

Sonship by Story:

A Collection of Bible Stories and
Lessons to Encourage
Gospel-Centered Living

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Table of Contents

Goals and Core Gospel Concepts.....	5
1. The Parable of the Two Lost Sons, Part One.....	11
<u>Being The Father's Child</u> - Identity - Adoption vs Sin & Self Rule	
2. The Parable of the Two Lost Sons, Part Two.....	16
<u>Being The Father's Child</u> - Identity - Adoption / Intimacy with Father / Self Righteousness / Use of Law	
3. David and Mephibosheth	21
<u>Being The Father's Child</u> - Identity - Adoption / Intimacy with Father	
4. Mary and Martha.....	26
<u>Being The Father's Child</u> - Intimacy with Father / Self Righteousness	
5. The Woman and the Serpent (Sin)	29
<u>Trying to Live Without a Father</u> - The problem the Gospel addresses - Nature of Sin - Unbelief / Hiding - Self Righteousness	
6. The Foolish Rich Man / The Foolish Rich Church	33
<u>Trying Live Without a Father</u> - Pride, Self Dependence	
7. The Call of Abram	38
<u>Becoming The Father's Child</u> - Justification by Faith / the Nature of Faith	
8. Nicodemus / The Bronze Serpent	44
<u>Becoming The Father's Child</u> - Justification by Faith, Received Righteousness / the Nature of Faith	
9. The Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector.....	50
<u>Becoming The Father's Child</u> - Justification, Self-Righteousness / Humility, Use of the Law, Repentance	
10. The Rich Young Ruler.....	54

	<u>Living in the Father's House</u> - Use of the Law / Self-Righteousness, Justification	
11. Jesus and the Pharisees: Sabbath Controversies.....	<u>Living in the Father's House</u> - Use of the Law / Self-Righteousness	58
12. The Call of Isaiah.....	<u>Becoming Like the Father</u> - God's Holiness - Man's Sinfulness / Use of the Law	66
13. David and Bathsheba, with Psalm 51.....	<u>Coming Back to the Father</u> - Repentance - Lifestyle / Sin	
14. Saul and the Amalekites.....	<u>Coming Back to the Father</u> - Repentance - False / Sin / Obedience - Nature	
15. Peter's Denial	<u>Coming Back to the Father</u> - Repentance - Lifestyle / Heart Sin	
16. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and the Fiery Furnace.....	<u>Turning to False Fathers</u> - Idolatry	
17. Jacob and Leah	<u>Turning to False Fathers</u> - Idolatry	
18. Naaman / Bartimaeus.....	<u>Becoming Like the Father</u> - Sanctification by Repentance & Faith	
19. Peter Rebuked by Paul - Galatians 2:11-14, 20	<u>Living Out the Father's Gospel</u> - In Step with the Truth of the Gospel	
20. The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant.....	<u>Living Out the Father's Gospel</u> - Forgiveness	
21. Joseph	<u>Living Out the Father's Gospel</u> - Forgiveness	
22. Jonah's Anger and God's Compassion / Jesus and the Sinful Woman.....		

Living Out the Father's Gospel -
Faith Expressing Itself in Love / Sanctification by Faith

23. Jesus Washes his Disciples' Feet.....

Living Out the Father's Gospel -
Faith Expressing Itself in Love / Humility / Servant Leadership

24. Rehoboam and the Divided Kingdom.....

Living Out the Father's Gospel -
Conflict Resolution

25. Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus

Living Out the Father's Gospel -
Conflict Resolution

26. Jesus Teaches his Disciples How to Pray.....

Finding Power to Live as the Father's Child -
Holy Spirit

27. Jesus Teaches in the Synagogue from Isaiah

Going Where the Father is Going -
Kingdom - The King's Purpose - Our Purpose

28. The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard _____

Going Where the Father is Going -
Kingdom - Not what the world expects

29. The Parable of the Ten Minas _____

Going Where the Father is Going -
Kingdom - Serving the King by Faith, Stewardship

30. The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Going Where the Father is Going -
Kingdom - how it grows

Appendix: How to Study a Story..... _____

Goals

- **Goal of Sonship**
 - For students to experience spiritual renewal through engaging with key Sonship themes that offer profound understanding of the implications of the gospel, the necessity of repentance, and what it means to be transformed by God's grace.
- **Goals of this Curriculum**
 - To present truths found in Sonship in a format that is more accessible to primary oral learners to help them to understand, live in, and eagerly reproduce in their own communities the great themes of biblical grace.
 - This curriculum will provide a number of Bible stories that may be used to emphasize one or more key Sonship themes. Each story is accompanied by a set of questions and potential answers to facilitate discussions with oral learners after they have been taught a Bible story. In every lesson, the Bible story is the center of the lesson, the memorable fulcrum around which each lesson will pivot.

Core Gospel Concepts Foundational to Sonship

I. Created in God's Image

All men are created in the image of God and continue to bear that image despite its corruption by sin. That means that all men and women from every nation, from every economic stratum, and from every station in life have dignity and value.

II. Sin

You are more needy than you think. Sin is much more than surface behavior. Sin is rooted in the heart and consists of our attitudes, desires, and motivations as well as our actions.

When we live as spiritual orphans, we can turn towards two paths: moralism and/or idolatry. In moralism, we live to justify ourselves through "good" behavior or performance, which is always inadequate. The moralist seeks to be his own savior.

Idolatry is seeking to satisfy ourselves through finding life and value in something other than Jesus. Those idols might be "good" things on the surface, but they are evil when they replace Jesus as our ultimate satisfaction. Both moralism and idolatry find their roots in the self. The radical self-orientation of our fallen nature is what we refer to as "the flesh." Additionally, this self-centered root of sin always has community effects, as seen in broken relationships, division, abuse, poverty, etc.

The flesh will always be with us. It cannot be tamed nor improved. It must die. Throughout this life, the flesh will wage war with our spirit. Though the flesh is powerful beyond our efforts to control, we are not obligated to obey the demands of the flesh. Believing the gospel makes available to us the power of the Spirit to refuse the flesh and to walk in love.

Therefore, for the gospel to be transformational on both an individual and a community level, the deeper nature of sin must be exposed.

III. Justification

The work Jesus does for us on the cross is both the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of his righteousness. All of our sins are taken away, and the full expression of the Father's just anger is satisfied as it is poured out on Jesus in his death. Jesus pays our debt in full.

In addition to forgiveness, we are given righteousness, not which we earn on our own, but that which Jesus earned through his perfect life and then gives to us. Both forgiveness and righteousness are received by faith alone and not through any work we can do. Now that we possess true righteousness, we can enjoy the full expression of the delight of our Father, just as he would express delight in Jesus.

IV. Our Identity in Christ

Our identity as sons and daughters is solely based on the work of Jesus and our union with him, not on anything we do or accomplish, or fail to do or accomplish. Our assurance is secured through us being united with Jesus in his death and resurrection, and subsequently being adopted as sons and daughters of God. Therefore, we can have freedom from guilt and condemnation, and we can have sure hope of his love, his care, and the fulfillment of all his promises given to his beloved children.

Though we are new creations, we are still sinners, living in the corruption of the Fall. We are, as Martin Luther observed, "Just, and yet sinners." Progress in the Christian life demonstrates an increasing identification with the "new me" - righteous, empowered by the Spirit, and growing more into the likeness of Jesus - and less with the "old me" - helpless sinner incapable of doing any good.

V. The Nature of Faith

Faith is accepting, receiving, and resting in the riches of the gospel. Faith is passive in that it "receives and rests" on the work of Jesus alone for salvation and for the fulfillment of all the promises the gospel gives to us. Though it is passive in the sense that it is a

receiving faith, it is not inactive. Faith actively pursues these gifts and blessings, persistently running to and grasping onto Jesus for his blessing.

Though faith is in part active, faith is not a work. It is, in fact, a gracious gift of the Spirit. It is also not the quality of our faith that gives us hope. Our faith is weak and never sufficient in and of itself. Rather our hope is in the object of our faith, Jesus, who never fails and forever holds us.

VI. Repentance

Repentance is the normative lifestyle of a believer, not just the beginning of the Christian life. It is not simply a change in outward behavior, nor is it merely sorrow over sin. First, it begins with brokenness over sin that is produced by the Holy Spirit, where we face more clearly the depth of sin in our heart and our inability to defeat it. In our brokenness, we turn from sin to Jesus. It is a relational turning from our idols and moralism, from our self-sufficiency and self-preoccupation, to being dependent on Jesus alone. In the cross, because of the work Christ has done for us through his life and death, we have the freedom to face our true sin problem and to return to Jesus. As repentance is both a turning from self and a turning to Jesus, joy is a primary fruit as we experience restored intimacy with him.

Repentance must also have a horizontal, communal impact. As we trust in the work of Jesus for us and in the power of the Spirit, we move more honestly and transparently towards others. We freely acknowledge and take responsibility for our sin, and rest in and experience the Father's love and grace.

VII. Sanctification

Sanctification is growth or progress in living not according to the flesh but by being more transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit into Christ-likeness. In this life we will never be perfected, but we will make progress in becoming more like Jesus.

We participate in our sanctification through faith (that is, continually believing the gospel) and repentance, which lead us to being transformed by the Spirit. By trusting more in the Spirit and less in ourselves, we are empowered more and more to resist the flesh, thus rendering it increasingly powerless. The primary evidence of growing holiness in one's life is love.

VIII. Obedience

Progress in the Christian life is required, commanded, promised, guaranteed, and a necessary and inevitable result of saving faith, of grace at work in us. This progress may be slight and inconsistent, but if there is no tangible progress, then the presence of faith

must be questioned. This progress is not simply moral reformation, but deep spiritual transformation from being self-focused to being other, outward focused.

Our call to obedience does not conflict with the freedom we have through the gospel. Our freedom is not to be used for the gratification of our flesh, but it is a freedom to express our faith through loving others. We are free to love, not free from obedience.

The nature of true obedience is not merely the fulfillment of duty, though duty has its place. True obedience is the joyous expression of love to the Father and to others in response to the great love we have been shown. We are called to obey even when the emotions are absent, but the mere fulfillment of that outward duty cannot be construed as complete obedience.

IX. Love

All true obedience is relational. In other words, holiness has external results. As Jesus said in Matthew 22:37-40, the whole law is fulfilled in the two commandments, love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself. There is no true fulfillment of the law outside of the context of relationships. Therefore, true holiness cannot merely be defined by our outward performance or adherence to a set of rules. Rather, it is faith expressed through love.

Therefore, faith will always lead us to love and a deeper involvement in community with others. When faith is working, we are always driven outside of ourselves and into the lives of others. Our righteousness in Jesus sets us free to fail, and therefore to take risks in moving toward and loving others. Faith never leaves us as we once were. It always moves us outward. If love is not evident, then faith is absent.

The gospel must go into one's heart before it can flow out of them. Love for others flows from a heart of faith the more we experience God's love for us and rest in our identity in Christ. We cannot love until we know we are loved. Love is something that the Spirit produces in and through us.

X. The Role of the Holy Spirit

Power in the Christian life is supplied by the Holy Spirit. We live in reliance on the Spirit, and he provides for us all the resources we will ever need to live out the life God calls us to. We access the power of the Spirit as we, by faith, turn from ourselves and our self-sufficiency towards Jesus and his Spirit in dependence. Through our faith we are empowered to believe and to love as we are loved, bearing the fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

XI. Intimacy with the Father

Because we are fully righteous through the work of Jesus, we now possess and can enjoy the full delight of the Father. Because we have his delight, we can enjoy intimacy with the Father as a beloved son or daughter. We can draw near to him without fear or shame because he has drawn near to us through the cross of Christ. This intimacy is pursued on our part through prayer, reading and hearing the preaching of Scripture, the sacraments, worship, and the community of other believers. These disciplines, or means of grace, become more than mere duty. They are pathways to know more deeply the great love of the Father.

XII. Forgiveness

Forgiveness from all of our sins, achieved through Jesus' death on the cross, now becomes the basis of our ability to forgive others. Because we have been forgiven a huge debt of sin, we are called now to forgive others who are indebted to us. Failure to forgive points to our own unbelief in that we do not accept God's forgiveness for ourselves and we insist on living on the basis of justice instead of mercy.

Forgiveness is not equal to reconciliation. Forgiveness is the foundation from which reconciliation can take place.

XIII. The Use of the Law

The law still plays an essential role for the Christian, though it must be used properly. The law consists of all of God's commands and requirements of us as given in the Scriptures. It can also be a system of achieving God's favor through keeping the "rules" that govern our lives, many of which we create ourselves.

The law does not have the power to change us, nor was it given to make us good people. It allows us to know the character of God the Father. It also defines for us what love is and what love does. Finally, by showing us the inadequacy of our efforts, it drives us to Jesus for mercy and help.

We are no longer "legally" obligated to keep the law because Jesus kept it for us through his life and death. We are now obligated by love, doing what pleases the Father through responding to his love for us, and joyfully expressing that love through the way we now love and serve others. Jesus now lives out his love through us.

Legalism is more than merely working for our salvation through good works. It is also our attempt to gain a sense of value and identity because of our performance. This is the improper use of the law.

XIV. The Kingdom

When the gospel is properly understood and embraced, the natural result will be a focus on the larger Kingdom of God. The gospel connects us to Jesus and to his broader mission, which is to bring redemption to all of creation. Therefore, the gospel moves us to lay down our lives for those who do not know the grace of Jesus, and to enter into the brokenness of the world in order to push back the effects of the Fall (mercy, reconciliation, education, etc.).

The Parable of the Two Lost Sons, Part One

Luke 15:1-2, 11-24

Key Theme: Adoption

[Core Gospel Concepts: Identity in Christ, Sin, Repentance, Intimacy with the Father]

THE STORY:

One day, tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So Jesus told them several parables like this one:

“There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between his two sons. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had and set off for a distant country, and there he squandered his wealth in wild living.

“After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

“But when he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death? I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.”’

“So he got up and went to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.”

Optional Memory Verse: Galatians 4:4-5: “When the time had fully come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under the law so that we might receive the full rights of sons.”

Introduction Question (discuss with a neighbor)

- **What is life like for abandoned orphans? Why is it so difficult not to have a father?**
 - Possible responses: *Lonely; no help; no one to depend on; no one who cares; no sense of belonging; no provision; deep sense of abandonment; uncertain future; need to provide for oneself; tendency to beg, borrow, steal instead of trusting in a father to provide; no place to call home; no shelter; no protection; easily gets into trouble; independent; does not need to listen to authority; has no parent or authority to tell him or her what to do or how to live; no good clothes; looked down on; people don't want to touch or associate.*

Teacher's Transition Statement

This story has two parts, and deals with two sons who each act like orphans, but in very different ways. Today, we will look at the first son, and think in turn about how we live like orphans sometimes, even as Christians.

Learn Story Together (Listening Task)

- As you're committing this story to memory:
 - Note all the words and actions of the younger son.
 - Note all the words and actions of the father.

