inheritance having a good time. He had served well and resented that his service had never been acknowledged or rewarded. His heart was not in it; however, work was only a chore so he could inherit the farm someday and do as he wished. While the father shows that he values the son by coming to encourage him to join them when he hears that the son is angry, the son does not seem to feel valued. Where is the celebration of all his years of service to the farm and family? His ego is crushed, for he believes that the celebration should be his and not his brother's. Like the Pharisees that Jesus was speaking to, the older brother felt, the younger brother should be glad to be a servant for the father and not equal in the Father's love.

6. Verse 29b In what ways do people often feel underappreciated in church? What can the church do to minister to their needs?

Church work can be challenging as we labor when things don't go as well as we want and when we face Satan's attacks for what we do. Others don't seem to appreciate what we do, and we may feel ready to quit when the going gets tough or when we see other things that are more fun to do with our time. We labor like the older brother and wish that we could just be the younger brother and have some fun. The situation makes us feel worse when new members join the church, and we celebrate them with a fellowship meal and give them gifts from the church. We complain in our heart that the church wouldn't even supply glue for my Sunday school class or helpers when we took on cleaning the bathrooms. Maybe, we need to have a yearly celebration for those who work in the church. It might even be nice to celebrate anniversaries of people who have served ten years at a task or two terms on the council.

7. Verse 30 How does the brother show contempt for his father's actions? What do you suppose he wants the father to do instead?

In his anger, he shows contempt for the father as well as the brother. One might suppose that he wished that the father had refused to accept the younger son as anything but a servant. Since the father has treated the younger brother with mercy, he is angry with the father. Can't the father see how worthless the brother is? Can't the father see how taking the brother back endangers the farm and the future? Since the father refuses to act rationally, the situation creates a chasm between the father and the older son. In his self-righteousness, the older son will think that the father is a fool. The older son may have been dutiful, but he has missed the act of love. He will not forgive his brother or forgive a father who foolishly excused a wayward son.

8. Verse 30 How can self-righteousness divide us from God and other Christians?

God wants us to love and forgive others just as He has forgiven them and us. That is hard with new Christians. They are often messy with a series of destructive and sinful habits that they have not yet overcome and unreliability that causes us to fear what they will do in the future. Some in the church will act with hearts of mercy, and the older brothers among us will feel contempt with others who disagree with them. Those who show mercy are suddenly the enemy. Discussions in the parking lot and the back halls start dividing those who would love the lost with those who don't trust them or feel that such new Christians should be on probation before accepting them. Sadly friendships can be broken as people fall into camps over the receiving of the lost.

9. Verse 31 What is the father's response to the older son? How does the Father attempt to minister to his son's needs?

The same father who ran to meet the prodigal son now comes out of the celebration to plead with the other son. He is loving and gracious with the older son. It is apparent that he values the older son and sees him as just as crucial to him as the younger son. Since the older son is struggling with value, he expresses how he treasures the older son's loyalty and work. Since the older son may be wondering how this affects the inheritance, the father acknowledges that everything belongs to this son and that the younger son will not receive a second inheritance. It would seem that the father also wanted the older son to see the blessings that he had received because he had not squandered what he had. The father shared affection at a time when he could have responded in anger to the anger and disrespect that the older son was showing to him.

10. What is the cure for self-righteousness and a lack of personal worth?

The cure is to look at God's love and the blessings we have in him instead of comparing ourselves to others. If the older son had looked at the great love that the father was showing him, he would have realized how lucky he was. Instead, he expected the father to treat his brother like dirt so that he would feel good. We need to see that our loving Father will never act that way and celebrate it. It means that when we fail, and we all fail, God will forgive and still love us. It is God's love alone that can break a selfish heart and cause us to appreciate what we have in Him. We have value because God has given us a value that is so great that even our failings cannot take his love or our worth to Him away.

11. Verse 32 How do the older son's actions rob him of joy and his father's respect?

The elder brother seems to have refused to go in but stayed outside and pouted. His anger has robbed him of the joy and celebration with family and friends. He missed the joy of forgiving his brother and restoring the broken relationship. He also has dug a chasm between himself and his father. His challenge is what to do next. As the father and many servants continue to rejoice in their hearts that the younger son is not dead, what does he do? Will his pride break, and he again becomes part of the family, or will he

eventually get so angry that he does something stupid like leave himself? If he wants to remain part of the family, he will need to forgive and rebuild his father and brother's fellowship.

