

Introduction

Last week I looked at the “*why*” of salvation based on the introduction and three parables that make up the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke. The basis for our examination of this passage last week was the use of questions. I am told that in the four gospels Jesus is asked 183 questions. Have you noticed that Jesus only gives a direct answer to only 3 of those 183 questions! For people who have grown up assuming that the major role of the Christian, and of religion, is to give people answers and to resolve peoples' dilemmas this may be a bit confusing. Apparently this is not Jesus' understanding of His function. He operates very differently. Jesus either keeps silent as with Pilate (**John 19:9**), returns with another question as with the coin with Caesar's image (**Matthew 22:19**), or gives an illustration, as with the parable of the Good Samaritan. (**Luke 10:30f**).

At other times Jesus puts the question back inside the frame of reference of the inquirer, as if to make them critique it for themselves. He does so with the rich young man: "You know the commandments" (**Mark 10:19**). Sometimes he can only weep, sigh, or lament because of the seeming ill-will or hostility represented in the question, as when the Pharisees asked him for a sign. (**Mark 8:12**). Here he simply refuses to respond. Jesus knew that to interact with someone who has an entrenched position will serve only to further entrench them in their position and fortify their adherence to their own argument.

What is behind Jesus' questions?

Jesus uses questions to re-position His hearers, to make them aware of their biases, to challenge their thinking and their image of God or the world, and to introduce them to new possibilities. He hopes to illicit faith from the individual as he or she begins to answer the question for themselves. His questions are worth examining because they, along with the parables, reveal Jesus method of encounter with people, or what we may call today, his style of "evangelism". Jesus' question method is almost exactly the opposite of modern televangelism or even the mainline church approach which spends it

time handing out bits of inspiring advice and workable solutions for daily living.

C.S. Lewis addresses this very issue in his essay on Christian Apologetics in "*God in the Dock*." He says,

"We can make people attend to the Christian point of view for half an hour or so, but the moment they have gone away from our lecture or laid down our article, they are plunged back into a world where the opposite position is taken for granted. As long as that situation exists, widespread success is simply impossible". (1994:96) [\[1\]](#)

This is the natural result of teaching that always gives answers and never allows people live with the questions until they have integrated those questions into their way of living.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says that, far from faith excluding questions, questions testify to faith--that the world is not random, the universe is not impervious to our understanding, and life is not a matter of blind chance.... A God who cared for creativity would not provide the answers. He would prefer a universe in which people asked the questions. When faith suppresses questions, it dies. Exploring the theme of faith, He tells the story of Isidore Rabi, winner of a Nobel Prize in physics, who was once asked why he became a scientist. He replied, 'My mother made me a scientist without ever knowing it. Every other child would come back from school and be asked, "What did you learn today?" But my mother used to ask a different question. "Izzy," she always used to say, "did you ask a good question today?" That made the difference. Asking good questions made me a scientist.' (2000:79) [\[2\]](#)

I reminded you that questions and the art of formulating appropriate questions is at the heart of the rabbinic teaching system of which Jesus was a

part. I want to encourage you to look out for Jesus' questions. Make them your questions. Live with them. We saw that the parables are not so much about the lost and found as they are about the commitment and joy of the Finder. The chapter is divided into four parts;

15:1-3 The introduction which gives the context;

15:4-7 The Finder of the Lost Sheep

15: 8-10 The finder of the Lost coin

15:11-32 The Finder of the Lost Son

The God of Abraham is a finder God. He searches for the lost and his joy at finding is at the heart of the biblical story and these parables. Finally, we saw that this finder-heart of God is contrasted with the hardened heart of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law who grumbled at Jesus' association with tax collectors and sinners.

The “*How*” of Salvation

The central message of Luke 15 is that it is God Himself who saves people. He does so because he wishes to and His joy is expressed in so doing. These statements are about the “*who*” and the “*why*” of salvation.