Basic Outline of Discussion (to help facilitator lead without reading everything)

- **Audience:** Who was Jesus telling the parable to? Why?
- **The Younger Son:** What was he like? How was he living like an orphan? What do we learn about ourselves from the younger son?
- **The Father:** What was he like? What do we learn about God from the father?
- **Repentance:** What does this story teach us about repenting from orphan living?
- **Application:** What needs to change in my life after studying this story? What actions, attitudes, or beliefs?
- **Sharing:** Who needs to hear this story?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (with some possible responses):

- **Why was Jesus telling these parables? Who was with Jesus while he was teaching? What did he observe about these people?**
 - *Tax collectors and sinners had drawn near to Jesus, and he ate with them.*
 - *This upset the Pharisees and teachers of the law. They were judging Jesus for mixing with sinners. Jesus was challenging their way of thinking.*
- **Who were the main characters in the parable?**

The Younger Son

- **What was the younger son like at different points in the story? What did he do or say that makes you say that? How did the younger son relate to his father? What was his attitude toward his father?**
 - **What was he like at the beginning of the story?**

- *Proud, demanding, disrespectful, unthankful, self-centered, rule-breaking, foolish.*
 - *Did not have or want a real relationship with his father; he only wanted his father's things, wished him "dead" in his life, and wanted complete independence.*
 - *I.e. he wanted his father's things, not his father himself.*
 - **What was he like in the middle of the story, immediately after all his money was gone? What was the result of his rebellion against his father?**
 - *Was left starving, desperate, friendless, hopeless.*
 - **What was he like later when he "came to his senses"? What does it mean that "he came to his senses"?**
 - *Saw his desperate situation, realized it was all his fault, and saw that he could not help himself. His only hope was his father.*
- **How are people today like the younger son – especially in the time before he came to his senses? How are even Christians like him sometimes?**
 - *Various examples today of rebellion against God and "wild living," especially as our lives parallel the son's attitude toward himself, his father, and his life.*
 - *Sometimes Christians forget God and are interested in themselves more than God and others. Religion becomes more about us than about God. We desire to be important, to have a good reputation, to be educated or wealthy, to depend on ourselves, not God.*
 - *Therefore we worry, and turn to dishonesty, false gods, quick fixes, pain relief, divorce, etc. We run from our problems instead of running to Jesus.*
 - **What did the younger son finally do right?**
 - *"Came to his senses."*
 - *Saw where his sins had led him, what the results of his choice were.*
 - *Saw that he deserved no help from his father or anyone else.*
 - *Agreed and confessed that it was all his own fault.*
 - *Returned to the father, knowing he was the only one able to help him.*
 - *Asked for mercy. Understood that his father was a merciful man.*
 - **The son did repent, but how was his repentance incomplete?**
 - *Imagined that he could only come back as hired help. He never imagined coming back as a son. He did not dare ask for full restoration.*
 - *Still did not really understand his father or the fullness of his father's love and mercy.*
 - **Think back to our introduction question about abandoned orphans. How was the younger son living and acting like an orphan at various points in the story? (Note: You may choose to have your students first discuss in pairs before listening to their answers in the full group.)**
 - *At first:*
 - *Acted as if his father did not care about him. Demanded his "rights."*
 - *Wanted to depend on himself alone, to run his own life.*
 - *Concerned only about himself.*
 - *Easily got into trouble.*
 - *When destitute:*
 - *No one would care for or help him, had no one to depend on, sent out to the pigs, away from people, abandoned, uncertain of the future, fending for himself, begging.*
 - *No place to call home, no shelter, no protection.*
 - *Was looked down on. People didn't want to touch or associate with him.*

- **How do fathers in your society act when their sons rebel against them? Can you think of any examples?** (Have the students discuss in small groups, then in the larger group.)
- **Tell us all the actions and words of the father in this story as they relate to the younger son.**
(Review details of the story)
 - *Did not force his son to stay with him. Gave him his share of the inheritance.*
 - *Watched and waited for his son, ran to him, hugged, kissed, put on the best robe, gave him a ring, sandals, slaughtered the fattened calf for them to celebrate.*
 - *Called for a party without demanding explanation or restitution.*
 - *Rejoiced because his son was dead, now alive, was lost, but now found.*
- **What do you think the robe, ring, and sandals stand for?**
 - *Robe: the “best” robe – distinct, special, likely belonging to the father himself. Also covers his son’s uncleanness: a picture of Jesus’ blood and righteousness covering our sin!*
 - *Ring: showed he possessed the father's authority, similar to having the family credit card, showing he was a son, not a servant.*
 - *Sandals: the son is a free man, not a slave. Only slaves went barefoot in this culture.*
- **So what do we learn about the father from all this?**
 - *Merciful, loving, not worried about his reputation in the community, willing to forgive wrongs and losses. Wanted relationship with his son.*
 - *Thrilled for his son to return.*
- **What was the father willing to give up for his son?**
 - *His dignity, reputation, and pride.*
 - *His property, because he cared more about his son than his possessions.*
- **What did the father most want from his son?**
 - *Intimacy, close fellowship.*
 - *To know him, to be known by him.*
- **Who do you think the father represents?**
 - *God, our Father.*
- **So what does this part of the story teach us about God?**
 - *He is forgiving; he has mercy for those who turn back to him, not anger.*
 - *He longs for intimacy with us, to know us and be known by us.*
 - *He is loving. He wants us to be sons and daughters, not slaves!*
- **How do we as believers often view God, especially when we sin?**
 - *As angry, ready to punish us harshly; as distant, offended, not wanting our fellowship. Sometimes we even view him as vindictive, prepared to get revenge against us because of our sin against him.*
 - *As one who requires us to earn our way back to him.*
- **How does God actually want us to view him?**
 - *As our loving father.*
 - *Ready to forgive when we repent and turn back to him.*
 - *Willing to sacrifice himself and his dignity to gain us back.*

- o *Longing to be restored to and in fellowship with us, his children.*
- o *Wanting us to know him.*
- **When the father refuses to listen to all of his son’s explanation and apology, what is he communicating?**
 - o *He is saying, “I will not allow you to be a servant, to earn your way back home. I am making you my son – completely by grace. I want a son, not a slave.”*
 - o *“I want to be close to you, to be intimate.”*
 - o *He wants us at the feast! Wants to cover us with the robe of Christ’s perfect righteousness.*
- **What do we learn about repentance from this story?**
 - o *We need to “come to our senses!”*
 - *See our sin, confess that it is ours and not anyone else’s.*
 - *Realize that we deserve punishment.*
 - o *Believe in the mercy of God in Christ.*
 - o *Turn back to him, believing in the Savior who died for us. Trust him to forgive and cleanse us from our sin and give us his righteousness.*
 - o *Ask him to help us to change our words, thoughts, attitudes, affections, and behavior.*

General Application Questions:

- **What are some ways we may act like the lost younger son (i.e. like a spiritual orphan)?**
 - o *Feel that God is withholding something good so we need to steal it for ourselves.*
 - o *Rejecting God's rule over our lives. Ignoring his law because we don't trust that He is leading us well.*
 - o *Giving in to lust. Being jealous of someone else. Complaining about our lives.*
- **Read Galatians 4:4-7 - "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.' So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir."**
 - o **When we trust in Jesus, we are no longer slaves or orphans but sons and daughters of God, a kind and loving father. How should this truth affect our daily lives?**
 - **How should believing this truth help you to repent of your sin and follow Him?**
 - **How should the love of the Father affect the way you look at other people? How would this help you not to judge people harshly?**
- **Read John 14:18 - “I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you.”**
 - o **Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to every believer. How does this promise encourage you? How does it help you live as a Christian today?**

Personal Application Questions (choose one or two for small group discussion):

- **What recent actions or thoughts of yours lately have been like the lost younger son or a spiritual orphan?**
 - o **How have you despised or rejected your Father at times?**
 - o **How have you run too much after the things of the world even in some small way?**
 - o **What do you need to repent of today?**

The Parable of the Two Lost Sons, Part Two

Luke 15:1-2, 11-32

Key Themes: Self-Righteousness & Orphan Living

[Core Gospel Concepts: Identity in Christ, Intimacy with the Father, Repentance, Justification, Use of the Law]

THE STORY:

One day, tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." So Jesus told them several parables like this one:

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between his two sons. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had and set off for a distant country, and there he squandered his wealth in wild living.

"After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

"But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men."' "

"So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

"But the older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

"'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

Optional Memory Verse: Galatians 4:4-5: *"When the time had fully come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under the law so that we might receive the full rights of sons."*

Introduction Question (discuss with a neighbor)

- **Can you think of a time in your life when you have been good and faithful, while you saw someone else who has been unfaithful treated better than you? How did that make you feel? Why did you feel this way?**

Teacher's Transition Statement

Usually when you hear this story, the focus is on the younger brother and his need to repent, and possibly about the great love of the father when he does. But we don't think much about the "good guy," the elder brother.

Learn Story Together (Listening Task)

- As you're committing this story to memory:
 - Note all the words and actions of the elder son.
 - Note all the words and actions of the father.

Basic Outline of Discussion (to help facilitator lead without reading everything)

- **Audience:** Who was Jesus telling the parable to? Why?
- **The Older Son:** What was he like? What was good about him? What was not good? How was he living like an orphan? What do we learn about ourselves from the older son?
- **The Father:** What was he like? What do we learn about God from the father? What does he want from us?
- **Application:** What needs to change in my life after studying this story? What actions, attitudes, or beliefs?
- **Sharing:** Who needs to hear this story?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (with some possible responses):

- **Who was Jesus' main audience when telling this story?**
 - *The Pharisees and the teachers of the law.*
- **Who would those people be in today's world?**
 - *Those who look down on others, perhaps church people, people approved by society or religion, people of dominant races or classes.*
- **What seems good about the elder brother?**
 - *He is obedient, good, never refused to obey his father, stayed at home, faithful, did not waste inheritance, disciplined, did not meet prostitutes, did not get drunk, and caused no problems.*
- **What was not good about him?**

- o *He was self righteous, judgmental, hated his younger brother, jealous, angry because of the mercy shown to his brother, offended, and had no love for brother or father.*
- o *His service was like a slave or servant rather than the joyful service of a son, and wanted an exclusive party with his friends.*
- o *Described his brother to his father as “this son of yours” instead of “my brother.”*
- **Describe his relationship with his father.**
 - o *Obedient on the outside, but was depending on his work or good behavior in order to earn from his father respect, position, and possessions rather than rejoicing in simply being his son and enjoying all the fruits of that relationship.*
 - o *Did not share his father’s heart of love for the younger son; in fact he did not understand his father at all.*
 - o *Still wanted to control his own life, but instead of doing this by running away, he chose to stay at home and obey (i.e. tried to control his life or “get life” by staying and obeying).*
 - o *Was inside the house, but wandering far from home in his heart. Was lost inside the house.*
 - o *Did not claim a relationship with his brother or father: “This son of yours!”*
- **How did he use his obedience? Was it joyful service out of love for his father?**
 - o *No, not joyful service but he used obedience as a tool to make himself feel worthy or righteous, to “deserve” his father's favor*
 - o *used obedience as a tool to defend himself, judge others, attack his brother, disrespect his father, argue, shame his father, and to stay outside.*
 - o *Ultimately he used it as a weapon to get what he thought he deserved.*
- **Who did the elder son represent?**
 - o *Religious people: the Pharisees and teachers of the law.*
 - o *Those who were “inside the house, but wandering far from home.”*
 - o *Those who are very busy for God, obeying his commands at least superficially, but not knowing and loving him.*
 - o *Those who condemned Jesus for welcoming sinners and eating with them.*
- **So who is more lost, the younger son or the elder?**
 - o *The elder son is more lost because of his “goodness” blinds him to his lostness, to his need for his father’s love. He does not “come to his senses” the way the younger son does.*
 - *He is not starving like the younger son, but is full and satisfied - satisfied with himself. So the younger son, though just as far from the father, is more likely to come to the end of himself and see his desperate need.*
- **The younger son goes inside to the party, but the older son does not! What does this mean?**
 - o *The elder brother is lost, not despite his goodness, but because of his goodness.*
 - o *Because he “obeyed” (i.e. obeyed in order to get control, to merit life), he can’t really understand his father’s love, therefore he won’t come in.*
 - o *Our “goodness” can separate us from God worse than our “badness” IF it hides our sin, or hides how we try to save and rule ourselves, if it makes us think, “I deserve this.”*
- **So is it wrong to try to be good?**
 - *No! We are not saying it is wrong to be good, to do good, or to obey God. Of course not! But we should not only be good for the wrong reasons.*
- o **What is the proper reason for true obedience?**

- *The foundation for our obedience should be love and gratitude for God's mercy to us. Obedience should not be just an attempt to earn God's or other people's favor.*
 - *The motivation and power to obey can only come from the Good News of what Christ has done for us - living sinlessly, dying for us, and rising again to victory.*
 - *We strive to obey God and live a life worthy of the gospel through the power of the Holy Spirit because of what Christ has already done for us.*
- **What is the proper goal or motivation for true obedience?**
 - *Ask yourself: what do you really want?*
 - *Do you mostly want God's things? – wealth, respect, reputation, position, success, authority, comfort, security, pleasures. Or...*
 - *Do you mostly want God himself? God the Father – to know and be known, to have a relationship with the one true God.*
- **Who should have gone looking for the younger brother?**
 - *The elder brother!*
 - **Who is our true elder brother, the one who comes looking for us in order to bring us home to the Father?**
 - *Jesus! The true elder brother who brings us back even though it cost him his life. He went to the cross to bring us to the Father's feast!*
 - **Why does the story end unfinished? Why is the elder brother still outside, and we're left wondering whether he came in or not?**
 - *Jesus wants us to listen to him, whether we are elder or younger brother types. He is calling to us, "Come home!" Whether you have run away from home, trying to discover yourself, or have hidden inside the house behind your own obedience, you have been away from home.*
 - *Home is the place you were created for, the person you were created to be. There is a true elder brother. He is inviting you to come home.*

General Application Questions (discuss with whole group)

- **What are some wrong motivations we believers sometimes have for trying to obey God?**
 - *to look good in front of others, to improve or maintain our reputations*
 - *to feel proud, confident, and righteous before God*
 - *to obtain higher positions, opportunities, power, or wealth*
- **What good things do we sometimes need to repent of? In other words, what are some of the good things we do that we sometimes do for sinful reasons?**
 - *attendance at church, prayer meetings - or tithing - or serving in the church (but looking down on others who do less); being kind to others (but expecting recognition or appreciation), sexual purity (but looking down on those who have failed), sacrificing self for God's work (and feeling proud)*
- **What are some signs that may reveal that we are living as elder brothers?**
 - *Anger - at God, at self, at others.*
 - *Jealous – "I deserve, they don't." For example: "I have prayed so much for _____ and those people get what I want even though they are not as faithful as me!"*
 - *Judgmental of others.*

- o *Hates the law, but claims to love it. In other words, he obeys the law, but hates it when it doesn't serve him well.*
 - *Says, "I have slaved," To him, rules feel like "orders" rather than God's loving guidance. Obedience feels like "slavery" instead of grateful service.*
- o *Exclusive, shows favoritism*
 - *The elder brother wants to meet with his small group of friends. The father ~~slaughters the fattened calf to~~ welcome the whole community to celebrate together.*
 - *The elder brother doesn't want to "eat with sinners."*
- o *Unforgiving.*
- o *Not interested in sharing the Good News! (except as another form of merit).*

Personal Application Questions (choose one or two for small group discussion):

- **What "goodness" do you need to repent of?**
 - o **In other words, what good things do you do? Why do you do them? How are these things at least sometimes done *for you* instead out of love for your Father?**
- **Remembering the elder brother (the Pharisees) and his attributes, how have you acted like the older brother? Are you jealous? In what ways do you tend to think you deserve to be treated better by God or others? How is your thinking wrong?**

David and Mephibosheth

2 Samuel 4:4; 9:1-13 (Background: 1 Samuel 20:12-17)

Key Themes: Adoption

[Core Gospel Concepts: Identity in Christ, Intimacy with the Father)

THE STORY:

During the time of King Saul, the Israelites went to battle with the Philistines with whom they had been at war for many years. During the fierce battle, King Saul and his son Jonathan were both killed, and the soldiers of Israel all fled in defeat. When the news of King Saul and Jonathan came to their family, Jonathan's five-year-old son was taken up by his nurse, and they ran away in fear. As she fled, the boy fell and became lame, crippled in both feet. His name was Mephibosheth.

Years later, when David was king over Israel and the Lord had established his covenant with him, David said, "Is there anyone left in Saul's house that I can show kindness for Jonathan's sake?" [He asked this because David and Jonathan had been best friends, and they had promised to show kindness to one another's family as long as either lived.] Ziba, a servant from Saul's house, was called to David and was asked the same question.

Ziba answered, "There is still a son of Jonathan; he is crippled in both feet."

David asked, "Where is he?" When Ziba told David where he was, David sent for him. When Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, came and fell on his face before David to honor him, David said, "Mephibosheth!"

And he answered, "Behold, I am your servant."

Then David said, "Don't be afraid, I will show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan, and I will restore to you all the land of your grandfather Saul, and you shall always eat at my table."

Mephibosheth was amazed and said, "Who am I, that you should notice a dead dog like me?"

