



The Parables of Jesus
The Parables of Lostness
The Lost Sheep (Luke 15:4-7; Matthew 18:12-14)
The Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10)
The Father and His Two Sons (Luke 15:11-32)

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now I’m found, was blind but now I see.” These, of course, are the wonderful words of the hymn penned by John Newton. It is a hymn with which we are all familiar. It is a hymn with words that fit every single believer in Jesus Christ. In a sense, we all have the same testimony. Whether we were converted as a very young child or as a very old man or woman, we could still all say, “I was once lost but now I’m found.”

These parables that are the focus of this study all have to do with this very thing – things that have been lost but now have been found. The Parables of The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, and The Father and His Two Sons (commonly referred to as “The Prodigal Son), found back to back to back in the Gospel of Luke, teach us of the need of man and of the wonderful, mighty grace of God. All three of them are similar in theme and yet the first two are interrogative parables while The Parable of the Father and His Two Sons is a double indirect narrative parable. The Lost Sheep and The Lost Coin both are interrogatory which simply means that they use questions to bring about a response. The Lost Sheep begins with “What man of you?” while The Lost Coin asks “or what woman?” The Parable of the Father and His Two Sons is a narrative parable. It is the longest of Jesus’ parable and develops a plot along the way. The story developed and told is what makes the point. And with this parable, it is a mistake to only concentrate on the son who went away because both sons play a major role in the parable. The second half of the parable, as a matter of fact, is about the older son and it is he who represents the one to whom

Jesus is addressing the parable in the original context.

Speaking of context, The Parable of the Lost Sheep is the only one of these three that is recorded elsewhere in the Gospels. It is found in Matthew 18:12-14. The context in which it is recorded is very different in Matthew than it is in Luke’s Gospel. And not only is the context in which it is recorded different, but the context in which Jesus tells it is different as well. There is no reason to think that Jesus couldn’t have told this parable and two different times and for two different reasons. In fact, one should be surprised if this were not how Jesus used them often. We see this with other parables as well.

In Matthew, Jesus tells this parable in the context of having called a little child to himself and saying, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). He has gone on to say, setting up the parable, “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 18:10). And then after the parable, he moves on to instruction regarding those who have gone astray and teaching concerning forgiveness. In this context, Jesus has in mind those who are the weakest among us. Whether they be little children in the physical sense or little children in the spiritual sense, the application and instruction holds true. The disciples were asking “who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:1). And Jesus answers the question in a most striking, and probably contrary way; the one who is humble like a child, the one who has a heart for those like children, and the one who forgives – for after all, this is what

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God has done. He has humbled Himself and become man. As Paul says in Philippians 2:7-8, "But made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." He has a heart for those like children, "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young" (Isaiah 40:11). And He forgives sinners. Psalm 103:10-12 says, "He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us."

The Parable of the Lost Sheep in Matthew emphasizes the importance of those "little ones" to God in heaven. He watches over them, He loves them, He disciplines them, and if they stray, He goes after them – and when He brings that one back to the fold, He rejoices! What a wonderful picture of who God is.

Now the context in Luke is different. Therefore, the meaning of the parable is also somewhat different. In Luke, Jesus has been teaching and people start gathering around Him. And yet, it is not simply "people" who begin to do so. They are the outcasts of the society. They are the despised among the people. Luke 15:1 says, "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him." And this should be great news right? For after all, isn't it the sinners who need to hear him? Isn't it the sick who need the physician and not the well? And yet, there were those among the people who did not like this at all. We hear again of the Pharisees. Verse 2 says, "And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'"

This serves as the setting and the context for the three parables that we find in chapter 15 of Luke. Not only were those

"tax-collectors" and "sinners" looked down upon in their society, but so too were those who associated with them. Mekilta Amalek, an early midrash (homiletical teaching; in our language, a "commentary") on the Book of Exodus, says, "In this connection the sages said: Let a man never associate with a wicked person, not even for the purpose of bringing him near to the Torah." To associate with these kinds of people was to be "associated" with them. Jesus was often accused of associating with sinners – and well, did often associate with sinners. So it was in this context that we find these three parables.

For the sake of time and writing space, a helpful way of discussing these three parables may be to look at them from three common points in all of them. There is the one who seeks. In The Parable of the Lost Sheep, it is, of course, the shepherd. In The Parable of the Lost Coin, it is the woman. **RABBIT TRAIL:** And just as an interesting observation, doesn't it say something about Jesus that when he tells a parable convicting them of their self-righteousness and while they are accusing him of associating with sinners, that in the two first parables the characters that represent God are shepherds and a woman? Neither of whom were very respected in the culture of the day. As a matter of fact, shepherds were often despised and viewed as thieves because they led their flocks onto other people's lands. And both shepherds and women were used to spread the good news of the birth of Christ child! **NOW MERGE BACK INTO MAIN TOPIC.** In The Parable of the Father and His Two Sons, the one who seeks, or at least runs to meet his son, is, of course, the father.

There is also then, the one who is found. In the order that the parables are found in Luke, those that are found are the sheep; the lost coin; and the son.