Having answered these questions the practical question remains:

“*How* is this salvation possible?” From this question two more questions naturally follow;

How may I be in the position of the found illustrated by the parables of Luke 15? *How* does the lesson aimed at the Pharisees and teachers of the law apply to me?

To answer these questions we need first, to place the chapter in its greater context, and go back to the preceding section to see why Luke arranges his material as he does.

The section that precedes our passage is Luke 13:22 — 14:35. Jesus is in a place known as Perea, sometimes referred to as “*Judea beyond the Jordan*”. Perea was the area through which observant Jews travelled to avoid going through Samaria. (Luke 13:22-19:27) We could call this section ‘*The narrow door*’ Luke uses a variety of literary devices to describe how a person may come to God, while emphasising the fact that we have to let go of the all the things that we feel, make us superior to others and acceptable to God. There is nothing we can bring to Him which is not, at worst a sin, or at best, a hindrance. This section records seven teachings by Jesus not only to Pharisees but to all sorts of people who were hindered by the things they thought would make them acceptable to God.

Luke 13:23-35 The Narrow Door of Urgency

Questions about the number who would be saved. 13:23-30

The warning about Herod and the lament over Jerusalem both stress the urgency of the situation 13:31-35

Luke 14:1-24 The Narrow Door of Humiliation

Healing on the Sabbath which highlights the law of mercy as apposed to false piety and self interest. 14:1-6

The guests and the places of honour 14:7-11

The host and the guests who cannot repay 14:12-14

The Dinner and guests with feeble excuses 14:16-24

Luke 14:25-32 The Narrow Door of Commitment

The cost of discipleship is a cross 14:25-27

Counting the cost – a tower and a battle 14:28-33

Salt without flavour is useless. 14:34-35

'Now', says Luke, having elaborated the importance of not trusting in ourselves for salvation, moves on from chapter 14 to chapter 15, 'the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near'. These were the people who knew that they had nothing to be complacent about. (15:1).

Thus 15:1 sums up the whole section that precedes it, and 15:2 sums up the whole section that follows.

When sinners draw near, he receives them. When the prodigal returned in the frame of mind required by Jesus' narrow door' sayings, he comes confessing in abject humility

'I am no longer worthy to be called your son', then his father 'ran and embraced him and kissed him' (15:19, 20).

When we come stripped of all that we thought might commend us to God's favour, it is then that he cries, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him' (15:22).

How is this salvation possible?

Luke 15:7 summarizes the whole lesson. It tells us who is concerned in the salvation of humankind; it is God himself, none less and no one else. It is God's joy and delight to save people from their sins. And it tells us how: penitence. The response to our repentance is the joy of God which is reflected in the heavenly host. "For there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents."

The greatest devotion we can show to God is repentance – turning away from our own will to submit to His.

How may I be in the position of the found?

In a word – repent. Repentance is contrasted to the self confidence and self righteousness addressed in the previous chapters. Genuine repentance is the ultimate expression of humility. “Father I have sinned against Heaven (an Hebraism to avoid using the name of God) and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired servants.”

Compare this to the older son’s response who has a particular perspective about himself and his father. You cannot help but wonder whether Luke has the interactions in the previous two chapters in mind.

How does the lesson aimed at the Pharisees and teachers of the law apply to me?

Jesus’ response to the self righteous confidence 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* אֱלֹהֵי צְדִיקָה “The Righteous God” (**Isaiah 45:21**). These parables are meant as a lesson in contrast – that is their primary purpose and significance.

As followers of Jesus we must guard against a confidence in anything other than the faithfulness of God’s love for us expressed in and measured by the sacrificial death of Jesus the Messiah. Our own performance, our familiarity with the Scriptures, our denomination all these things are not substitute for the faithfulness of the Finder God who rejoices over the sinner who repents.

[\[1\]](#) Lewis C. S. 1994. *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*. Eerdmans. Grand Rapids

[\[2\]](#) Sacks J. 2006 *Celebrating Life: Finding Happiness in Unexpected Places*. Continuum: London