12. How does self-righteousness from a few affect others and themselves?

The older brothers stand in the parking lot and grumble. They stand up at church meetings and try to shout out or out vote others to get their way. They are often special people who have served the church and others for a long time. Yet, their pride can get the best of them, and if they are not careful, they can get so angry on an issue that they say things that are hard to take back. They can divide a church and either force others out of the church or leave the church themselves. What is sad is that some of these children of God have caused divisions more than once. Like the father, we will try to speak to them. Sometimes, we calm them down. Other times, they get mad at us as the older son does of the father when he refuses to give in to their way. Let us pray that the Holy Spirit will soften their hearts and help them to be touched with God's love before Satan can harden them in his ways.

13. How is the older son as lost as the younger son? What is the solution for those who struggle with sinners who have returned to the church?

The self-righteous among us need to repent as much as the wayward sons do. In His ministry, Jesus was always dealing with Pharisees and Sadducees, who struggled with His mercy for sinners. We may struggle with the new convert or the person just outside the church and feel superior. We need to remember that we are sinners, too, who need God's forgiveness and mercy at times in our lives. We need to see that messy sinners like you and I fill the church. The new convert or the member who seems to still struggle with sin is the person that we need to reach for Jesus. Our goal is to help them become more like Jesus. That will be work, and it may be hard for us, but it is the way of joy. It is worth noting that everyone in this chapter experienced joy except for the older brother. Because of his pride, he misses out on happiness. May the Lord help us find the joy of forgiveness instead of suffering because we nurse our anger and pride.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 What does this parable teach you about the Lord's love for others? Why is God so kind?

Deep 2 How do you guard yourself against feeling resentment when others receive mercy and celebration that you don't think they deserved?

Deep 3 What could you do to celebrate those who serve the Lord well and never get any credit?

1. Helping people makes me happy

Luke 10:25-37

Big Idea: A fulfilled life begins with loving God and loving others

The expert in the law asked a question that plagues a lot of people. He has studied all the Jewish law but is uncertain of his salvation. He believes that he keeps all of the Jewish law, but something is missing. Jesus sends the scholar back to the Bible, where the answer was apparent all along. If you want a fulfilled and happy life, love the Lord and love your neighbor as yourself. The answer, however, makes the man squirm and so he tries to limit who is my neighbor, but Jesus in the parable will not let him put on such a limit. Loving the neighbor requires time just as the Samaritan interrupted his journey. It means spending your resources as the Samaritan gave his own money and pledged more for the man's care. Finally, it requires effort as the Samaritan treated the man's wounds and transported him to an inn. Loving our neighbor is costly, but scripture shows how important it is.

Having received salvation from the Lord, we need to understand why salvation is ours. We need to have the purpose of filling the hole that is there in everyone's life. The first purpose is to be close to the Lord so that you can feel His affection and respond with love to the Lord. God becomes the bedrock in your life who makes you feel safe and loved. You can depend on Him in the toughest of times. The second purpose is loving others because that is one of the best ways to serve the Lord. If I have a friend and help his children, he will view that as helping him because he loves his children as much as his own life. Loving the other children of God is a way to love God because He cares about His other children. It may not always be simple and may be inconvenient at times, but it is the purpose of every Christian to care for others. It is also our blessing since those who help often give support to us when we need assistance.

Such love and care for our neighbor are possible because we know that God will continue to care for us. The Samaritan lived under God's protection as he cared for the man on a dangerous highway. He gave of the money and time that the Lord had given to him to help another in need. We trust the Lord and give more than a kind word in passing or a promise to pray for those in need. God has given us the task of sharing His love with others as He has shared that love with us. Service can be our greatest joy as we can change lives and participate with the Lord in helping others. We need to see our service as something we do for the Lord, giving Him the chance to lift someone so that they can succeed. The Christian faith is not to make life easy. Its purpose is to bring salvation and meaning to our life.

1. When has someone gone out of their way to help you?

Read Luke 10:25-37

2. Verse 25, 27. What question does the man ask of Jesus? What answer does he already know from scripture?

3. Verse 27. While we know that salvation comes from the cross, what causes people to feel empty and doubt their salvation?

