

JESUS AND YOU

Tales of the unexpected

*Stories told by Jesus
from Luke's Gospel*

By Pete and Anne Woodcock

Leader's Guide



Introduction

Welcome to the leader's guide for *Tales of the Unexpected*.

Tales of the Unexpected introduces people to Jesus Christ and his teaching, by looking carefully at three of his most famous stories, recorded in Luke's Gospel, in the New Testament part of the Bible. In just four sessions, we aim to present the Christian message in a non-threatening way, either in a small group or one-to-one, to people who may know little or nothing about the Christian faith and Jesus Christ.

Tales of the Unexpected is part of the *Jesus and You* series of four-session introductions to Jesus Christ. To get started, you will need *Tales of the Unexpected* booklets for each person who joins the group, the DVD and this leader's guide.

Note: You can find plenty of helpful information and ideas about setting up and running a *Jesus and You* group in *How to run a Jesus and You group*. It's worth reading if you are new to doing this, or are introducing the Christian faith to people who may not be familiar with one or more of the following:

- the English language
- church or any 'religious activity'
- reading, studying and discussing a text, like the Bible

How to run a Jesus and You group is available as a free download from The Good Book Company websites:

UK: www.thegoodbook.co.uk

USA & Canada: www.thegoodbook.com

Australia: www.thegoodbook.com.au

New Zealand: www.thegoodbook.com.au

This leader's guide gives target answers to the questions in the booklet. These are what you should be aiming at in your group discussions. *How to run a Jesus and You group* (see above) includes useful advice about how you can best help your group get the most from discussing the questions.

At the end of the leader's guide you will find scripts for the Downloads (DVD talks). If you cannot use the DVD in the sessions, you will need to present the Downloads yourself.

1 The rich fool

Luke 12 v 13-21

TARGET ANSWERS

Think about...

Things that show someone is successful—a big house in a good area, an expensive car, all the latest gadgets, designer clothes and jewellery. But also... photos and articles about their life/house/career in celebrity magazines, or appearing on TV chat shows.

Test yourself: how much can you remember?

(**Note:** The purpose of this activity is to help people who are new to the Bible familiarise themselves with the Bible passage. It's optional—use it if you think it will be helpful for your group. It doesn't have to be done as a strict memory test—let people refer to the printed Bible passage if that is helpful for them. Be guided by your knowledge of the group and their preferences.)

- One, or two if you include God (either answer is okay)
- A farmer
- Not enough room to store all his crops
- He asks himself for advice: *'What should I do?' (v 17)*
- Tear down his storerooms and build bigger ones
- Taking life easy and having a good time
- He dies
- Foolish
- People who are not rich in God's eyes

GATECRASHER!

1. What is the best description of the man in the crowd?

b. He thought Jesus might be able to help him get some of the inheritance.

2. What did this man think would make his life really happy and successful?

Having lots and lots of things

3. What is the man's real problem?

He wanted more and more things but he was not rich in God's eyes.

4. Can you think of any examples of songs etc. that tell us how good it is to have loads of things?

Make sure *you* have some up-to-date examples of songs, articles or TV shows that tell us how good it is to have loads of things.

DOWNLOAD 1:1

(**Note:** This summary is printed on p13 of the booklet.)

- *Jesus is the world's greatest teacher. In Luke chapter 12 he has been talking about some of the most important subjects ever.*
- *When the man in the crowd interrupts Jesus, he shows he is not interested in what Jesus thinks is important. He is only interested in what he thinks is important.*
- *This man thinks getting his share of money from his brother is the most important thing.*
- *This man is interested in being rich with money. He is not interested in being rich towards God.*
- *Jesus tells us to beware of greed. In his story he will show that you can be rich in this world, and yet be completely poor towards God.*

5. Which statements treat God in the same way that this man treated Jesus?

'I pray every week that I will win the lottery.'

'Where was God when my house got flooded?'

People who say things like this show that they are interested in God only because they hope to get something good from him. When something happens that they don't like, they get angry with God—as if he isn't doing his job properly.

But the last statement—*'Our Father in heaven, we pray that what you want will be done here on earth as it is in heaven'*—treats God as God (the one who is in charge of everything). This statement shows trust in God. Trusting God means understanding that it's good to pray for what he wants even if we don't understand what he is doing.

6. How can we be like this man?

1. We are like this man if it's important for us to have money and lots of things.

(**Note:** Be aware that people will often say money and possessions are not important to them, but their behaviour tells a different story. How do we know if money and possessions are important to us? Find out by asking the extra questions—choose those appropriate for your group.)

Extra questions

- **Have you ever argued about money with a relative or friend?**
- **Have you ever felt upset because you couldn't afford something that your child wanted?**
- **Have you ever found it difficult to sleep because you were worried about money?**
- **Have you ever thought that buying something you wanted very much would make you really happy?**
- **Have you ever felt embarrassed because you didn't have the right sort of car / clothes / mobile phone / holiday etc?**

2. We are also like this man if we only show interest in God so that we can get something good from him, or to stop something bad from happening to us.

Get people to think about a time when they might have prayed. Why did they pray and what did they ask God for? Or get them to think about a time when they felt angry with God. Why was that? Was it because something happened which they didn't like?

3. And we are also like this man if we don't want to listen to the words of Jesus—the greatest teacher this world has ever known, talking about the most important things there are.

Ask yourself

- *Imagine I can get Jesus' attention like this man. Is there something in my life that I want Jesus to sort out for me?*
- *What sort of things do I pray for?*
- *What stops me listening to the words of Jesus?*

Read out the 'ask yourself' questions and give your group a few moments to think about them. You could ask them to share answers if they want to, and if that is right for your group. Or you could get them to think about their answers by themselves. Or you could ask them to go home and think about their answers, or write them down, or talk about them with someone.

ME, MYSELF AND I

1. How many times did the rich man say 'me', 'myself' or 'I'?

Ten times in three verses.

(**Note:** You can move fairly quickly through the following questions. The idea is to build up a striking picture of this man's self-centredness.)

- **Who was he trying to please?**
Himself
- **Who did he turn to for advice (v 17)?**
Himself
- **Whose plan was he following?**
His plan
- **Who did he think was in control his life?**
Himself

2. Who did he pray to?

(**Note:** This is a trick question.)

He didn't pray. He just talked to himself.

3. What was the man's goal in life (see v 19)?

He wanted to take life easy and have a good time.

- **Did he reach that goal?**
No, because God took away his life before he could carry out his plan.

4. How does Jesus show that this man was a fool?

He was a fool because he only thought about his life in this world, which he thought (wrongly) that he could control. But he didn't think about God, the one who took his life at the end of the story and made all his plans fail. He made himself rich in this life,

which didn't matter and couldn't help him, but he didn't think about how to be rich in God's eyes—the only thing that mattered in the end.

DOWNLOAD 1:2

(**Note:** This summary is printed on p13 of the booklet.)

