

Compassionate Father and Two Lost Sons

Luke 15

Turn to Luke 15 please. There are actually three parables in this chapter: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the two lost sons. But all three together have one message, in all of them Jesus responded to the same situation. And the third parable, often known as the prodigal son, which we will call the two lost sons, brings into the open the teaching of the first two parables.

The Setting: Lk 15:1-2 *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law grumbled, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Then Jesus told them this parable.*

Keep this part clear, it is the anchor that holds the whole chapter together. To whom did Jesus tell these things? The Pharisees and law teachers.

Why did he tell them these stories? Because Pharisees and teachers were grumbling at him. Why were they grumbling and Jesus? Because when tax collectors and sinners came to hear Jesus, Jesus welcomed them and ate with them. That's why the righteous people grumbled, and Jesus told them these stories to explain why he welcomed sinners and ate with them.

The Lost Sheep *Then Jesus told them [the Pharisees and law teachers] this parable: ⁴ "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.*

This parable is an allegory, which means that different parts of the story stand for particular people in real life. Most are not allegories, but Luke's setting and the application in v7 make it clear. The lost sheep represents the tax collectors and sinners. The 99 sheep already in the fold represent the Pharisees and teachers, righteous people who do not need to repent.

It might make us grumble that Pharisees are treated this well, but there are several places like this in the Gospels, where Jesus was kind and respectful toward them.

And the man represents God. The tax collectors and sinners come to Jesus; God has gone looking for them, searching for them. He found them and put them on his shoulders to bring them home, so pleased as he walks along. That's what it looks like in heaven, on earth it looks like losers gathering to hear Jesus, who welcomes them.

And when God gets them home, there is all kinds of celebrating in heaven. I don't know if a shepherd would normally have such a lively party when he found one lost sheep, but we can understand how that might happen.

Parables teach a lesson, they never correspond to life in every detail, and I think Jesus exaggerates the man's celebration precisely because that IS how heaven responds when these people who seem so far from God actually come to him.

So Jesus is telling the Pharisees and law teachers that **he** welcomes the sinners and eats with them as a small expression of the great rejoicing in **heaven**. **God** has gone looking for them, and **God** is brings them in rejoicing, and **God** celebrates! That's why Jesus welcomes sinners.

The Lost Coin ⁸ “Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' ¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

This story repeats the lesson of the lost sheep. The woman compares to God. Jesus used male-female pairs, a man plants a mustard seed and a woman puts yeast in her bread dough. As the man searched and found his sheep, so the woman searched and found her coin.

People do fancy things with the ten coins, like it represented jewelry or dowry or something like that. Best to lose that. It was a drachma, the equivalent of a denarius, a day's wage for a laborer. If you lose a whole day's wage in your house, you will look until you find it.

Preachers have done all kinds of things with the parables we're reading today, especially the two sons. It is endless. It preaches well, but the more we depend on information not in the Scripture, the farther we get from what Jesus meant. Don't forget the setting: Jesus was explaining to the Pharisees why he welcomed sinners.

The lost coin teaches the same thing as the lost sheep. God celebrates, the angels celebrate, and THAT is why Jesus welcomes the tax collectors and sinners.

The particular emphasis of the lost coin is diligent search. She lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and searches carefully. Jesus wants Pharisees and law teachers to picture God working that hard to find tax collectors and sinners. And how God celebrates when he finds the people he wanted.

Jesus is respectfully explaining to grumbling law teachers why he welcomes sinners: because God searched for these sinners and found them, and God joyfully welcomes them.

The First Lost Son ¹¹ *Jesus continued [still speaking to grumbling Pharisees and law teachers]: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.*

It was not unheard of for a father to divide property while he lived, but for a son to ask his share while the father lived would be disrespectful, and the father was not at all obliged to cooperate. All ancient Mediterranean societies would have condemned this.

The son wants his father’s goods, not his father. In Deut. 21 it says the oldest son got two shares, a double share, so we should probably assume the younger son got one third of the estate. It sounds like a substantial farm, and one third would be quite a bit.

¹³ *“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*

He blew all that money in pretty much the worst way possible. Then, when broke and hungry, he hired himself out to feed someone’s pigs.

Tax collectors were Jews who hired themselves out to Romans to collect Jewish taxes to give to Rome. This younger son, who the story assumes is a Jew, hired himself out to Gentiles. He is a clear parallel to the tax collectors Jesus receives, who had hired themselves out to Rome.

The Younger Son Comes to Himself ¹⁷ *“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.*

Repentance: The joy in heaven, about the lost sheep who was found, was joy over one sinner who repented. The joy before the angels, in the lost coin story, was joy over one sinner who repented. This son does not just decide to go back home and ask to be taken in.

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you,” that is, “I have sinned against God and against you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” This parable does not give us a complete picture of repentance, Luke’s Gospel fills that out elsewhere, but this is a good start.

It was not enough to enjoy Jesus and his teaching. In Luke 13, Jesus taught this: *“You will stand outside and knock at the door and say, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then in reply the owner of the house will say, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ Then you will say, ‘We ate and drank with you,*

and you taught in our streets.’ But he will say, ‘I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!’ There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Those are words from Jesus, and that’s what happens when people are attracted to God but won’t decide to live in his ways. The younger son’s words represent real repentance.

Which reminds me: baptism. Church camp is in three weeks. We’ll baptize any time a person desires it, but we normally baptize people at church camp. If you want to tell God in a more complete way that you want to be his child and to live in his ways, then talk to me. Now, back to our story: the younger son has prepared his speech to his father and is walking home.

The Father Celebrates Immediately *“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.”*²¹ *“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’*

²² *“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.’*²³ *Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate.”*²⁴ *For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.*

There are wonderful details hear, but the point of the parable is the older brother, so we’ll carry on. The father saw the son far off, which means the father kept watch, and he was filled with compassion for him, and went down the road to meet him, but walking was too slow so the old man started to jog and run because he could not wait to put his arms around his scoundrel son.

