The Journey to Jerusalem Week 4
Luke 14:1 – 16:18

22) “Take the lowest place”

Read Luke 14:1-14

Jesus was invited to “the house of a prominent Pharisee”, not to honour him but once again to try and catch him out about Sabbath observance (1-2). For the fourth time in Luke, Jesus insisted that it can’t be wrong to do good to people on the Sabbath, especially as they’d be willing to care for animals (3-6; 6:1-5; 6:9-11; 13:10-17).

This challenge to their legalistic view threatened their control over the people and with it their honour and esteem (Mt.23:5-7). That desire for honour was also shown by the guests at the meal vying for the high-status seats. So Jesus told a parable to address that (7-11). He wasn’t just giving some advice on how to avoid disgrace (cf. Prov.25:6-7) – rather, that advice illustrates a key spiritual principle about humility (11).

The same truth is taught in another parable (Lk.18:14; 1 Pet.5:6) and echoes his teaching that “the greatest among you must be your servant” (Mt.23:11-12; Mk.9:35; 10:43-44). For Jesus, exaltation came via humbling himself, and so it is for us too (Phil.2:3-11). His followers are not to seek prominence but to serve others humbly, particularly by doing good to those who cannot repay it (12-14; Lk.6:32-36).

23) “They all made excuses”

Read Luke 14:15-24

This passage continues the previous dinner conversation (14:1-14). Jesus had just told them to invite the poor to their banquets, if they want to be rewarded on the day of resurrection (14:13-14). This prompted a pious remark from a guest who clearly expected to share in the blessing of the great feast on that day (15; Is.25:6; Mt.26:29; Rev.19:9).

Jesus challenged his expectation (16-17). Would he (and the others present) really accept the invitation offered to them? The parable illustrates that those who have previously shown interest in attending a feast might be indifferent to it when it happens. The excuses made are not about things that are wrong, but it’s not only the rich who are foolish when it comes to what matters most in life (18-20; 12:20; Mk.4:18-19).

Once again Jesus is urging his Jewish hearers to enter through the narrow door before it’s too late, for on the day of God’s feast many Jews will find themselves excluded while (to their shock) believing Gentiles will enter in (13:24-30). The mission of the church will be to go to those who never expected to receive such an invitation and persuade them that God wants them to come to his banquet (21-24).
24) “Count the cost”

Read Luke 14:25-35

Why would anyone turn down the invitation to God’s great banquet (14:15-24)? The answer is because there’s a considerable cost involved. God’s grace is free but it is not cheap. “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance... or discipleship” (Bonhoeffer). Jesus here spells that out, three times saying that someone “cannot be my disciple” without great sacrifice (26,27,33).

I cannot be his disciple if I put anyone else, even my nearest and dearest, before Jesus (26; Mt.10:37-38). That includes my own life too. Nor can I avoid taking up the cross if I want to follow him (27; 9:23). It costs nothing to become a Christian; it costs everything to be one (33). So Jesus uses two short parables to underline the need to count the cost before becoming his follower.

The first parable asks us to be sure that we’ve resolved to stick with our commitment (28-30; Mk.13:13). The situation in the second parable is different, for a king under attack has to do something – the question becomes can we afford not to follow Jesus (31-32). Doing so will be costly, but to save our life is to lose it while losing it for Jesus is to save it (Mt.10:39; Mk.8:34-35).

25) “Rejoicing in heaven”

Read Luke 15:1-10

The three parables in this chapter have a common theme, summed up by a later verse: “The Son of Man (Jesus) came to seek and to save the lost” (Lk.19:10). The parable of the lost sheep is also recorded in Matthew where it illustrates God’s pastoral concern for his “little ones” (Mt.18:10-13). But there too Jesus adds that God is not willing that any of those little ones should be lost (Mt.18:14).