- *The rich farmer in the story looks very successful, until you get to verse 20.*
 - *Jesus shows that the rich farmer was a complete failure because he made three big mistakes.*
 - *Mistake 1: He lived as if there is no God.*
 - *Mistake 2: He lived as if this world is all there is.*
 - *Mistake 3: He lived as if there is no Judgment Day.*
- 5. *'Most of the time, ordinary people live as if there is no God. Even if people say that they believe in God, they don't live as if he is real.'***
What shows us that this is true?
- (**Note:** There are lots of answers to this question. Allow people to share what comes to mind before you make any suggestions.)
- People don't mention God in their plans or decisions (so probably they don't think about him)
 - People don't often pray
 - If people wanted to find out what God thinks, you might expect some of them to come to church or read the Bible, but many people never do these things
 - People often don't have any clear idea about who God is or what he is like, so how can they have any strong belief in him?
 - People do what **they** want to do or what **they** think is right, and never ask whether it's what God wants or thinks is right.
- 6. *How do people build 'bigger storerooms' in their lives?***
- (**Note:** Let people say what they think first, before helping them.)
- Like the rich farmer in Jesus' story, people are always planning the next thing they want to do in their lives—whether to go to college or get a job, which job to get, where to live, who to live with, where to go on holiday, **how to get bigger and better stuff**, what to do in their free time, what to get for the kids, what to get for themselves, **how to get bigger and better stuff**, when to stop working, what to do with all that spare time, how to keep going for as long as possible, **how to get bigger and better stuff**... But people try **not** to think about what will happen when they die.
- 7. *Why do people fail to prepare for death?***
- (**Note:** Again, allow people to share their ideas before you make any suggestions.)
- People are afraid of death: they don't know what will happen and they don't know what to do about it. They don't know God and they haven't spent any time trying to find out about him, so they are afraid of him.

Ask yourself

- *If the story stopped at the end of verse 19, would I like to be this man?*
- *If I were to die tonight, what would Jesus say about my life?*

REALLY RICH!

DOWNLOAD 1:3

(**Note:** This summary is printed on p13 of the booklet.)

- *Jesus wants us to ask ourselves: 'Am I rich in God's eyes?' and 'How can I be rich toward God?'*
- *Only Jesus Christ can make us rich in God's eyes.*
- *The way to be rich toward God begins with listening to Jesus.*

(**Note:** The DVD includes the real-life story of a Christian who once was a 'rich fool'.)

THE BIG QUESTION: Where am I in this story?

Take your group through the options in the booklet and let them decide which one best fits them.

End the session by reading out the verse printed in the booklet (2 Corinthians 8 v 9).

Briefly explain what it means:

We can only become rich in God's eyes through Jesus and what he did for us in dying on the cross.

You could finish the session with a short, simple prayer. (This is optional—see **How to run a Jesus and You group.**)

2 The runaway son

Luke 15 v 11-24

Begin the session by reading out the summary so far. You could check if people have any questions, comments or problems from last session. Deal with these briefly, or arrange another time when you can do this eg: during refreshments or at the end of the session.

TARGET ANSWERS

Think about...

Most people think that freedom is being able to do what you want with no one else telling you what to do or what not to do. So most people think they are not free if their choice is restricted in some way—by rules and laws or by circumstances (eg: disability, kids, not enough money).

(**Note:** You could begin to show that this is a wrong understanding of freedom by asking the extra questions.)

Extra questions

- **What happens if there are no rules of the road (eg: stop at a red light)?**
- **Will that give people more freedom?**

Test yourself: how much can you remember?

(**Note:** As this is an exercise to help people familiarise themselves with the story, don't worry too much about remembering the precise wording of the Bible passage. All reasonably correct alternatives should be allowed.)

- (1) family property (inheritance, money)
- (2) a country far away
- (3) wild
- (4) food
- (5) feeding pigs
- (6) pigs' food
- (7) hired workers (servants, employees)
- (8) sinned
- (9) your son
- (10) threw his arms around (hugged)
- (11) kissed
- (12) best robe
- (13) ring
- (14) sandals
- (15) fattest calf

'GIMME GIMME!'

1. When does a son or daughter normally get the family property from their parents?

When their parents die.

- **What was the younger son really saying to his father?**

'I wish you were dead.'

2. What did the younger son do when he got his money?

He packed up, left home and went far away.

- **What does this show about his attitude to his father?**

He was only interested in his father for what he could get out of him. As soon as he got the money, he left. He wasn't interested in his relationship with his dad—in being with him and enjoying his company.

3. What did this father do?

He gave his son what he asked for and let him go.

DOWNLOAD 2:1

(**Note:** This summary is printed on p23 of the booklet.)

- *Jesus' story of the runaway son is not about how to treat our parents, but about how we treat God and how God treats us.*
- *The father represents God, and the two sons show different ways in which people like us turn away from God.*
- *By demanding his share of the family property, the younger son was really saying that he wished his father was dead!*
- *The younger son left his father because he was certain that he could run his life better on his own.*
- *Like the younger son, we take the good things that God has given us and then run our life on our own, as if God is dead.*

4. Think of some ways in which people today treat God and his gifts in the same way that the younger son treated his father.

You could remind people of what you discussed in Session 1: question 5, which raised the subject of how people only pray when they need or want something from God.

They don't pray as part of a relationship with him. And they pray for what they want, not what God wants.

Ask yourself

- *How do I treat God in the same way that the younger son treated his father?*

Read out the 'ask yourself' question and give your group a few moments to think about it.

You could ask them to share answers if they want to, and if that is right for your group. Or you could get them to think about their answers by themselves. Or you could ask them to go home and think about their answers, or write them down, or talk about them with someone.

WASTED!

1. What is the difference between the younger son's hopes and where he ended up in verse 16?

The younger son thought that once he was far away from his father with lots of money, he would be free to live the life he wanted. But he ended up without money, friends or food. He was deeply in need and not free at all.

2. The younger son 'came to his senses' (v 17). What does this mean?

(**Note:** To answer this question, people will need to answer the questions below.)

- **What did he realise about his need (v 17)?**

That he was dying.

- **What did he realise about other people (v 16)?**

That no one would help him. 'No one gave him anything'—v 16.

- **What did he realise about his father (v 17)?**

That his father was wealthy, generous and able to give him what he needed.

- **What did he realise about himself (v 18-19)?**

That he had sinned against his father.

3. What did the younger son decide to do?

He decided to go home and ask his father to show him mercy.

Make sure your group understands that he decided to do this only because he knew that his father was generous.

DOWNLOAD 2:2

(**Note:** This summary is printed on p23 of the booklet.)

- At first, the younger son had a good time. But when his money ran out no one helped him.
- He thought he could make a home for himself away from the father, but he ended up feeding pigs and starving.
- Even if we have all that this world can give us, we won't find true satisfaction or freedom. 'The party is always followed by the morning after.'
- The younger son came to his senses when he realised that he needed to go home to his father.
- He knew he had sinned against his father. But he also knew how good his father was. So he had hope that he would be accepted back.

4. What will it mean for us to come to our senses?

(**Note:** To answer this question, people will need to answer the questions below. Help people to work out the answers by asking at each point: 'What did the younger son realise?' [see question 2 above] and 'How are we like the younger son?')

What must we realise about...

- **our need?**
Away from a relationship with God we are in desperate need. Our bodies are dying, life damages us and we can never find true happiness. 'The party is always followed by the morning after.' In this world we will never be 'at home'.
- **God?**
God is different to how we think of him. He is a good and generous Father, not a miserable, mean control-freak.
- **ourselves?**
We have sinned against God. Like the younger son, we have taken God's good gifts but we have run away from God himself. We don't deserve any welcome from him.

