

Luke 15: Parables of the Lost and Found

Jesus was the master of teaching spiritual truth through parables. Parables are fictitious stories about common stuff His disciples understood to explain unknown spiritual truth they did not understand. But Jesus told most of His parables to the public crowd which included the religious leaders who had rejected Him. When asked why He was suddenly teaching in cryptic parables, He said that in order that believers would understand and unbelievers would not understand. At the time He said that (Matt. 13), the religious leaders had totally rejected Him, and they were just listening in order to find some way to disgrace or indict Him. Apparently, Jesus knew their heart, and He knew they would not respond positively to the truth He was teaching. On the other hand, His disciples would seek the important meaning of His teaching. This was illustrated when they would come to Him later in private for explanation and interpretation (Mark 4:34). Along with that, I think an excellent reason to tell important truth through parables is that they illustrated truth without any argument. Jesus could teach this way without the Pharisees contradicting and arguing with Him. A wise man once said, "Never argue with fools in public, people might not know who is who". In Jesus' case, He was refuting the established religious traditions; therefore there would have been a guarantee of argumentation.

In every parable of Christ, there was always a question or an issue that prompted the parable, and it is important to our interpretation to know what that is. In Luke 15:1-2, we read that the Pharisees were upset that Jesus made Himself available to the known sinners like the tax collectors, prostitutes, and other undesirables. The Pharisees asked why a great religious leader and a prophet would "receive sinners and eat with them". This is something the Pharisees would never do, instead they ostracized sinners and banned them from the Temple and the synagogues. They did not understand Jesus' purpose statement in passages like Luke 5:31-32, "It is not those who are well who need a doctor, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous (self-righteous) but sinners to repentance", or Luke 19:10, "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost".

In order to answer the Pharisees' grumbling complaints, Jesus told three parables in Luke 15 about something or someone who was lost and then found. The Pharisees obviously don't believe that God loves sinners, and they don't believe that they themselves are sinners. Jesus makes it obvious in the first two parables of Luke 15 that God loves sinners and there is

rejoicing in heaven when even one sinner repents and is saved. If Jesus' audience can connect the dots, they would realize that the youngest son in the third parable represents the known sinners, and the oldest self righteous son represents the Pharisees. The father clearly represents God, and we can see that He loves both the sons. Whether the religious leaders figure it out, we are not told, but we can see that all three parables refute the traditions and beliefs of the religious leaders. God loves sinners, and it's a good thing because we are all sinners. Whether we are wild and rebellious like the younger son or self righteous and holier than thou like the older son, or somewhere in between, God loves us and desires an intimate relationship with us.

Loss, Search, Recovery, and Great Joy

In Luke 15:3-10, Jesus told two short parables about a lost sheep and a lost coin. 99 sheep were already safe in the pasture, but one is in danger and needs to be found. This story makes it clear that God cares about each individual, God takes the initiative to search for each individual, and when he/she is found there is great rejoicing in heaven. This concept was revolutionary to the people of Israel in Jesus' day. In fact the idea that God seeks for sinners is foreign to every religion but Christianity. In Luke 15:7, we can just imagine their shock when Jesus told them there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than 99 righteous people. Comparing that to all of Jesus' teaching about the incorrect self righteousness of the Pharisees (see Matt. 6:1-5, Luke 18:9-14), we can be sure that Jesus was referring to the religious leaders as self righteous.

In the second parable found in Luke 15:8-9, a woman had ten coins but lost one, and frantically searches for that which was lost. When she finds it there is great rejoicing. Again Jesus interprets the story for us that God desires each individual to repent and return to Him, and when they do there is rejoicing in heaven. Now that Jesus has established this principle, He told a longer more dramatic parable to fully explain God's loving view of sinners and how He rejoices when they return. The parable of the two sons (the prodigal son) further explains the plight of mankind as alienated from God, and God's grace towards them.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son, Luke 15:11-32



*Rembrandt, The Return of the Prodigal Son,
1662-1669 (Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg)
(Photo credit: Wikipedia)*

Jesus told a third and longer parable about someone who is lost but then found, which is commonly called the Prodigal Son, although Jesus introduced it as the parable of two sons. It is actually two parables within one story—a parable about the wild rebellious younger son, and another about the self righteous older son. The two sons are radically different yet both are alienated from their father. The younger son becomes alienated geographically, while the older son is alienated in the sense that he resents the father and has an unloving view of their relationship. In spite of the mistreatment by both sons, the father loves them both and desires that they repent and be restored to a loving relationship. It is the story about the passion of a caring father for his run away rebellious son and also for his self righteous resentful son.

Jesus' audience would have understood the inheritance laws and traditions of first century Israel. When the patriarch (father) of the family died, the oldest son would become the head of the family business or farm, and get a double portion of the inheritance. Thus in the parable, the older brother would receive two thirds of the property and money while the younger brother received one third. We are shocked at the beginning of the story to see the younger brother ask his father for his share immediately. Jesus' audience would have been outraged at that request, but even more surprised that the father agreed to do it. It was as if the younger son was saying, "I wish you were dead now so I could get my money."

