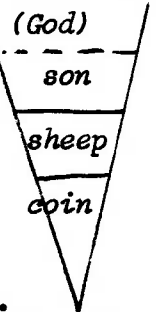


On the reverse is repeated what is on the reverse of "Evening #1 Sheet." Section references here are as the numbers appear there. These comments are mainly to help you on Phase 1 of the group Bible study process. You may want to read additional material in commentaries in the church library. But *caution: Jesus usually just let his parables "sit": don't kill Luke 15 by telling the folks what it "means"--just nudge them into finding out for themselves in Phases 2-4.*

General comments: (1) Of French fiction, we say "Look for the woman": of our Lord's parables, we should say "Look for God," for Jesus' life and mission center in God, what God is like and what God's governance ["kingdom"] is like being the parables' themes. In the big story of Luke 15, where is God, what does God do, and from that what do you deduce as to what God is like, and therefore the church should be ~~and~~ do? (2) Note that coin and sheep are but preludes to the big story. Luke arranges the three as a parabola with a dip before the ascent to the highest: son! Jesus' implicit argument is *a fortiori* and incomplete: if all that attention to a coin, HOW MUCH MORE....[Consult the reverse of this sheet, and you may want to use some such diagram as this:]

(3) You'll be way ahead

if you master the story and tell it *from memory* without looking at any paper! For this, determine your own memory cues in the text. The one's I use here are not official!



Section 1: "wasted." A sketch of maximun offensive behavior and alienation. In the Near East, requesting your inheritance expresses a death-wish against the parent, and liquidating your share before the parent's death violates the parent's life-right to usufruct [=increment on capital]. The father, in L.15, granted the portion (probably 1/3rd) and the right to liquidate, even though the farmland was sacred to the family dynasty. Further, this Jewish money got spent in a goy-gentile country ["far"], mit "pigs"! Still further, the money was squandered! Morally, the worst use: "reckless living." This boy has thumbed his nose at everything his father holds sacred. Rebellion, first class. And the exact opposite of stewardship, responsible living: the "famine" is more than physical. And his resultant conditions are appropriate: starvation, and to a Jew the most repulsive job (pigherd), making the practice of Judaism impossible. So now he's a pan-traitor, having betrayed his whole native set of values and relations.

Section 2: "started back." The turning point comes here as Jesus takes us into the younger son's head: his self-question, and action-decision, change not only his direction and behavior, but our attitude toward him. But isn't he still only belly-determined? He's utterly bereft of what's needed for his outer life, his inner life, and his social life (rights, claim-bases): a pure type of the candidate for grace, which is the offended's love in action toward the undeserving offender. [Note how the two themes, bread and forgiveness, are, in the Lord's Prayer, contextualized and controlled by centering in God ("hallowed") and God's governance ("come").] True repentance, in enlightened self-interest [which Jesus appeals to].

Section 3: "let's celebrate!" The father, conscious only of the returnee, violates custom and dignity in an upsurge of love and joy. Overwhelmed also, the son forgets his calculating gambit and throws himself utterly on his father's mercy, forgetting his preplayed effort at dignity. The whole episode cracks convention and opens up--via exaggeration--its character as a metaphor ("parable" or "paradigm") of God's "Kingdom."....Now, narrate Sections 4 & 5 more slowly, as Jesus did [Boomershine].

Section 4: "What have you given me?" Double reversal: sinner in, righteous out. Both condemnation and forgiveness are infectious.

Section 5: "alive...found!" Each of us is both sons, and needs grace for actions and attitudes of each side. The church is the "banquet" for celebrating both graces!

Guideline question: How does this story from Jesus speak to what the church is and should do?

BIBLE STUDY FOR EVENING #1: Luke 15 [adapted from Good News Bible]

THEME: By indirection (via negativa), God's grace as the heart of Christian Faith.

CONTENT: Don't let the word turn you off, but our faith is about being "saved" after our coming to see that we are "lost." Our UCC Statement of Faith says that God "calls the worlds into being, creates" us, and "sets before" us "the ways of life and death." Well, forget about the Christian Faith and Church unless you're ready to confess you've not always chosen the way of life! It goes on: "He seeks in holy love to save all people from aimless and sin."....The words of Jesus in our chapter for this evening are all directed toward the JOY, in the form of party, that bubbles up when the "lost" is "found" and so "saved." The inherent logic is a fortiori, and the fourth dimension Jesus leaves for us to tell: if you have a party when you recover mere inorganic *money*, HOW MUCH MORE should you when you rescue a sentient fellow-creature (*sheep*), and HOW MUCH MORE still when a beloved one is reconciled to you (*son*)[, and HOW MUCH MOST when a human being "returns" to life's Source and Destiny, called in our Statement of Faith "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father"]?

A man had two sons. Said the younger, "Father, give me now my share of the property." So the man divided the property between his two sons. After a few days, the younger sold his part of the property and left home with the money. He went to a country far away, where he wasted his money in reckless living. When he'd spent it all, a severe famine spread over that country, and he was left with nothing. So he went to work for one of the citizens of that country, who sent him out to his farm to take care of the pigs. He wished he could fill himself with the bean pods the pigs ate! Nobody gave him anything to eat.

2

At last he came to his senses and said, "All my father's hired workers have more than they can eat, and here I am, about to starve!" I will get up and go to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired workers." So he got up and started back to his father.

3 He was still a long way from home when his father saw him; his heart was filled with compassion, and he ran, threw his arms around his son, and kissed him. "Father," the son said, "I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son." But the father called his servants: "Hurry! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. Then go get the prize calf and kill it, and let's celebrate with a feast! For this son of mine was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found!" So the feasting began.

4 Now as the older son, coming in from his fieldwork, approached the house, he heard music and dancing. "What's going on?" he asked a house servant, who answered, "Your brother came back home, and your father killed the prize calf because he got him back safe and sound!" Now the older brother was so angry that he would not go into the house, so his father came out and begged him to come in. "Look," he answered back to his father, "all these years I have worked like a slave for you, and I never disobeyed your orders. And what have you given me? Not even a goat for me to have a feast with my friends! But this son of yours wasted all his property on prostitutes, and when he comes back home you kill the prize calf for him!"

5

"My son," the father answered, "you are always here with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to have a feast and be happy, because your brother was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found."