



THE HEIGHTS

CHURCH

LIFE GROUP TEACHING PLANS
THE SIMPLEST WAY TO CHANGE THE WORLD
LESSON 12

THE SIMPLEST WAY TO CHANGE THE WORLD

FROM LOOKING BACK TO LOOKING FORWARD

LESSON 12

TEACHING PLAN

PREPARATION

- > Spend the week reading through and studying Luke 15:1-32 and Hebrews 13:15. Consult the commentary provided and any additional study tools (such as a concordance or Bible dictionary) to enhance your preparation.
- > Determine which discussion points and questions will work best with your group.
- > Pray for the upcoming group meeting, your teaching, your group members, and their receptivity to the study.

HIGHLIGHTS

- > **Series Theme Aim:** Loving our neighbors means choosing to engage rather than unplug, open rather than close, and initiate rather than sit idly.
- > **Biblical Emphasis:** Those who do not have a personal relationship with Christ are lost and in need of salvation. Jesus calls those who are found to search for those who are still missing.
- > **Teaching Aim:** When we love our neighbors, we move from looking back to looking forward to what God will do and celebrating what He is doing now.
- > **Memorize:** Hebrews 13:15

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to help get the conversation going.

DO NOT SKIP THIS

- 1 Did you ask someone in your neighborhood this week for help or advice? If so, what happened? Do you think that conversation will help you move from stranger or acquaintance to friend? Explain.
- 2 As you think about what you've learned in this group and the plans you've made going forward, what are you most excited about?

Notes:

As we come to the end of this study, we certainly aren't coming to the end of what God will do in our neighborhoods through this study. God has taught us so much and will continue to give us new opportunities to change the world in the simple way of loving our actual neighbors. With that in mind, it's important for us to be joyful and celebrate what God has done, what He is doing, and what He promises to do.

- 3 What is the most fun celebration you've ever been a part of (i.e., a birthday party, a New Year's Eve get together, etc.)? What made it so much fun?
- 4 There is a day set aside to celebrate most everything: National Walk to Work Day, National Corn on the Cob Day, Ball Point Pen Day, Wear Brown Shoes Day, International Chicken Wing Day, Plan Your Epitaph Day, or Ugly Truck Day. What do you think these celebrations say about our culture?

People want to celebrate everything! You can look up monthly celebration calendars online and find something to celebrate every day of the year. We like to celebrate; in fact, we were made for it. In the Old Testament, God instituted celebration as a spiritual practice. Long before there was ever a national U.S. calendar, the Jewish calendar was full of festivals (Lev. 23). Those festivals teach us that God wants us to celebrate. And because each of the Old Testament festivals foreshadowed or symbolized an aspect of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we can know our celebrations should center on our relationship with Him, too—who He is, what He has done, and what He promises to do.

Notes:

- 5 How can we continue to celebrate the work God does in and through us in our neighborhoods moving forward? Why should we?

The “lost parables” in Luke 15 remind us that we should celebrate anytime someone turns to Jesus in faith and anytime someone who is in a season of rebellion turns back to Jesus in faith. Hebrews 13:15 reminds us that any day is a day for celebrating. Because of Jesus’ sacrifice on our behalf, we always have reason to praise Him.

UNDERSTANDING

Notes:

Unpack the biblical text to discover what Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

> Ask a volunteer to read Luke 15:1-10.

- How did Jesus' parable of the sheep relate to the complaining of the Pharisees?
- What are the similarities between the two parables in Luke 15:3-10?
- In these parables, where did responsibility lie? Why?
- Do you think of yourself as being responsible for your neighbors who do not know or follow Jesus? Why or why not?

Both of these parables pointed to the seeker's joy. Jesus said there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than the many—the 99—who don't need repentance. No one is so lost as those who fail to see their lostness. Jesus pointed out the need for His followers to diligently and intentionally pursue those who are without Christ and celebrate when people make Jesus Lord of their lives.

- Do you think your view of your responsibility in your neighborhood would change if you considered every person who does not trust and follow Jesus not only as lost but also missing? Explain.

> Ask a volunteer to read Luke 15:11-32.

- Why did the father respond the way he did upon the son's return? What does this teach us about God our Father?

Notes:

Forgiveness is our greatest need and God's greatest provision. It is God's joy to welcome and celebrate when those who are lost are found. The father's celebration in the story of the prodigal son reminds us of how gracious God has been to all forgiven sinners. What a beautiful picture! Regardless of the depth of sin, God restores every person who turns in faith to Him and celebrates that restoration. Every Christian is a product of amazing grace.

- Look again at verses 25-30. Why did the older brother respond the way he did? What is the lesson or warning from his example?

The older brother didn't care if his younger brother came home, and he certainly didn't want to celebrate the restored relationship between his brother (the former prodigal) and his father. He would rather see the punishment continue. Self-righteousness is dangerous, and, if allowed to run its course, eventually will convince us that we don't need God. We need to examine our attitudes constantly, for an elder-brother attitude can develop in each of us and keep us from carrying out God's call on our lives to invite and welcome all who are lost to come home.

- With whom do you most identify in the story: those who celebrated and welcomed the son, or the uncaring older brother who chose to stand at a distance? Why?

- Can a person ever truly celebrate spiritual restoration as a spectator only, never personally seeking the lost or sharing the gospel message? Explain.