What must we do? We must turn around and go back to God. That means we must look for a relationship with him. We need to know that we don't deserve any welcome from him, but we also need to understand that he is good and generous.

Ask yourself

- *Have I come to my senses, like the younger son?*
- *Like the younger son, have I ever admitted that I have sinned against God, and I am not worthy to be his child?*

HOME COMING!

1. What did the father do when his son came home?

He ran to him, hugged him and kissed him (v 20); he gave him the best robe, a ring for his finger and sandals (v 22); he had the fattest calf killed and threw a party to celebrate (v 23-24).

2. Which of these do you find most surprising? Why?

You could get people to think how their own fathers might have reacted to the younger son. Or ask them: 'What would you have done if you were the father?'

DOWNLOAD 2:3

(**Note:** This summary is printed on p23 of the booklet.)

- *His father was waiting for him. He ran to him, and hugged and kissed him in his dirty pig-feeding clothes.*
- *The father enjoyed having his son home again and celebrated with a great party.*
- *Despite all the things in our lives that make us unclean, God wants to welcome us back into his family.*
- *God has run to us by sending Jesus. In Jesus, our 'dirty clothes' are removed and we are given 'new clothes'—we are forgiven and accepted back into God's family.*
- *Where are you in this story?*

(**Note:** The DVD includes a choice of two real-life stories of Christians, each of whom was once a 'runaway son'. Choose the one that's best for your group and play it after Download 2:3.)

THE BIG QUESTION: Where am I in this story?

Take your group through the options in the booklet and let them decide which one best fits them.

End the session by reading out the verse printed in the booklet (John 1 v 12).

Briefly explain what it means:

We can only become children of God our Father through believing in Jesus and what he did for us in dying on the cross.

You could finish the session with a short, simple prayer. (This is optional—see ***How to run a Jesus and You group.***)

3 The stay-at-home son

Luke 15 v 11-32

Begin the session by reading out the summary so far. You could check if people have any questions, comments or problems from last session. Deal with these briefly, or arrange another time when you can do this eg: during refreshments or at the end of the session.

TARGET ANSWERS

Think about...

Children, even very young ones, often say: 'It's not fair!' Think about when they say this—usually it's because they think someone is treating them unfairly. They don't often say this when other people are being treated unfairly! No one teaches us to say this. It shows that humans naturally understand that there should be fairness, and it is especially important that **we** are treated fairly.

Test yourself: how much can you remember?

- a. True (see v 12)
- b. False
- c. False
- d. True (As soon as he had the money, he left home)
- e. False
- f. False
- g. False (see v 29)
- h. True (see v 29-30)
- i True (see v 20 and 28)
- j. False, or don't know

WHO'S A GOOD BOY THEN?

1. How is the older son different to the younger son?

He didn't leave home; he worked on the family farm (see v 25); he followed his father's orders (v 29); he didn't waste the family money (see v 30).

2. When the older son found out about the party for his brother, why was that an unpleasant surprise?

Clearly, he thought that he deserved a party, and that his brother didn't deserve one.

- **How did he feel?**

He felt angry (v 38).

3. What made him angry?

He was angry because he thought his father was being unfair. He wanted a reward for behaving in a better way than his brother.

4. What would you say was the older son's opinion of...

- **himself?**
He thought he was a good son, and deserved a reward from his father.
- **his brother?**
He thought his brother was a bad son who didn't deserve to be welcomed home.
- **his father?**
He thought his father was unfair and wrong to welcome back the younger son.

DOWNLOAD 3:1

(Note: This summary is printed on p34 of the booklet.)

- *The main point of Jesus' story about the two sons is to get us to think about the older son.*
- *This story is the last of three stories told by Jesus in Luke chapter 15. Each one is about something that is lost—in a place where it ought not to be. In each story someone goes to look for the thing that is lost.*
- *At the end of the story of the two sons, the older son is as lost as the younger son was. He is not where he ought to be—in the party, with the father.*
- *The older son looks good, but inside he is angry with his father because he thinks he has no reward for his hard work. He treats his father like a chocolate bar machine.*
- *We treat God like a chocolate bar machine—we think that if we do good things, God should reward us. Just as no one wants a relationship with a machine, so we don't really want to know God as our Father.*
- *It is possible to be a hard-working, clean-living, decent religious person but still be lost, because we are miles away from the heart of God.*

5. In truth, how good was the older son? (Did he do what his father wanted at the end of the story?)

The older son was proud of the fact that he always obeyed his father's orders (v 29). But he refused to join his father's party for his brother. And at the end of the story, even after his father begged him to come in, he was still outside the party. He wasn't as good as he thought he was.

6. What did he really think of his father? Look at verses 29-30.

He thought his father treated him like a slave; he thought his father was mean and didn't love him because he had never given him a party; he thought his father was unfair because he welcomed home the younger son.

7. How like his father was the older son? (How much did he share what his father loved and longed for?)

He didn't understand how his father could welcome home his brother; he didn't share his father's joy; and he certainly didn't love his brother. He was very different from his father.

8. What did he really want from his father?

He wanted a reward from his father for his 'goodness', but he didn't want to grow in his relationship with his father.

Ask yourself

- *Have I ever treated God like a chocolate-bar machine?*

SAME DIFFERENCE

1. How similar are the two brothers?

(**Note:** To answer this question, people will need to answer the questions below.)

At the beginning of the story...

- **what did the younger son want?**
He wanted things from his father—his share of the family property.
- **what did he not want?**
He didn't want a relationship with his father—he ran away from home.

At the end of the story...

- **what does the older son want?**
He wants things from his father—a goat, a party, a reward for his 'goodness.'
- **what does he not want?**
He doesn't want a relationship with his father—he doesn't want to be with his father in the party, and to enjoy and love what his father enjoys and loves.

DOWNLOAD 3:2

(**Note:** This summary is printed on p34 of the booklet.)

- *The people who find this teaching of Jesus most difficult are those who are very good and religious. They are 'older son' people and there are four things that we can learn about them from Jesus' story.*
- **1. 'Older son' people live good and religious lives because they are pleasing themselves, not because they love God and enjoy pleasing him.**
- **2. 'Older son' people compare themselves with others who are worse than them.**
- **3. 'Older son' people can't bear the idea that someone, however bad, can call God 'Father', without having to do good stuff first.**
- **4. 'Older son' people are more lost than 'younger son' people. That's because they don't know that they are lost.**

2. Look at what the father says to the older son in verse 31. What does the father think is the most important thing in their relationship?

The most important thing for the father is that the older son is with him and shares in his whole life.

- **Does the younger son now have this kind of relationship with his father? (Where is the younger son at the end of the story?)**
Yes—he is in the party with his father.

- ***Does the older son now have this kind of relationship with his father? (Where is the older son at the end of the story?)***
No—he is outside the party and angry with his father.

3. *How does the story show us that God is very different to what we often expect?*

(**Note:** Use the extra questions if that will help your group to answer this.)

