

Looking at Luke 14 - 15

These studies are based on the readings from the Gospel according to Luke chosen for the revised Common Lectionary for Year C, from chapter 15, but they can be used at any time of the year.

1. Luke 14:15-23 – The Parable of the Great Feast
2. Luke 15:1-10 – The Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin
3. Luke 15:11-32 – The Parable of the Prodigal Son

You can do all three studies or pick only those which interest you.

Each study asks you to read a passage from Luke, offers you a commentary which brings today's thinking into dialogue with the text, and some open-ended questions for you to use as springboards for your own discussion and action. The questions are deliberately very open, so you can have space to bring your own experience and questions to the text and take it where you need to go, which may differ from group to group.

If you are coming together as a group, make sure

- everyone can see everyone else
- everyone is included and is encouraged to participate as they would like
- there is room for people to agree, differ, be clear or confused, and be accepted
- people are encouraged to value each other's input, to listen without using that time to work out what you are going to say and without interrupting, and when discussing a question to keep the focus on the question

You will need at least one Bible translation. NRSV is probably best, but others might include NIV or some other new translation.

The sessions are designed to last around 60 minutes and encourage you to explore not only what the texts meant on the basis of the latest historical research but also what they might mean for living today.

Making these studies work for you and your group.

Adapt them to suit your group and its preferences. For instance, you can read the gospel passage and the commentary and then look at the questions *or* you could first read the passage and note anything which popped out for you and then read the commentary, section by section, stopping to talk about anything that arises, *before* going right through to the end and looking at the questions *or* you could start with a general question on the topic *before* doing one of the above *or* you may want to circulate the studies in advance, so that people have already read the passage and commentary *before* they come. Then go through it when you come together in one of the ways mentioned above.

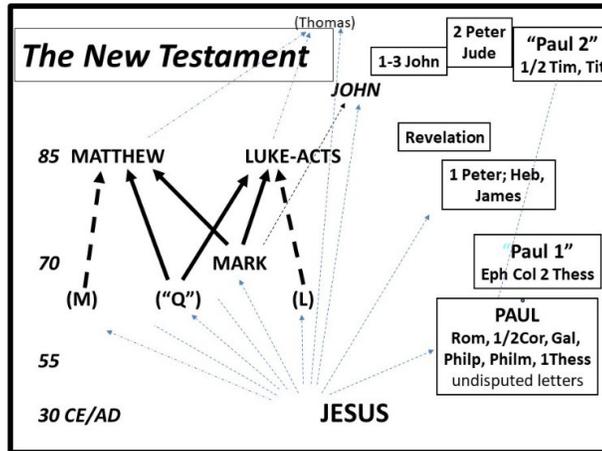
... whatever makes the studies work best for you!

Before we start:

Meet Luke!

Like the other gospels, Luke contains no information about the author. When we move beyond what it actually says to ask when it was written and who wrote it, we are on shaky ground. Luke was a fairly common name. This Luke may be the one referred to as a doctor in Col 4:14 and mentioned elsewhere (Philemon 24; 2 Tim 4:11). Luke also wrote Acts and appears to have been associated with Paul at some points on his journeys, though his account of Paul suggests he did not know him well.

Luke tells us at the beginning that he is not the first to write and that he was writing to give people a firm foundation for their faith. He almost certainly knew Mark's gospel, as did Matthew, and both Luke and Matthew apparently also had another common source which has not survived, but which contained, among other things, the Lord's Prayer and the core of the Sermon on the Mount. Luke wrote his gospel probably some 10-15 years after Mark wrote his, so some time in the 80s.



What we have for sure is what he wrote and in that he challenged the people of his day and challenges us. That is our starting point.

For further information about Luke, see <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/Luke.htm>

Or for a shorter version: <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LookingatLuke>

For weekly commentaries on the revised Common Lectionary readings from the gospels, see my website: <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/lectionaryindex.html>

These studies are prepared by Emeritus Professor William (Bill) Loader FAHA, a Uniting Church Minister and New Testament researcher and teacher. Literal translations in appendices are his own.

Images are Bill's own photos

1. Last Supper Scene, St Catharina's monastery, Arequipa, Peru – can you see Judas, the Inca? The rest look Spanish
2. A Sheep – Nagold, Germany
3. Great grandmother (Bill's mother) and great granddaughter

Session One

Luke 14:15-23 – The Parable of the Great Feast

The passage begins by referring to what had just gone before – about inviting guests to dinner. Jesus is at the house of a Pharisee who had invited him to dinner. There, Luke portrayed Jesus as poking fun at one of the common customs of the day, namely, to seat people in order of their importance. He had just been watching it (14:7-11). Indeed, in some groups there was an annual reassessment of who should sit where. Jesus suggests (we may assume, tongue in cheek): take the most lowly place and enjoy being moved up. In Jesus' vision of the kingdom there are no hierarchies.