Notes:

> Have a volunteer read Hebrews 13:15.

- What reason do you find in this verse for the spiritual practice of celebration? What does it teach us about what those celebrations should look like?
- Having participated in this 12-week series on loving your neighbors, what reason do you have to “openly profess” your joy in God today?

As we join God in His kingdom purposes—loving our actual neighbors by Jesus’ example and for the sake of the gospel—the writer of Hebrews challenges us to continue to engage together in the practice of celebrating God!

NEXT STEPS

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Notes:

- 1 How well would you say we do as a group at celebrating God's work in and through our lives? How can we do better?
- 2 How might celebrating by way of sharing how God is moving in our relationships at work and in our neighborhoods continue to encourage us to make our lives about seeking the lost and sharing the gospel with them?

DO NOT SKIP THIS

- 3 Review again your neighborhood map. Encourage members to pray that God will continue to use these maps to advance relationships with their neighbors so that any who are lost and missing might be found and join God's forever family.

PRAY

Praise God for the grace He has given you. Ask God to continually remind you of His love and grace so that you might begin to see other people like He does—missing and worth finding. Pray that you will see the vital role you have as a part of Jesus' church and allow Him to work through you in your neighborhood. Thank Him for a community of believers with whom you can celebrate the work He has done, is doing, and will continue to do.

LUKE 15:1-32

15:3-6. As a shepherd, you care for 100 sheep. One night, one lone sheep wanders from the fold. What do you do? You leave the 99 to fend for themselves in the relative safety of the open field and begin an immediate search-and-rescue mission for the lost sheep. Having found the sheep, you gather all your friends and neighbors and share the good news with them.

Notes:

15:7. That is what heaven is like. Ninety-nine self-righteous people who keep all the rituals, festivals, and rules bring no joy to heaven. One sinner confessing his sin and repenting sets off celebration. God is concerned about the lost who admit they are lost and turn back to Him. He wants people to put the sinful life behind them and follow Him. Pharisees never do this, because they never realize they are lost. They always count themselves among the saved, even though they have never repented of their sins.

15:8-10. Jesus gave another parable, hoping His hearers would get the idea. A woman had saved her small wages and gathered ten silver coins, her wages for ten days. Tragedy struck. She lost one coin. To search for a lost coin indoors required lighting a lamp since very few homes had windows. This search also required sweeping the house, because the floor was dirt. Jesus repeated the message of verse 7. Joy in the presence of God's angels speaks of God's joy over a repenting sinner.

15:11-12. Jesus turned to the family setting for this parable to illustrate why He associated with sinners. A younger son demanded his share of the estate and got it. We don't know why he wanted it or why the father so quickly gave it to him. The younger brother's portion was only a third of the estate if the entire estate were divided. By law, the older brother got a double portion (Deut. 21:17). Although this well-known parable (vv. 11-32) is usually called the parable of the prodigal son, the other son and the father are also important characters.

15:13-16. The younger son did not plan to return to his family. It is impossible to know whether his foolish living included “prostitutes” (v. 30), or if that was just an angry accusation made by the older brother. The irony of the younger son’s new job was that pigs were unclean animals to Jews. He was at rock bottom in his new life.

Notes:

15:17-19. It took extreme poverty and hunger to bring the younger son to return and become one of his father’s hired hands. The younger brother came to his senses: the day laborers on his dad’s farm had enough to eat. The sinful younger brother had forfeited his position as son. He had no more claims on his father, so he applied for a new job—day laborer. Humans have the capacity to change. We do not have to remain in the pigpen. We do not have to continue to live as sinners. We can become responsible for our lives. We can come home.

15:20-23. Focus shifts from son to father. That the father saw his son coming from a long way off indicates that he habitually looked for his return. Perhaps the normal parental reaction to the younger son’s return would be anger or at least deep disappointment, but this father’s response displayed: (1) compassion, (2) love (threw his arms around his neck and kissed him), (3) celebration (a feast), and (4) joyful restoration of status for his son (a robe of distinction, signet ring of family authority, sandals worn by a son, in contrast to barefoot slaves).

15:24. At this point the parable ties to the two previous stories about God’s joy in saving the lost. The father’s celebration shows the way God the Father receives repentant sinners. How could the father act like this? Did he not know what the son had done? Of course, but the son had been given up for dead. The lost sheep is back. Certainly a lost-and-found son is worth much more than a coin or a sheep. What a picture of the Father in heaven.

15:25-30. Instead of the story ending on a note of joy and celebration, as might be expected, the spotlight shifts to the older brother. Unlike the father’s positive attitude, the older brother (1) was surprised at the return of his sinning

brother, (2) was offended and jealous at the father's celebration, (3) became angry at the father's forgiving love, (4) declared his own self-righteousness, and (5) focused on his brother's sinfulness rather than his newfound repentance. Jesus' representation of the religious leaders in the character of the older brother was a scathing rebuke of their self-righteousness.

Notes:

15:31-32. The rebuke of the religious leaders continues. They did not understand (1) the opportunity for a close relationship with God, (2) the generosity of His grace, (3) His joy at the salvation of sinners, or (4) the profound transformation of conversion.

HEBREWS 13:15

13:15. Christians should continually offer their own sacrifice of praise in appreciation for the sacrifice of Christ by confessing His name.