

Luke 15

Aim of lesson

To show that because God loves us, he will forgive our wrongdoing if we repent.

Background study

Psalm 32:1-5; Psalm 103:8-13; 1 John 1:9; Deuteronomy 21:16-17.

Investigate the custom of dividing an inheritance. The lost coin was probably from a headband of coins called a "semedi" which was sometimes given by a bridegroom to his bride on the occasion of their wedding. It would, of course, be greatly treasured by its owner.

Suggested outline of lesson

Jesus' choice of story material

Talk about the joy of finding something which was lost; it is a feeling that all the children will have experienced. When telling stories Jesus always used familiar incidents. The idea of searching for something lost would be well known to all his listeners. Describe the great multitude of people who tried to get near to Jesus in order to hear what he was saying. Among the crowd were rich and poor, young and old, shepherds, housewives, and learned men. Jesus wanted all people to know about the love of God, and he varied his stories so that they would be understood by all his audience.

The story of the lost sheep would have a particular appeal to shepherds and farmers concerned for the safety of their animals, and would enable them to appreciate more readily the joy that God feels when a sinner repents and turns to him. The story of the lost coin would have helped many of the women in the crowd to understand the happiness of the woman in the story, and to learn the lesson that Jesus was teaching.

Hearing the first two stories would have helped to prepare the minds of Jesus' listeners to receive the third, the essential teaching of which is also that of rejoicing over the recovery of something which was lost. However, the details are more significant, in that they relate more closely to the relationship of God with men and their response to him.

Relevance to the children's lives

The greatest lesson of this story is forgiveness; no matter what we have done, if we are really sorry, we will be forgiven. Does this mean that we can do anything we like because God will forgive us? How do we feel when we have done something wrong? What was it in the story that gave the young man lasting happiness?

The parable: inheritance

Tell the story simply, explaining the right of the second son to inherit one third of his father's wealth. Unlike his brother, the younger son was rebellious. He was not content to settle for his father's way of life, and wanted to find adventure. No doubt the father was sad to lose the boy and reluctant to let him go, but he agreed to the arrangement.

The parable: true friends or not?

The next part of the story is particularly colourful. The children will readily understand the excitement of having plenty of money to spend, and a number of friends with whom to enjoy new pleasures. Point out that while the younger son was enjoying life he was thinking of no one but himself. His father and home were far from his thoughts; he felt he could do without them. But his father had not forgotten him, and was daily hoping for his return. Glad to be independent, the boy was unaware that his new companions were not true friends. The realization came when his money ran out and he found himself utterly alone. Ask the children if they have noticed that some "friends" attach themselves to them only when they have sweets or a good game, and disappear when they are really needed.

The parable: destitute and sorry

Emphasize the increasing poverty of the young man and his growing sense of loneliness. He became absolutely destitute. In desperation he took a job that most Jews would shun, since handling pigs would offend his religious upbringing. Thoughts crowded in on him. He experienced many feelings - anger, bitterness, depression, injured pride, self-pity, nostalgia, self-examination and finally recognition of his own foolishness and his need for help. At last he thought of his father, and realized the pain that he must have caused him and how he had let him down. With all his heart he felt sorry for what he had done. He decided to return home, to confess his wrongdoing to his father, and beg for his forgiveness.

The parable: a waiting father

Draw particular attention to the unceasing concern of the father who was still longing for a reconciliation with his son, and who was watching for his return. Convey the joy the father felt as he ran to greet his son; a joy shared by the son as he experienced the loving welcome, and forgiveness of his father.

The parable: the real lost son

Only the reactions of the older brother marred their happiness. Angry and jealous he remained outside. He, too, was lost because of his unforgiving attitude. The father first sent a messenger, and then went out personally to plead with his older son who could not bear to see such a fuss made of his younger brother. Some of the children may take to heart this part of the story. Help them to see the relevance of the incident in Jesus' time, and also its relevance to their own experience. It is easy for us to behave like the older son, failing to forgive others in spite of the fact that God forgives us for the things we do wrong, if we are truly sorry and turn to him.

Worksheets

The stones in the sheepfold read:

sheep	coin	lamp	lost
pigs	calf	alive	found

Prayer

Dear Lord God, we thank you that, like a loving father, you will always forgive us when we are sorry for the wrong we have done. Amen.

Memory verse

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9).