

## **STANDARD A: WHO IS JESUS AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO FOLLOW HIM?**

### **Lesson 4: How May People Have Peace with God?**

#### **Introduction**

We have looked at what the Kingdom of God is like. But how does one become a citizen of the Kingdom of God? How does one enter the Kingdom? In this lesson we will answer these questions.

One day while Jesus was teaching, a strange thing happened. People who were recognized as sinners, were trying to get as close to Jesus as they could. They wanted to hear every word He said. But these were the people the religious leaders called sinners. They did not obey all the religious laws the leaders thought righteous people should obey. Because of this, the religious leaders believed sinners could not receive God's favor. Since they claimed to represent God, they thought God would act like them. God certainly would not have anything to do with sinners as Jesus was doing. But Jesus claimed to speak for God. So, it didn't make any sense to them that sinners would be gathered close around Jesus, listening to His every word (Luke 15:1-2).

What were the religious leaders doing while the sinners pressed to see Jesus? Since they claimed to know God, they too must have wanted to be near Jesus. But that wasn't the case at all. They did not enjoy being around Jesus. Instead of thirsting to hear and be near Jesus, the religious leaders were unhappy. They were unhappy because Jesus gladly received sinners to himself. The religious leaders—the Pharisees and Scribes—grumbled and complained. They were sure God loved them, but not the sinners.

Hearing the religious leaders complain, Jesus began to tell stories. He did so for a purpose. He wanted all of His hearers to know what God is really like.

#### **A. Those Who Enter the Kingdom Must First Recognize They Are Lost.**

Jesus taught this truth through stories about everyday life.

##### **1. The Lost Sheep (Luke 15:4-7)**

Jesus told about a shepherd who had 100 sheep. In the evening, the shepherd realized one sheep was missing. He did not say, "I have 99 sheep, so I will just forget about the one that is lost." Instead, the shepherd left the 99 that were safe in the sheepfold. He then went out into the night and looked for the lost sheep for a long time. He searched and searched until he found it. Placing the sheep upon his shoulders, the shepherd brought the sheep home. He was so happy he called his friends to come and help him celebrate.

##### **2. The Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10)**

Jesus also told a story about a woman who had ten silver coins. She lost one of them. She could have said, “Well, I have nine coins. I will just forget about the lost one.” Instead, she lit a lamp and then carefully swept her entire house. Finally, she found the lost coin. She was so happy she called her friends to come and help her celebrate.

### **3. The Lost Son (Luke 15:11-32)**

Jesus told another story, which is one of the most beautiful stories in the Bible. A father had two sons. One day the younger son said to his father, “Give me the money I will receive after you die. I want it now.” The father did what the son asked. The son then left home and moved to a distant country. There, he wasted all the money his father had given him. The son lived carelessly and sinfully. Finally, he had nothing to eat. So, he took a job of feeding pigs. This was a shameful job for a Jew in New Testament times. Jews were to have nothing to do with pigs. The young man ate the same food he was feeding the pigs. The son brought shame to both his father and himself.

One day the son realized what a sinful and shameful thing he had done. He admitted he was sinner. Then he said to himself, “My father’s servants have better food than I do. I will go to my father and ask that I become one of his servants.” That was his plan, and that is what he set out to do. He did not think he deserved to be treated like a son.

As the young man came near his home, the father saw his sinful son coming down the road. When the father saw his son, he ran joyfully to meet him. Quickly the son repented of his sins. He told the father he had come back to become a servant. He admitted he had sinned against God and against his father. He said he no longer deserved to be called a son.

How did the father respond? In anger? Did he send his son away? No! The father commanded the servants to bring out a robe, sandals, and ring and give them to the son. The robe would identify him as a son of the father. The ring would announce that the father had forgiven the son’s sins. Then the father held a great feast to celebrate the son’s return. The father was very happy his wayward son had come back home. The father forgave, restored, and treated the son as though he had never gone away and sinned. The father did this because of his love, not because the son deserved it.

The father also had an older son who had not left home. He had stayed home and worked for the father. He resented his brother for what he had done. So, rather than being happy, the older brother was angry. He did not believe that their father should forgive his wayward brother. He thought that once his brother was a sinner, he was always a sinner. He would have urged the father to drive the sinful boy away, never to be seen again.

The older son was correct about only thing. His brother had not earned the right to be forgiven. He deserved to be turned away and rejected forever. But happily, the father responded on the basis of love and forgiveness, not on the basis of worth or merit. Jesus told these stories to help us see what God is like. He also told the stories to help us see ourselves and to recognize all of us need God's forgiveness.

Who do the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son represent? All of us. All persons. All people have sinned against God. We have not loved and worshiped God as we should. We have not faithfully obeyed and served Him. Therefore, all persons are lost and away from God. We are sinners. Like the younger son, we deserve to be punished for our sins. We certainly do not deserve God's forgiveness and grace. There is absolutely nothing any of us can do to deserve God's forgiveness and favor. Also, no other human being or saint or ancestor or Mary, the mother of Jesus, can assist us. All persons are helplessly in need of God's mercy. All parts of our lives have been affected by our sins.

So what hope is there for any of us? All of us are in despair. All of us are lost, just like the sheep, the coin, and the son. None of them could find themselves. Someone else had to find and restore them.

**Question:** Who represents God in the stories Jesus told?

**Question:** Who is God really like?

**Question:** How are we like the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son?

## **B. Those Who Enter the Kingdom Must Accept the Kingdom as God's Gift.**

Entering the Kingdom of God comes through God's grace alone. Only God can forgive and restore us. In the Gospel of John we read: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:16-17). In another place, we are told God sent His Son, born of a woman, to redeem or save all persons who would repent of their sins and receive Jesus as Savior. Just like the younger son Jesus told about, all who repent of their sins and turn to Christ will receive adoption as the children of God (Galatians 4:4).