He then plays on another custom: the obligation to invite people back who have invited you to dinner (14:12-14). He suggests: why not instead invite people to dinner who cannot play the game and repay you, like the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. God will repay you.

Jesus' comments prompt the response by one of the guests with which our passage begins: "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God" (14:15). That guest is at least in tune with Jesus' favourite way of depicting the future: people sitting down for a meal, the hungry being fed, the thirsty given a drink, a place of fellowship and friendship.

Most people were poor, so that having a good dinner was rare, especially one with meat and wine. That happened not only with weddings, but also with pilgrimages to Jerusalem, where some of the meat from the sacrifice made a good meal. We are used to good dinners everyday so it is a little hard for us to see why Jesus should make dinner his main symbol of hope for the future, even though we keep the image alive when we celebrate Holy Communion, a symbolic foretaste of that hope. It certainly meant something to his contemporaries.



Jesus' parable is rather pointed. A man invited people in his town for a feast. He must have had the where-with-all to do so because he had a slave. It all happens within the space of a day in a small village. The invitation goes out and the next step is to say when the feast is ready and for the guests to come. Then came the excuses. One had bought a field and needed to go and look at it. Another had bought five pairs of oxen and need to check them out. Another had just married a wife and couldn't come. As a story-teller Jesus follows the common practice of grouping events in threes. For the story it does not matter too much how well the details stack up. It is told to make a point.

When the slave reports all this, the master was angry and told him to go out into the town and find "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame" and bring them in. In Luke's version this echoes Jesus' earlier comments. But even after the slave did this, there was still room, so the master sent him out again to compel people to come so the house would be full, adding about the ones originally invited: "none of those who were invited will taste my dinner".

This is a story. It doesn't have to be realistic. For instance, would everyone invited have made excuses? The point is that Jesus has been offering God's invitation for people to join with him in

making the kingdom of God and God's generosity, their highest priority, but they refuse to join. Those who do grasp the promise of the kingdom are the poor, the hungry, the nobodies, the marginalised. The others, however religious, were too pre-occupied with themselves. Those seen as the wrong people got it right and the right people got it wrong.

Luke's version has two new groups invited, possibly because he sees it applied first to the Jews who did follow Jesus, many of whom were poor, and then the non-Jews who responded through the mission to the Gentiles. A later version found in the second century Gospel of Thomas targets in particular those giving excuses related to making money.

The same parable inspired Matthew who reworked it and applied it to the mission of the first apostles to fellow Jews (22:1-14). He makes the dinner a wedding feast held by a king for his son. The king sends not one slave but many slaves and sends them twice to tell those invited to come. The second time those invited did not just refuse. Instead they "made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business" (22:5), but Matthew adds more: "while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them" (22:6). The enraged king then burned their city and sent the slaves out into the streets to invite anyone they found to come, "the good and the bad".

Matthew then adds a supplement: the king inspects the guests and confronts one who was not wearing appropriate clothing for a wedding celebration and throws him out. Matthew slips out of the world of the story when he has the king speak like God and say: "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." ¹⁴For many are called, but few are chosen" (22:13-14).

Clearly Matthew has decided to use the parable to reflect on the terrible event of the sacking of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE and is reading that event as divine punishment of the inhabitants of Jerusalem for not believing in Jesus and his apostles. Matthew also added reference to this in the scene of Jesus trial when he has the Jerusalem crowd declare: "His blood be on us and on our children!" (27:25). It is hard not to see this as a vengeful use of Jesus' parable which is hard to marry with the spirit of Jesus' teaching elsewhere.

Behind Matthew's story, and also Luke's, which has also been reworked to reflect the later church's situation, is a story Jesus told with which he confronted the obstinacy of his contemporaries. In the parable of the Prodigal Son he does the same when he depicts the elder brother as failing to join the father's welcoming back of his wayward son and in the parable of Good Samaritan when he depicts religious officials passing by the man in need. Then and now it happens that being religious may be no guarantee that one is in touch with God and what God wants.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What other occasions can you think of when Jesus used meals as an image of hope?
3. What are modern day excuses for not responding to God's invitation to be involved in love and loving?