- 4. Verse 29. What question does the lawyer ask when Jesus' response makes the lawyer feel uncomfortable? How does he try to justify his actions in light of his answer from the Bible?**

- 5. Verse 29. Who do you feel uncomfortable serving, and why do less than perfect people make you feel uncomfortable?**

- 6. Verse 31. What are the responses of the priest and the Levite to the man who has been robbed? Why do you think they acted the way that they did?**

- 7. Verse 31. What is the cost of not helping someone that crosses your life?**

- 8. Verse 33f. What three investments did the Samaritan make in the life of the robbery victim?**

- 9. How do you find the people that the Lord wants you to help? How does the Lord help you find such people?**

- 10. Verse 34. What can we learn from the practical things did the Samaritan focuses on for the robbed man?**

- 11. What if someone needs some form of help that we can't give to those in need? What can we do for them in those situations?**

- 12. Verse 36. What does this story teach us about being a neighbor?**

- 13. Who is God calling you to be a neighbor in your life? Why might that be a blessing to you as well as them?**

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 If you could ask Jesus a question today, what would your question to the teacher be?

Deep 2 What does it feel like when someone shows mercy on you? How is that a motivation to show compassion for others?

Deep 3 If a Good Samaritan came to your town, what problems would he address? What needs do you see that you can help others within your community?

2. An eye to eternity

Luke 12:13-21

Big idea: A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions

It was all about the money. The young man's father had died, and the brothers were arguing about who got what share of the inheritance. The man asked Jesus to make his brother give him his rightful share. Jesus refused to do so since, as long as the brothers were greedy, there would be no satisfactory settlement. He took advantage of the request to teach a parable about greed. A rich man suddenly gains abundant wealth and begins plans for a lifetime of ease. Suddenly, the man dies, and Jesus calls the rich man a fool since he ignored his relationship with the Lord. The parable speaks to the problem of greed and encourages us to think about how we can get the most advantage from the blessings that the Lord gives us. How do we use our abundance for the Lord and others?

Money still makes people do funny things. I have experienced adult children fight over the inheritance of their parents, leaving lawyers wealthy from the fight and a family shattered. I have watched a person win the lottery and lose all their friends who think that their "rich buddy" should spend his winnings on them. In our society, money is often king bestowing prestige and ease on those who have it and jealousy on those who do not. Such thoughts forget the Lord, who is the one who blesses us with every good gift that we have. They also put personal ease, which can be taken away in a moment over making a difference in the world. Our challenge is to get the most benefit out of the blessings that the Lord gives us. We want to take the money we have and have something that even death can't take away.

The parable wants us to look at the eternal benefits that our possessions can make. Greed looks at temporary things and causes people to miss what is important. The rich man in the text has such an abundance that he has no place to put it. He could have used it to help others. One of the few things that we can take into heaven is a Christian relationship. Those we befriend with our time and possessions in this life can spend eternity with us in heaven. It might be a fellow Christian you help provide for in a tough time or someone who uses your possessions and comes to know the gospel. This action surely pleases our heavenly father, who considers the help that we do for others as a gift that we do for Him. Serving others and having a relationship with the Lord opens up our lives and gives it purpose. Our life becomes more than the sum of our possessions. Our life builds treasures in heaven and friendships here on earth.

1. What did you argue about with your siblings as you grew up? Who usually won the arguments?

Read Luke 12:13-21

2. Verse 13. What was the man's concern and what did he want Jesus to do for him?

3. Verse 15. What is the deeper issue with the man's request?

4. Verse 15. What signs of greed show up in a person's life, and how do they affect them?

5. Verse 17. What problem is the rich man facing? What is his answer to the challenge, and what does that say about him?
6. Verse 17. What challenges would you face if you were to receive a large inheritance?
7. Verse 19. What does the rich man think that God wants him to do with his wealth?
8. Verse 19. What alternatives can you think of just to take it easy to do with your money that would be more pleasing to God and helpful to others?
9. Verse 20. What is the flaw in the rich man's plan? How had he forgotten God?
10. Why is it tough for us to accept that life is temporary and beyond our control? How does such a belief change how you manage your possessions?
11. Verse 21. How does Jesus summarize the parable, and what do you think His words mean?
12. What does it mean to be rich to God?
13. What is one step you could take to be rich toward God, and how might it be a blessing to you?

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 When have you been like the rich man in this story? Have possessions brought you lasting happiness?

Deep 2 Have you ever had a time when you funded and worked on a project that brought you a lot of joy? Why was the project so much fun?

Deep 3 If you knew that the Lord was going to provide for all your needs, what project would you like to take on today for others?