The context once again is the Pharisees’ disapproval of Jesus welcoming and eating with “sinners” (1-2; 5:29-31; 19:7). All these stories are a rebuke to them. God values and cares for everyone, including those who are most lost – just as a shepherd seeks a lost sheep (3-6), a woman seeks a lost coin (8-9), and a father grieves over a lost son (15:11-24).

So when any sinner repents there is rejoicing in heaven (7,10). Jesus eats with sinners so that they know they are valued and that God will welcome them joyfully. But there can be no heavenly joy over the Pharisees who self-righteously refuse to repent. They too are just as lost and in need of saving. Jesus is the good shepherd who reaches out to all, “sinners” and Pharisees (such as Paul) alike (Jn.10:11; Ph.3:5; 1 Tim.1:12-15).
26) “A man had two sons”

Read Luke 15:11-32

The parable of the prodigal son is really a single story of two sons, both of them equally lost. The rebellious younger son left home (12-16) but eventually “came to his senses” (17) – he knew that he must swallow his pride and return contritely to his father (18-19). However far we wander from God, there is always a way back if we are willing to take the first step (Lk.13:24; Acts 3:19).

The father demonstrates vividly the joy that God has whenever a sinner repents (15:7,10). This third parable in the set illustrates not God’s seeking of the lost but his overflowing welcome when his lost children return and sonship is fully restored (20-24; Rom.8:15-17). The same unconditional love and compassion extends to us all (Ps.103:8,10; 1 Jn.4:19).

That includes the older brother – he too is loved by the father and shares in his blessing, despite his resentment and pride (25-32). He represents the Pharisees who despised Jesus for welcoming “sinners” (15:1-2). “It is hard for me to concede that this bitter, resentful, angry man might be closer to me than the lustful younger brother. Yet the more I think about the elder son, the more I recognise myself in him” (Henri Nouwen).

27) “Trustworthy with true riches”

Read Luke 16:1-13

It’s shocking to read this parable and find Jesus seeming to commend dishonest behaviour (8). But parables are mainly pithy stories to make one particular point very strikingly and that’s what’s intended here. Jesus uses an example of bad behaviour to underline once again that Christians need to use money in a way that will result in eternal reward (9).

If the people of this world appreciate shrewd use of money, how much more should we who are stewards of what God has entrusted to us make sure that our worldly wealth is used faithfully. Being rich is spiritually dangerous, for as Jesus sums up here, “You cannot serve God and money” (13; Mt.6:24). The fact is we own nothing. All we have is God’s (Ps.24:1), given for our enjoyment (1 Tim.6:17) but also to use for good and for God’s glory (1 Ch.29:14; Rom.11:35-36).

A steward must be trustworthy – Jesus says honesty is essential (10-12). So we must use our Master’s resources properly or else we rob not only him but ourselves too (Mt.24:45-51). Material wealth is temporal, but good and faithful stewards know that it can be used to acquire treasure in heaven, along with their Master’s, “Well done” (Mt.6:19-21; 25:21,23).
28) “The Pharisees loved money”

Read Luke 16:13-18

Jesus told the three parables in Luke 15 in response to the Pharisees’ pride and their disdain of “sinners” (15:1-2). Now the reason for both those shortcomings is made clear: “the Pharisees loved money” (14). So they are the people who Jesus was addressing in the parable of the shrewd steward (16:1-9), with its punchline, “You can’t serve God and money” (13).

“The love of money is the root of all evil” (1 Tim.6:10), not money itself. Money can be used for eternal benefit (16:9) but that’s only possible when we love God rather than money – we cannot love two different masters (13). Outward religion might fool others and even ourselves, but God knows our hearts and what we truly value (15). The love of our heart will be set on whatever we treasure most (Lk.13:33-34).

All of this is part of the coming of God’s kingdom which wise people will make every effort to enter (16). The shrewd steward illustrates that determination, in contrast to the Pharisees who were blind to the opportunity. Though the law would never pass away they failed to grasp the way Jesus fulfilled its purpose and meaning, bringing the greater righteous of God’s Kingdom (17-18; Mt.5:17-20,31-32).