

STUDY ON THE PARABLES OF SALVATION

Parables of Lost Sheep, Lost Coin & Lost Sons

Read Luke 15

There is no chapter of the New Testament so well-known and so dearly loved as the fifteenth chapter of Luke's gospel. It has been called "the gospel in the gospel," as if it contained the very distilled essence of the good news which Jesus came to tell. This chapter contains three linked parables that explain why Jesus associates with sinners. The linkage is evident in the terms lost and found (vv. 6, 9, 24, 32) and rejoice and celebrate (vv. 6, 9, 24, 32). All three parables end with similar statements (vv. 7, 10, 32).

These parables arose out of definite situations. It was an offence to the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus associated with men and women who, by the orthodox, were labelled as sinners. Jesus tells these parables in-front of tax collectors and sinners to the religious leaders of His day - Pharisees and scribes. Thus, the stories offer comfort, especially in the face of the Pharisees and scribes' grumbling that Jesus *welcomes sinners and eats with them*. The fact that tax collectors and sinners listen to Jesus while the leadership does not is a cultural reversal of expectation. Sometimes hearers are found in surprising places.

Parable of Lost Sheep

Jesus begins with a pastoral scene that would have been familiar in Palestine. A shepherd had a hundred sheep—a count that would indicate he is modestly wealthy, since the average flock ranged from twenty to two hundred head. Such flocks were an economic resource since they provided wool and mutton. During the count as he gathers the sheep at day's end, the shepherd notices that one is missing. Jesus' original hearers probably assumed that the shepherd asks a neighbour to keep an eye on the ninety-nine so he can search for the missing sheep, though the story does not offer this detail. The sheep needs to be found; otherwise, it may be permanently lost or attacked by hungry predators. It is risky to be a lost sheep.

The search proves fruitful: the shepherd finds the sheep and lifts it onto his shoulder to bring it home. Given the possibility that the sheep could have been devoured, the shepherd rejoices at finding it.

The parable pictures God's desire to find sinners and bring them back into the fold. Thus, the owner throws a party, asking his neighbours to celebrate with him since the lost sheep is found. In the same way, Jesus says, *there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent*. When a sinner turns to God, heaven throws a party. The prospect of such joy keeps Jesus associating with sinners.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd."
(John 10:11-15)

Jesus modelled Himself as the Good Shepherd who will go after His sheep and ready to lay down His life for His sheep and should we. We were not given the option to consider the sheep that is not willing to be found so, we must assume all sheep are willing to be found.

Parable of Lost Coin

The second parable parallels the first. Here a silver coin has been lost. It sounds as if the coin is a drachma, which equals a denarius--a day's wage for the average worker. As with many things that are dropped and lost, the search begins with the certainty that "it must be in here somewhere." The search is likely to be taking place in the evening, since the woman must light a lamp to look for the coin. She sweeps the house clean, looking carefully, until it turns up. We can almost hear her "there it is!" relief as the search ends successfully. Like the shepherd, this woman calls her friends together to celebrate the discovery of the lost coin. So, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. The reference to angels is a circumlocution for God's joy. The courts of heaven are full of praise when a sinner turns to God.

Q: Who is the main character rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God?

"... for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." (Luke 19:10)

Is there any significant difference between the two parables? At their most basic level they make the same point. The second parable, however, stresses the search a little more than the first. Recovering a lost sinner can take diligent effort. But the effort is worth it when the lost is found. Sinners should know that God is diligently looking for them. Disciples should diligently engage in the search for sinners on behalf of the Master they serve. Jesus provides a clear example for us to follow. Finding lost "sheep" and missing "coins" is a disciple's priority. Jesus involved himself with sinners; so, should disciples.

Q: How would you build a personal culture of seeking the lost?

Q: How would you categorise the lost?

Parable of the Lost Sons

The third parable of Luke 15 is a more elaborate treatment of the seeking-of-sinners theme. The parable's popular title "prodigal son" probably puts the focus in the wrong place. The story gives more attention to the father and his reaction than to the son's return. The father's response to the elder son's resentment also shows how central a character he is in the parable. So, a better title might be "the parable of the forgiving father" or "the parable of a father's response to his two sons."

The parable is unique to Luke and is almost allegorical. The father pictures God. The prodigal symbolizes the lost, especially the tax collectors and sinners of verse 1. The elder brother represents the self-righteous leadership, the Pharisees and scribes of verse 1 or anyone else who claims to serve God and yet is harsh toward the possibility of forgiveness for sinners. The major issue is repentance before God and God's willingness to forgive. The parable is Jesus' final defence of the offer of good news in the face of official criticism of his association with sinners.