Then David said to Ziba, "Everything that belonged to Saul I have given to Mephibosheth. And you, your sons, and servants shall till the land for him and give him the produce, that your master's grandson may have bread to eat. But Mephibosheth, your master's grandson, shall always eat at my table." Ziba agreed to everything David had said. So he, his fifteen sons, and twenty servants became Mephibosheth's servants.

So Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem because he always ate at David's table, like one of the king's sons. And he was crippled in both of his feet.

Optional Memory Verse: 2 Samuel 9:7 - *"Then David said, 'Don't be afraid, I will show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan, and I will restore to you all the land of Saul, and you shall always eat at my table.'"*

Introduction Question (discuss with a neighbor)

- **What is the most kind thing someone has ever done for you? Did you deserve that**

kindness? Why did they choose to love you that way?

Teacher's Transition Statement

Our story today is about a man who deserved nothing, but was given the greatest gift he could ever imagine.

Learn Story Together (Listening Task)

- As you're committing this story to memory, consider these questions:
 - Who was the only living descendant of Saul? What had happened to him?
 - What did Mephibosheth call himself?

Basic Outline of Discussion (to help facilitator lead without reading everything)

- **Mephibosheth:** What was he like? What were his problems? How was he living like an orphan? Why was he unworthy to eat at the king's table?
- **David:** What was he like toward Mephibosheth? Why could he have refused to help him? What do we learn from him in this story about God from the father? What does he want from us?
- **Us:** How are we like Mephibosheth? How do we live like orphans?
- **Application:** What needs to change in my life after studying this story? What actions, attitudes, or beliefs?
- **Sharing:** Who needs to hear this story?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (with some possible responses):

- **What was Mephibosheth's physical problem? How did this affect the rest of his life?**
 - *Mephibosheth was lame from an accident that happened when he was a child.*
 - *Made him an outcast, constantly dependent upon others, not able to make decisions on his own, helpless, hopeless.*
- **What was Mephibosheth's other problem? What happened to his family? How do you think this made him feel? How was Mephibosheth's situation like that of other orphans?**
 - *He was the descendant of Saul, who had been rejected as king by God.*
 - *He was an orphan. His grandfather and father were killed, and he was forced to live in hiding in case another king wanted to take his life.*
 - *He likely lived every day of his life in fear of what could happen to him by someone more powerful than him. He was completely unable to help himself out of his situation.*
 - *Mephibosheth had everything in his life stripped away from him in the matter of a few hours: his position in the royal family, his health, childhood, independence, loved one, friends, even his dignity. He was only five years old when this all happened. This was a true tragedy.*
- **Why does David choose to extend kindness to a member of Saul's house? How had Saul treated David during his life? What does this teach us about David's heart?**
 - *Because of the covenant that he had made with his close friend, Jonathan. David and Jonathan had promised each other that as long as they live, they would show kindness to each other's families. After all those years, David did not hate Saul, even though Saul hated David and had sought to kill him numerous times.*
 - *David had truly forgiven Saul and had truly loved Jonathan and was willing to keep his promise even though no one was there to hold him accountable to it.*

- *His kindness was not based on the merit of Mephibosheth.*
- **How is Mephibosheth described in this story?**
 - *Several times in the story we are reminded that he was crippled or lame in his feet. This seems to be the distinguishing characteristic of Mephibosheth.*
 - *But David primarily sees him as a son of King Saul and Jonathan. His previous identity as son of his dear friend Jonathan and a member of the royal family is more important to David than the fact that he is lame.*
- **How do you think Mephibosheth felt when he was brought before the king?**
 - *He was probably scared, perhaps he thought that he had finally been found out and that he would be punished by David for all the evil that Saul had done to David. Mephibosheth falls down on his face before David in respect.*
- **How does David choose to treat Mephibosheth? What sorts of things does David give Mephibosheth?**
 - *“Don’t be afraid.” Immediately reassures him that this is a meeting of peace, not revenge.*
 - *Identifies and treats Mephibosheth as a son of the king.*
 - *Restores to him the land that had been Saul's.*
 - *Gives Ziba and his household as servants to care for the land and bring him the produce.*
 - *Offers him a seat at David’s table all the days of his life (which would imply that Mephibosheth would live in Jerusalem with the king in his house).*
- **Who normally lives in the king’s house and eats at the king’s table? What does this tell us about David?**
 - *The family! Only the king’s wife, children, and closest advisors and friends would eat at his table. Mephibosheth is being invited to a place at the table where only the king’s family is welcome. Mephibosheth is being treated as if he is one of David’s own sons.*
 - *David, the king of Israel, delights to extend kindness to this person who doesn’t deserve it. There is nothing Mephibosheth can contribute to the work of David’s kingdom; David expects nothing in return from Mephibosheth for the kindness that he is showing him.*
- **How does this remind you of how God treats us?**
 - *This story is for everyone who repents and puts their faith in Jesus! We are like Mephibosheth: hopeless, helpless, afraid, hiding, undeserving. But the King, in his abundant and eternal kindness, has invited us to eat at his table all the days of our lives as one of his own children.*
 - *Mephibosheth moved from being an orphan to being a son of the king, simply because the king declared it to be true. God does the same for us when we trust in Christ.*
 - *He never again needed to live in fear of being outcast but in the freedom of knowing he was part of the king's family. Mephibosheth was no longer known primarily by his physical disability; instead he was identified as a child of the king.*
 - *This is the heart of the gospel! We are unable to save ourselves out of our terrible situation. The only solution is for the King to extend undeserved kindness to us and make us a member of his family. It’s not because of anything we have done.*
- **Does Mephibosheth’s place at David’s table come at a cost? Who pays the cost? What is this a future picture of?**

- *David pays for Ziba's care. Also Ziba and his servants commit to serving Mephibosheth all of their days.*
- *Points forward to Christ: the greater King, the greater Promise Keeper, the greater Servant, who paid with his own life so that we could be reconciled to God and given a seat at his table forever.*
- **Mephibosheth's life has been completely changed. He changed from living like an orphan to living as a beloved child. What is life like for abandoned orphans? Why is it so difficult to not have a father?**
 - *Lonely; no help; no one to depend on; no one who cares; no sense of belonging; no provision; deep sense of abandonment; uncertain future; need to provide for oneself; tendency to beg, borrow, steal instead of trusting in a father to provide; no place to call home; no shelter; no protection; easily gets into trouble; independent; does not need to listen to authority; has no parent or authority to tell him or her what to do or how to live; no good clothes; looked down on; people don't want to touch or associate.*

General Application Questions (discuss with whole group)

- **What are some ways that we might be living daily as if we are spiritual orphans?**
 - *May feel worthless because of being poor, less educated, less talented, less beautiful, less important than others.*
 - *May be anxious or fearful because we feel alone, helpless, or as if we don't belong.*
 - *May worry about our future, not trusting that our Father will care for us.*
 - *May feel that no one is providing for us so we need to steal it for ourselves.*
 - *May reject God's rule over our lives or ignore his law because we don't trust that He is leading us well.*
 - *May complain and grumble about our lives or be jealous of others.*
- **Jesus kindly invites us to dine at the Father's table! To be with Him, to be nourished by Him. What are some ways that we (even as Christians) sometimes fail to truly enjoy the feast He provides us at His table?**
 - *Shame, guilt, anxiety, fear, discontent.*
- **Ephesians 2:8,9: "It is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast." God's kindness to us is pure grace, totally undeserved. Sometimes instead of feeling too unworthy to be loved by God, we believe that we deserve God's favor and good treatment. What are some of the reasons our hearts may feel this way? How does that rob us of the full riches of the Gospel?**
 - *Because we feel we have been faithful, generous, obedient. Or because we are talented, wealthy, educated, well known, important - at least more than other people!*
 - *Makes us less grateful to God and less dependent on the Gospel of Jesus, less able to rejoice in His great love for us!*

Personal Application Questions (choose one or two for small group discussion)

- In what way do you sometimes feel the same as an orphan would feel? How do you view yourself more by things that are true on your surface than by what the King has declared to be true about you?

- What is one way that you sometimes fail to feast at the Father's table? Do you truly believe that the King delights to see you personally come into his presence? How can you more fully experience the freedom and joy that Jesus offers you at His table?
- What is one way that you are tempted to think that God loves you because you deserve His love? How could that rob you of the full riches of the true gospel? How can you repent today of this pride?

Mary and Martha

Luke 10:38-42

Key Theme: Resting in Our Father's Presence

[Core Gospel Concepts: Intimacy with the Father, Sin, Identity in Christ]

THE STORY:

One day Jesus and his disciples were traveling, and they came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.

But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Optional Memory Verse: Luke 10:42: *"Only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her."*

Introduction Question (discuss with a neighbor)

Why should we pray? What are your motivations for praying or taking time to be with God?

Teacher's Transition Statement

Today's story tells us about two women who welcomed Jesus into their home, but they did so in very different ways. Let's look together at how they each came to Jesus.

Learn Story Together (Listening Task)

- As you're committing this story to memory, consider these questions:
 - What choice did Mary make when Jesus arrived in her home?
 - What choice did Martha make when Jesus arrived? How did she respond to Mary's choice?

Basic Outline of Discussion (to help facilitator lead without reading everything)

- **Martha:** What was she like? What was good? What was not good? How did she treat Jesus and her sister? What was most important to her?
- **Mary:** What was her attitude toward Jesus? What was most important to her?
- **Jesus:** How did he respond to Martha's complaint? What was most important to him?
- **Us:** What does Jesus most want from us?
- **Good works / spiritual disciplines:** What can we learn from this story?
- **Application:** What needs to change in my life after studying this story - after learning how Jesus just wants us to enjoy his presence and learn from him? What actions, attitudes, or beliefs? How can we love others better?
- **Sharing:** Who needs to hear this story?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (with some possible responses):

- **What did Martha do when Jesus came to her village? What did she do when Jesus came into her house?**
 - *She welcomed him into her home, and she began to make preparations for his visit.*
- **What did Mary do when Jesus came into the house? Where was she? What was her attitude?**
 - *Mary sat at Jesus' feet, listening to his teaching.*
 - *Her attitude was one of humility and eagerness to be with Jesus, to be near him, to listen to him, to sit with him.*
- **Why was Martha upset? What did she do about it? What did this reveal about her heart? What was Martha most concerned about? What do you think really motivated her or caused her to be that way? Why was Martha's work so important to her?**
 - *Martha opened her home to Jesus, but she failed to open her heart to him.*
 - *Serving Jesus is good, but Martha was so busy trying to make him think well of her that she failed to slow down and to know him personally and listen to him.*
 - *Martha was very distracted by all the work she thought she needed to do. Perhaps she was too concerned about looking good in front of her visitors.*
- **What was Mary most concerned about? Why do you think she was that way?**
 - *Mary wanted to know Jesus, sit in his presence, listen to his words.*
 - *She was most concerned with having a relationship with Jesus.*
- **What was Jesus' response to Martha's complaint?**
 - *"You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."*
- **What mattered most to Jesus when he went into someone's house or entered into their life?**
 - *Relationship with him.*
 - *Affecting their heart.*
 - *Loving them.*
- **How did Martha treat Mary in this story? Why?**
 - *She was angry, blaming, and judgmental.*
 - *Mary was not joining in Martha's priorities. She was making her look bad and making her work harder.*
- **When we allow our "good" work for God to prevent us from being with our Father, how does it affect the way we treat other people?**
 - *Makes us proud, angry, jealous of other people who are not working as hard as we are.*
 - *Prevents us seeing and loving other people the way that God sees and loves them.*
- **In what way is Martha like the elder brother in the story of the Two Lost Sons?**
 - *Martha felt that she deserved Jesus' favor because of her work for him.*
 - *She wanted Jesus' approval more than she wanted to be with him.*
 - *She believed that hard work would make her right with God.*
 - *She was self-righteous, judgmental toward her sibling, and self-centered.*

- **If someone really understands and believes what Jesus has done for them – that he died on the cross and rose again for them - how can that help them long for fellowship with the Father?**
 - *If we think that we must keep earning God's favor by our hard work for him, we will remain anxious when it becomes difficult or we are failing.*
 - *If we trust fully in what Jesus did for us, we can relax sometimes and take time to sit with him, not feeling guilty about all the work we need to “produce” in order to feel good about ourselves.*
 - *Understanding the cross will help us see that God wants to be our Father, wants us to value our relationship with him, and wants us to sit and listen to him.*

General Application Questions (discuss with whole group)

- **How do we resemble Martha at times?**
 - *want to look good in front of others, to improve or maintain our reputations*
 - *want to feel proud, confident, and righteous before God*
 - *are so concerned about doing our duty that we don't take time to sit and listen to our Father who loves us.*
- **What are some common things in our lives that distract us from really sitting in the Father's presence?**
- **If knowing Jesus and being with him in his presence became the most important thing in our lives, how might we live differently? How would our attitudes be different? Or our actions? How can slow down to “sit” with and listen to Jesus help us to love others?**
- **If people in your church began considering knowing Jesus more important than all other activities or concerns, how do you think your church would be different than it is now?**

Personal Application Questions (choose one or two for small group discussion):

- **Can you think of a recent situation where you felt like Martha in this story? Perhaps a situation in your own life when you have failed to love others because of your busy work for the Lord?**
- **What works do you do “for the Lord”? How does this work, even though it is good, sometimes distract you from what is really needed - to be with your Father? What are you “worried and upset” about today? How can you repent of these distractions?**

The Woman and the Serpent

Genesis 3

Key Theme: The Nature of Sin, Unbelief

[Core Gospel Concepts: Sin, Created in God's Image, Intimacy with the Father]

Context: God had created mankind in His own image, male and female, and had placed them in the garden of Eden to help him care for his creation. They lived there in perfect fellowship with God.

THE STORY:

The Tempter

The serpent was the cleverest of all the animals God had made. One day, the woman was in the garden, and the serpent came up to her. The serpent said, “Did God really tell you that you may not eat from any tree in the garden?”

The woman said, “No, God said we may eat from every tree in the garden, except one of those in the middle— the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil. We may not even touch it or we will die.”

The serpent said, “No! That is not true! God knows that when you eat of that tree, you will become wise like He is, knowing good and evil.”

Then the woman looked at the tree. She saw it was beautiful, and it would be good to eat, and desirable for gaining wisdom. So she took the fruit and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Suddenly, their eyes were opened, and they saw that they were naked. So they sewed leaves together to cover their bodies.

Hiding

Just at that time, they heard God walking in the garden. So they ran into the forest to hide. God called to the man, “Where are you?”

Adam said, “I heard you and was afraid, so I hid because I am naked.”

God said, “Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat from the tree that I told you not to eat from?”

Adam said, “This woman you gave to me – she gave me the fruit and I ate it!”

Then God said to the woman, “What have you done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate the fruit.”

Curses, Mercy, and Separation

God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, you are cursed! You will crawl on your belly all your days eating the dust of the ground. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he (the seed of the woman) will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”

Then God also cursed the woman, saying, “You will have terrible pain in child-bearing. Your desire will be against your husband but he will rule over you.”

Then God said to the man, “Because you listened to your wife, and have eaten of the tree I told you not to eat from, the land is cursed because of you! Through painful work by the sweat of your brow you will get your food, but the land will produce thorns and thistles. Then you will die and return to the dust from which you were taken.”

At that time, the man gave a new name to the woman. He called her Eve because she was the mother of all living people. And God made clothes for them from animal skins and clothed them. Then God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” So the Lord drove them out of the garden, and at the entrance of the garden he set angels and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

Optional Memory Verse: Romans 3:10: “As it is written. ‘There is no one righteous, not even one.’”

Introduction Question (Discuss with neighbor)

- What do you think is the main motivation behind every sin?

Teacher’s Transition Statement

This story is taught in more detail in the Chronological Bible Storying (CBS) series. Here we are going to focus on seeing what it teaches about SIN.

Learn Story Together (Listening Task)

- As you’re committing this story to memory, consider these questions:
 - Name each sin done in this story.
 - Make a list of each word or occurrence that led to a sin.

