

Part I: Parables

Lesson Two

The Kingdom of God Life in the Upside-Down Kingdom

Introduction

Compare and contrast what you know about the Pharisees in Jesus' day and the people with whom he tended to associate. What do you notice?

The Pharisees were often very outwardly righteous people. They gave to the poor. They attended church and were very moral. Jesus, however, spoke harsh words of condemnation against them and spent his time with tax collectors and prostitutes—two classes of people not considered very righteous! For a God who demands righteousness, he seemed to practice the opposite in choosing with whom to associate!

Studying God's Word

What kind of king is Jesus? During his ministry on earth, he spoke words to elevate and bless the “sinners,” while condemning those who seemed so “righteous.”

In this lesson we continue our study of the *parables of the kingdom*. Remember: The “kingdom of heaven” usually doesn't refer to heaven itself. It's the spread of God's rule through the preaching of the gospel here on earth. The kingdom parables focus on what happens when the gospel of the kingdom is preached to sinners.

God works with a different kind of justice

Read Luke 18:9-14.

1. We tend not to speak well of Pharisees these days. However, why would Jesus' statement in verse 14 likely have shocked an average Jewish person?

The Pharisees likely *were living* very outwardly moral lives.

2. What does this parable say about God's standard of justice?

The tax collectors, with whom Jesus was associating, had a reputation of being thieves and crooks. In rejecting the upright Pharisees and choosing to associate with tax collectors and other “sinners,” Jesus made it clear that the justice system of his kingdom is far different from what people normally expect.

3. The tax collector was declared justified by Christ as he put his hope in God's mercy, not in himself. What is Jesus' point?

Our justification doesn't come at all from our own outward righteousness—our words and deeds. It comes simply as a gift of God's mercy.

4. Why is this truth still shocking to the world?

The world judges people as “good” or “bad” based on their actions. It’s a blow to our egos to think that God judges us in a completely different way, namely, not on the basis of what we do or earn. But praise God that he does!

God works with a different kind of love

God’s sense of justice is tied inseparably to his unique love. That love is explained beautifully in Christ’s most familiar and endearing parable—the parable of the prodigal son.

It’s important to remember the context of this parable. The Pharisees had looked down on Jesus for eating with “sinners”—something they were sure that no one representing God would ever do. Also, Jesus tells us that the main point of the parable is to teach us about “the man” who had two sons. The *focus* is on the love of God, not the sons per se.

Read Luke 15:11-32.

5. Summarize what the younger son’s request to the father really was.

He requested his inheritance before his father died. His priority was on having his father’s money. He could not have cared less about his father. His request could just as well have been: “Father, I wish you would die so I could have your money, but this is the next best option.”

6. In your opinion, what best illustrates the father’s love?

A number of answers could be given, but the teacher will want to highlight the following:

- The father saw the son while he was a long way off. He seemed to be always watching and hoping for his son’s return!
- The father interrupted the son before he could even finish his apology. No groveling required!
- After the son had squandered the father’s wealth, the father continued to pour out more of his wealth on him.

7. How does the second son’s response to his father highlight the unique nature of God’s love?

The second son’s response was actually very reasonable. He had earned his father’s affections far more than the first son had. And that’s the point: God is like a father who loves even his most wayward and unlovable children. [Plus, a person does not earn God’s love or affections by what he does.]

God works with a different standard of fairness

Read Matthew 20:1-16.

8. Evaluate the landowner’s action. Was it fair?

Not in the sense of pay being commensurate with work. Jesus does emphasize the fact that it was “fair” in that they each got what was promised. And it was fair in the sense that the landowner had the right to do as he saw fit with his own riches.

9. What statements might Christians be tempted to make, which echo the thoughts of the hired workers?

Some possibilities:

- I don't think God really accepts deathbed confessions.
- It just doesn't seem right for someone like that to end up in heaven.
- Well, that person surely isn't a very good Christian!
- Do mission work in *that* neighborhood? Forget it; people like that will never believe!

10. Jesus' parable has a warning for us. What should we realize if we ever find ourselves offended by what we might consider God's "unfairness"?

It's only because of God's "unfairness" that we're saved. We dare not despise his grace for us.

Summary

Key Points:

- We can only find true righteousness in the righteousness that God gives to us for his mercy's sake.
- The love and justice that God shows strike human hearts as extremely unfair.
- It's God's "unfair" love and justice that are responsible for our salvation and make his kingdom such a wonderful place in which to live.

Who would want to live under such a King? Not those who are convinced that they are more righteous and loveable than others. Only those who see their sins, thirst for mercy, and recognize their need for help. God grant that we are always found in their number!

During the Week

1. Watch the newspaper for people's reactions to injustices in this world. Remind yourself that the preaching of the gospel will often bring the same reaction (if it's preached in its truth!).
2. Listen for statements from Christian authors or friends who imply that God's love should be earned. If you have children, consider ways that you may have given them the same false impression while dealing with their sins.
3. Thank God for his unfairness in dealing with you; repent of ways you've been far too "fair" with others.