The parable opens with the younger son's request to have his *share of the estate*. Having divided the living between the two sons, the father watches the younger son depart. On his own, the son loses everything *in wild living*. No other details are given. In fact, the text says he scatters (*diaskorpizo*) his resources: he *squandered* his inheritance and throws his money away. Following his financial failure comes natural disaster. Famine strikes the land, and he is in need. Finding a job, he ends up feeding swine, a job of great dishonour for a Jew (Lev 11:7; Deut 14:8). Now as a Jew working for a Gentile and caring for swine, he can sink no lower. It is clear that he has taken whatever job he can get.

Though employed, he still suffers. *He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating.* No one has anything to offer him. Even unclean animals are better off than he is. Here is the lostness of the sinner.

The son reflects on his condition and realizes that his father's servants have it far better. Thus, the sinner discovers his desperate situation because of sin. To be outside of God's family is to be utterly alone.

The son devises a plan of action. He will confess his sin before his father: *"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."* This expresses the humility of one who turns to the Father. Sinners have nothing to rely on except the Father's mercy. They recognize that they have failed and can claim no blessing.

So, the son comes home. The father's reaction is telling: *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 action breaks all Middle Eastern protocol; no father would greet a rebellious son this way. But as is often the case in Jesus' parables, the twist in the story makes the point. Literally, the father drapes himself on his son's neck. He is pleased and thrilled to see his prodigal return.

The son proceeds with his confession, but the father interrupts. The son is satisfied to be a slave, but the father will restore him to full sonship. So, the father orders the servants to bring the *best robe, a ring* for the son's hand and *sandals* for his feet. A *fattened calf* is prepared, and a party will be held. Fatted calves were saved for special occasions like the Day of Atonement. This is not just any party; it is a rare and complete celebration. There will be rejoicing for the lost son, now found (vv. 7, 10).

The note of joy about the son's return is crucial in the passage, as is the father's restoration of sonship privileges. The son has come from destitution to complete restoration. That is what God's grace does for a penitent sinner.

The elder son has been labouring in the field, so he has missed all the action. Returning home, he hears the commotion of *music and dancing*. There is a real celebration going on. One of the servants explains to the older brother what is taking place. The servant gives an accurate summation: celebration and a fattened calf for a returned brother who is safe and sound.

Enraged, the elder brother does not go in to join the festivities. Here is one of the parable's great ironies, made graphic by Jesus' use of literary space. The brother who had been on the outside is now on the inside, while the brother who had been on the inside is now on the outside. Again, Jesus' words echo, "The last has become first, and the first has become last." The repetition of this theme shows how important it is not to be in the wrong place in the line!

The father's compassion does not cease. He comes out to the angry brother and tries to calm him down. The elder brother pleads his faithfulness despite the lack of celebration for him at any time in the past. Not even a "kid" has been butchered for him. (The contrast he draws is as if steak were now served for the returning son while a fast-food meal has never been served for him.) The elder makes a serious complaint--"I am worthy," he pleads; "you are ungrateful. This is unfair!" What parent has not heard such a complaint from one child about another? The elder's problem is his self-righteous, self-directed focus. There is no joy that his brother has come home. The elder is too self-consumed with issues of justice and equity to be caught up in the joy.

Other things are more important to this elder brother than showing forgiveness and compassion. His anger is so great that he refers to his own brother as *"this son of yours."* He speculates that the brother has wasted his money on harlots. As far as the elder brother is concerned, there is nothing to praise here.

The father has a ready reply aimed toward reconciliation between the brothers. He accepts his elder son and acknowledges that all the father has belongs to him. There is no reason for jealousy. In a sense the elder son has always had access to celebration: the animals are his! But there is one other fact. The father says, *"We had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."* Note the reminder that the returning son is a brother. Justice means that the son should be received back with joy and celebration. The focus should be outward, on the transformation that has occurred. The sinner should be welcomed back into God's family with joy.

The parable has two major points. First, repentance means an absolute reversal of status. The lost son has become a family member again. The father's acceptance of the penitent son is total. This is God's grace. This is why God pursues sinners. Second, others should have joy when the penitent returns. Reconciliation involves not only God and the individual but also the individual and the community.

The story is left hanging. The elder brother is left to contemplate the father's words. We do not know if he comes in to celebrate or not. In literary terms, this is an open ending. What will he do? Jesus' listeners are to contemplate their own response as well. The parable is truly a story of reversal. It is hope of such a reversal that causes Jesus to seek the sinner. The potential of God's grace drives him to love others and actively pursue them.

Summary

Parable / Question	Who got lost?	Why did they get lost?	Response of the Lost	Response of the Owner
Lost Sheep	Sheep	?	Nothing	Restoration
Lost Coin	Coin	?	Nothing	Restoration
Lost Younger Son	Younger son	?	Repentance	Restoration
Lost Elder Son	Elder son	?	Still "Open"	Willingness to Restore