Basic Outline of Discussion (to help facilitator lead without reading everything)

- **The Serpent:** What were his strategies for tempting the woman and the man?
- **Sin:** What do we learn about sin? What it looks like? Where it comes from, it's root?
- **More Sin:** What do we learn about how sin progresses?
- **Romans 1:18, 21-31:** The nature of sin? What does it mean to be given up to sin?
- **Hope:** What hope does this story give to sinners?
- **Application:** What needs to change in my life after studying this story - after learning about sin and how deceitful our hearts are? What actions, attitudes, or beliefs?
- **Sharing:** Who needs to hear this story?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (with some possible responses):

- **How did the serpent influence the thoughts of the woman (and the man who was with her)? In what way did he tempt her?**
 - *Made God’s good law seem too strict. “Did God REALLY say . . . ?” Tempted them to doubt God’s word or His goodness and trustworthiness. To think that perhaps God was withholding something good from them?*
 - *Tempted them to put themselves in charge of deciding what is best.*
- **What is sin? How was the man and woman’s response to temptation sinful? What was the surface sin? What was the deeper sin underneath it?**

- *Sin is breaking or failing to obey the law of God. The woman responded by paying attention to the lies that the serpent said about God and considering the doubts that he put into her mind. She failed to trust what God had said. She then responded by taking the forbidden fruit and eating it.*
- *The surface sin was eating the fruit from the tree that God told them not to eat from. The deeper or hidden sin was unbelief - doubting that what God said was true and doubting that God had their best in mind when he gave that command. This ended with them deciding to rule their own lives in this situation rather than submitting to God's rule.*
- **What happened after they ate the fruit? What does this teach us about the nature of sin?**
 - *Their relationship with God was broken.*
 - *They saw their nakedness and felt shame and began trying to hide their sin and shame by sewing fig leaves and by hiding in the forest.*
 - *Sin is rooted in deception and leads to hiding and adding sin upon sin in order to make ourselves seem righteous and approvable.*
- **What evidence was there that the first sin led to more sins?**
 - *The shame they felt, the attempts to hide their sin and make themselves appear righteous, this first instance of depending on themselves for their needs instead of God, fear of being seen and known inside and out blaming others for their sin - each other and God*
- **READ Romans 1:18, 21-31 -**
 - ***¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. . . . ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. ²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; ²⁷ and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. ²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.***
- **What does this passage teach us about the nature of sin? How is sin related to the truth in this passage?**
 - *Sin always involves **suppressing the truth** about God and about ourselves.*
 - *Sin involves **exchanging the truth** about God for a lie.*
- **Three times in this passage it says that “God gave them up to” more sin. What does this teach us about sin and how it works in our lives?**

- *The more we listen to temptation and give into sin, the harder our hearts become, and the more easily we follow sin the next time. Unchecked by true repentance it grows deeper and stronger in us.*
- **What hope is there for sinners? Every person is a descendant of Adam and Eve, the mother of all living people, and are born outside of the Garden of Eden, outside of fellowship with God. We are all born with the sin nature, unable to save ourselves from the effects of sin. Where is there hope in this story?**
 - *Genesis 3:15 is the first promise of a Savior who would come. It is pointing to Jesus Christ, the Seed of the Woman who would crush the head of the serpent. In other words he would destroy Satan and all his works and give us victory over sin. From this point on people could come to God by confessing their sin openly and putting their trust in the promised Savior.*
 - *1 Corinthians 15:22 - "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive."*
 - *Romans 10:9 - When we sin, it is still true that "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*
 - *Even when God "gives us over" to our sin, he is allowing our sin to reap its natural consequences in our lives so that we might "come to our senses" and repent, trust in Christ, and be changed.*

General Application Questions:

- **What are some ways that we "suppress the truth" and let our intimacy with our heavenly father be compromised?**
- **What are some practical examples where you can see destruction in people's lives when they "exchange the truth about God for a lie?"**
- **What are some ways that we as Christians sometimes suppress the truth about God and ourselves?**
- **How do you see practically in people's lives today that God "gives us over to" sin when we rebel against Him?**
- **When we realize we have suppressed the truth or allowed sin to run away with us, what are we encouraged by this lesson to do?**
 - *admit our sin to God, turn back to him, and put our hope in the Savior that he has promised to send, Jesus Christ.*

Personal Application Questions (choose one or two for small group discussion):

- **What is one way that you have recently tried to suppress the truth or HIDE from God or "SEW FIG LEAVES"? In other words, in what situation have you tried to cover your sin and shame through your own efforts? How can this story help you come out from hiding?**
- **How has Satan deceived you sometimes? What lies about God or yourself are you even now tempted to believe?**
- **How are you tempted to try to take God's place in some area of your life? How can you repent of this?**

The Foolish Rich Man / The Foolish Rich Church)

Luke 12:15-21,31,34 / Revelation 3:15-20

Key Themes: Pride, Self-Dependence

[Core Gospel Concepts: Sin, Repentance, Intimacy with the Father]

THE STORY:

One day Jesus was teaching crowds of people, and someone said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” But Jesus said to him, “Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?” And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” Then he told them a parable, saying,

“The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And then I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.”’

“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God . . . Instead, you should first seek God’s kingdom, and these other things will be given to you as well . . . For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Optional Memory Verse: Revelation 3:20 - *“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”*

Introduction Question (discuss with a neighbor)

What are some of the gifts God has given you? (things, abilities, relationships, opportunities, etc.)

Teacher’s Transition Statement

Today’s story centers around Jesus’ parable of the rich fool. After learning this story we will also compare it to one congregation in the early church and see what we can learn.

Learn Story Together (Listening Task)

- As you’re committing this story to memory, consider these questions:
 - Why did Jesus tell this parable? What had someone said to him?
 - What did the rich man do as his business got bigger?

Basic Outline of Discussion (to help facilitator lead without reading everything):

- **Reason for the Parable:** Why Jesus told it?
- **Rich Man:**
 - Riches, response, real goal, result?
- **Rich Church / City:**
 - Riches, response, real goal, result?

- **Real Problem:** What we really need to understand about ourselves?
- **Real Solution:** What Jesus offers for us to buy?
- **Application:** What needs to change in my life after studying this story - after learning how our riches, blessings, or advantages can hurt our relationship with God? What actions, attitudes, or beliefs? How can we love others better?
- **Sharing:** Who needs to hear this story?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (with some possible responses):

- **What prompted Jesus to tell this parable? How do you think the man who asked for Jesus' help with the inheritance was feeling? What did Jesus think was wrong with his request? What warning did he give?**
 - *take care, guard against life being about accumulating possessions*
 - *gave him example who HAD all those things the man wanted from his brother - and how bad it turned out.*
- **What were the RICHES of the man in Jesus' parable? How was he blessed?**
 - *Grain, storage, money, organized, financially secure future, reputation*
- **What was his RESPONSE to these riches? How did it affect his attitude? What did this show about what was most important to him? Who was he depending on?**
 - *proud, self-dependent, greedy, hoarding for himself, selfish, apathetic*
- **What was the REAL GOAL underlying that response?**
 - *himself, not others or God*
- **What was the RESULT, the actual fruit in his life of the attitude he had about his blessing?**
 - *death - physically and spiritually, a wasted life*

Note: The rich man in this parable is similar to both the city and the church in Laodicea.

Rich City (Note to teacher: just summarize this information for the group. Note that it does not come from Scripture but from a Bible dictionary.)

Many years later, after Jesus had gone up to heaven, God spoke to the church in Laodicea, as recorded in the book of Revelation. According to other historical documents, Laodicea was a city in the Roman province of Asia that started a few hundred years before Christ was born. By the time of the early church, it had become a wealthy center for business. It was in an area that was famous for producing beautiful, black wool and for having very good doctors who made special medicines.

But the city did have one obvious problem. They had no good water supply nearby. Therefore, they had to pipe water to their city from springs far away, so by the time the water arrived in Laodicea it was lukewarm and very hard to drink. This was different from its neighboring towns, one of which had hot water with healing powers, another of which had cold refreshing water.

But despite its poor water, the people of Laodicea thought they needed nothing from anyone else. They were proud of their own ability to take care of themselves. For example, when the city was destroyed by a terrible earthquake in AD 60, the people actually rejected the Romans' offer to help them rebuild. They could do it themselves! They thought they were rich and needed no help! The church at Laodicea had the same attitude. Listen to what God says through the angel to that church in Revelation 3.

Rich Church (Note: read aloud Revelation 3:15-20, repeat once before dialogue)

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm-- neither hot nor cold-- I am about to spit you out of my mouth.

*You say, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." **But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.***

- **For the people of the city and church of Laodicea, what were their riches, their gifts, their advantages?**
 - *City: business, farms, money, gold, professional people, black wool, medical skills*
 - *Church: had all the same wealth physically plus felt rich spiritually*
- **For each of them, what was their response to their riches, gifts, advantages? What fruit did it produce in their attitudes?**
 - *proud, self-satisfied, made an idol of wealth, success, felt important and worthy*
- **What was the finally result of these attitudes?**
 - *Their fruit in their lives was bad, tasteless (like the lukewarm water in the city)*
 - *Forgot God as source of all blessing. Credited themselves instead.*
 - *Lukewarm spiritually, spiritual pretenders, deceived themselves.*
 - *Prideful, blind to see their own need, so not praying to God for what they most needed*
- **What true needs in their lives did they fail to see? God told them that they were what? What did they truly need?**
 - *wretched, pitiful, poor*
 - *blind*
 - *naked*
- **Considering the parable of the rich man as well as Jesus' words for the church at Laodicea, what do you think is one of the most foundational sins of people's hearts?**
 - *pride, depending on self, rejecting God*
- **What did he counsel them to "buy" from Him?**
 - *gold - true, refined by fire (remember, Laodicea was famous for its rich business)*
 - *so that would be rich, not wretched, pitiful, and poor*
 - *salve (remember, Laodicea was famous for its doctors and medicines)*
 - *so that they could see, not be blind, but able to truly see the truth about their own sin and need for forgiveness, and about the gift of life that Jesus offers*
 - *white clothes (remember, Laodicea was famous for black wool)*
 - *so that they could cover their nakedness and shame*
- **What was the gold refined by fire that they really needed?**
 - *growing relationship w/Christ – true riches*

- **What was the salve that they needed and Christ offered?**
 - *His Word and Spirit to enable them to see their own sin in light of God's holiness and to see the beauty of the Gospel of salvation that Jesus offers.*
- **What was the white clothes Jesus offered for purchase?**
 - *Jesus shed his blood to cover their sin and shame.*
- **How could they and you buy these important things?**
 - *Hear Him knocking at the door of your heart. Open the door so he can come in and eat with you and you with Him.*
 - *Realize that **He has already purchased all of this** for you.*
- **Jesus says, "So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." Is he mainly speaking to the lost who do not believe in Him? Who is he speaking to?**
 - *He's talking to believers, to the church, to us when we become prideful and self satisfied, unwilling to see our sin and follow Him closely through ongoing repentance and trust in the Gospel.*
- **Why are we so afraid to accept that we are "wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked?" How does Jesus treat such people? Does he wait for them to come to Him? What does he really desire from those who realize they are "wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked?"**
 - *He does not wait for us to clean ourselves up, to earn our own wealth, to clothe ourselves. He is knocking at the door!*
 - *He wants to help believers become hot for the Gospel, to grow in holiness, to grow in passion for knowing God more fully (to abide with Him, eat with Him be nourished by Him) and for making Him known to others.*
- **Consider again the rich man in Jesus' parable. How should he have thought about and used his blessings?**
 - *He should have recognized that every gift was from God Himself and that only God sustained him day by day. This should have felt him with thankfulness and praise.*
 - *He should have depended on God to know how best to use his blessings for God's kingdom - to love others and show them the beauty of God so that they also could feast with Him.*

General Application Questions:

- **The rich man was rich with good crops and all the possessions he could ever want. Most of us are not that rich money wise, but we all do have some ways in which we are rich. What are some ways that people, particularly believers, are rich?**
 - or think of it another way:
- **What are some ways that we would like to be rich? In other words, of what things or advantages or positions do we sometimes think, "If only I had _____, then my life would be OK!"**
 - **When we think this way how can this hurt our relationship with God? Or with other people?**
- **How should we respond to God's blessings in our lives, to the riches He provides for us?**

Personal Application Questions (choose one or two for small group discussion):

- **What is one particular blessing/possession/advantage** (maybe you have it, maybe you do not) **that you sometimes feel you cannot live without? Something that has become a source of hope to you? How has this damaged your relationship with God? What would it be like for you to repent of this attitude?**
- **In reality, in what way are you lukewarm? Or wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked? When you realize this truth, how can it lead to change in your life?**
- Jesus said, “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.” **Are you experiencing God’s discipline in any way? What might God be asking you to repent of? Will you open the door to him and let him in to love you?**

The Call & Faith of Abram

Genesis 12:1-8; Genesis 15

KEY THEMES: Justification by Faith, Living by Faith

[Core Gospel Concepts: Justification, Identity in Christ, Nature of Faith, Obedience]

THE STORY:

After the time of Noah and the Tower of Babel, there was a man named Abram. He was 75 years old. His wife, Sarah, was also old. And they had no children. One day, God appeared to Abram and said, “Abram, you must leave your country. You must leave your family. And you must leave your father and go to a place that I will show to you. And I will make of you a great nation. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. And I will bless all the nations of the world through you.”

So Abram took his wife, Sarah, and his nephew, Lot, and he traveled for many months until God led him to Canaan, the Promised Land. Around that time there was a famine in the land. So Abram took his family to Egypt. There, even though Abram sinned by not trusting the Lord and lying to the king, God, in his mercy, protected him and his family, both from famine and from the Egyptians and even blessed Abram with great wealth during that time.

When Abram and his family returned to Canaan from Egypt, they had many animals. Both Abram and Lot were very rich by this time, and the land was not strong enough to support them both, so arguments broke out among their herdsmen. Abram said to Lot, “Let us not quarrel. We are one family. Look over the land. If you choose to go to the right, I will go to the left. If you choose the left, I will go right.” Lot looked at the whole land and saw that the valley of the Jordan River was very beautiful. It was full of tall grass good for animals and water. So he moved his herds to the valley and settled near the city of Sodom while Abram remained in Canaan, and God promised to give him and his offspring that whole land.

Then God appeared to Abram and said, “Do not be afraid. I am your shield and your reward.” But Abram said, “What good is it if you bless me when I have no son to inherit?” And God took Abram out and showed him the sky. He said, “If you can count the stars, then you will be able to count your descendants.” And Abram believed God and God counted it to him as righteousness.

Then God told Abram to offer a special sacrifice in which God appeared to him as a flame of fire between the two halves of carcasses of several animals and spoke to him of the future.

Optional Memory Verse: Romans 3:21-22a - *“But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”*

Introduction Question (discuss with neighbor):

- **How would you explain to someone the relationship between faith and obedience and how we are saved?**
- **When God looks you in the eyes, what is the expression on his face? What if you do good? What if you do bad? What can you do to change the expression on his face when you look at him?**

Teacher's Transition Statement;

Today's story helps us understand the relationship between faith, obedience, and righteousness in the eyes of God.