3. Humility gives value.

Luke 14:7-15

Big idea: What makes us as important to others is not a success, but value.

In Jesus' day, a dinner party was arranged at U shaped tables with the host sitting at the top of the U. The further that you were from the host, the lower your status at the banquet. Jesus noticed guests grabbing seats close to the center to seem more important and receive other dinner invitations. He uses this as an opportunity to teach the disciples and the host about humility. To the disciples, he warns about taking the better seats lest you find yourself asked to give up your seat for someone more important. Take the lower seat so that the host will sing your praises and have you move up to a better place. Let others sing your praises. If you have value, let others share your worth. To the host, Jesus tells him to invite others who can't return the favor. Don't just do good things to those who can repay the favor because many will not repay the kindness. Show your generosity by humbly inviting others simply because God has been good to you.

Many people in our world want to be part of the most prominent church, drive the most expensive car, or have the most elegant clothes. We want the world to take notice of us and think that we are unique. Those who brag about themselves are missing something. What makes us special to others is not our home, clothes, or a fancy car. We are unusual because we have value. We are the people who don't need to brag about ourselves. Others have felt our kindness or seen our talents, and they give us honor like the host does when he asks the man to take a better seat. Self-promotion is dangerous because someone might put us in our place and cause us embarrassment. The humble are comfortable in who they are and usually are slow to compare themselves to others. If someone does compliment them, they take it as an honor because they have made a difference in someone else's life. They are people of value because they are more concerned with helping others than promoting themselves.

Life is about serving others and creating value. Humble people are not doormats to others. They are people who quietly serve and care for others. Others remember their service and sometimes recognize it. If it isn't acknowledged, it doesn't matter to them because the joy was helping others around them just as the Lord continues to help them. These are people who care more about what the Lord thinks of them than whether they are getting praise from their peers. They feel good about themselves for the things that they do for others and the love of Jesus that they show in their lives. When others do lift them for their works, they accept the praise and look for other ways to help them. Honor is fleeting, but the person who continues to help others will be valuable to their friends and family.

1. What formal dinner party have you been to that stands out to you? Did you have a good seat or a bad one?

Read Luke 14:7-15

2. Verse 1. What is the setting for the parable?

3. Verse 8-9. Why is it not wise to take the best seat in the house? What is the danger in doing so?

- 4. Verse 8. How vital are position and self-promotion in our society? Why is our place in life so important?**
- 5. Verse 10. What benefits can come with humble choices, according to Jesus?**
- 6. Verse 10. What qualities and attitudes do you think that it takes to be a humble person?**
- 7. Verse 11. What does Jesus say is the value of humility?**
- 8. How does service create value and real honor while self-promotion does not do so?**
- 9. Verse 12. What advice does Jesus give the host?**
- 10. Verse 12. Why is it a blessing to do something for those who can't repay you?**
- 11. Verse 14. In what way will the host and others who are kind to the less fortunate to be repaid?**
- 12. Helping others, instead of seeking honor makes no sense to our culture. What benefits could you have by making humble choices?**
- 13. What does this parable teach us about value instead of honor?**

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 How do status and self-promotion get in the way of loving and caring for others?

Deep 2 How would you benefit by being humble and helping others that you know without a thought of being repaid?

Deep 3 How valuable do you feel to yourself and God? What act of kindness could you do this week to make you feel happier and give you self-worth?

4. The parable of the Lost Sheep

Luke 15:1-7

Big Idea: The lost sheep want to come back

The tax collectors and other sinners surrounded Jesus. They may not have been ready to believe and follow Jesus, but many wanted to hear more. Surrounding them was a group of Pharisees who were amazed that Jesus would associate with such people. They were lost and even hopeless. Encouraging them to be part of the kingdom was wrong because they would pollute God's holy kingdom. The parable shows how much God wants the lost. This passage is a new concept for the Jew. Here, we see God seeking the lost and not just forgiving those who came to Him. We also see how much God and all of heaven rejoices when a single sinner comes to faith. God cares, and so should we.

God still calls us to reach out to the lost. They will be messy. They will have broken relationships and bad habits that make them hard to be around. Often, they are people who don't have a strong moral compass because Jesus is either new to them or part of their distant past. Many of them didn't mean to get away from the church—they just drifted away with busy jobs and busy lives. The crisis came, and they suddenly realized that they didn't have the support of God and friends that they once did. Like the sheep in the text, they need someone to come after them because they don't know their way. That needs to be us. Like the shepherd, we need to seek them and find ways to not be awkward on their doorstep or over the phone. The payoff is that there will be a great joy for them and you if you can bring them back.