- ***If you feel that you are a bad person, what will you expect God to be like?***
You will expect God to be like an angry judge who punishes you, but the story shows God is like the father who loved and welcomed his runaway son.
- ***If you feel that you are a good person, what will you expect God to be like?***
You will expect him to reward you. But the story shows that God is not just a reward-giver (like a chocolate bar machine). He is a loving father who wants to share everything that he has and that he loves with us.

Ask yourself

- *Which son am I most like?*

RELATIONSHIP

DOWNLOAD 3:3

(**Note:** This summary is printed on p34 of the booklet.)

- *Jesus teaches that what is most important is not what we do for God, but what relationship we have with him.*
- *The story of the stay-at-home son teaches us that good people too need to come to their senses and seek a true relationship with God.*
- *Where are you in this story?*

(**Note:** The DVD includes a choice of two real-life stories of Christians, each of whom was once a 'stay-at-home son'. Choose the one that's best for your group and play it after Download 3:3.)

THE BIG QUESTION: Where am I in this story?

Take your group through the options in the booklet and let them decide which one best fits them.

End the session by reading out the verse printed in the booklet (Matthew 7 v 22-23).

Briefly explain what it means:

Jesus himself says that on Judgment Day, it's not things we have done that will help us. The only thing that will help us is a relationship with Jesus—knowing him and him knowing us.

You could finish the session with a short, simple prayer. (This is optional—see ***How to run a Jesus and You group.***)

4 The Pharisee and the tax collector

Luke 18 v 9-14

Begin the session by reading out the summary so far. You could check if people have any questions, comments or problems from last session. Deal with these briefly, or arrange another time when you can do this eg: during refreshments or at the end of the session.

TARGET ANSWERS

Imagine...

The religious suicide-bomber expects God to reward him for giving up his life for his religion. Allow people to share their own ideas about what he will discover. Their answers will depend on their view of God and religion. It doesn't matter at this stage if they are right or wrong, as this session will show what the Bible teaches about God's view of religious people.

Test yourself: how much can you remember?

(**Note:** The terms 'Pharisee' and 'tax collector' will be explained in Download 4:1, but you may want to mention these here. 'Pharisee' = someone who followed Jewish religious rules very strictly and was respected as a very good person. 'Tax collector' = someone who worked for the Roman state, the enemy of the Jews, and was considered a very bad person.)

- A. b (v 9)
- B. a (v 10)
- C. c
- D. a (v 11)
- E. b (v 13)
- F. a (v 14)

A SHOCKING END!

1. Who was Jesus teaching when he told this story (v 9)?

He was teaching people who were sure they were right with God and who looked down on everybody else.

2. Look at the end of the story in v 14. Who was right with God?

The tax collector—he went home accepted by God.

- **Who was not right with God?**

The Pharisee

3. What is good about the Pharisee's life (v 11-12)?

He is not a robber, he does not commit adultery and he is not like the tax collector; he fasts twice a week and he gives away a tenth of everything that he gets.

4. Look at the Pharisee's prayer.

- **How many times does he mention God?**
Once, at the beginning
- **How many times does he mention himself?**
He says the word 'I' eight times in his prayer.
- **Why does he think he is right with God?**
Because he does good things (fasting, giving away a tenth), and he doesn't do bad things (robbery, adultery, being a tax collector).

5. The Pharisee compares himself with the tax collector. What does he think of the tax collector?

He clearly thinks that the tax collector is a bad person because he tells God that he is not like 'this tax collector'.

DOWNLOAD 4:1

(**Note:** This summary is printed on p43 of the booklet.)

- *Jesus puts two people into this story who are completely different. One tries to be very good—the Pharisee, who keeps laws very strictly and believes he is one of God's special people. The other is very bad—a tax collector, which means he is a traitor and a thief.*
- *Jesus turns everything upside down. He tells us that the tax collector went home right with God, but the Pharisee did not.*
- *The real difference between the two men is who or what they are trusting in as they come to God.*
- *The Pharisee trusts in himself. He prays about himself and he believes that he is okay.*

6. Today, what kind of people do you think are right with God?

- **What kind of people do you think cannot be right with God?**

Allow people to share what they think. It doesn't matter at this stage if they are right or wrong. If people are slow to answer, you could throw out a few ideas. What about Hitler? The Pope? A paedophile? A thief? A liar? Make sure to ask why that person can or cannot be right with God.

Ask yourself

- How much like the Pharisee am I?

A WONDERFUL END!

1. How did these two men stand when they prayed? How were they different?

The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself. He was confident that God would accept him. But the tax collector would not look up and he beat his chest. He felt bad about himself.

2. Look at the tax collector's prayer (v 13).

- **What does he believe about himself?**

He knows he is a sinner.

- **What does he believe about God?**

He believes that God shows mercy, otherwise he wouldn't pray to God.

- **What help does he need?**

He needs God to have mercy on him and to accept him even though he is a sinner.

3. We've seen that the Pharisee is trusting in himself. What do you think the tax collector is trusting in?

The tax collector isn't trusting in himself because he knows he is a sinner. Instead, he trusts in God's mercy.

DOWNLOAD 4:2

(**Note:** This summary is printed on p43 of the booklet.)

- *The tax collector knows that he is guilty of sin, and he knows that God knows. The first step to be right with God is to know that you are **not** right with him.*
- *The tax collector knows that only God can help him and so he asks God to have mercy on him.*
- *The tax collector asks God to be 'mercy-seated' to him. What happened at the Mercy Seat in the Temple shows us how God forgives sinful people—a perfect substitute is punished instead of sinners.*
- *Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He was perfect, but when He died, he was treated like a sinner.*
- *The next steps to being right with God are to ask God for mercy and then trust in what God has done for us—sending Jesus to die on the cross.*

4. Look at verse 14. What does Jesus want us to learn from this story?

He wants us to learn that it is a mistake to think we are right with God if we are trusting in our own goodness. But also that we can ask God to make us right with him, and he will do it because he is merciful.

- **In what way was the tax collector humble (brought down)?**

He knew he was a sinner and he asked God for mercy.

- **In what way did the Pharisee lift himself up?**

He thought he was a good person and he tried to impress God with his goodness.

5. How are people who trust God's mercy different from people who try to be good enough for God?

(**Note:** To help your group answer this question, get them to think about the differences between the Pharisee and the tax collector when they were in the Temple. If people are slow to answer, you could write up half of the table below on a board or flip chart, and get your group to make suggestions on how to complete the table.)

People who try to be good enough for God	People who trust God's mercy
---	-------------------------------------

Talk about their goodness	Admit their sin
---------------------------	-----------------

Compare themselves with other (worse) people	Don't compare themselves with anyone
--	--------------------------------------

Look down on other people	Look to God
---------------------------	-------------

Pray about themselves	Ask God for mercy
-----------------------	-------------------

Are proud	Are humble
-----------	------------

6. Why do you think so many people, like the Pharisee, ignore God's mercy?

(**Note:** To help your group answer this question, you could use the extra questions below.)

Extra questions

- **Why would it be difficult for the Pharisee to pray like the tax collector?** Because he would have to admit he was a sinner. But he is proud of his goodness.
- **Why is it easier to trust our own goodness (like the Pharisee) than to ask God for mercy (like the tax collector)?** We don't like to depend on someone else (like God) for help. We feel better about ourselves if we think we can do something to help ourselves.