We hear the son’s opening words again: *Father, I have sinned against God and against you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son.* At that point Jesus lets the father interrupt the son, the son does not get to say the last part, but Jesus makes sure we hear this line twice. He repents.

“Quick!” That is the first word of the father’s response to his servants. First word in the NIV, and also in Greek. Quick! We will have a great celebration, begin as soon as possible, so you servants all get going. *My son was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found.*

The Second Lost Son. So far, the story of the two sons has only repeated what Jesus already said in the lost sheep story and the lost coin story. A man found a lost sheep, and celebrated with friends, and that’s how it is in heaven when a sinner repents. A woman found a lost coin, and celebrated with her friends, and that’s what happens in heaven when a sinner repents.

A father recovered his lost son, and the father immediately prepared a celebration banquet, and that’s how it is in heaven when a sinner repents. Jesus speaks to the Pharisees and scribes. *Jesus* welcomes sinners because *God* was looking for them and *God* has found them and *God* immediately celebrates this joyfully. Jesus has said this three different ways.

Now Jesus gets more personal with the Pharisees and law teachers to him. The older son, the second lost son, grumbles about the welcome banquet the father put on for the reckless but repentant younger son, and that is *precisely* the voice of the Pharisees and law teachers.

²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him [to join]. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² 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.’”

The older brother refused to go in. So the father has to come out. Both sons publicly shamed their dad. The father was kinder than he should have been, by most standards, with both sons. He gave the younger son his inheritance share, and he left the banquet and came out and pleaded with the older son, who was fuming in the yard. The father throws a family celebration and the oldest son will not attend. This distresses the father.

Both sons come home from a field. The father goes out to both sons to meet them. Both sons would rather celebrate with their friends than with their father. The father would rather have relationship with his dishonorable son than save his own honour. The father would rather have relationship with the obedient resentful son than save his own honour. But he has trouble getting either son interested in him.

Neither son understands how much compassion the father has for both sons. They both shame him. They both would rather celebrate with their friends. That’s why both are lost. He goes out to meet both.

Do not miss the tenderness of the father toward the obedient resentful son. He wants this son to be a part of the celebration, he comes out to plead with him, not to command him. Remember how this story began: *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus.* ² *But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law grumbled, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Then Jesus told them this parable.*

How could Jesus invite the Pharisees and law teachers more kindly than he has just done? By their grumbling, they are the obedient resentful son, out fuming in the yard, refusing to join the happy family dinner.

The lesson of Luke 15 is not how kindly the father welcomed his wayward son.

God does welcome sinners that way, but that's not its purpose. The purpose is not that we should be more like that father. It's true that we should be, but these stories are for something else. The stories help the Pharisees understand why Jesus welcomes sinners. God searches for the lost, and God rejoices when he finds them.

The Pharisees thought Jesus was taking himself outside God's ways when Jesus welcomed sinners, but actually Jesus was in the center of God's ways, and the Pharisees, the obedient righteous, were taking themselves outside God's ways by their grumbling.

The Pharisees and law teachers are now the older resentful son, fuming outside the happy dinner. Jesus told the stories for the benefit of those Pharisees, urging them not to take themselves out of God's celebrations.

Celebration Joy is a big part of the kingdom, in Luke's writings. I will not tell you to feel joy, because nothing good happens when people tell me to feel something, and I won't do that to you. It remains clear in Scripture, though, that following Jesus the Lord and being a child of God is the best thing that could possibly happen to anyone, and it is good reason to celebrate.

We cannot control what we feel. Many things we cannot control. Remember that the Jesus who rose has all authority in heaven and on earth; our Rescuer controls everything.

What we can control is what we tell ourselves. We talk to ourselves regularly, there are words going through our minds. What are we saying to ourselves? That we can control, we can tell ourselves God things. We have that kind of thing right in this chapter.

“Father, I was dead, but you made me alive, and that's good reason to celebrate. Thank you Father. I was lost, but you found me, and that's good reason to celebrate. Thank you for finding me. You are always with me, and that's good reason to celebrate, thank you Father that you are always with me. Everything you have is mine, Ephesians 1 says in Christ I will inherit every spiritual blessing that's in the heavenly realms. Thank you Father for my great inheritance. Thank you that you lit a lamp and searched for me and found me and brought me to yourself, which is the best possible thing that could happen to any person. Thank you that you celebrated when you found me.”

I have written stuff like this on a recipe card and carried it folded up in my pocket, and I used dark moods as a prompt to pull this out and pray it out loud to God. I did this just to survive. Several times a day. After a while the paper wore out, but by then I had memorized the words.

There are many discouraging things in the world, and many encouraging things in the Bible. Pray that the Spirit will refresh you, but give him something to work with. We can manage what we tell ourselves. We may not grumble about “no joy,” if we are not in the habit of telling ourselves God's encouraging truths. Give the Holy Spirit something to work with. What we feed in us grows, pay attention to what we feed in ourselves.

Message of Luke 15. We in this church are the obedient righteous, we are perfectly set up to be like the Pharisees and law teachers, and like the obedient resentful son. If we do not welcome the repenting scoundrels and repenting rebels as kindly as God does, we are outside his celebration.

We will be tempted to think “they” don’t belong with “us,” but God found them and celebrates over them and with them. If we do not welcome them, we put *ourselves* on the outside.

As far as the obedient righteous are concerned, that would be us, God is scandalously kind, offensively patient and tender. This in part because we the obedient righteous never did understand how kind was to us. If we knew how good he was being to us, we’d have less trouble with his kindness to repenting rebels. Amen.