The world is a scary place. Being a lost sheep is like being the kid lost on a school field trip. When people come and look for you, it feels good to be back with the fold. God and the angels rejoice over the lost being found because they know the cost of being lost. The church and the lost sheep rejoice, too, as new friendships are made, and God can help both of you through each other. The Pharisees didn't want to be shepherds, for it is hard to reach out to the lost. Sometimes you get doors slammed in your face, and you ache for those who used to come to church but somehow wandered off. The payoff is the rejoicing. It just feels good to see someone who was lost come back to church. It feels good for them, and it feels good to have made a new friend and know that God is pleased because you reached out and began searching for someone you missed. The lost sheep isn't lost anymore.

1. How did you feel the last time you lost your car keys? What did you do to find them, and why are they so important?

Read Luke 15: 1-7

2. Verse 1. Who gathered around Jesus to hear His teaching? What do you think drew them to Him?

3. Verse 2. Why did the Pharisees grumble about Jesus? Why were they displeased with what Jesus was doing?

4. Verse 2. How does the church view outsiders with less than perfect lives?

- 5. Verse 4a. What problem exists for the shepherd in the parable? Do sheep deliberately get lost?**
- 6. Verse 4a. What do you think causes people to drift from the church? How do some get lost even though they never intended to do so?**
- 7. Verse 4b. Why must the shepherd seek the lost sheep instead of just waiting for them to return?**
- 8. Verse 4b. Why is it hard for people who drift from the church to find their way back?**
- 9. Verse 5. How does the shepherd react when he finds his lost sheep? What does it say about the value of each sheep?**
- 10. How does your church react when someone who is lost returns? What are some ways that you could welcome the missing home?**
- 11. Verse 7. Jesus ends the parable by speaking of the joy in heaven over repentant sinners. How do His words relate to the sinners and the Pharisees?**
- 12. How do you think people feel when they return to church after a long absence?**
- 13. What does this parable say about Jesus' feelings about the lost? What does it say about the mission of the church?**

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 Who is missing from your Sunday worship that you haven't seen in a while? Do you have any idea why they are missing?

Deep 2 What could you do for someone who returns to the church to make them feel more comfortable on Sundays and give them a purpose?

Deep 3 What would you miss most if you suddenly could not be with other Christians and worship the Lord? Why is that so important to you?

5. A rebellious brother returning to freedom - Prodigal son A

Luke 15:11-24

Big Idea: Real freedom is living in Christ

Remarkably, the younger son seeks freedom, and he gets it. He is tired of the old family rules and thinks that he knows better than his father. Give me my money and leave me alone. He is abandoning his father's values until the money runs out, and people abandon him. The most helpful moment in the story is "when he comes to his senses." The veil comes off his eyes, and he sees things as they are. Then he does something that shows maturity. He admits his sin and humbly goes home to be a servant in his father's house. He realizes that freedom was the life that he had with his father. He doesn't just say he was wrong; he is willing to follow that feeling up with action. Imagine the joy that the father has at hearing the humble confession of his son. The son has finally grown up and is ready to return with obedience and a desire to take responsibility for his life.

We have seen people chafe over God's rules in the way that the son is upset with his father's rules. They struggle because God is too strict or don't want anyone telling them what to do. Sadly, those who live in rebellion from God are in a nightmare that will always catch up to them. They destroy their lives little by little as they abandon God's values and mercy. Live stupid, and you pay the stupid tax for rebellion has its own rewards. Only when they hit bottom, do some realize what they have done. They recognize that they are not free since rebellion has imprisoned them to their urges and robbed them of the future. Some show maturity by coming back to the church and to the Lord. They want the mercy and freedom that only God can give. Some expect God to punish them and are surprised at the love and forgiveness of God. Our heavenly Father is waiting for them and will help them rebuild broken lives.

I can't help but think of the new beginning for the younger son. He wanted just to be a servant. The father restores him as a son. He is now free to develop into the man that his father always wanted him to be. Those who return to the Lord have a new beginning and a sure hope. The past is forgiven, the present will be lived in personal growth and God's potential for us, and the future is certain as God brings opportunities and promises eternal life. The fool thinks that God holds them back. Yet, real freedom comes as we live with God. He frees us from the control of the world and our sinful desires. He gives us the chance to become the person that we were meant to be. As we live in the Lord, we have more opportunities from God. We have character and values that will make us useful to ourselves and others. The good news of this parable is that it is never too late during life to come back to the Lord so you can have his restoration and freedom.