Ask yourself

- *What stops you from being like the tax collector?*

MERCY FOR YOU

DOWNLOAD 4:3

(**Note:** This summary is printed on p43 of the booklet.)

- *Some people find out the truth—that although they think they are right with God, they are not—but they won't listen to the truth. This is because they don't want to make themselves humble.*
- *But the truth about Jesus can only help us if we make ourselves humble—if we are like the younger son and the tax collector, not like the rich farmer, the older son or the Pharisee.*
- *God, in his kindness, has spoken to us through all of these stories of Jesus—so that we might come to our senses and say: 'God, be mercy-seated to me, a sinner'.*

(**Note:** The DVD includes a choice of two real-life stories of Christians, each of whom was once a 'tax-collector'. Choose the one that's best for your group and play it after Download 4:3.)

THE BIG QUESTION: Where am I in the chart?

Take your group through the chart in the booklet and let them decide which option best fits them.

End the session by reading out the verse printed in the booklet (Romans 5 v 8).

Briefly explain what it means:

God has shown his great love and mercy to each person in the group by sending Jesus to die for us while we were still sinners. Because our sin has been punished in Jesus' death, God can show mercy to us. He can forgive us, and we can become the greatly loved children of our Father God.

At the end of *Tales of the Unexpected* explain the three ways in which people can respond:

- 1. You understand and accept what you have learned about Jesus.**
Then it is time to decide to trust in Jesus. This means you will become rich in God's eyes, you will be welcomed home as the greatly loved child of our Father God, and you will receive God's mercy.
(Explain what is available for people like this. See *How to run a Jesus and You group: What next?*)

- 2. You can't yet decide and you want more time to think about things.**
Then you need to keep learning about Jesus and about what God says in the Bible. This is good, but you need to realise that you can't sit on the fence forever.
(Explain what is available for people like this and encourage them to join in. Options could include: another *Jesus and You* group, inviting them to suitable church meetings or events, meeting one-to-one to read the Bible etc.)

- 3. You have decided not to trust in Jesus.**
Then you need to know that the Bible says you are not rich in God's eyes, you are far away from God and you can't receive his mercy. You can only become God's child through Jesus.
(It may still be very early days for people like this. Although they are clear about not wanting to commit themselves to following Christ at the moment, it is still worth keeping up friendly contact and, if possible, getting them to continue learning from the Bible. Explain what is available for people like this and encourage them to join in. See suggestions for 2 above.)

You could finish the session with a short, simple prayer. (This is optional—see *How to run a Jesus and You group*.)

DOWNLOAD SCRIPTS

In this section you will find all the scripts for the Downloads (the DVD talks) used in *Tales of the Unexpected*. If you are unable to use the DVD in the sessions, you can use these to present the Downloads yourself.

We recommend that you watch the DVDs first to see how the Downloads are presented. If possible, try to 'talk' the Downloads to your group rather than simply reading them aloud. This will make it far easier for your group to listen to. It will mean getting to know the scripts well enough so that you can present the Downloads without having to read from the scripts most of the time.

Please note:

1. Some of the illustrations are personal to the author. You will need to think about how to present these to the group.

2. The wording used in the scripts often ties in closely with the NIRV translation of the Bible and the questions in the booklet, so it's best to stick as closely as possible to the original wording.

3. The DVD also contains the real-life stories of people who have become Christians and whose lives reflect those of some of the people in Jesus' stories. These can only be presented to your group by showing the DVD.

Tales of the Unexpected: Download scripts

Session 1: The rich fool

Download 1:1

Without a doubt, Jesus is the greatest teacher this world has ever known – everyone wants to quote Jesus. Even other religions want Jesus as a prophet.

So, what we have here in Luke chapter 12 is an amazing event. Jesus is talking about really important things – in fact, pretty scary things. And he’s talking to a very big crowd...

He’s been talking about God even hearing our whispers.

He’s been talking about a Judgment Day and hell.

He’s also been talking about the kindness and forgiveness of God.

And in the middle of this amazing speech, this man butts in, as if to say: ‘I don’t care about all that stuff you’re talking about, Jesus. I’ve got a problem with my brother not letting me have my inheritance.’

Can you imagine that? I mean, interrupting the greatest teacher ever! It would be a bit like the Queen giving the most important speech in front of thousands and thousands of people – talking about politics and law and judgments and crime and prison sentences – and you interrupt and say: ‘Look! I’ve got this dispute with the dustman. He’s always leaving half the rubbish and he never cleans up after him. Can you sort this out, Mrs. Queen?’

That’s the kind of shocking interruption that is going on here. And it really shows what is driving this man’s life. He doesn’t want to listen to Jesus – he wants Jesus to listen to him! He doesn’t want to change his life to what Jesus is saying – he wants Jesus to change his brother. He’s not interested in what Jesus thinks is important, but only what he thinks is important. What he sees as important is money and getting his ‘fair share’ of it.

Now, let’s think about this. Imagine if Jesus was here. Would you be telling him what you want him to do? Or would you be listening to him? Think about a lot of prayers. How often do we ask God to step in and do something for us? And how often do we ask to become the sort of person God wants us to be? How often do we want God to sort out our money problems, rather than asking what will make us rich in his eyes?

Look at how Jesus deals with this interruption. He turns to the crowd and says: ***‘Watch out! Be on your guard against wanting to have more and more things. Life is not made up of how much a person has.’*** Beware of greed! You can be rich in this world, and yet have absolutely nothing in God’s eyes. That’s the big thing that Jesus has come to deal with. That’s why he refuses to sort out the man’s complaint. It isn’t what Jesus has come to do. There’s a much bigger issue than that. The important thing is not how rich you are in the eyes of your brother or other people, but how rich you are in God’s eyes.

Download 1:2

If you stop at verse 19 of this story, this man looks very, very successful. He was already a rich farmer when his bumper crop came in, making him mega-rich. I can imagine that he would

be famous – the sort of person who gets biographies written about him, and interviewed on chat shows. He was a success.

But not according to Jesus – he was a total and utter failure. You couldn't be poorer or more unsuccessful than this man.

He made three big mistakes in his life:

He lived as if there is no God – or as if God isn't really important. He may well have believed that there is a God; he may well have gone to the church of his day – but he didn't live as if God was part of his everyday life. The centre of his life was 'me, myself and I' and that's why Jesus calls him a fool.

He lived as if this world is all there is. The big thing he built his life around is '*Eat, drink and be merry*', or, as it says in this Bible passage: '*Eat, drink and have a good time*'. That's a good summary of what loads of people want today. But Jesus calls him a fool. He had nothing bigger in his life – no bigger plans than his plans, no more important good than his good, nothing greater than his barns. He had full barns, but it was all so empty because God was not in his life. That's all there was – and then, death!

He lived as if there is no Judgment Day – where riches toward God are the only thing that is important. Jesus calls him a fool because '*Tonight I (God) will take your life away from you*'—the very thing he wasn't prepared for.

This man had a wrong view of success, which made him a failure; He had a wrong view of what will satisfy, which made him empty; and he had a wrong view of security, which put him in the greatest danger (of God's judgment).

So, the big questions we must ask our selves are:

Am I rich in God's eyes?

and How can I be rich towards him?

