



## Session Twelve

### The Gospel of Luke, Pt.9

#### Luke 14-16

These three chapters are not only the heart of Luke's telling of the Gospel, they are among the most difficult and challenging in all of Scripture: hard teaching resulting in hard questions and, unavoidably, hard answers.

German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about what he called "cheap grace," by which he meant our predilection for using grace as an excuse for not being the people we're called to be:

*"Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate... Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again... Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow...because it costs a man his life...because it condemns sin... Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son...and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us."*

I urge you, as you work through these three chapters of Luke, to reflect on the disconnect between what Jesus calls us to do and be as his followers and what, ultimately, we're willing to do—and what that means for both the world we know and the Kingdom to come. I urge you to come to terms with the reality that the disconnect is there because, as Bonhoeffer says, we too often want discipleship without cost.

#### **Questions to consider as you read Luke 14-16**

1) We know the Pharisees were obsessed with keeping God's law, even as it applied to the smallest details of life. This is what led to their silence and lack of action in the face of the man with dropsy (14:1-6): healing was not allowed on the Sabbath unless life was endangered. Jesus' actions, however, indicate that addressing human suffering should take priority even over strict obedience to religious law. What are the implications of Jesus' teaching for your understanding and practice of *Sabbath*?

2) Read 14:7-14, then consider the following:

- a) What do these verses teach us about power and esteem in the Kingdom? In our culture?
- b) There is a strong sense that in the Kingdom outcasts will be accepted as equals. How do you really feel about that? Are you willing to embrace such acceptance?
- c) Jesus seems to be telling us that our goal in life should be *righteousness*. What would your life look like if that, indeed, was your goal?

3) The Parable of the Great Banquet (14:15-24) can be read on a number of levels. Clearly, however, this is a story of excuses: people are presented with the opportunity to share in the Kingdom but come up with all manner of reasons as to why such an opportunity, whatever its blessings, is inconvenient. What excuses do you use to avoid the commitment of sharing in the Kingdom? What do your excuses say about your real priorities in life?

4) 14:25-35 speak directly to the demands and sacrifices of discipleship. Jesus is clear: we must be willing to renounce all we have and, if necessary, suffer the same fate that he will suffer. That said, Jesus was no fool: he knew that few would ever be willing to sacrifice what true discipleship requires. At the same time, the church has been very successful in redefining discipleship in terms of the common aspirations of the middle- and upper-classes. This would seem to put discipleship somewhere between the stringent demands of Jesus and the more amiable demands of the church. How do you, as someone seeking to know Jesus better, respond?

5) The people to whom and with whom Jesus chose to minister was a constant source of conflict, resulting in relentless criticism and judgment of Jesus' actions by the spiritual leaders of the day. That in itself was problematic enough, but as 15:1-10 makes clear, God takes more joy in repentant outcasts and sinners than in righteous church people. What does that suggest to those of us seeking to know and follow Jesus?

6) The case can be made that the Parable of the Prodigal Son (15:11-32) is among the most profound of all Jesus' teachings. The case can also be made that it is the very heart of Luke's telling of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I urge you to read the Parable slowly and carefully, placing yourself in the role of the Prodigal, the Father, and the Elder Son in order to discern what each says to you about your relationship to Jesus and the Kingdom as *they are now* and *as you believe they should be*. Finally, ask yourself this question: forgetting all you know and have experienced of being church, were you asked to design a faith community based on the teachings of this parable, what would it look like?

7) The Parable of the Dishonest Steward (16:1-13) is one of the most debated pericopes in Scripture because it's difficult to read it as anything other than Jesus praising dishonesty and deceit. That said, it can be argued that the real thrust of Jesus' words are not about honesty vs. dishonesty but about the necessity of decision to avert disaster. In other words, forget that the steward is dishonest; the issue is that he is faced with a potential disaster at the hands of his master if he doesn't take decisive action. He cannot hem and haw, choosing to do nothing (or

very little) in hopes that the situation will resolve itself or, better yet, go away. He must make a decision himself and act. Which he does. Within the overall context of Jesus' message in these three chapters, this makes sense: the Kingdom and discipleship require a decision and action. If we instead hem and haw, choose to do nothing, etc. there will be great consequences both for the Kingdom and us as individuals. This, then, leaves each of us to reflect on this question: are you willing to choose and take decisive action for the Kingdom or do you prefer hemming and hawing because that requires far less commitment?

8) 16:14-18 might seem out of place, sandwiched between the parables of the dishonest steward and the rich man and Lazarus. But consider that these verses speak to the reality of probably the two most influential forces in human history in general and our contemporary world in particular: love of money/power and sex. A primary factor in our approach to discipleship is who—or what—will be Lord of our lives. Jesus calls us to total commitment to Him and the Kingdom which necessarily means that we'll frequently find ourselves being asked to assume positions diametrically opposed to what the world celebrates and values. Most of us do not enjoy living in opposition to the norm because it invites rejection and ridicule, so we tend to hedge our discipleship bets, finding places we can comfortably balance what the world accepts as normal with what we know, in our hearts, Jesus is calling us to do. Both the parable of the dishonest steward and the rich man and Lazarus make it clear that, at some point, we will have to give an accounting of our lives before God. Was that to happen right this moment, what would your accounting be?

9) Much happens in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus; indeed, many strands of Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom weave their way through these verses (16:19-31). We've had ample opportunity to reflect on and discuss most of them at length already, so at this point I want to call your attention to an issue the parable raises about which we've spent somewhat less time talking: our responsibility as Jesus followers for *systemic change*. Here's what I mean: We could talk about the failure of the Rich Man to care for Lazarus; certainly, on a very basic level, he had the responsibility to help this man lying outside his front gate. But is that where his responsibility ends? Does he not also have a responsibility to address the larger systemic realities that resulted in Lazarus lying outside his front gate to begin with? Absent such responsibility, all we ever do is deal with symptoms—we never get to the causes. So: What responsibility do you feel for dealing not just with individuals in need but with those systemic realities that create the need in the first place?