

INTRODUCTION

I want to begin by thanking Chris Young for beginning this series for me. Chris taught about the “*who*” of salvation based on Luke 15. Today I want to look at the “*why*” of salvation. The words *who* and *why* suggest a question which is a good place to start when approaching the biblical text. You will recall that Jesus is described at his year of Bar Mitzvah in terms of His ability to formulate questions in the context of rabbinic debate.

Luke 2:46-47 *Then, after three days they [His parents] found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both **listening to them and asking them questions**. And all who heard Him were amazed at **His understanding and His answers**.*

We tend not to operate this way, but in rabbinic debate, questions and the ability to formulate them are seen as the true test of understanding. There is a lot more to this issue but we will leave it for another time. Today we are going to ask a number of questions as our way into the text and the overall question of the “why” of salvation.

Question 1.

First, how do we understand the significance of the three parables that we find in Luke 15?

If you look at the fifteenth chapter of Luke you will notice that it does not only contain three parables. There is a brief introduction which gives us some important information. The chapter opens with a description of Jesus’ audience and complaint against Jesus.

The audience: Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him.

The complaint: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them”

You will notice that the complaint takes the situation one step further to table fellowship.

The Pharisees tended to separate themselves from those who did not live pious lives. However the term “*sinners*” as used by the Pharisees refers to a more serious disregard for the Torah, it refers to prostitutes, thieves and others of low reputation, whose sins were blatant and obvious, not the misdemeanours the establishment tolerated.

Jesus taught that those who considered themselves not to be sinners but "righteous" were in fact worse, because they made themselves unteachable. This idea is reflected in the book of the

prophet **Jeremiah (2:35)** *Yet you said, 'I am innocent; Surely His anger is turned away from me.' Behold, I will enter into judgment with you because you say, 'I have not sinned.'*

The same point is made in Jesus confrontation with the teachers of the Law after healing the blind man in **John (9:41)** *Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.*

Jesus' response to the self righteousness of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law is to tell three parables which emphasise the love of God for the open sinner who repents. In other words He contrasts their attitude with the attitude of *El Tsaddik* עֵלֶּיֶךָ-לֵאלֹהֵינוּ “The Righteous God” (**Isaiah 45:21**). These parables are meant as a lesson in contrast – that is their primary purpose and significance.

This idea of God's love for the penitent sinner is not unique to Jesus or the New Testament. David Stern points out that there is an excerpt from the *Rambam's Mishneh-Torah*, Maimonides' comprehensive summary of Judaism's requirements, completed in 1178:

"Let not the *ba 'al-t 'shuvah* ["Jew who repents/returns to [Orthodox] Judaism"] suppose that because of the iniquities and sins he has committed he is kept at a distance from the level attained by the righteous men. It isn't so. He is loved as tenderly by the Creator as if he had never sinned..." Berakhot 34b. (David Stern. *The Jewish New Testament Commentary* pg 131)

The point here is that this godly love for penitent sinners was not a foreign concept to Judaism it was a failure on the part of those Pharisees and teachers of the Law to practice it that provoked Jesus' response.

The “Why” of Salvation

Question 2. Why do we need salvation anyway?

This question is at the heart of the problem demonstrated by the Pharisees' and teachers of the Law. After three introductory verses, Luke begins with the story of the lost sheep (**15:4-7**), which Matthew also relates.' Alongside it he places a similar story, that of the lost silver coin (**15:8-10**), not recorded in any of the other Gospels. To these he adds another, longer than the first two put together and told in a rather different way, but still recognizably on the same subject. (**15:11–32**). Michael Wilcock (1979:153) describes the three parables as being like, “three musical instruments, which, although each makes a different type of sound, are nevertheless playing the same tune. The distinctive tone-qualities [can be noticed in] each one separately. But as soon as we consider them together we can hear that their three melodies are identical.

The sheep is lost, then found (15: 4, 6); the silver is lost, then found (15:8-9); the son is lost, then found (15:24, 32)”.

These parables are unambiguous about the state of being lost. The Pharisees and teachers of the Law were not really convinced of just how lost they were. They thought that they had it all. They honestly believed that they were righteous. The Pharisees were very pious people – they lived at a standard of obedience to the Torah, both written and oral, of which most Christians can only dream. Yet Jesus does not consider them righteous people who have no need to repent. Why do we need salvation – because we are more lost than we generally presume. Today, at this moment you need to be saved. You need to be saved from your sinful nature that leads you into sin consistently. You need to be saved from the guilt of the sin that you have committed. You need to be saved from your own blindness and complacency. That is what these parables illustrate.

In the parable of the lost son it takes him a while before he realizes how lost he really is. He should have realized how lost he was when he contemplated asking his father for his inheritance. He wandered a long way away from his family into a land filled with Gentiles who did not honour God and became assimilated into their society and their lifestyle. Still he did not recognise how lost he was. Even when he was rearing pigs, something that his Jewish heritage should have made repulsive to him, still he could not see how lost he was. It was only when he was tempted to eat their food that he came to his senses. Ever seen pig’s food? Could it be that Jesus is comparing the lifestyles of his audience of sinners to this? Those who know their need have reached this point but those who think that they are righteous have still to get there. That is why we need salvation.

There is a Hasidic story with many similar details but in the service of a different moral but it illustrates the problem of not knowing how lost you really are:

"A parable about a prince who sinned. And his father expelled him from his house. And he went erring about, aimlessly, in the company of card players and drunkards. And all the time he sank lower and lower. Finally he joined a group of peasant villagers. Of their bread he ate and at their work he worked.

One day the king sent one of his lords to search for his son, for perhaps he had improved his ways and was worthy of being returned to his father's house. The lord found him plowing in the field. And he asked him: 'Do you recognize me?' 'Yes,' answered the prince. And the lord said: 'And what is your request of your father the king? I shall tell him.' The prince answered,

'How good would it be if my father took pity on me and sent me a garment like those the peasants wear, and also heavy shoes which are suitable for a villager.' 'O, you fool, you fool,' cried the lord, 'it would have been better for you to ask of your father that he should take you back to his house and his palace. Is, perchance, anything lacking in the house of the king?' "Thus they [the Jews] cry, 'Give us this and give us that....' It would be better to request and to pray that He should lead us back to our country and build our Temple, and there we shall have everything we need."

(Abraham S. B. H. Michelsohn, *Sefer Shemen haTov* ("The Book of Good Oil"), Piotrkov, 1905, p. 142, as translated and quoted in *The Messiah Texts*, p. 79 in Stern, D. 1996 *The Jewish New Testament Commentary* pg 132.)

The “Why” of Salvation

Question 3. Why would God save us anyway?

The parables all describe the joy of finding – not so much the joy of being found. It is the finder’s joy that is at the heart of these parables. Had the Pharisees and teachers of the law, who were grumbling about Jesus, understood the heart of God they too would have been finders like Jesus. The joy in these parables expresses is incremental. The first is the joy associated with the recovery of a lamb representing one hundredth of the flock. The second is coin representing a tenth of the silver the woman owned. The son is one of two representing half. However the joy associated with his return far exceeds this proportion. It is expressed in terms of life and death.

The joy of God in the finding of a lost child of His creation is immeasurable. It is this joy that Jesus expresses and the cross measures. The writer to the Hebrews picks up this idea when he writes,

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12:2-3 NIV)

This joy consumed Jesus. It was at the heart of His ministry. It was the foundation of His compassion for the multitude and the inhabitants of the city of Jerusalem. (Matt 23:37)

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.

This is why God is intent on saving us. It was the failure of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law to grasp this aspect of God’s character that left them critical and hardened to the state of the world around them.

What about you...?