Download 1:3

So, Jesus has been telling us all kinds of helpful, challenging things that in everyday life we just tend to forget or ignore or don't think about.

Life is not about how much you own
Don't live as if God isn't real
Don't live as if this world is all there is
Don't live as if there is no Judgment Day

Right at the end of this story, Jesus says: *'This is how it will be for anyone who stores things away for himself but is not rich in God's eyes'*. So the big question, as we have already seen, is: How can I be rich in God's eyes?

The answer that Jesus gives, and that is found all over the Bible, is that only he can make us rich in God's eyes. So the way to be rich toward God begins with listening to Jesus. That's why I want to encourage you to keep coming along.

Now let me introduce you to a modern-day rich fool... (Brief interview / testimony follows)

Tales of the Unexpected: Download scripts

Session 2: The runaway son

Download 2:1

This is one of the best-known stories that Jesus told, and for many people, like me, it's a favourite. It's stuffed full of wonderful things. But in order to discover the treasures in this story, we need to realise it's not actually about how we treat our parents. It's about how we treat God—and how God treats us. We know that from the two other stories that Jesus told in the earlier part of Luke chapter 15. And what a wonderful picture of God we will see! For the father in this story represents God, and the two sons show different ways in which people like us turn from God. In this session we're going to look at the father and the younger son.

You've already discovered what a shocking thing the younger son has done to his father. He's actually wishing his father was dead—not only by demanding his inheritance, but by walking out when he gets it! He's not breaking any laws, but it's a massive rejection of his father. And don't think this is just a teenager growing up and spreading his wings. This is 'I don't want you as my father!' But it's even more than that! The son is absolutely certain that he can run his life better on his own.

And that is exactly what the Bible says about us. We're so like that son! Just like the son, everything we have is given by God. Just like the son, we want to take those gifts—life, love, health, whatever—and run our life on our own, as if God is dead.

Now, here is the great surprise—the father gives his son the money and lets him go. So, what will the outcome be? Will he make it?

Download 2:2

Wow! Look at the son—he's feeding pigs! He never thought it would come to this. This wasn't part of his dream—this is a nightmare!

He set out, confident that he would make a better life without his father. And at first, it was definitely good fun. He seemed to have everything a young man could want. His brother, later on in the story, talked about him wasting all his money on prostitutes. And that's just it—he had so-called friends as long as he had money. But as soon as his money ran out, his only companions were pigs!

He had thought he could make a home for himself away from his father, but he ended up worse off than his father's servants. After he had spent everything, verse 16 says: '***no one gave him anything***'—not even the pigs! People only gave after they had first taken from him. And in the end, they took more than he could give, and gave less than he needed.

Think about us. Think about this world. Don't you see the connection? Most of us step out in life, confident that we can make a good go of things on our own. The thought of God makes us uncomfortable. We sort of pick up the idea that he's not for our good—he's not going to let us be free—we're better off without him. We want what he gives but we don't want him.

But this world is hard, disappointing, lets us down. It can leave us weary and damaged—emo-

tionally, in our relationships and physically (all of us have bodies that will fail and decay). And sometimes we're left out in the starving cold—certainly not 'at home'. Even if we have all that the world gives us, still we won't have true satisfaction or true freedom. The party is always followed by the morning after.

Now the turning point in the story of this young man is that he came to his senses. This is the big thing that we need to do. He didn't just plod on in the vague hope that it might get better. He turned around. He realised that 'home' was home with his father. He knew he wasn't worthy of a welcome, but he also realised that he was better off with his father. The big issue wasn't all the foolish things he had done but his relationship with his father. ***'I will get up and go back to my father. I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against Heaven [against God that is]. And I have sinned against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son"'***.

But he had hope—and that hope was in the goodness of his father accepting him back.

Download 2:3

You've got to remember that Jesus was telling this story to Jews. And to a Jew a pig was the dirtiest animal you could imagine. So, got the picture?

Here is this boy, who is really 'dead' to his father. He's wished his father was dead, he's wasted his life and his inheritance, he's even envied pigs—and now he's got the cheek to return! You can imagine him in filthy pig-clothes—unclean and unwanted, creeping up the road to the family home, wondering how exactly he can beg a place as a servant. Wondering would the family be busy eating together? Or out in the fields working? But no—the picture Jesus paints of the father is of someone looking out longingly, waiting for his dead son to return. It says: ***'While the son was still a long way off, his father saw him. He was filled with tender love for his son. He ran to him. He threw his arms around him and kissed him.'***

I wonder what the son thought when he saw his father running toward him. Was he going to be beaten? Was this the nearest he would ever get to home? But he didn't have any time to change his clothes—or even to say all the words he had planned—before the father hugged him and kissed him. It's a very beautiful picture. Of course, to be kissed is to be intimately welcomed and accepted.

Remember, this is talking about God. God doesn't just want to forgive us—he wants to welcome us with a kiss; he wants to love us; he wants us back in the family as his long-lost child.

And God **has** run to us, and our situation, by sending Jesus. He is the one who removes the 'pig-clothes'. Despite all of the things that make us unclean, God, in Jesus, embraces us and covers us afresh with the clothes of acceptance. Then look at how the father enjoys his son. There's a celebration, and a massive generosity—the complete opposite of all that he had found in that faraway country. Whatever you have done, whatever you have been, the greatness of God's love in Jesus can bring you into his family.

So, in the first story of the rich fool, we learned that we need to be rich in the eyes of God. In this story we have learned something of **how** to become rich toward God—to come to our

senses and realise that our greatest need is a relationship with God. And the one who makes all of this possible is Jesus.

But let me just ask you where you are in this story:

Are you in verse 12?

'The younger son said to his father, 'Give me my share of the family property.'

You want to take God's good gifts, but you don't want God, and you're sure that you can make a success of your life on your own.

Are you in verse 13?

'The younger son packed up all that he had. Then he left for a country far away. There he wasted his money on wild living.'

Things seem to be going quite well. You're living how you want to live.

Are you in verses 14 -16?

'He spent everything he had. Then the whole country ran low on food. So the son didn't have what he needed. He went to work for someone who lived in that country, who sent him to the fields to feed the pigs. The son wanted to fill his stomach with the food the pigs were eating. But no one gave him anything.'

You feel as if you have spent everything and you're on your own.

Are you in verse 17?

'Then he began to think clearly again [he came to his senses]. He said, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food! But here I am dying from hunger! I will get up and go back to my father...'

You are coming to your senses and beginning to realise that you have made a great mistake in leaving God out of your life.

Or are you in verse 20?

'While the son was still a long way off, his father saw him. He was filled with tender love for his son. He ran to him. He threw his arms around him and kissed him.'

You know you have come back to God and you understand something of his love for you.

Now let me introduce someone who was once a runaway son...