The Parable of the Great Feast		
Matthew 22:1-14	Luke 14:14-24	Thomas 64
<p>Jesus responded to them again in parables saying: (2) "The kingdom of heaven can be likened to when someone who is a king made a wedding breakfast for his son. (3) And he sent his slaves out to summon those who had been invited to the wedding breakfast, and they did not want to come. (4) Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those invited, "Look I have prepared my dinner, my beef cattle and fattened calves have been butchered and everything is ready. Come to the wedding breakfast!"' (5) They didn't care and went off, one to his property, one to his business, while the rest took hold of his slaves, abused them and killed them. (7) The king was furious and sending his armies, put those murderers to death and burned their city. (8) Then he said to his slaves: 'The wedding breakfast is ready, but those invited were unworthy. (9) So go out onto the main roads and invite whomever you find to the wedding breakfast.' (10) And going out into the streets those slaves gathered all whom they found, both bad and good; and the wedding hall was full of people reclining at table. (11) The king came in to see those reclining at table and saw there a man not dressed in wedding attire. (12) and he said to him, 'My friend, how did you get in here not wearing wedding attire?' He was silent. (13) Then the king said to his slaves, 'Bind him hands and feet and throw him into outer darkness. There will be weeping and grinding of teeth. (14) For many are called, but few are chosen.'</p>	<p>One of those reclining at the meal, hearing this, said to him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God." (16) He(Jesus) said to him, "A certain fellow made a big feast and invited many, (17) and when it was time for the feast he sent out his slave to tell those invited, 'Come, because it is ready.' (18) And they began one and all to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a farm and I must go and look at it; I ask you, have me excused.' (19) And another said, 'I've bought a yoke of five oxen and I am going to test them out. I ask you, have me excused.' (20) And another said, 'I've just married a wife, and so I cannot come.' (21) And the slave returned to inform his master about these matters. Then the householder was furious and told his slave, 'Quickly go out into the squares and the city gates and bring the poor and the disabled and the blind and the lame in here.' And the slave reported, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done and there is still room.' And the master said to his slave, 'Go out into the streets and by-ways and compel people to come, so that my house will be full. (24) For I tell you, none of those men who were invited will taste my feast.'</p>	<p>Jesus said, "A man had guests, and when he had prepared the feast, he sent his slave to summon the guests. He went to the first and said to him, 'My master summons you.' He said, 'Some merchants owe me some money; they will come to me this evening; I will go and give them orders. I ask to be excused from the dinner.' He went to another and said to him, 'My master summons you.' He said to him, 'My friend will celebrate a wedding and I am to MC the wedding breakfast. I won't be able to come. I ask to be excused from the feast.' He went to another and said to him, 'My master summons you.' And he said to him, 'I have bought a village; I am going to collect the rent. I won't be able to come. I ask to be excused.' The slave came and told his master, 'Those you summoned to the feast have excused themselves.' The master said to his slave, 'Go out into the streets, bring those you find, so they can eat. The buyers and the merchants will not come into the places of my father.'</p>

Session Two

Luke 15:1-10 – The Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin

Luke gives these parables of Jesus a setting. They are a response to criticism of his welcoming and eating with toll or tax collectors and sinners. From elsewhere in the gospels we can be confident that this is accurate. Jesus encountered criticism for having dealings with such people. In Galilee many of these collectors were agents of the administration. Some collected customs taxes at the border (toll collectors), for instance between Philip's territory, to which Bethsaida belonged, and Galilee/Perea. Matthew, also called Levi, was one of them. Others may have had the role of collecting tax on sales, perhaps like Zacchaeus.

Fulfilling such roles need not have been disreputable. Someone had to do it. But they were often criticised for collaborating with the authorities who were seen as Rome's agents and therefore as the enemy. There is evidence that they could also rig the system by charging more than was required and pocketing a lot for themselves. They accumulated wealth for themselves, engaging in the luxuries of the more well-to-do, such as feasts and parties, with entertainment by dancers and prostitutes, and sometimes performers or novel speakers. Best to keep well away from such events!

Jesus, however, accepted invitations to attend and doubtless shared his message there. In those days sharing meals with people meant much more than it does most of the time for us. It meant a degree of acceptance. In the case of Jesus' involvement in such meals this was a way of his indicating that God did not write such people off. Others strongly disagreed and saw Jesus' involvement as both unwise and unspiritual. Mark reports criticism when Jesus accepted Levi's invitation to join such a meal (2:13-17), a story Luke repeats (5:27-32). Luke tells the story of Zacchaeus, a tax collector, where Jesus in fact invited himself (19:1-10).