Learn Story Together (Listening Task):

- **As you're committing this story to memory, consider these questions:**
 - **What promises did God make to Abram?**
 - **Why was Abram righteous in God's eyes?**

Basic Outline of Discussion (to help facilitator lead without reading everything):

- **Abram:** In what ways does he sin? In what ways does he show his faith in God?
- **Hebrews 11:1** How is Abram's faith like what is described in this verse?
- **Lot:** In what ways do we see his sin? How does he not trust God?
- **Righteousness:** Where did it come from?
- **Ephesians 2:8,9** Where does salvation come from? Where does faith come from?
- **Sacrifice:** Why is it important to our justification, i.e. to being declared righteous? What does it have to do with Jesus?
- **2 Corinthians 5:21** The Great Exchange example - our sin / Christ's righteousness.
- **Justification by works:** How do we try to make ourselves right in the eyes of God or others?
- **Sanctification:** How can remembering our justification daily help us to change, to grow more like Jesus?
- **Application:** What needs to change in my life after studying this story? What actions, attitudes, or beliefs? I.e. How can trusting in our justification by grace through faith become the foundation on which we grow in obedience?
- **Sharing:** Who needs to hear this story?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (with some possible responses):

- **How does this story portray Abram? Was Abram a sinner? How do we see this?**
- **How is Abram different from Lot? How did Lot look at the world and make decisions?**
 - *Abraham first considered his relationship with God when making decisions while Lot was focused only on himself and his earthly interests.*
- **What does this tell us about man in general?**
 - *Mankind is naturally focused on himself, making decisions based on what is in his own interest, not considering God in the process.*

- **What did God first call Abram to do? What promises did God make to Abram? What were the obstacles to him doing this? What were his struggles? in relation to his family? Lot?**
- **How did Abram solve the conflict between him and Lot? How did this display his faith?**
 - *He let go of some good things (beautiful grassy valley), he was centered on other people, and He trusted God to bless him. Did not cling to his rights.*
- **What did God say to Abram after Lot left him? (Don't be afraid.) What does this show about God?**
 - *Sensitive to Abram's feelings and deep needs, faithful to his promises*
- **So, to review, what are some ways that Abram demonstrated faith?**
- **Did Abram have perfect faith?**
 - *NO, he had doubts, showed through his question of "What good is all this if I have no one to inherit?"*
 - *He stopped trusting God for a time when he lied to the Egyptian king.*
- **What is God's role in faith?**
 - *Faith must be rooted in God's character and promises. God was the initiator. He chose and commanded Abram. He blessed him and guided him. He was faithful to keep his promises.*
- **Read Ephesians 2:8,9 – What does this tell us about where faith comes from?**
 - *It is the gift of God.*
- **Read Hebrews 11:1 - What is faith?**
 - *Assurance of things hoped for, belief in things not seen*
 - **How do we see this in this story?**
 - *Abram goes, doesn't ask questions, doesn't know where he is going, doesn't know how he will get a child in his old age.*
 - *More than head belief. It is a relationship of trust.*
 - **How do we see this?**
 - *Abram trusts God enough to act, to do hard things.*
 - **What do we learn from this story about how faith relates to obedience?**
 - *Faith comes before obedience.*
 - *Faith produces obedience.*
 - *Our faith is seen in our obedience. (Gal 5:6)*
 - **Is faith easy?**
 - *No, there are many obstacles to faith. Not easy.*
 - **What are some of Abram's obstacles to faith?**
 - *Age of self and wife, being without child, going to unknown land*
 - **Does God require perfect faith for him to respond to us in grace? How do we see this?**
 - *No, Abram had doubts and failed to trust at times. For example, he lied to the king of Egypt out of fear.*
- **After you have heard the story, which character quality of God really draws your heart closer to him? (GRACE)**
 - **What do we learn about God's grace from this story? Why was it grace for God to be good to Abram?**
 - *Abram was a sinner. God was very patient with him.*
 - *God was consistent and kept affirming his promises.*

- **God was the primary actor in this story and in this relationship. How do we see God acting on Abram's part?**
 - *Appears to him over and over; called him; repeatedly affirmed His promises; declared Abram righteous; purposed to bless all the nations through him; led him, protected, provided; encouraged him over and over.*
- **What was Abram's response to all of God's initiative?**
 - *He received. By faith. Passive righteousness. Like earth receiving the water.*
- **What was God's response to Abram's faith – especially after showing him the stars and renewing his promises?**
 - *He COUNTED HIM as RIGHTEOUS*
 - **What does this mean, that God credited or counted him as righteous? What does the story show us about what this means?**
 - *He accepted him as His own. He received him into relationship despite his sin. He forgave his sin. The righteousness God gave him was a gift. He did not earn his status of righteousness through his good works.*
- **What had been the obstacle to Abram being counted as righteous?**
 - *His SIN, God's HOLINESS*
- **What was Abram's condition (i.e. what did he "do"?) so that God responded by counting him righteous?**
 - *HE BELIEVED – trusted God's promises and character and acted on the basis of his faith, trusting Him for his future. He did earn his righteousness, but received it.*
- **What did God require Abram to offer in order to continue meeting with him? What does this show us?**
 - *He had to offer a sacrifice. The bloody sacrifice tells us that Abram is a sinner who needs a lamb who would die in his place, a lamb whose blood is shed in his place in order to meet a holy God.*
 - **How does this point to Christ? How was he like the sacrifice?**
 - *Christ is the final, perfect sacrifice that eternally provides a substitute for our sin. When we trust in Him and his death on the cross, our sins are forgiven and we are declared righteous by God.*
 - **What does this teach us about justification?**
 - *Justification is being made right before God, not by our own goodness, but by God's grace, by Him declaring us righteous based on a righteous sacrifice made in our place. We receive it by faith.*
- **READ 2 Corinthians 5:21 – How does this affirm what we've been talking about?**
- **ILLUSTRATION – 2 Book Covers** – *one book labeled with my name contains all the deeds, thoughts, words of my life (obviously deeply tainted by sin), the other contains all Jesus' thoughts, words, actions (completely holy and good) – when I trust in Jesus, God essentially takes the cover off of Jesus' book labeled with his name and puts it on my book, i.e. Jesus is taking credit for my sin and pays the penalty on the Cross. He also takes the book cover with my name and puts it on the book about Jesus, i.e. crediting me with all of Jesus' righteousness. - the Great Exchange of my Sin for His righteousness!*
- **If someone is 1) forgiven of all his sins and 2) given credit for all of Jesus' perfect righteousness, how would this affect them when they stand before God on the day of judgment?**

- o *He's completely accepted by God, and can look forward to eternal life of joy and peace with Him.*
- **If someone is 1) forgiven of all his sins and 2) given credit for all of Jesus' perfect righteousness, how should it affect a believer's life now – especially when he struggles with sin? What specific changes might it lead to in a person's life?**
 - o *He will be more at peace. Will be less worried about what other people think of him or about the problems or challenges he has in his life. It will help him to lie or gossip or boast or be too critical less and less over time. He will become more and more like Christ!*

General Application Questions (discuss with whole group)

- **Every sin is somehow connected to not trusting God.** I.e. from not believing that what God has done in saving us is enough - that we are not really completely righteous in God's eyes through the blood of Christ. From not truly believing God loves us.
- **Name some different sins. Share how each one can be linked to not fully trusting God.**
- **People throughout history have tried to justify themselves, to make themselves righteous before God. Every religion does this. But even believers who are eternally justified before God sometimes slip into living as if they need to justify themselves. What are some ways that people do this?**
 - o *Obedying all the laws of their religion.*
 - o *Trying to do all the right things, to never make a mistake or do anything bad.*
 - o *Doing great and generous things that other people can recognize.*
 - o *Comparing themselves to others in hopes of looking better.*
 - o *Pretending that their sin is not so bad.*
 - o *Trusting in education or riches or power.*

Personal Application Questions (choose one or two for small group discussion):

- **What is one of the obstacles today that makes it challenging to trust God or to really believe he has forgiven you and made you completely righteous in his eyes? How can this story encourage you?**
- **What is one of the actions in your life that seems to be rooted in NOT believing that you are truly forgiven and made right before God? For example, which of your deeds or words are motivated by a sense that you can only satisfy God through your own obedience or righteous behavior? What have you learned in this story that can help you grow in true obedience through faith in the Gospel?**

TEACHER'S REVIEW: Main points about JUSTIFICATION from this story: (Teacher, study through this as part of your preparation for teaching.)

- **Faith: Justification is by faith alone.**
 - o Faith is rooted in understanding what God is really like. He is trustworthy, holy, truthful, faithful, powerful, and gracious.

- Faith is more than just intellectual belief. It is a trusting relationship that results in taking risks, i.e. being willing to step out to obey when we don't see the outcome. (Heb 11:1ff)
 - It is leaning one's whole weight upon God.
 - Faith has obstacles – look at Abram's obstacles to faith:
 - His own sin, doubt, his age, Sarai's age, their lack of child, the long wait
- Faith is expressed in obedience.
- God honors people of faith, even through times of weakness.
- **God's revelation: Abram's justification was rooted in God's revelation** of himself so that he could know him.
 - God was the actor in justifying Abram: He chose him; he reached out to Abram; he called him, justified him; led him; protected him; and was faithful to him. Abram received all that God did for him by faith. God was active. Abram was passive. He simply received.
- **God's goodness / grace. Justification is totally based on God's unmerited grace toward sinners.**
 - Abram was a sinner. Not consistent in his faith, yet God honored, responded to his faith.
 - Abram had not earned anything by his deeds.
- **Counted or credited as righteous: Justification is not being righteous on our own, but having Christ's righteousness** credited to our account because of his shedding his blood for us.
 - God met with Abram, appeared to him in a special way, and related to him.
 - God provided a way for Abram to come into his holy presence.
 - Sacrifice was needed for Abram to relate to God.
 - It was grace, BUT it was not free. Sacrifice was required to atone for Abe's sin.
 - The sacrifice pointed to Christ and his sacrifice.
- **Our justification is the foundation for our ongoing sanctification.**
 - **Colossians 2:6,7** - *“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him,⁷ rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.*
 - I.e. You received Jesus through repentance and faith. Continue to live daily in the same way, through repentance and faith, full of thankfulness which leads to obedience.
- **In SUMMARY:**
 - Man comes to God, is justified, only through the bloody substitute that God provides.
 - God responds to faith in that substitute, Jesus Christ, by justifying the sinner.
 - Justification is a one-time, eternal act by God. It cannot be undone!
 - But our faith that leads to justification is a journey with ups and downs, not a one-time act. This persevering faith in our justification is vital for ongoing growth in the Lord.
 - Faith perseveres even when things don't make sense. It is often risky.
 - True faith is known by the works or deeds it produces. i.e. True faith produces obedience. I.e., Obedience flows from faith.
 - True obedience is living in light of our justification, i.e. living as if we have indeed been justified or counted righteous before God.

OTHER HELPFUL VERSES. What do they each say about JUSTIFICATION and how it helps us live our lives daily?

- Romans 4:1-3 – *Abram justified by faith, not by works*
- Hebrews 11: 1-12 – *By faith . . . obedience*
- Romans 5:8 – *Christ died for us and justifies us “while we are still sinners.”*
- 1 John 4:10 – *God love us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for us*
- Romans 1:16,17 – *Salvation for all who believe - A righteousness that is by faith*
- Romans 4:3 – *Abe believed God and credited to him as righteous.*
- Romans 3:21-25 – *had to meet the requirement of the law – sins could only be forgiven by shedding of blood – a righteousness by faith, justified by grace*
- Romans 5:1 – *because we are justified by faith, we have peace through Jesus.*
- Galatians 2:14 - *living in step with the truth of the Gospel.*
- Galatians 2:20b - *“The life I live in the body, I live by faith in (who?) the Son of God, who (did what?) loved me and gave himself for me.” i.e. Since I'm a believer, a child of God, I live my life daily in obedience to God by trusting in the truth of the Gospel, that the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me.*

Nicodemus & the Bronze Serpent

John 3:1-21 (also Numbers 21:4-9)

KEY THEMES: Justification by Faith, Received Righteousness

[Core Gospel Concepts: Justification, Sin - Unbelief, Nature of Faith]

THE STORY:

One day Jesus was in Jerusalem around the time of the Passover and had been teaching all day. When it was evening, he went out to the place where he was staying. When it was dark, a man came to see him. His name was Nicodemus, and he was one of the rulers of the Jews. Nicodemus said, "Teacher, we know that you have come from God for no one could do the things you are doing unless God were with him."

Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God."

Now Nicodemus was confused. He said, "How can a man be born again when he is old? Can he enter his mother's belly a second time and come out again?"

Jesus answered, "Truly, truly I say to you, The one who is born of flesh is flesh, but the one who is born of the Spirit is spirit. You must be born again."

Nicodemus was still confused. He said, "How can this be?"

So Jesus reminded him of an incident in the history of Israel when Moses was leading the people through the wilderness. At that time Israel had disobeyed God, and God had sent many snakes into the camp which were biting many people. Many were in great pain and were sick and even dying. Then Israel cried out to God, "Help us!" Then God told Moses what to do. He said, "Make a snake out of metal and put it on a tall pole. Then set the pole up in the middle of the camp. If any one is bitten by a snake, he only has to look at the snake-on-the-pole, and he will not die." And this is what happened.

Then Jesus said to Nicodemus, "In just the same way that Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so also the Son of Man must be lifted up so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."

Optional Memory Verse: John 3:16,17 - *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."*

Introduction Question (discuss with neighbor):

- What do you think it means to be born again?

Teacher's Transition Statement

Today's story helps us to see how our salvation and the way we live are all about Jesus.

Learn Story Together (Listening Task)

- **As you're committing this story to memory, consider these questions:**
 - **How does Jesus bring the Old Testament into his own day?**
 - **What comparison does Jesus make in this story?**

Basic Outline of Discussion (to help facilitator lead without reading everything):

- **Nicodemus:** Who was he? What was his faith like?
- **Born Again:** What does it mean?
- **John 3:16:** Where does being born again lead?
- **Justification by Faith:** How does it relate to John 3:16?
- **Bronze Serpent:** What do we learn about saving faith? About the object of our faith?
- **Nicodemus Changed:** What was different?
- **2 Corinthians 5:21** The Great Exchange example - our sin / Christ's righteousness.
- **Justification by works:** How do we try to make ourselves right in the eyes of God or others?
- **Sanctification:** How can remembering our justification by faith daily help us to change, to grow more like Jesus?
- **Application:** What needs to change in my life after studying this story? What actions, attitudes, or beliefs? I.e. How can trusting in our justification by grace through faith become the foundation on which we grow in obedience?
- **Sharing:** Who needs to hear this story?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (with some possible responses):

- **Who was Nicodemus? Why was it risky for him to come see Jesus?**
 - *He was a ruler of the Jews, a teacher. Risked being condemned by fellow Jews who opposed Jesus.*
- **Nicodemus said, "Teacher, we know that you have come from God for no one could do the things you are doing unless God were with him." What did Nicodemus believe about Jesus at this point? How can we see that his faith was still weak?**
 - *Nicodemus had a growing faith. He came asking questions. He knew Jesus was from God.*
 - *His faith was weak and confused. He showed fear by coming at night.*
 - **What does this teach us about the quality of faith that Jesus requires in order to respond to us?**
 - *Jesus never rejects those who earnestly come to him, though their faith is weak or confused.*
- **How does Jesus respond to Nicodemus' comment / question? What was he most concerned about?**
 - *Jesus is concerned about Nicodemus more than about defending himself or arguing theology. Wants Nicodemus to be in his kingdom, to have new birth.*

- **We tend to think that we will be saved or enter God's kingdom if we can turn our life around. What do we learn from Jesus' words, "You must be born again?" How is being "born" different than "turning your life around"?**
 - *To turn your life around implies that you will fix yourself. For someone to be born is something beyond his own power. We cannot make it happen. Only God can give us life. We have to leave behind the old life. We are dead in our sins. We must be made alive again spiritually through a new birth.*
- **In John 3:16 Jesus uses a different way to describe what he means by being born again to enter the kingdom of God. What does he say there about gaining eternal life or entering the kingdom of God?**
 - *When we are born again, we BELIEVE in the one and only Son that God, in his love, has sent into the world, and we receive eternal life.*
 - **Being born again leads to saving faith.**
- **Justification:** Being justified before God means being counted as righteous in his eyes. Remember Abram. He "believed God and it (his faith) was credited to him as righteousness." (Gen 15:6)
 - **How is being born again like being justified or counted as righteous?**
 - *Just like being "born again" is something only God can do for us, being "credited" with righteousness before God is also something only God can do for us.*
 - *Faith in Christ that justifies means simply receiving His grace. His righteousness or salvation is given to us and received by faith alone, not by our works.*
 - **Saving faith leads to being counted righteous and receiving eternal life**

Saving Faith - an example:

- **Jesus uses an example to explain what it means to believe - the Israelites in the wilderness. Why was their complaining unfair to God? What had God already done that Israel so quickly forgot? How does their complaining reveal their unbelief?**
 - *He had already miraculously saved them from Egypt through the plagues and led them through the Red Sea and had provided food and water over and over again.*
 - *By complaining they were showing that they did not trust in His promises to provide and care for them and his promises to lead them back to the Promised Land.*
- **The Israelites' faith was tested when they had to wait for water or for food or to reach the promised land. In what ways is our faith tested? When are we tempted to complain against God?**
 - *So many ways. When life is not working out the way we want – when we don't get blessings we want, when we go through pain and sickness, when we're treated unfairly, when we have to wait for God's answer to our prayers.*
- **When we give in to unbelief and start complaining, what are we forgetting? What are we refusing to believe?**
 - *We forget all that God has already done for us – especially the salvation and hope and new identity he has given us through Jesus, and all the promises that go along with that salvation.*

- **How does this story of the Israelites in the wilderness help Nicodemus and us understand what it means to be born again? What did saving faith look like for the Israelites? What should it look like for us? How would Jesus be like the bronze serpent?**
 - *The Israelites recognized and confessed their sin before God and pleaded for mercy. Then they looked to the salvation God provided, the bronze serpent.*
 - *Jesus also would be lifted up on a pole - on the cross - to pay for our sins.*
 - *Like the Israelites we confess our sin and rebellion and plead with God for help and mercy and look with eyes of faith upon the Savior that God has provided - Jesus.*

- **What was the function or purpose of the many serpents that God sent on the Israelites? Was there any grace in His sending the serpents?**
 - *The snakes were a punishment they deserved for their sin, but also . . .*
 - *The snakes were a huge grace to make the people desperate for a saving God and to lead them to repentance and faith.*

- **Let's return to Nicodemus for a minute. How would you describe Jesus' response to Nicodemus in general? What was Jesus' attitude?**
 - *kind, patient, attitude of teaching, not hung up on winning an argument or convincing a hard heart, but intent on digging into Nicodemus' heart needs – the need to be born again by faith.*

- **Was Nicodemus changed after meeting with Jesus?** Consider these two other instances that the New Testament records Nicodemus' words and actions:
 - **Read John 7:45-52** where Nicodemus stands up for Jesus before other Pharisees.
 - **Read John 19:38-42** where Nicodemus helps Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus' body for burial.
 - **What might these two instances of Nicodemus' words and actions teach us about his faith and the evidence of slow steady growth?**
 - *Nicodemus is slowly getting a bit bolder. Daring to question his peers, the Pharisees he spent time with.*
 - *Even stronger, though still quiet, commitment to Jesus – to help Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus after his death. He was not too afraid to be associated with Jesus' followers.*
 - *He responded to Jesus' kindness and patience with him. Surely he had been born again and was beginning to taste the new life of salvation!*
 - **What can we learn from this about where true change in our lives come from?**
 - *Change comes when we turn the eyes of faith on Jesus and what he did for us in his death and resurrection.*
 - *Faith in Jesus leads to salvation, eternal life.*
 - *And it then also leads to a slow change in the way we live for God day by day, just as it did for Nicodemus!*

- **READ 2 Corinthians 5:21 – How is it like John 3:16,17?**

- **ILLUSTRATION – 2 Book Covers** – *one book labeled with my name contains all the deeds, thoughts, words of my life (obviously deeply tainted by sin), the other contains all Jesus' thoughts, words, actions (completely holy and good) – when I trust in Jesus, God essentially takes the cover off of Jesus' book labeled with his name and puts it on my book, i.e. Jesus is taking credit for my*

sin and pays the penalty on the Cross. He also takes the book cover with my name and puts it on the book about Jesus, i.e. crediting me with all of Jesus' righteousness. - the Great Exchange of my Sin for His righteousness!

- **If someone is 1) forgiven of all his sins and 2) given credit for all of Jesus' perfect righteousness, how would this affect them when they stand before God on the day of judgment?**
 - *He's completely accepted by God, and can look forward to eternal life of joy and peace with Him.*
- **If someone is 1) forgiven of all his sins and 2) given credit for all of Jesus' perfect righteousness, how should it affect a believer's life now – especially when he struggles with sin? What specific changes might it lead to in a person's life?**
 - *He will be more at peace. Will be less worried about what other people think of him or about the problems or challenges he has in his life. It will help him to lie or gossip or boast or be too critical less and less over time. He will become more and more like Christ!*

In Summary:

- **The Pharisees often focused on gaining righteousness through obeying the law. But this was fruitless.**
- **“Received righteousness” - Jesus said, “You must be BORN again.” It does not say, “You must fix yourself.”**
 - **i.e. The only true righteousness before God is “received” righteousness. It is received from him. Made right - all by God's work.**
 - *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8,9)*
- **Received by faith - We receive this righteousness only by believing, by focusing our spiritual eyes on the Savior that God provides just like the Israelites focused their physical eyes on the bronze serpent.**
 - **Learning to REST in the righteousness that Jesus provides is the foundation for living more obediently for doing righteous deeds that honor God.**
- **Heart change leads to life change, to a fuller obedience, a deeper confidence to live for Him!**

General Application Questions:

- **Many of the Pharisees like Nicodemus tried so hard to be good and to obey all of the law in order to justify themselves before God. What are some ways people try to justify themselves today? What about we as believers?**
- **What kind of things continue to condemn us in our lives? How can this story help us when we feel condemned?**
- **Like the rebellious Israelites looking at the bronze serpent, we need to look by faith at Jesus alone on the cross to be born again and to remain strongly connected with him. He is the one who makes us right before God and helps us to live for His glory. What are some ways that we tend to take our eyes off of Jesus?**

- **What might be some of the serpents God uses in our lives to stretch our faith? How can the pain someone is going through lead to a deeper faith and a richer understanding of the new life we have in Christ?**

Personal Application Questions (choose one or two for small group discussion):

- **Christian, in what issue in your life are you taking your eyes of faith off of Jesus? What do you need to repent of so that you can trust again in the awesome grace of God that justifies you and sustains you? How does God promise to receive you when you repent and trust Him?**
- **Have you been born again? Has God changed your heart so that you see your sin and your need for a Savior? If not, can you share with a believer and understand what it means to give your life to Jesus?**
- **What sin or failure seems to be condemning you over and over? How can this story encourage you?**

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Luke 18:9-14

Key Themes: Justification, Self-Righteousness / Humility

[Core Gospel Concepts: Sin, Repentance, Use of the Law, Justification]

THE STORY:

One day Jesus told a parable to some people who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else. This is what Jesus said:

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself, saying, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men - robbers, evildoers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his chest and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'"

And Jesus said, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Optional Memory Verse: Hebrews 10:19-22: *"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience..."*

Introduction Question (discuss with a neighbor)

Are there any people in your life who you tend to look down upon? If so, what kind of person or people do you look down on? Why?

Teacher's Transition Statement

In today's story Jesus has something to say to us when we are feeling proud or looking down on others. Let's look at the story he teaches and discuss what we learn about the story's characters.

Learn Story Together (Listening Task)

- As you're committing this story to memory:
 - Note all the words and actions of the Pharisee.
 - Note all the words and actions of the tax collector.

Basic Outline of Discussion (to help facilitator lead without reading everything to the group)

- **Audience:** Who was Jesus telling the parable to? Why?
- **Same:** How were the Tax Collector and Pharisee alike?
- **Different:** How were they different in their behavior?
- **Motivation to Pray:** What was each man's source of hope or confidence?
- **Attitude in Approaching God:**
- **Final Results:** What happened with each man?

- **Justified before God:** What does this mean?
- **View of the Law:** How well did the law serve each?
- **Spiritual Disciplines:** What laws do we make for ourselves about disciplines like prayer, Bible study, fellowship, tithing, etc.? What should be our true goal in such disciplines?
- **Application:** What needs to change in my life after studying this story? What actions, attitudes, or beliefs? How am I like the Pharisee in my approach to God? How can I repent?
- **Sharing:** Who needs to hear this story?

Discussion Questions (with some possible responses)

- **What did these men have in common? What did each of these men go to the temple to do?**
- **Let's look at some of their differences. Where and how did each one position himself to pray?**
 - *The Pharisee stood proudly, spoke loudly, had no shame, only felt confidence in himself.*
 - *The tax collector stood far off to the side, almost hiding. He was full of shame and sorrow. Beat his chest with his head down.*
- **Why did each of these men go to the temple to pray?**
 - *Pharisee: to exalt himself, to show off in front of others, to boast in front of the Lord, to recount for all every act of commitment.*
 - *Tax collector: to plead for God's mercy, he was broken by his own sin. Knew he deserved punishment and condemnation, was burdened by it.*
- **What was each man depending on?**
 - *Pharisee: himself, his own good deeds, his own rule keeping, his own righteousness.*
 - *Tax collector: God alone, God's mercy on sinners.*
- **How was it possible for the Pharisee to feel so confident in himself?**
 - *He looked only at his surface activities, not at his heart attitudes.*
 - *Compared himself to others in these surface activities. Felt that God owed him since he performed better than other people.*
- **What was the difference in how each man approached God?**
 - *Pharisee: not in need, just came to acknowledge his own righteousness. He said he was thankful, but really was just proud. Felt like God owed him a good position and that he deserved for God and man to listen to him. He could not see the sin of his heart because of his pride in how well he performed in his religious activities.*
 - *Tax collector: desperately needy, ruined by his sin, knew it and admitted it, hopeless in himself, grateful for a God that would just listen to him, even though he didn't deserve it.*
- **What was the final result for each man?**
 - *The tax collector went home justified before God.*
 - *But the Pharisee remained lost in his sin.*
- **What did it mean for the tax collector to be "justified" before God?**
 - *He was accepted by or approved of by God. He was made right in God's eyes.*
- **So, did all the good things that the Pharisee do end up being good for him or harmful for him? Why?**

- o *They were ultimately harmful because Satan used them to deceive him into thinking he was righteous and in need of no help. He did not see his need for a Savior.*
- o *In the end he did not really trust God and was not justified. Therefore he was in danger of God's judgment.*
- **How well did God's law serve or help each man?**
 - o **How did it serve the tax collector? How did it help him?**
 - *It showed him that God was holy, that he was a terrible sinner, and it led him to cry out to God for mercy.*
 - o **How did it serve the Pharisee? How did it help him?**
 - *Not very well. The law is good, but the Pharisees set up external obedience to the law as the key to pleasing God and standing before him. They even added more rules and regulations that they could obey in order to increase their display of commitment before others. Thus, they cheated themselves regarding the reality of their inner heart sins.*
 - *Their misuse of the law led them to depend on themselves and not on God. In the end it led to destruction for those who never repented.*
- **Who was Jesus telling this parable to?**
 - o *Those who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else.*
- **Who might those people be these days? In whom might we see the Pharisee or the tax collector today, in our churches and world?**
 - o *Highly committed people in the church - pastors, leaders, those who tithe, those who attend every event, some who pray or sing loudly and passionately.*
 - o *People who do good things, but begin to be proud of themselves for these things. They do good things more for their own reputation than out of humble gratitude to God or out of love for others.*
- **What do you think this parable can teach us in regard to using the various disciplines of our faith, such as having our personal quiet times?**
 - o *Simple external activity, or obeying a law to pray and read every day, can just lead to pride rather than truly meeting with our Father.*
 - o *God wants us to come to him in need, admitting our own unworthiness and inability to save ourselves or fix our own lives or the problems of the world. We are to believe that he is a God who loves us and receives us always. We are to come in gratitude for all he has done for us in Christ.*
- **How could having daily times of prayer and Bible reading ever turn into a bad or dangerous thing? Is this possible? Does that mean we should stop doing it?**
 - o *These practices can become dangerous when doing them makes us proud and makes us look down on others, as if these practices earned our salvation before God.*
 - o *We should not stop doing these things. Instead we should continue in them but repent regularly of the wrong attitudes we've had and trust Jesus alone for our righteousness. We should ask the Spirit to grow in us a humble, thankful, and repentant heart.*
- **What really makes true fellowship with God possible?**

- o *The gospel of grace through Christ. We need to respond to the gospel in faith, to know that God loves you and wants you to be with him. This must always be at the heart of our devotional time, church activities, and areas of service.*
- **What should be the ultimate goal of prayer and Bible study? What should you avoid? Why?**
 - o *The final goal is to meet with your merciful Father.*
 - o *Should be aware of your own tendency to build a sense of your self-righteousness or to be overwhelmed with guilt when you fail. Better to rejoice in having a Father who loves you and a Savior who died for you.*
- **Read Hebrews 10:19-23. How can confidence in God's grace and forgiveness for your sins help you in your devotional life? How can knowing that you are adopted as God's child who is always welcome into his direct presence encourage your devotional life?**

General Application Questions (discuss with whole group)

- **How do we resemble the Pharisee at times in the way we think and act? How do we subtly try to look good in front of other believers?**
- **When you realize that you are more concerned about your own reputation than loving others, what should you do?**
 - o *Confess your sin, repent, trust again in Jesus, knowing that he saves you and is ready through the Holy Spirit to continue helping to change your heart and your actions.*
- **What are some specific ways that such a Pharisee attitude can hurt the way we approach our daily devotions or other spiritual disciplines?**

Personal Application Questions (choose one or two for small group discussion)

- **How do you sometimes think or behave like the Pharisee? How does the attitude of the Pharisee affect your spiritual disciplines such as participating in church, doing daily devotions, or avoiding particular sins?**
- **Are you ever tempted to do or say something among fellow Christians that, deep down, is mainly an effort to impress people and look good? What are specific ways that you sometimes brag about your spirituality in "humble" ways? What would repentance look like for you now?**

Jesus and the Rich Young Ruler

Matthew 19:16-26

(cf. Luke 18:18-27, Mark 10:17-27)

Key Theme: Use of the Law

[Core Gospel Concepts: Nature of Faith, Use of the Law, Justification]

THE STORY:

Now a man, a ruler, came up to Jesus and asked, "Good Teacher, what good deed must I do to get eternal life?"

"Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only one who is good – God. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments. You know them."

"Which ones?" the man asked.

Jesus replied, "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself."

"All these I have kept from my youth," the young man said. "What do I still lack?"

Jesus looked at him and loved him, and he answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Optional Memory Verse: Matthew 19:26: *"With man this [i.e. being saved] is impossible, but with God all things are possible."*

Introduction Question (discuss with a neighbor)

Can you think of a person in your church or community who is a great model of someone leading a good life? Why do you think well of them? What about them makes them a great role model?

Teacher's Transition Statement

Today we are introduced to a man who seems like a wonderful example of someone who was living the right kind of life. Let's see how Jesus interacts with him and what he teaches him.

Learn Story Together (Listening Task)

- As you're committing this story to memory, consider these questions:
 - What did the young man think about his obedience to God's law?
 - How does Jesus respond to the young man? How does Jesus feel toward him? What detail indicates Jesus' heart posture toward the young man?