Tales of the Unexpected: Download scripts

Session 3: The stay-at-home son

Download 3:1

Now Jesus told this story to get us to think about the older son—that's his main point. Right at the beginning of Luke chapter 15 Jesus is talking to two groups of people. They would have been seen as very good people and very bad people. It says: *'The tax collectors and "sinners" [those were the very bad people] were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law [those were the very good people, who were also leaders in the community] were whispering among themselves. They said, "This man [talking about Jesus] welcomes sinners and eats with them!" Then Jesus told them a story.'*

In fact, Jesus told them a bunch of stories. And each one of these stories is a picture of us and God—how we treat God and how he treats us. And the big thing that Jesus wants us to see in all of the stories is this: when it comes to knowing God, even good people are lost—we are not where we ought to be. In each of the stories Jesus tells, there is something or someone lost. There is a sheep lost—in a place where it ought not to be; there's a coin lost—in a place where it ought not to be; as we have seen, the younger son was lost—he wasn't where he ought to be. But now we come to the older son, the good boy, the one who stayed at home. But he isn't where he ought to be—at the end of the story he's outside the party.

And then, in each story, someone goes out to get the lost one back. The shepherd goes out to find the sheep; a woman searches her whole house to find the coin; the father runs to find the younger son to bring him in to the party. But in verse 28 the father comes out of the party to plead with the older son. Jesus is telling us that the older son is as lost as the younger son.

Why? How can Jesus think that? This seems to go against all common sense. But this is why we need to listen to Jesus. The problem is that doing good things can cover up what is really going on in your heart. How good is your goodness really? How good was the older son's goodness? What attitudes were hidden deep down inside him? Jesus goes deeper to show us what is really in our hearts.

Have you ever had that experience when you're on a station platform, feeling a bit bored and peckish? You see one of those vending machines and decide to get a bar of chocolate. So you put your money in and what happens? Nothing comes out! It's so frustrating. You look around for CCTV cameras because you'd really like to kick that machine in. 'It's so unfair' you think. 'I paid for that chocolate bar. I deserve it. I'm not like some hoodie who just smashes the machine up and takes one for free. I paid the money. I deserve the chocolate.'

Now that is how the older son felt about the party for the younger son. I mean, he had been a good boy, put the effort in, worked hard, like a slave—but in his eyes there was no chocolate bar at the end. That's why he was so angry.

Most of us think God is like this. If we do good things, God should reward us. So we think of God as nothing more than a chocolate bar machine. You don't want a relationship with a machine—you just want what it gives. And we don't really want to know God—we just want what he gives.

Do you see what we do here? God is just there to reward us—not there to be known, loved and enjoyed. In other words, we don't want God as a Father.

So in Jesus' story we will see that it is possible to be a hard-working, clean-living, decent, even religious person but LOST. Miles away from the heart of God. Treating God as a reward machine for our goodness. And therefore hating God if he forgives those who haven't earned his kindness.

Now let's work through the story, to see this in more detail.

Download 3:2

You know, we can all find the teaching of Jesus in this story difficult. But the people who find it hardest are the very good and very religious people, simply because they are very good and religious. They are convinced that these things should bring them a reward from God. ***And this is so important to them that they actually end up rejecting God because of it.***

Look, I've never been in the army, but I'm sure that I could get on with my boss—the sergeant major—especially when he buys me a drink. At moments like that it looks as if I am his friend. But what happens when he orders me to get up at 3am to clean his boots? Then I may not feel so friendly—other people might even hear me saying a few bad things about him. My real attitude towards him will become clear. And you see that with this 'good' older son. He doesn't want to listen to the father at the end of the story. The story ends with the father still pleading with his son to join him in his happiness. He only wants to listen to a father that does what he thinks a father should do.

How much like the older son are we? Jesus story shows us four things about 'older son' people. First, we too can all feel friendly toward God when he does what **we** like. But it's not because we really like and love and respect him—we do what God wants because he happens to agree with us, so actually, we are just pleasing ourselves. Often people can be very religious—they go to church, pray a lot, give money to charity and try to live good lives. But actually, people do these things because **they** think it is a good way to live—not because they love God and enjoy pleasing him. But because they do those 'good' or religious things, they think that God should be happy with that. If he isn't, they're angry. So, 'older son' people really do reject God.

A second thing that 'older son' people do is compare themselves with others. Of course, it's nearly always possible to find someone worse than you. The papers are full of stories about people who do awful things—with headlines that label them 'Monster!', 'Animal!' or 'Pervert!' It's easy to feel good with these kind of people around. Notice what the older son says in verse 30: ***'this son of yours'***. Not 'my brother' because 'He's nothing to do with me. I'm not anything like him!'

There is a third thing about 'older son' people: they can't bear the idea that someone, however bad, can call God 'Father', without first doing good stuff. Again, just like the older son – look at what he says in verse 30: ***'This son of yours wasted your money with some prostitutes. Now he comes home. And for him you kill the fattest calf!'***

Actually, all of this is so far, far away from God, because what God wants is relationship, and that happens by us accepting his forgiveness. Let me put it this way. If you think God is all about rewarding good people, and you know you are **bad**, you will not come to God as your Father—you'll want to run away from him, because you know that all you deserve is punishment. So you would be like the younger son, hiding in the pig-sty. But then, if you think God is all about rewarding good people, and you think you are **good**, you will not come to God as your Father either, because you see God only as some kind of reward-giver.

There's a fourth thing about 'older son' people. They are more lost than younger sons. But how can you be more lost than lost? Because you don't know that you're lost! You think you are fine. At least the younger son knew he was far away from the Father.

Download 3:3

In another part of the Bible Jesus says: *"Many will say to me on that day [talking about Judgment Day], 'Lord! Lord! Didn't we prophesy in your name? Didn't we drive out demons in your name? Didn't we do many miracles in your name?' Then I will tell them clearly, 'I never knew you. Get away from me, you who do evil!'"* But again, Jesus is making the same point—what is important is our **relationship** with God. It's not about slaving away for him, or doing good and religious things for him—it's about knowing him; it's about accepting his forgiveness, and being loved by him, wanting to be with him and please him and follow him. These people, in Matthew 7, were doing all kinds of things in the name of Jesus—even miracles—but he says 'I never knew you'. Very much like the older son.

So, in the first story of the rich fool, we learned that we need to be rich in the eyes of God. In the first part of this story, we learned from the runaway son that we need to come to our senses and that our greatest need is a relationship with God. And in the second part of this story, we learn from the stay-at-home son exactly the same thing—that even good people need to come to their senses and seek a true relationship with God.

So, I wonder where you see yourself in this story.

Are you someone who has received the kiss of God, new clean clothes and you are now in the party? All those things given by God in Jesus.

Or are you outside the party, busy looking at yourself and the things you have done—but still lost?

Let me introduce someone who once thought they were a good son...

Tales of the Unexpected: Download Scripts

Session 4: The Pharisee and the tax collector

Download 4:1

It can be embarrassing to think that you are right, but then find out that you are wrong. But if you find out you've lived your whole life in a wrong way, that's more than embarrassing—it's terrible!

You've already thought about suicide bombers. I mean, some of them have left children, loving wives and parents; they've tied explosives to themselves; they've prayed a lot. They seriously think that their acts of suicide and mass murder will send them into the presence of a smiling God, who'll say: "Well done! Enter into paradise." Just imagine the shock of God saying instead: 'Go away from me, you evildoer I don't know who you are.'

In this story, Jesus is speaking about this kind of awful experience. He is saying that it is possible to think that you are right with God. But then to come to the rude awakening that you are not—that all your thinking is wrong. He is saying that there are people who think that they are on the road to heaven, but in fact, they are on the road to hell.