Jesus often defended himself using pointed parables. In our passage the first parable appeals to common sense about what a shepherd would do if he found a sheep was missing. He would go and find it. So why can't we think that God would care about people who have lost their way? It is probably Luke who added the statement at the end of these two parables about sinners repenting and joy in heaven. The original point of the parable, however, was to make a claim about God caring at least as much as a shepherd.



The next parable is similar. If a woman losing a coin makes such an effort to find it, why can't we think of God as seeking to find lost people, who have been marginalised or who have marginalised themselves? As we shall see in the next session, the parable of the prodigal Son is in part making the same point: why can't you think about God as being at least as caring as a parent for a child?

The parable of the lost sheep came to Luke from the source that Matthew also used, commonly called "Q", but Matthew has given it a new application (18:12-14). He applies it to what the church

should do when one of its members goes astray. Don't condemn and abandon them! Care! Like a shepherd would for sheep.

Matthew tells the parable in the context of portraying what he thinks Jesus would have said about wrongdoing in the church. The advice is similar to what we find in other Jewish groups of the time. When there has been wrongdoing, go and deal with it one to one and if that doesn't work, try again along with support, and if that doesn't work, then the church council needs to make a decision about discipline and may need to exclude a person from participation (18:15-18). No sweeping things under the carpet! Jesus promises to be present in spirit when the church has to face such tough decisions (18:19-20).

Matthew, however, shows no sign of suggesting that hate should take over. Instead he slips in another saying of Jesus about forgiveness, forgiving not just seven but seventy seven times and then another parable about an unforgiving servant to make the same point. That message of love and caring coming after the rules about discipline echoes the parable of the lost sheep which comes before them. There is no room for hate. No one is to be written off. He book-ends discipline with love.

Whether it is in the church, as in Matthew, or in the wider community, as in Luke and originally with Jesus, the message is clear. No one is to be written off. Love always has its arms open, even when those whom it seeks to reach mock and despise such generosity – and in the case of Jesus, crucify it.

Love and respect makes sense if we are to live in community. At an international level there is broad agreement these days that every person should be respected and that everyone has human rights. This has been a major advance compared with previous times. For some it remains as a matter of legality, a basis for prosecution. For others it is much more than that and much more than "rights".

The way of Jesus takes it to another level where it moves from upholding what ought to be to something grounded in our deep inner being because we have learned to be loved ourselves and so have been able to see love for others generated within ourselves. "Rights" can remain at the level of what a person deserves or has a right to. Love goes beyond rights and what people may deserve to initiatives which help people help themselves.

Offering not just protection but relationships of acceptance and caring can give people a lift and help them engage in that all-important process where love (being loved) frees us to love others. Love is, in that sense, the fruit of the Spirit, something more than a rule or principle which we know we should heed, and more of a natural response. That is at the heart of Christian spirituality. Jesus lived and died to make the claim that this is life and used these parables to appeal to people to think again about God and about what makes life whole and good.

God is like a caring shepherd, a very ancient tradition, and a concerned woman caring for a household. Jesus, too, came to be described as the good shepherd.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?

2. Does shepherd work as an image of God for you? What do you see as its strengths and weaknesses?
3. "Don't sweep it under the carpet!" How can we deal with issues of wrongdoing and also be good shepherds?

The Parable of the Lost Sheep	
Matthew 18:10-14	Luke 15:3-7
<p>Watch that you don't despise any one of these little ones. For I tell you their angels in heaven are constantly looking upon the face of your Father in heaven. [v 11 was a later addition] (12) What do you think? If someone has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray, will he not leave the 99 on the mountains and go and look for the lost sheep? (13) And if it happens that he finds it, I tell you he will be happier over that sheep than over the 99 who didn't go astray. (14) So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that any of these little ones perish.</p>	<p>He told them this parable: "Which of you with a hundred sheep and having lost one of them, wouldn't leave the 99 in the outback and go after the lost sheep till he finds it? And finding it he would joyfully lift it up onto his shoulders and coming home summon his friends and neighbours, telling them, 'Celebrate with me, because I have found my sheep which was lost.' I tell you there will be such joy in heaven over one sinner repenting than over 99 righteous people who have no need to repent."</p>

Luke 15:11-32 – The Parable of the Prodigal Son

People in Jesus' day might well have known of situations like this, where a son leaves home, although the parable is deliberately a story with the overblown aspects so typical of storytelling, e.g. The son who goes off ends up in a pig sty. The claim to the father's inheritance before his death is probably less realistic, but it serves the purpose of the story.