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And then there is a third common theme. In fact, I would argue that that this third theme is what most closely ties these three parables together. It is the theme of joy. Again, these are in the order in which they are found. In *The Lost Sheep*, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:6-7). In *The Lost Coin*, “When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:9-10). And in *The Man and his sons*, it says, “Let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate” (Luke 15:23-24).

In all three parables, the one who seeks is, of course, a picture of God and His love and heart for the lost. He is like the shepherd who will leave the ninety-nine to pursue that one lost sheep. That one lost sheep is important enough to run after. He is, indeed, with all reverence, like Francis Thompson describes Him, the Hound of Heaven. He is relentless in His pursuit. Even as God pursued Israel, even as He had mercy on her, “Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her the vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope” (Hosea 2:14-15). He goes after that one sheep like a hound on a trail; “Nigh and nigh draws the chase, with unperturbed pace, deliberate speed, majestic instancy; and past those noise-ed feet, a voice comes yet more fleet – ‘Lo, naught contents thee, who content’st no me” (Francis Thompson, *The Hound of Heaven*). He is the God who who doesn’t say, “I’ve got plenty of other coins just as this one and leaves the lost one in the cushions of the couch.” But he searches the house, turns on a lamp to search into the hours of the night or the dark corners of the room, whatever it takes, he sweeps the house from room to

room, to find His child. He is the God who, when He sees His child from afar, doesn’t wait until the son makes it to him, but as is so not the proper thing to do, showing His utmost joy, He hikes up his robe and takes off across the field to embrace and kiss his son.

And when He finds that which is lost, His first words are not words of rebuke, but joy in that what was lost, is now found. Again, we’ll get to the “joy” in just a few paragraphs. But notice, even for the sheep, who, whether unable to make it back to the fold on his own or just out of pure joy, the shepherd “lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing” (Luke 15:5). What a wonderful picture of a shepherd saying, by his actions, “this is MY sheep.”

What an appropriate place to turn then to the “one who was found.” The sheep who had wondered off. The sheep who was unable to find his way back to the fold, even if there were a desire to do so. The sheep who usually in this situation would simply give up, lie down, and wait to die. The sheep who was lost...could do nothing to get found.

The coin was unable to cry out for help. The coin was unable to direct the woman in the proper direction. The coin was unable to turn on the lights or to make a noise or to jump back on the table. The coin, too, just like the sheep, was completely dependent upon someone else.

The son...one might be tempted to argue that he did save himself. After all, he did come back. And yet, the point of this parable is to show that the son did repent, he saw his sin, recognized it for what it was, and clung to his father’s grace and mercy. Indeed, this is the case. Repentance and the need for repentance doesn’t contradict the grace of God. In fact, Jesus is here showing the Pharisees that this son did exactly what he should have done. This son represents those who saw their need of Christ. They saw their sin, recognized the heap of trouble

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they were in, they acknowledged that their situation was helpless in and of themselves, and they reached out to the one who could do something about it. The lost, in all three parables have been found! And yet, in The Parable of the Father and His *Two* Sons, this is only half of the story.

There was another son, a son who thought he was never lost, and therefore was never found. It was the older brother. He said to his father, “Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends” (Luke 15:29). Certainly, we can see the self-righteousness here. “I never disobeyed your command”? Does he really think that is true? Does this not remind you of the Rich Young Ruler? Jesus had quoted several of the commandments to him to which he replied, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth” (Mark 10:20). So, of course, Jesus says to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Mark 10:21). But the man was unwilling; he loved his riches more than he loved Christ. He was unwilling to give up the things of the world to follow Jesus. Did this mean Jesus picked that because he had, in fact, obeyed the other commandments? Of course not; Jesus picked that to clearly reveal the man’s heart.

This older brother hadn’t obeyed his father perfectly; he may have thought he had, but he hadn’t. And his heart is clearly revealed in the fact of his displeasure over the celebration of the younger son. He had always had his father. In fact, the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours” (Luke 15:31). The older brother had his father but what he wanted was the very same thing that his little brother had desired and had caused him to run off and squander all that he had. He, too, wanted his father’s stuff rather than his father. He should have rejoiced when the younger son who had been “dead” was now “alive.” But, instead, there was jealousy. Jesus is pointing the finger here directly at

those who had said, “This man receives sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2).

How convicting this can be if think about our own hearts! Are we often the self-righteous older brother who rather than rejoicing, begrudges the blessings and salvation of others? As if, we, in and of ourselves, deserve or have earned what we have or what they have? May God forgive us of that and give us a proper response. And that proper response is joy; it is rejoicing.

The one sheep has been found! To which Jesus says, “There will be more joy in heaven over on sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7). Jesus is not saying that there are those who need no repentance – He is saying that there are those who think they have no need of repentance, in fact, a multitude of them – and the joy over one little sinner will be greater than the joy over all of them combined. Heaven rejoices when a sinner repents! Do you?

The angels of God rejoice over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:10). The angels have only to marvel at the wonder of the gospel! They do not experience redemption. They do not experience conversion, but they rejoice over it! Do you?

It is “fitting to celebrate and be glad” (Luke 15:32) when one who was dead comes alive through Jesus Christ. We have wedding showers and celebrate the union of a man and woman – and we should. We have baby showers and celebrate the gift of new life – and we should. But do we celebrate new life spiritually? WE SHOULD!! REJOICE!!

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