Teenagers tend to minimize the good things they have at home and their family relationships, so I'm guessing he was about 16-17 years old. At home he had love, security, good health, a future, peace, a nice home, and plenty to eat, but he took it all for granted. Most of all, teenagers want their freedom, which begs the question, "Is freedom the ability to do what you want, or is it the ability to do what you ought? Clearly God sees it as the ability to do what you ought.

To the casual observer, the father's decision to sell property and give him the money seems crazy, but was actually wise. He knew this was the only way his son could learn—if he ever would. So the younger son took the money and left for a distant land like Las Vegas. He left singing the Frank Sinatra song, "I did it my way". The father letting him go his own way is

similar to what God did in Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve rebelled. God basically said to Adam and the whole human race, “OK, you want to disobey and go your own way, and live for yourself? Let’s see how that works out. I will let you and your descendants find out the hard way what a creation run by you, apart from God, looks like. It will not be pretty, but hopefully you will come to your senses and return, and I will be waiting on you with open arms”. In Luke 15:13, the son packed up his stuff and went to Vegas (or somewhere like it), and bought himself a gaudy gold watch with diamonds, a couple of big gold chains, new loud clothes, and a Cadillac convertible. He entered the casino with a girl on each arm, and stayed in a big suite. He proceeded to gamble all his money away. For a short period of time, he was adored by all, welcomed everywhere, and strangers laughed at his jokes. He found out the truth of that saying “A fool and his money are welcome everywhere”.

Reality Bites—Luke 15:14-19

Soon, two really bad things happened—he was broke, and there was a famine in the land. Because of the downturn, there were no jobs, so with no money and no job he had to take desperate measures. The text says he began to “be in great need”, which was a new experience for him. You would think that he had reached the bottom, and it could not get any worse, but not so fast. He became so desperate that he hired himself out to a Gentile pig farmer. For a first century Jew this was the worst imaginable humiliation of feeding the swine. He was starving, cold, wet, dirty, humiliated, and rejected. The parable does not minimize the seriousness of sin. Sin always takes you farther than you want to go, keeps you longer than you want to stay, and costs you more than you want to pay. I think his condition represents the condition of the human race alienated from God. We can view the human race apart from God in three phases—pleasure and glory seekers, next you have the squandering of time, wealth, and resources, and thirdly in need, desperate, and dying. The estranged son was so desperate that he even ate with the pigs.

Full Circle—He Came to his Senses, v.17-19

In his degraded condition, he came to his senses that not only was he way better off at home, but even the lowest servant in his father’s house had plenty to eat, and was well treated. We can compare this change of mind to the Beatitudes of Matt. 5:3-6, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn over sin, blessed are the humble, blessed are those who

hunger for righteousness". His plan was to go home to his father in complete humility with no claim to sonship, and no feeling of entitlement or merit of any kind. This is a true picture of repentance, to approach God empty handed confessing that his only hope lies in the mercy and grace of the Father.

Reversal of Fortune—he did not get what he deserved

The son was expecting a stern lecture, a cold shoulder, and a kick in the rear, but the reception he got from the father in v.20-21 was surprising. His father had not forgotten him, and his father was out on the road keeping watch for his return. The father went far beyond just forgiving him, he restored him to his former position in the family and he expressed his great love for his wayward son. This was followed by great rejoicing and instructions from the father to the servants to prepare for a great party to celebrate the sons return. In verse 24, the father gave the reason for the celebration that "this son of mine was dead and has come to life again, he was lost but now has been found". I can't help but think that John Newton who wrote the song "Amazing Grace" had this Scripture in mind when he wrote his song.

The Parable of the Older Self Righteous Brother, Luke 15:25-32

It is almost as if Jesus was saying that there were just two kinds of people in the world, the wild rebellious people like the younger brother, and the self righteous superior- feeling older brother. During his brother's return, the older brother was busy working hard in the field, so when he came in he was surprised at the celebration going on at home. After a servant explained about his younger brother's return, "he became angry and would not go into the party" in v. 28. He separated himself from his brother and his father by staying outside, and he had contempt for them. The father comes out seeking him just as he had gone seeking the younger brother. We can contrast the father's response with the older brother's response—the father forgave because he was filled with love, but the older brother refused to forgive out of selfish resentment. We can also compare the Pharisees of Jesus day to the elder son—both condemned sinners, both separated themselves from the father, and both were self righteous. In the case of the elder son, appearances were deceiving. Many of us might think that the elder son had a right to complain. He had been responsible, hard working, and always done the right thing. But in his complaint we can see his problem of resentment, entitlement, and an unloving stance. I doubt his complaint in v.29 is true that he

had always perfectly served and perfectly obeyed every commandment, but the father had never given him a party. In the case of the Pharisees who were like minded to the older brother, Jesus made it clear they were hypocrites, not entitled, and not righteous. The father in the parable told the son that he had no right to complain or resent. The older son had no doubt had a very good life, plenty of parties, and plenty of love from the father.

This parable is the Gospel (good news) within the Gospel of Luke. Rebellious sinners encounter a loving God who has a plan of reconciliation that He has implemented. When the son (us) repents and comes home, he is met with God's love through His mercy and grace, or as John Newton put it, "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost but now am found was blind but now I see"

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