1. Who was the wild child in your family? How did they get along with the other kids?

Read Luke 15:11-24

2. Verse 12 What is the son's request? What do you think motivated his desire?

3. Verse 12 What does rebellion look like in the church? Why do you think people leave God?

4. Verse 14 What happens to the younger son as he lives this new lifestyle?

- 5. Verse 17 What does the younger son finally realize about the choices that he made? What does He resolve to do?**

- 6. Verse 17 What can be the result of abandoning God? What finally causes people to realize that they need God?**

- 7. Verse 20 How does the young son show maturity? How will his life change because of his actions?**

- 8. Why are the words of repentance useless without actions?**

- 9. Verse 21 What does the son say when he sees his father? What do you think the father felt when he heard the words of his son?**

- 10. Verse 21 How do the words and actions of repentance change the future?**

- 11. Verse 24 What does the Father say, and how do his words show the essence of Christian freedom?**

- 12. What does the Bible teach us to expect when we humbly repent before God?**

- 13. How is real freedom found in the Lord?**

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 What do you think the father was doing while the son was away? What do you think God is doing when sinners live in rebellion?

Deep 2 What do you expect from God when you repent of your sins? Why do you think that God reacts like the father in the text?

Deep 3 How does living in the Lord give you freedom? How would you be in bondage without Him?

6. The (self) righteous brother – Prodigal son B

Luke 15:25-32

Big Idea: The self-righteous rob themselves of the joy of God's righteousness.

Everyone wants to be recognized and feel like they are valued. The older brother worked in the fields for the months or years while the younger brother played around. The party shows that the father values the younger brother, but did anyone notice the older brother's hard work or celebrate what he had done. He resents the love that the father shows on the younger brother and forgets what he has had for years that the younger brother missed. He has had a home with food and clothes to share. He is now the heir to everything that he sees around him. Sadly, his self-righteousness has created a chasm between the father and him. He feels excluded, and his anger will rob him of the joy and celebration that his father and brother share with family and friends. His pride robs him of all the good things he has.

It is easy to feel underappreciated at work or in the church. You are the steady one who always takes on the demanding projects at work and gets them done. You have taught Sunday school for a decade, and no one seems to notice. There is a celebration for the new members. Why don't they celebrate my years of service? There are days that even God doesn't seem to appreciate me. The church is lucky to have me. Like the older son, we forget all the joys that we have had because we have been part of the church. God has listened to your prayers and surrounded you with people who do care about you. His love has impacted your children and helped you through tough times at work and in your marriage. Your self-righteousness has made you drift away from the church and robbed you of others' joy. When you stand apart, you hurt yourself more than you hurt others.

The cure for pride begins with the Father's love. In the text, the Father came to the older son and pleaded with him to join in the festivities. It is evident that the Father loves his son and values him. In many ways, the older brother was as lost as the younger son. His heart is far away from home, and he has built up walls that separate him from the Father and others. He is like the Pharisees that Jesus is speaking to who also are far away from the Heavenly Father. When we feel unappreciated, we must return to God's love for us. One look at the cross tells us how much God values us. The church values its workers, and so does the Lord. I wish we did a better job of letting them know it. Until then, we need to see how our service to the Lord and others builds us. If we are not feeling the joy in one area of service, look for another where you can recapture the satisfaction you have been missing. Know that you are valuable to God.

1. How do you react when others mistreat you?

Read Luke 15:25-32

2. Verse 28 What is the older brother's response to the celebration of his brother's return?

3. Verse 29a What is the brother's complaint to the father? How does he express his importance compared to the younger son?

4. Verse 29a What blessings have you enjoyed as a Christian for years that the new convert missed in life?

5. Verse 29b How does the older brother express his hurt at this celebration? What is the real issue for him?

6. Verse 29b In what ways do people often feel underappreciated in church? What can the church do to minister to their needs?

7. Verse 30 How does the brother show contempt for his father's actions? What do you suppose he wants the father to do instead?