Basic Outline of Discussion (to help facilitator lead without reading everything)

- **Rich Young Ruler:** What was he like? What was good? What did he desire? How did he think he could get it?
- **Jesus:** How did he respond? What was most important to him? How did he feel about the man?
- **Riches:** What is Jesus' attitude toward our riches?
- **What are we trusting in?** What can we learn from this story?
- **Application:** What needs to change in my life after studying this story? What actions, attitudes, or beliefs? What are your riches? What do you need to sell?
- **Sharing:** Who needs to hear this story?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (with some possible responses):

- **What was this man like? What do we know about him? His behavior, reputation, etc.? What was his reputation based on?**
 - *Rich, young, leader, or ruler. Had obeyed all the law, at least so he thought.*
 - *Very good man in the eyes of the community, judging by disciples' reaction at the end. Well thought of.*
 - *Reputation based on obedience, respectability, leadership, riches*
- **What was the young man seeking for? How did he think he would be able to get it? Why was he confident?**
 - *Seeking eternal life, the highest place in the kingdom.*
 - *Thought he could get it from doing good deeds, the more completely the better.*
- **How did Jesus answer him? Why did he answer this way?**
 - *Keep the commandments!*
 - *Jesus knew that eternal life was not earned through perfect obedience to the law, but he knew man's heart and thoughts and wanted to show him how his understanding was wrong, how he was depending on the wrong thing to save him: law-keeping.*
 - *It is as if Jesus said, "OK, if this is your method for pleasing God or earning eternal life, then this is how you have to do it – simply obey!"*
- **What was wrong with the young man's understanding of eternal life and how to enter it?**
 - *all based on his own performance, his own riches or gifts, that the more he did, the better his chances!*
 - *Did not understand his own sin, his own inability to truly keep the law in his heart.*
 - *Depended on himself instead of God*
- **How did Jesus respond when the young man asked what extra laws he could obey in order to be sure of his salvation? What did he feel toward the young man? Were his words to the young man meant to be hurtful or helpful? How?**
 - *He loved him.*
 - *Jesus' words to go and sell all would have felt difficult and unloving.*
 - *But he gave this advice in order to help the young man by challenging his way of thinking, and to help him find the true way to life.*
- **When Jesus told him "sell all," the rich young man went away sad. What does this tell us? How were his goals different from Jesus' goals for him?**
 - *Wealth was too important to him – more than gaining eternal life, more than a relationship with God. He depended on riches to give him comfort, provision, and a good reputation.*

- o *Jesus wants a relationship with lost sinners who come to him. He's not interested in us trying to make ourselves look perfect through good behavior. True obedience is built on relationship based on repentance and trust in the Savior.*
- o *Relationship with God through Jesus is the real treasure! Far superior than worldly wealth or reputation.*
- **Jesus saying, "Sell all your possessions" was another way of saying to the man, "To be saved, you need to repent." If the young man seemed really good in keeping the law, what did the young man need to repent of?**
 - o *He needed to repent of depending on all of his good deeds and the blessings he possessed to be in right standing with God.*
 - o *A funny way to say it would be, "You need to repent of all your good deeds and blessings."*
 - o *He also needed to repent of thinking he actually kept the law when in his heart he did not. (For example, he did not love the poor enough to sacrifice his wealth.)*
- **When the young man left, Jesus told them that it is impossibly difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Why did they despair?**
 - o *"Who then can be saved?" They believed the same as the rich man (the same as the world believes) - that someone who is respectable, obedient, and rich surely deserves salvation. (This is the world's view.) If he was not good enough, then what hope did they have?*
- **Does God hate riches? Does God require every person to sell all his riches and be poor before they can follow God? So why do you think Jesus told the young man to "sell all"? What do you think Jesus knew about the man's heart that caused him to answer this way?**
 - o *His riches were hurting him! They hid from him his great need for a savior.*
 - o *He knew the man was putting all of his hope in his riches and his good deeds: how they met his needs, how they gave him a good reputation, how they made him feel righteous and worthy.*
 - o *He was trusting riches far more than trusting God.*
- **What do you think Jesus means by being a "rich" man? Does "rich" only mean having material wealth?**
 - o *No, he's talking of any kind of "riches," any blessing or gift, anything that someone depends on more than God to make himself righteous before God.*
- **Read Matthew 5:20-22, 27-28, 43-44. What do these verses teach us about trusting in our obedience to the law to gain life?**
 - o *God's standard is unimaginably high. It is sheer perfection.*
 - o *Therefore no one can obey perfectly enough to meet this standard. "It is impossible" for any man depending on his own strength, discipline, or ability.*
- **What hope did Jesus give the discouraged disciples? What hope did he give us?**
 - o *"With God, all things are possible." God's mercy is huge beyond our imagination. Even great enough to save a man who is "rich," when he stops trusting in his own "riches" and puts his hope in the Savior.*
 - o *Only Jesus himself would be able to keep the law perfectly. Only God could make salvation possible. Only if God becomes man and keeps the law for man, and man puts all his trust in the real law-keeper can man be saved or get eternal life!*

- o *God is saying to each of us, your “riches” are blocking your relationship with me. You need to “sell all,” trusting that the riches you’ll get from me are so much better. Then, come and follow me. Be with me. Abide in me. Be strengthened by me. Rest in me.*

General Application Questions (discuss with whole group)

- **What examples of “riches” can you think of in peoples’ lives today? How can such riches become dangerous for us?**
 - o *Money, cattle, property, education, reputation, good behavior, position in the church or community, health, abilities or talents, good grades, popularity, social skills, being accepted by others, opportunities, obedience, discipline, experiences.*
 - o *We can depend on these things to stay right with God, to remain blessed, to keep our reputation. This blocks our relationship with him because we're not trusting him alone.*
 - o *Jesus wants us to depend on him continually, never to depend on our blessings, gifts, or talents in place of him. We must be grateful for them, yes - to use them for his glory and for the good of others. But not to turn them into means to save ourselves.*
- **The young man (and even the disciples) lived by certain “life rules” that he thought were true. For example:**
 - *“If I obey all the laws, I will be blessed and have eternal life.”*
 - *“If I am wealthy and blessed with a good reputation, this means God is happy with me. I am righteous in his eyes. He will be even more pleased if I find more laws to obey!”*
 - o **What life rules do we try to keep today in order to be “right” or to “get life”?**
 - *Go to church, get a good job, have a respectable family, make a decent income, live in a particularly well known neighborhood, be publicly recognized, etc.*
- **Jesus says to each of us, “Sell all!” What does he mean? What might it look like for them to “sell” something they are depending on too much?**
 - o *Repent of trusting in anything other than Jesus for eternal or abundant life.*
 - o *Do whatever you need to do in order to make that thing less important to you.*
- **What are some of the things God wants people to “sell”? How can you know that you need to “sell” one of your riches?**
 - o *possessions, abilities, a good family, education, solid health, a reputation or position in your church or community, opportunities*
 - o *Ask yourself these questions: What are you clinging to? What are you refusing to give to God? What do you fear losing?*

Personal Application Questions (choose one or two for small group discussion)

- **What riches or blessings do you have in your life, especially on the surface? What is one of these that you have allowed to satisfy you or to cause you not to look to Jesus every day for forgiveness and help? What could it mean to “sell” this thing in your life?**
- **Jesus looked at the young man and loved him by telling him to repent. How does Jesus really feel about you when he sees you depending too much on something other than himself? How can this help you to repent?**

Jesus and the Pharisees: Sabbath Controversies

Mark 2:28-3:6

Key Themes: Use of the law; self-righteousness

[Core Gospel Concepts: Use of the Law]

THE STORY:

One Sabbath day, Jesus and his disciples were going through some grain fields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pluck heads of grain to eat. But the Pharisees saw this, and they said to Jesus, “Look, why are your disciples doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?”

Jesus answered them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, David entered the house of God, and ate the sacred loaves of bread, which is lawful only for the priests to eat. And he gave some to his companions too.”

And Jesus said to the Pharisees, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and there was a man there who had a withered hand. Since it was the Sabbath, some Pharisees were there, looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him very carefully to see if he would heal this man, then they could accuse him of working on the Sabbath.

Jesus said to the man with the withered hand, “Stand up in front of everyone.” And the man did. Then Jesus asked the Pharisees, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath? To do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they remained silent and would not answer.

And Jesus looked around at them in anger, grieved at their hardness of heart. And Jesus said to the man with the withered hand, “Stretch out your hand.” And the man did, and his hand was completely restored.

Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the supporters of Herod how they might kill Jesus.

Optional Memory Verse: Mark 2:27,28 *Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”*

Introduction Question (discuss with a neighbor)

Laws. Rules. Commandments. Ordinances. Regulations. What kind of emotional response do these words elicit in you? So is the law good or bad?

Teacher’s Transition Statement

Today want to talk about the purpose (or purposes) of God’s law. To do this, we will see Jesus focusing on a particular law – the law about the Sabbath.

Learn Story Together (Listening Task)

- As you’re committing this story to memory, consider these questions:
 - List all that the Pharisees did and said. What might they have been thinking?

Basic Outline of Discussion (to help facilitator lead without reading everything)

- **Two Situations - Main Issues:** Pharisees' response? What is the surface issue? What is the deeper issue?
- **Sabbath - Scriptures:** Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:15; Exodus 31:13b,16; Hebrews 4:3a, 9-11a; Romans 8:20-21
 - What do these Scriptures teach about the Sabbath and Sabbath rest?
- **Meeting # 1 Jesus and Pharisees:** How were the Pharisees misusing the law here? What did they not understand about the Sabbath law? What was the goal of the Sabbath?
- **Meeting # 2 Jesus and Pharisees** How were the Pharisees misusing the law here? How do we see here that the Sabbath was made for man? What is true Sabbath rest?
- **Purpose of the Law:** How should God's law work in our lives? 1 Timothy 1:8; Romans 3:20b. How does the Gospel help us to more effectively keep the two greatest commandments?
- **Application:** What is one way that I misuse God's law? What is one of God's laws that I am often breaking? How can remembering the Gospel help me as I look in the mirror of this law? How can it lead to a fuller law keeping?
- **Sharing:** Who needs to hear this story?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (with some possible responses):

- **What were the two situations in our story? What did the Pharisees do and say?**
 - *Jesus and disciples walking through field, plucking kernels of grain*
 - *Jesus healing a man's withered hand.*
 - *Pharisees: "Why are your disciples doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" Became silent and angry, planned how to kill Jesus.*
- **What are the main issues in this story?**
 - *The surface issue – What can and cannot be done on the Sabbath day?*
 - *The deeper issue – What does true, godly, law keeping look like?*
- **What do you know about Pharisees? Are they good?**
 - *Known as the "Law guys"*
 - *Very serious about keeping God's law. (This seems good at first, but . . .)*
- **Do you know of any OT law that seems to support the Pharisees concerns?**
 - Exodus 20:8-10 - 4th commandment – "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates.."
 - *For Pharisees - "Work" includes – plucking grain, healing a withered hand.*
- **What do you think was the big purpose of the Sabbath when God gave them this law?**
 - *God knew that man needed REST!*
 - Genesis 2:3 -. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.
- **Read these passages about Sabbath to learn about the kind of rest God gives:**
 - **Exodus 20:11** (The reason for the Sabbath law given after 4th commandment) *"For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."*
 - **Why did God rest according to this verse? Then why would we need such rest?**

- *He had completed all his work of creating in six days.*
 - *Since he is the one who completes his purposes, we don't need to rely solely on ourselves to have every possible work completed before we can rest. He made rest possible for us.*
 - *A physical rest, but not just to rejuvenate your body, but also to know that you've done enough for now, that you can trust God to take care of you even if some of your work feels incomplete.*
- **Deuteronomy 5:15** – (The reason for the Sabbath law given after 4th commandment) . . . *“You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.”*
 - **Exodus 31:13b, 16** - (The reason for the Sabbath law.) *“Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. . . .¹⁶ Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever.”*
 - **What kind of rest did God give? What reason did God give for Sabbath rest?**
 - *A physical but especially a spiritual rest*
 - *Resting in God's saving work (saved from slavery in Egypt). He's the mighty deliverer.*
 - *Trusting that God is the one who does the work to make us holy (to sanctify us). We don't clean ourselves up!*
 - *Confirming relationship with God (covenant - “keep” my Sabbaths as sign)*
 - **Hebrews 4:3a, 9-11a** – *“Now we who have believed enter that rest . . . There remains then a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work just as God did from his. Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest . . .”*
 - **What kind of rest does God want to give us through the Sabbath according to these verses?**
 - *Spiritual rest - to rest from works – earning our identity*
 - *The Pharisees were making every effort to do each tiny thing, but this urges us to “make every effort to enter that rest.” Our striving is not to earn our place with God by doing every possible work, but to strive to more fully trust in what He has done for us through Jesus.*
 - *“IT IS FINISHED!” – on the CROSS!*
 - *Forgiveness of sin*
 - *Gift righteousness of Christ!*
 - **Romans 8:20-21** – *“For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope²¹ that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.”*
 - **What kind of rest does God want to give us through the Sabbath according to these verses?**
 - *A groaning creation that will finally come to rest as it is redeemed and restored (liberated from its bondage to decay and made free)!*
 - *Liberation from bondage, decay, and sin IS God's rest!*

Jesus and the Pharisees - Meeting #1 (RETELL Mark 2:23-28)

- **Note: In the first part of the story, the disciples were not truly breaking God's law according to the OT scriptures.** *OT law allowed for the poor, fatherless, widows, and sojourners to pluck grain in any field they chose if they were hungry. It also gave some specifics regarding what kind of grain harvesting was considered to be "work. People in Israel were not allowed to pull out a sickle or other tools for harvest, because then it became work or business rather than just survival.*
- **If it was not really God's law, where did the rule about plucking come from?**
 - *The Pharisee's commandment was extra-biblical tradition, i.e. rules made up by men.*
- **What do you think motivated Pharisees to make rules which were even more strict?**
 - *Went to extreme degree to insure no law is broken.*
 - *Were focused on external compliance, less concerned about heart issues.*
 - *Opportunity to display exceptional commitment. To show who is really serious about following God*
- **How were the Pharisees using God's law sinfully in this case?**
 - *They saw obedience to the law as the way to be qualified or made acceptable before God and man. They used the law to earn their own righteousness.*
- **How did Jesus answer the Pharisees?**
 - *"Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, David entered the house of God and ate the sacred loaves of bread, which is lawful only for the priests to eat. And he gave some to his companions too."*
- **So the first thing he said was, "Have you never read what David did?" Why do you think he began his answer this way? Why would this have caught the Pharisees attention?**
 - *They were the "law" guys, the ones who supposedly really knew and were serious about their OT Scripture. He used those Scriptures to challenge them.*
- **How can Jesus' approach be helpful to you or me when facing hard questions about faith or its practice?**
 - *We need to learn more and more of Scripture and what it means in its context. Need to be humble in our interpretation and not just think we are always right!*
- **What did Jesus say that David had done? Was this breaking any law of God? What was the reason that David did this?**
 - *Had eaten the consecrated bread and given his companions. This was against God's law. He did it because they were hungry and in great need.*
- **What do you know about the situation David was in?** (by the way, the Pharisees would have known the story from 1 Samuel 21:1-6)
 - *They had been running from Saul. David was anointed by Samuel to be king, but Saul was trying to kill him, resisting God's will. Rather than attacking Saul back, David chose to flee and to try to take care of his followers.*
- **So what do you think Jesus was trying to teach the Pharisees about the Sabbath law by reminding them of this story?**
 - *That there are exceptions when people are in great need or doing important work for God where it may be ok to violate the law. The laws have a deeper purpose.*
- **What else did Jesus say to the Pharisees in this section? What did this mean?**
 - *"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."*
 - *The Sabbath law was created for man's good, to help him thrive in life and in his relationship with God. It was not made just to have an extra rule for us to obey in order to feel good about ourselves!*

- *The Son of Man (Jesus) actually has authority higher than the OT Sabbath law.*

Summary Conclusions of Meeting #1

- **Three clear statements about the Sabbath and, more generally, about God's law:**
 - *The Sabbath was made for man.*
 - *Man was not made for the Sabbath.*
 - *The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.*

Jesus and the Pharisees - Meeting #2 (RETELL Mark 3:1-6)