Jesus puts two people in this story and they are very different. The Pharisee belonged to the strictest group of religious people in the community. The word 'Pharisee' means 'set apart'. The great desire of a Pharisee was to keep laws that set him apart as different from other people—and that set him apart as one of God's special people.

The tax collector was not just like a taxman today—he was at the other end of society from the Pharisee. He was hated because his job made him a traitor to his people—he worked for the Romans, who ruled over the Jews. He was also hated because he was a thief—he made money for himself by charging too much tax. We might make rude jokes about taxmen, but the people then would have wanted to kill this man.

In this story Jesus turns everything upside down. Just listen again to verse 14: ***'I tell you, the tax collector went home accepted by God. But not the Pharisee.'*** It's not the good-living, well-educated, devout religious leader who's going to heaven at all! It's not the good neighbour and charity worker who's pleasing God. How could the Pharisee have got it so wrong? He did his best. So how could he go home, actually on the way to hell when he thought he was going to heaven?

What Jesus is showing us is that the real difference between these two men is bigger and deeper than what we have already seen. It's not that one is bad and the other is not. The real difference is who or what they are trusting in as they come to God.

The Pharisee was really trusting in himself. In Greek (that's the language in which Luke's Gospel was first written) verse 11 says: 'The Pharisee stood up and **prayed about himself**', or this could even be 'prayed **to** himself'. This is staggering—he goes to the temple to pray, and he talks to himself! After the first word 'God', the next word 'I' takes over the whole prayer: ***'I thank you that I am not like other people ... I am not like robbers ... I am not like those who commit adultery. I am not even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. And I give a tenth of all I get!'*** It's a bit like a pep tale that an athlete would do be-

fore a race: “Come on, I’m all right; I’ve done all the training; I’ve warmed up; I’ve eaten the right food; I’m in peak condition; I can win!”

In verse 11 he’s saying: ‘God, I thank you that I’m OK’. It’s a bit like going to the doctor and saying: ‘Doctor, I don’t want you to examine me. You can put away your stethoscope and blood-testing kit. I want you to know that I’ve examined myself and have found that I am healthy. And I’m so much better than those miserable, sick-looking patients in the waiting room.’

Well, we’ve looked at the Pharisee—now let’s take a look at ourselves.

Download 4:2

You can see the difference between these two men by the way they stand. Again in verse 11, where it says *‘The Pharisee stood up and prayed’*, the original language says: ‘The Pharisee took up his position’. It was **his position**—he was confident about being there. But the tax collector stood at a distance. He was ashamed of himself. He didn’t even look up to heaven. He knew that he was guilty and he knew that God knew. He was really cut up with emotional distress. All he could do was to blurt out his prayer: *‘God, have mercy on me. I am a sinner.’*

Do you see who the tax collector is trusting in? —definitely not himself. It’s only God who can help him. The first step to be right with God is to recognise that you are **not** right with him. The next step is to ask for the only thing that can help you—God’s mercy.

When the tax collector says: *‘Have mercy on me. I am a sinner’*, he uses a special word for ‘mercy’. It means ‘be mercy-seated to me’. Now that is an incredible thing that he has said, and takes us right into the heart of the story of the Bible—and what God had already said about how sinners could be forgiven.

Let me try to explain that. In Jerusalem there was this place called the Temple—in fact, where these two blokes are right now. And in the Temple was a separated section called ‘The Holy of Holies’ or ‘The Most Holy Place’. And that was a picture of where God was. It was so holy that no one was allowed in that bit, except one man—God’s special high priest—once a year. And even then he had to do lots of cleansing things to make himself ready to go in.

So the Temple was a strange thing because, in one sense it was saying: ‘God is here on earth. Come and know him’. But in another sense it was saying: ‘No entry! Don’t come in here! God is far too holy’.

But this is what happened with the high priest once a year... He had to take a perfect animal—no diseases, no deformities, not old or worn out, but the best of the lot. And that animal was killed and its blood was collected. Now all that may sound very gory, but it’s a massive picture. That animal was representing people; that animal died instead of people. It was a picture of a substitute—it was standing in the place of punishment, taking God’s perfect response to our wrong. The blood of that animal was taken into The Most Holy Place and put on this thing called the Mercy Seat, which was the lid of a golden box. Inside that box was God’s law, which the people had broken. God sees the law; he sees the people who have

broken the law, but he also sees the blood of someone who has innocently suffered the punishment. So God can have mercy on sinful people because the penalty for wrong has already been paid.

I know of someone who, in Australia, was driving a friend's fast, sporty car and decided, late at night on an empty motorway, to see what speed it could do. And during the 30 seconds in which he put his foot down, he was clocked by the police for speeding at 180 kph. It's true that he was speeding; it was right that he was fined. But the payment was never taken from him. He thought he had been let off, but later realised that his very generous friend had paid the fine on his behalf.

That is what happened at the Mercy Seat, and that is what the tax collector is basing his prayer on:

'God, I am sinful. I'm not good. I'm not worthy to be in your presence. But you have provided the Mercy Seat.'

The tax collector is trusting in God, not himself. And he's not just coming to God hoping that God *might* let him off. He knows that there is a just penalty that has to be paid for his wrong. But he also knows that God has done something about that.

Now all of this is an amazing picture of Jesus. In fact, he is called the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. When Jesus died, he died in *our* place. He is the perfect Son of God who has never sinned—he's always followed God's ways, always done what God wanted. And yet, he was treated like a sinner, taking God's just punishment.

Do you remember this verse from the first session? *'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.'* Jesus swapped places with us, so that we can swap places with him!

So the first step to being right with God is to recognise that you are not right with him. The second step is to ask God for mercy, like the tax collector. And the third step is to trust in what God has done for you, in sending Jesus to die on the cross.

Download 4:3

We started off with how shocking this story is—someone thinks that they are right with God, but they are not. But what is even more shocking is the person who thinks they are right with God, but they aren't... and who then finds out the truth, but won't listen! Now why would that happen? Well, it all comes down to what Jesus says in the last verse of this story:

'Everyone who lifts himself up [who makes himself great—like the Pharisee] *will be brought down* [he will be made humble]. *And anyone who is brought down* [who makes themselves humble—like the tax collector] *will be lifted up.'*

You see, a humble person will be made great. And a humble person is like the tax collector.

The rich farmer in the first story wasn't humble—he thought he was rich, but he wasn't. He didn't see his poverty when it came to God. He was a fool.

The younger son certainly didn't start off humble—he thought he could run his life his own

way. But he came to his senses and humbly came back and received the father's kiss.

The older son wasn't humble because he thought he was better than his brother, knew better than his father, and wouldn't listen.

The Pharisee clearly wasn't humble, as he proudly looked at everything he had done. So Jesus says: *'I tell you, the tax collector went home accepted by God. But not the Pharisee.'*

God, in his kindness, speaks to us through these stories. So that we might come to our senses and, like the tax collector, say: 'God, be mercy-seated to me, a sinner'.

One of my favourite sentences in the Bible says this:

'God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.'

What an amazing thing this is! We've seen again and again how kind God is, in sending Jesus, not only to teach us, but to be our rescuer.

Let me introduce someone who has asked for God's mercy, just like the tax collector...

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