The young man had made a mess of his life, squandered what funds he had, and engaged in behaviour that was reckless and blameworthy. Ending up with pigs would be more shameful than for us, because for Jews pigs were considered ritually unclean. Going to a far country also implied non-Jewish territory. He hits rock bottom and decides to return home, tail between his legs, as it were, mulling over his confession and hoping that he might at least be taken up at the level of one of his father's workers.

The scene then shifts to the father's perspective. Shame and honour played a big role in that society. Jesus' listeners would have seen the son's request for an advance on his inheritance as a shameful way to treat his father and now his behaviour warranted his being disowned. In the story, however, the father apparently knows nothing of what he has been up to – no phone calls or Facebook posts! He only knows what he done so far to his father, claimed his money and been off and away, also disrespectful and shameful. Normally a father in such a setting would be expected to seek to maintain his honour and at least await some kind of apology on his son's part and some kind of making up for the way he had been treated.

People listening to the parable would therefore have been somewhat taken by surprise by what happened next. But this father was also human and those human elements overcame what would have been the dignity and aloofness typical of a wronged father. The father leaves the dignity rules behind and runs down the road to embrace his son. The love and compassion of parents for children wins, dads or mums.

Probably people listening to Jesus would also have been able to relate to this. They were human, too. Therefore they could also understand that the father wanted to lavish affection on his son and arranged a celebration. Would they get the point?



Jesus was making the same point he had made in parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. If you can think of parental love like that, why can't you think of God being at least like a loving parent? Why then are people so upset when I reach out in the name of God to people who have messed up?

The parable then goes further. It brings in another factor which Jesus' listeners would also have been able to relate to. It relates how the elder brother was upset at what was happening. It was not fair. He had been obedient and loyal the whole time and not been rewarded. This wayward brother had treated his father badly and gets rewarded with a party! People listening would probably have had

mixed feelings: yes, the brother was right, but then isn't it something to celebrate when the younger brother came home? It's surely not about fairness. It's about love.

While Jesus sometimes refers to the Old Testament, the scriptures of his day, he frequently appeals to people's life experiences and especially to what they value in human relations. Love and caring make human relations work much more effectively than rules and fear of punishment or even set routines and customs. Nothing indicates that the father would from then on love the elder brother less. It was simply a matter of priorities. Love and compassion matters most. Let them flow and there will be more than enough for all.

In telling his story about a very human situation Jesus was both appealing to the love people know and cherish and exposing the lack of such love among those who were criticising him for his reaching out to many people considered beyond the pale. The sad aspect of their rejection was that it was often religiously motivated along the lines that God would not approve. Underlying the conflict were two different understandings of God. What does God want most of all: that people keep his laws and rules or that people are restored to wholeness and health?

It was not that Jesus was advocating a blind kind of loving which pretended people were good when they were far from being good. That's not loving; it is lying. Jesus did not love people because he pretended to himself that they were not sinners. He loved people as they were and invited them into a relationship which included forgiveness and the opportunity to become loving and caring people themselves.

Love is like a warm light which shines upon us. That light sees us as we are and loves and invites us. If we do not want to be seen for who we really are, we may hide from that light or even hate that light. It means taking down our facades and stopping the games we play to make people like us, while we struggle to really like ourselves. If, instead, we let that light shine and accept its embrace, then change begins to take place. We embark on a process of accepting forgiveness and removal of our guilt, of being freed from fear and anxiety about ourselves and our worth. That will mean that we have more space and energy to become, ourselves, people who love and care.

Jesus' argument was that this is the best way to enable people to change and that it works far better than asking people to be ever so strict about commandments and rules. In any case Jesus taught that behind all the rules is the fundamental call to love God and love one's neighbour. God's embrace of love makes that possible. His critics were often very devout. They would claim that they loved God, too, but they were failing to see that God's priorities are to establish relationships of love which in turn generate love in the world.

God is like a parent who never gives up loving. God is love, challenging us to let ourselves be loved and to share that love in the world. Jesus' parable works because it touches us at the deepest level and that is the level at which we also meet God.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Not all parents are like that, but they can be. What is your experience of parenting?
3. Does love really work like that? Does it mean no rules? Where do rules fit?