- **Describe the scene of the second meeting of Jesus and the Pharisees in this story.**
 - *Another Sabbath, at a synagogue. Jesus was faced with a man with the withered hand and was being observed by the Pharisees, who were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, especially to see if he would do a healing.*
- **What does this show about the Pharisees' attitude toward Jesus? And toward the Sabbath law? And toward the man with the withered hand?**
 - *They were not interested in Jesus' teaching or his healing power. They only wanted to find a way to bring him down. Like in part 1 of the story, they were legalistic, seeing law keeping as the way to earn acceptance before God and other people.*
 - *They did not care about the man with the withered hand.*
- **What did Jesus do, knowing what the Pharisees were thinking? What did he ask the Pharisees?**
 - *Had the man stand in front of everyone, then asked a question to the Pharisees.*
 - *"Which is lawful on the Sabbath? To do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?"*
- **Why did he say "lawful" rather than just "better"? What was he teaching?**
 - *Not only would it be better to do good and to save life, but it is actually lawful, i.e. it is not breaking God's law but actually keeping His law in a deeper, more meaningful way.*
- **So what was Jesus teaching them about the Sabbath? What about the law in general?**
 - *Doing good and saving life are clearly obeying the intent of the Sabbath law to help people thrive and rest in God and the salvation he provides.*
 - *The law is good. Its purpose is to lead toward good and to the saving of lives.*
- **When the Pharisees remained silent, what did this show about them?**
 - *They knew that Jesus had them beat, but they hated him and did not want to admit it. They showed that their hearts were hard to him and to his good intentions and to his heart to save. They had no love for others. All they cared about was keeping their own rules and being very religious.*
- **What did Jesus do in response to their silence? What does this show us about Jesus?**
 - *He looked at them, angry at their hatred, grieved at their hardness of heart.*
 - *That he hates sin, but that he also grieves for people's lostness. He loved the Pharisees. Their refusal to soften their hearts to him gave him great sorrow.*
- **What does Jesus then do? What does this teach us about Jesus' goals and purposes?**
 - *Tells the man to stretch out his hand and completely heals him.*
 - *He came to seek and save the lost and broken and to redeem this broken world, including broken bodies.*
- **Then what did the Pharisees do? What does this show us about them?**
 - *They began looking for a way to kill him. They hated Jesus. They wanted to destroy and to do evil, the very opposite of what the Sabbath was about. And they wanted to kill, to break the very clear sixth commandment. They were full of hypocrisy.*

- **What would probably have happened if Jesus had done something different, if he had decided to follow the Pharisees' little man-made rules and regulations which they had added to the Sabbath law?**
 - *Continued suffering. The man would have remained broken.*

SABBATH CONCLUSION:

- **What was the real purpose of the Sabbath law? How was Jesus the fulfillment of the Sabbath?**
 - *Rest for God's people. Rest from work. Spiritual rest.*
 - *Jesus is our rest. We can rest from all our hopeless striving to keep the law and to earn our relationship with God by our own obedience and goodness.*
 - *The ultimate purpose of Sabbath is RELATIONSHIP with God. It was created for MAN's GOOD. His sanctification. His healing. His freedom. His enjoyment and benefit.*
 - *In the two parts of this story,*
 - *It was fine for David and his companions to eat the forbidden holy bread because it was giving them benefit – strength as they fulfilled their Godward purpose.*
 - *It was perfectly fine for the disciples to pluck grain and strengthen themselves to fulfill their purposes. And God had never prohibited this anyway!*
 - *The withered hand was a picture of a broken, frustrated creation.*
 - *It was completely restored. Made whole!! This is what God is doing and will finish when Jesus comes again!*
- **Were the Pharisees pointing people to true rest as God intended. Were they themselves experiencing the kind of rest that God intended for them?**
 - *Ironically, adding Sabbath requirements as Pharisees did, trying to “raise the bar” on the Sabbath is ultimately going against its purpose. It is creating more of this toxic striving, and less of rest that God designed for us.*
- **Jesus said, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” How did Jesus further demonstrate this truth?**
 - *He showed that His purpose was not to follow misguided regulations, but to save and redeem. Jesus is Lord. He was Lord over creation. And he is Lord over broken creation that needs fixing, including healing the man with the withered hand.*

The PURPOSE of the LAW

- **God's law was a tool for the good of man that the Pharisees often misused. How did they misuse it?**
 - *They took a GOOD TOOL. But used it to try to do the WRONG JOB!.*
 - *Were using it to gain their own righteousness, their own identity, their own worthiness, their own standing before God and within the religion. And . .*
 - *Were using it to beat other people down. To judge them. To compare and elevate selves.*
 - *Were misusing the tool, God's gift. Misusing the Sabbath, misusing the law in general.*
- **Do you think we could take the three statements Jesus said and replace the word “Sabbath” with “Law”? Like this:**
 - *The Law was made for man.*
 - *Man was not made for the Law.*
 - *The Son of Man is Lord even of the Law.*
- **Why do you think that makes sense? What does this show us about the main or foundational purpose of God's law? What is the correct way to use God's law?**
 - **1 Timothy 1:8** – *“The law is good if used properly.”*

- **Romans 3:20 b** – *“Therefore no one will be declared righteous in His sight by observing the law. Rather through the law we become conscious of sin.”*
- *Just like the Sabbath was made for man’s good, the law also was made for man’s good. Man’s primary purpose in life is not to focus only on keeping the letter of the law. It is to know the saving, merciful God and thus bring glory to him. When we do that, our desire to keep the law grows!*
- *The law acts as a MIRROR on our hearts. It shows us our sin, and it proves to us that we cannot keep God’s law on our own. Therefore we can never save ourselves by obedience. When we see our sin against the mirror of the law, we know that we need help. We need a Savior who can fix our sin problem. The law thus drives us to Jesus!*
- *After we have come to Jesus, the law acts as a MAP or GUIDE that helps us know Him and his character, and to honor him in what we do, think, believe, and say. Obedience to the law leads to further blessing.*
- **So if you put these two things together, (the law as a mirror driving us to Christ and the law as our guide for kingdom living), what would you say the overarching purpose of God’s law is?**
 - *Relationship. For us to be in relationship with God and to love him in that relationship and love others as we relate to them as fellow children of God. The law is good. The law was indeed made for man!*
- **What if you want to drive to Nakuru and you see a big road sign pointing the way. It is a good thing, right? What if instead of following its directions and heading on to Nakuru we just rejoice over the sign and park under it to focus only on the sign itself? How is the law like a road sign?**
 - *The sign would become useless for us because we would be misusing it. We would never reach our true goal. Only by using it rightly can we reach our destination.*
 - *The LAW is a SIGNBOARD. The place we are going is JESUS! A deeper relationship with God. A fuller experience of His kingdom in relationship with Him and his people.*
- **Why can we say truthfully that Jesus is Lord of the law?**
 - **Matthew 5:17:** *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”*
 - *Jesus fulfills the law by obeying it perfectly and then by dying on the cross to pay our penalty for our breaking the law, and to grant us his perfect law-keeping righteousness. He kept the law for us, therefore is Lord over it. And he is the creator who made everything perfect and whole and who will restore all of Creation to wholeness!*
- **What are the two greatest commandments according to Jesus and the OT law?**
 - *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.*
 - *Love your neighbor as yourself.*
- **The Pharisees were so concerned about keeping all the details of the law. How well were they keeping these two laws? Explain.**
 - *The Pharisees misuse of the Sabbath law led them to break the two most important laws:*
 - *Loving God (they hated Jesus).*
 - *Loving neighbors (they cared nothing about the man with withered hand or the hungry disciples).*
- **If in these two situations the Pharisees had been using the law correctly, how might their responses have been different?**
 - *First they would have realized that they themselves broke the law by striving for their own righteousness, by refusing to REST in God’s grace toward them. They would have seen the hardness of their hearts and repented of trying to save themselves by obedient acts.*

- *Then they would have been more humble and not judgmental toward the disciples or Jesus.*
- *They would have loved the man with the withered hand and rejoiced in his healing.*

The Use of the Law Summarized:

- The Sabbath was made for mankind's benefit, to help him know God through Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath, to help man to get his REST in Him.
- God's law overall was given to help man, to lead him to a deeper relationship with God.
- The first thing the law does for us is reveal to us our sin, how are completely unable to keep the law on our own. It shows us that we need a savior! We find that savior as we turn to Jesus through repentance and faith.
- As we trust in the Savior, the law now acts to guide us in how best to live in God's kingdom in thought, word, and deed.
- We need to repent of misusing the law when:
 - We refuse to rest but instead try to save ourselves through striving to keep the law.
 - We beat other people with the law through our judgment and pride, ultimately pushing them away from the Savior.
- We need to trust the Holy Spirit to help us keep the law more deeply from the heart and to help us use the law more humbly and effectively in order to help others know Him.

General Application Questions (discuss with whole group)

- **The Pharisees made up rules about the Sabbath to add to God's command. What are some examples of laws or rules that we sometimes create in order to build ourselves up or judge ourselves and others?**
 - *A person must be on time to be righteous.*
 - *I must make top grades to be a worthy person?*
 - *Someone must dress a certain way to be well thought of in the church?*
 - *I must pray or sing a certain way to be important in the church?*
- **What are some other specific ways that Christians today misuse God's good law?**

Personal Application Questions (choose one or two for small group discussion)

- **What is a rule that you have created for your life or for your friends or family that you wrongly use to make yourself acceptable?**
- **What is one way that I misuse God's law? What is one of God's laws that I am often breaking? How can remembering the Gospel help me as I look in the mirror of this law? How can it lead to a fuller law keeping?**
- **What is one way you can grow in using the Sabbath law in your life today so that it leads you to deeper relationship with God?**

God Calls the Prophet Isaiah

Isaiah 6:1-13

(Background: 2 Chronicles 26:1-23)

Key Theme: God's Holiness & Man's Sinfulness;

Right Use of the Law

[Core Gospel Concepts: Use of the Law, Sin, Justification]

THE STORY:

Uzziah had been one of the godly kings of Judah during the time of the divided kingdom. As long as he humbly sought the Lord and listened to the Lord's priests, God gave Uzziah success against his enemies. But later, when he was strong, he became proud and burned incense in the temple, ignoring the priests' cries for him to stop and leave. So the Lord afflicted him with leprosy, and he died alone, never able to enter the temple again.

Isaiah was one of the great prophets God sent to Judah to warn them of judgment for their sins, and to give them hope of future blessing when they repent. This is the story of how God called Isaiah during the sad time after Uzziah died a leper. Isaiah describes what happened:

"I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted. His robe was so long that it filled the whole temple. Above him were angels, each with six wings. Two wings covered their faces, two covered their feet, and the other two were used for flying. They were calling out to each other: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.'

"At the sound of their voices the whole place shook and the temple was filled with smoke. And I cried out, 'Woe is me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.'

"Then one of the angels flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.'

"Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?'

"And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'"

Then God gave Isaiah the difficult task of preaching to his hard-hearted people even though most would not listen and would be destroyed, and only a remnant of faithful people would remain.

Optional Memory Verse: Psalm 51:1-3: *"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me."*

Introduction Question (discuss with a neighbor)

What is the closest, most frightening experience you have had with thunder or lightning or some

kind of extreme weather? How did you feel during the storm? What do you do when you feel helpless?

Teacher's Transition Statement

Today's story tells of a man who suddenly saw God in his glory alongside his own sin and weakness, who felt far more helpless than you and I have ever felt.

Learn Story Together (Listening Task)

- As you're committing this story to memory, consider these questions:
 - How is the Lord described in this story when he appears to Isaiah?
 - How does Isaiah respond when he sees the Lord's glory and holiness?

Basic Outline of Discussion (to help facilitator lead without reading everything)

- **God:** How was his holiness and greatness displayed?
- **Old Isaiah:** What did he learn about himself when bowing before God's holiness? Why did he talk of lips?
- **Burning Coal:** Where did hope come from in the midst of Isaiah's despair?
- **New Isaiah:** How was he changed? What changed him?
- **God's Law:** How do we see God's law (God's holiness) working rightly in Isaiah's life in this story?
- **Application:** What needs to change in my life after studying this story? What actions, attitudes, or beliefs? What are your riches? What do you need to sell?
- **Sharing:** Who needs to hear this story?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (with some possible responses):

- **What do we learn from this story about God? What words or phrases would you use to describe him?**
 - *He is powerful, awesome, holy beyond description, unapproachable by sinful man, supreme over all, he is the only King.*
- **What are some of the ways this story shows us God's holiness and greatness?**
 - *He is on the only throne in the temple, high, exalted, his robe filled the temple.*
 - *Angels worshiping – even sinless angels covered themselves due to his greatness.*
 - *Angels' words: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty; the earth is full of his glory."*
 - *Sounds so powerful that his voice shook the temple and filled it with smoke.*
 - *Sinful Isaiah was overwhelmed just to see God.*
- **What does this story teach us about Isaiah, or about ourselves? Why does Isaiah mention his and his countrymen's lips?**
 - *Deeply sinful.*
 - *He came from a sinful race of people, i.e. all are sinful, no one is good enough.*
 - *Sin is deeply related to his lips, his words. Words are the fruit of one's heart.*
 - *He feels helpless and unworthy to be in God's holy presence.*
- **How did Isaiah respond when confronted head on with God's holiness?**
 - *Despair, "woe is me." I deserve God's punishment, my people and I deserve nothing. We are deeply tainted by sin.*
 - *Overwhelmed because he had looked upon the Lord in his holiness.*
 - *Lost hope in himself and his own righteousness. He knew he was deeply sinful.*

- **What did Isaiah deserve from God? What did he get instead? What does this tell us about God?**
 - *Isaiah deserved death, but was given mercy.*
 - *God loves to show mercy and to use broken, contrite sinners, those who admit they cannot measure up to his standards, for the purposes of his glory. God came near to him.*
- **What did God use to change Isaiah?**
 - *He touched him with the burning coal in order to take away his guilt and atone for his sin.*
- **Where did the coal come from?**
 - *From the altar, the place of sacrifice, where sin is atoned for by an innocent lamb substituted for the sinner.*
 - *This is pointing ahead to the “hot love” of Jesus, sacrificing his life on the altar of the cross to be a substitute for sinners like you and me.*
- **What proof was there of a changed life?**
 - *Isaiah was no longer afraid of God’s presence. He rejoiced to be in God’s presence!*
 - *God’s mercy empowered him, made him willing and eager to go. “Here I am! Send me. I want to go!”*
- **What did God tell Isaiah to do? Was it an easy job? Was he willing? Where did he get confidence?**
 - *He was called to a very difficult task of preaching to hard-hearted people. Preaching without response from his listeners. A refining message of judgment and pruning of the people of Israel.*
 - *Until the land is utterly forsaken and the people utterly judged, until only a holy seed, a holy remnant is left in the land. A remnant faithful to the seed of the woman (Gen 3:15).*
 - *Isaiah was eager to obey because he had been cleansed by the gospel, by the “hot love” of Jesus which had touched him.*
- **So what do we learn from this story about how man is able to approach God, serve God, please God, and be changed by God?**
 - *He cannot deny God’s holiness or his own sinfulness.*
 - *He must admit his own sin and unworthiness and throw himself on the mercy of God.*
 - *He must be cleansed by the substitute sacrifice, the love of God.*
- **What kind of person can God use and work with?**
 - *Anyone! No matter how sinful, if they see their sin and God’s holiness, and receive his mercy, he will change them and empower them for the work he is calling them to.*
- **How can seeing God’s holiness help us to change?**
 - *A vision of God’s holiness should drive us to the Savior. There we are cleansed, changed, and empowered.*

General Application Questions (discuss with whole group)

- **When Isaiah was trembling before God, overwhelmed by his own sinfulness, he probably could think of some specific sins in his life that really condemned him before God. The same thing can happen to us when we look honestly at God's law - we become convicted of specific**

sin. What do you think are some of the kinds of sins that people would feel condemned about if they faced God in his holiness like Isaiah did?

- **What are some specific situations that people may be in where they may easily feel overwhelmed by their own sin and weakness?**
- **How can someone become more aware of God's holiness and areas of sin in his life?**
 - *Study his Word more and more.*
 - *Ask the Holy Spirit to show you your sin and lead you to repentance. (Psalm 139:23, 24)*
 - *Look for ways that you fail to love others.*
 - *Observe your lips! What is coming out of them? Lips, or words, display the truth of our hearts. ("What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart and defiles a man." Matthew 15:18)*
- **When you feel overwhelmed by your own sins and failures, what do you think God's message to you would be? What would he want to say to you? What does he want you to understand and believe?**
 - *Come into my presence, trusting in the sacrifice of Jesus.*
 - *Let me cleanse you with the "hot love" of Jesus.*

Personal Application Questions (choose one or two for small group discussion)

- **If you imagine yourself in Isaiah's position before God, what do you think your thoughts would be? What particular sins or law breaking in your life do you think you would become aware of? What do you need to repent of? How can this help you understand more your deep need for the Savior?**
- **Is there a particular sin of your lips in your life now that reveals a heart of unbelief or rebellion? What would it be like for you to repent and trust in the Savior for this issue?**
- **What might your Savior God be calling you to do? Where might he want to send you? How can you become convinced that he is trustworthy enough to be followed even when it is very difficult?**