8. Verse 30 How can self-righteousness divide us from God and other Christians?

9. Verse 31 What is the father's response to the older son? How does the Father attempt to minister to his son's needs?

10. What is the cure for self-righteousness and a lack of personal worth?

11. Verse 32 How do the older son's actions rob him of joy and his father's respect?

12. How does self-righteousness from a few affect others and themselves?

13. How is the older son as lost as the younger son? What is the solution for those who struggle with sinners who have returned to the church?

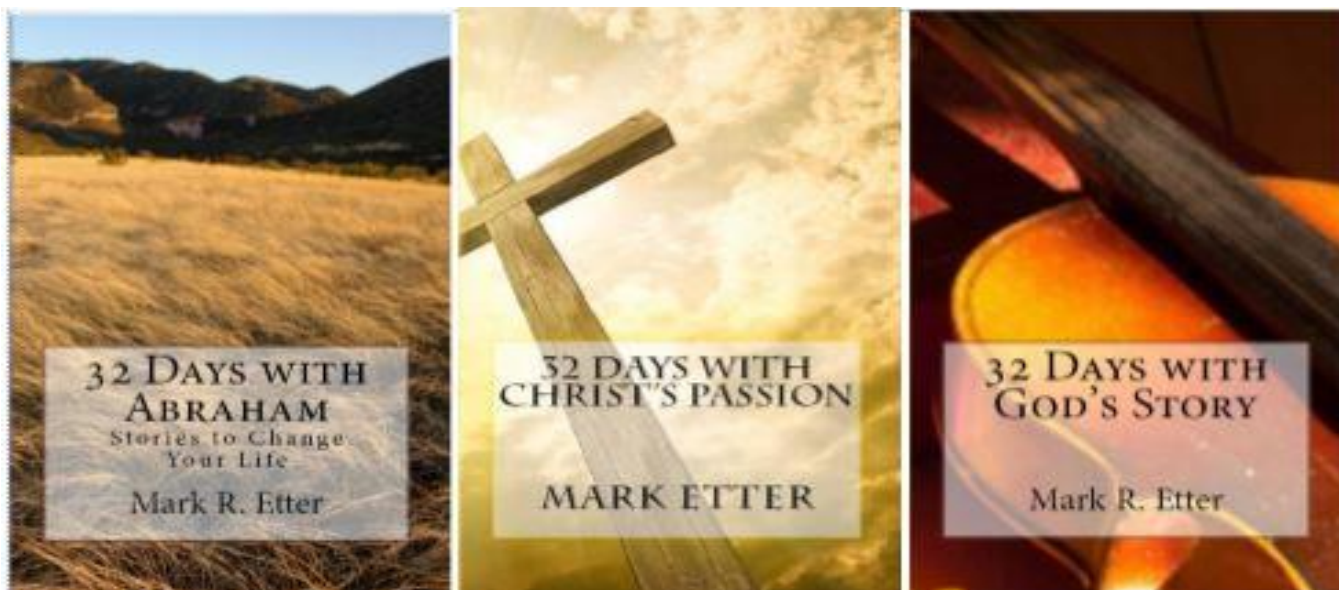
For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 What does this parable teach you about the Lord's love for others? Why is God so kind?

Deep 2 How do you guard yourself against feeling resentment when others receive mercy and celebration that you don't think they deserved?

Deep 3 What could you do to celebrate those who serve the Lord well and never get any credit?

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About the author

Rev. Mark Etter has been a pastor for over thirty-five years and is currently the pastor of Bethany Lutheran Church in Erlanger, KY. Rev. Etter has published several books of Adult Bible studies and numerous devotions and youth studies with Concordia Publishing House in St. Louis. He has been active in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod as an LWML counselor, evangelism chairman, coach for pastors, and circuit counselor. He and his wife, Joan, have three grown children and two grandchildren.

Did you know?

Here are seven questions that are answered in this study. The page and question number in this study are given after each question.

1. How do you find the people that the Lord wants you to help? How does the Lord help you find such people? (Page 9, Question 6)
2. What does the rich man think that God wants him to do with his wealth? (Page 10, Question 7)
3. What benefits can come with humble choices, according to Jesus? (Page 12, Question 5)
4. How does service create value and real honor while self-promotion does not do so? (Page 14, Question 8)
5. What do you think causes people to drift from the church? How do some get lost even though they never intended to do so? (Page 17, Question 6)
6. What can be the result of abandoning God? What finally causes people to realize that they need God? (Page 21, Question 6)
7. In what ways do people often feel underappreciated in church? What can the church do to minister to their needs? (Page 25, Question 6)

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