Repentance means we fully accept God's judgment against us. It means we are the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. It involves determination to leave the old way of life in which we wasted our lives and rebelled against God. No one can hear the Good News unless, like the lost son in Jesus' story, he or she has heard the bad news about sin. Repentance also means that we totally place our trust in Christ and abandon all of our foolish efforts to please God in our own strength.

It is through God's Son, Jesus Christ, alone that God makes salvation available to all persons. Only those persons who recognize they are sinners before God can ever hope to receive God's forgiveness and restoration. No repentant sinner contributes anything at all to his or her salvation. Even the ability to reach out to the Savior in faith is God's gift. The Holy Spirit, as God's witness to His eternal Son, shows us that we are sinners. He

convicts us of our sins and shows us our total helplessness before God. The Holy Spirit shows us just how bound in our sins we really are. But the Holy Spirit also shows us that indeed Jesus is the Savior who can bring us from sinful death into eternal life. The Spirit of God awakens us to our sins and to the promise of salvation through Jesus Christ. He promotes within us a hunger for salvation.

**Question:** What is God's gift to us?

**Question:** What does repentance mean?

**Question:** How do we leave the old life behind?

### **C. Those Who Enter the Kingdom Become Born Again.**

Jesus said that to enter the Kingdom of God a person must be born again (John 3:1-15). A person must be born "from above" by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit also makes it possible for us to confess our sins and reach out to Jesus. We can't do this in our own strength. It is through the Spirit that Jesus comes to live in us. Receiving Jesus as one's Savior is like being born all over again. We call this *regeneration* or *to become new*. A person who enters the Kingdom becomes a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

But the second birth is not a physical birth like the first birth. The second birth is a spiritual one. It comes from above, from God. It is the new life of forgiveness and restoration to fellowship with God that He alone can give. When one time we boasted about ourselves, we now boast in Christ alone.

In the New Birth that comes from above, we are reconciled to God. Christ has sought us, found us, and restored us to God's favor. Now we have peace with God through Jesus. The war that existed before has ceased. The separation has been overcome. Christ's life, death, and resurrection made all this possible. Jesus was faithful to His Heavenly Father. Through His faithfulness, we are saved; we are redeemed.

The Apostle Paul explained it this way. Even though Jesus was sinless, God placed upon Him the sins of all of us, who are sinners. God did this so we who are sinners could be reconciled to Him (2 Corinthians 5:21). In the Book of Ephesians we learn more. God is rich in mercy. And because of His great love for us, He loved us even when we were dead in our sins. He made us alive in Christ and saved us by His grace. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the results of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:4-9, NRSV).

Not only are we restored to God's favor, we are truly, at that moment, changed by Christ. The New Testament uses several words to describe this change. We become new creations in Christ. We are born again. Buried with Christ in death like His, we are raised to new life in Him. The old life passes away. A new reality takes place. We are regenerated or created anew. The Holy Spirit, who is at work in us now, makes it possible for us live in the new reality, the new life in Christ. We become children of God. The apostle Paul wrote: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through

Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:17-18). All those who have been changed by Christ will bear the fruit of Christ in their lives (John 15:1-11). Paul said they now set their minds on the things of the Spirit, and that doing so is “life and peace” (Romans 8:9-11).

**Question:** How does a person enter the Kingdom of God?

**Question:** What does it mean to become a new creation in Christ?

**Question:** What is the difference between the first and second birth?

#### **D. Those Who Enter the Kingdom Receive Eternal Life.**

To be in Christ and to know Him as Savior is eternal life. He is the light of the world. He is life, the life of God. Sin brings eternal death, but Jesus Christ brings eternal life. To live in sin is death and warfare with God. But to live in Christ is life and peace. Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. . . . This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son, and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day” (John 6:35, 40, NRSV).

**Question:** In whom is eternal life?

#### **Conclusion**

The religious leaders who grumbled because Jesus received sinners did not know very much about God. But Jesus knew exactly what God is like. God revealed himself in Jesus. So, when Jesus spoke about His Heavenly Father, the Father was speaking through His Son, Jesus. The sinners who pushed forward to hear Jesus heard the Good News they had never heard from the religious leaders. They loved Jesus because in His words and actions they heard about God’s love. He spoke of God in ways the religious leaders knew nothing of. So, they rejoiced to learn God would receive them, even though they were lost sheep. They, too, could be found. They, too, could live in peace with Him. That God loves sinners and wants to reconcile them is indeed Good News.

Those persons who repent of their sins will completely accept God’s judgment that they are sinners. They will fully recognize that left to themselves they would remain in their sins. They hear the Good News that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but will have eternal life (John 3:16). By the Spirit’s strength, they radically place their trust in Jesus. For Christ’s sake, the Father forgives them of their sins and adopts them as His children. Through the Spirit’s work in them, those who repent of their sins and who turn to Christ are changed, really changed. The old life of rebellion, guilt, and shame passes away. A new reality happens. The new believers become new creatures in Christ Jesus. In the power of the Holy Spirit, they now rise to walk a new path, a path that always leads to becoming more like Jesus Christ, the Lord.

**Activity:** Memorize John 3:16-17 and 2 Corinthians 5:17-18. See lesson for scriptures.

**Activity:** Tell someone in your discipleship group how you became a Christian.

**Activity:** Practice telling someone about the new birth and eternal life.