

The Parable Teller

Luke 15:1-32

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Our *Journey with Jesus* brings us to one of the most exciting chapters in the Bible. That is, it's really exciting if you are a sinner. Not so much if you don't think you are. After 11 years with the group of sinners known as Bethel Church in Crown Point Indiana, I am very certain that in this church, Luke 15 will be an exciting chapter.

The reasons why this is exciting are not readily apparent in the text since chapter 15 on the surface is merely three stories. However, these three stories are unique in their literary form and one of the three is considered the greatest ever told.

What are we talking about? Parables. One third of everything Jesus said in the gospels He said in a parable. There are around 60 parables in the gospels and Luke has 27 of them. That's nearly half. So there is no way that we could have a summer series in Luke and not spend time with Jesus as the Parable Teller.

What is a Parable?

The meaning of the word itself is helpful. *Para* = Alongside; *Ballo* = To set. To set alongside; to put in parallel with something else. Here's a definition – ***Divine truth in a human story***. Jesus was the master communicator. He was able to take eternal and spiritual realities and place them in and through a story with such simplicity that even the children could understand. Yet the truths are so awesome that the religious leaders of the day scratched their heads at their meaning. They were simple enough for the child and too profound for the self-righteous. Children got them. Pharisees didn't. But everybody was fascinated by them because everybody loves a story.

These stories were unique and interpreting them can be challenging. Sometimes Jesus would give their meaning, like the parable of the three soils or the wheat and tares. Often, He did not. They are not fables in which there is merely some moral point. They are also not strict allegories where everything in the story has some hidden meaning. They are parables where there is divine truth woven into a human story.

Luke 15 has three of them: the Parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the lost or prodigal son. Luke has arranged them in such a way that each builds on the next. You will easily recognize their themes. I'll only briefly comment on the first two as the third one is our focus today.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15:1-2) There is so much in verse 1. Who were the people drawn to Jesus? The fringes of society; the outcast and the morally bankrupt. Think of it. If Jesus was here today, who would feel drawn to Him and where would He hang out? Probably not who and where we would expect.

We met the scribes and Pharisees last week. The Pharisees were self-righteous and indignant that a Rabbi teacher like Jesus would actually spend time and eat with tax collectors and all the other "sinners." They had a rule that said a good Pharisee would not

associate with a sinner. Do you see the irony? ***It's hard to not associate with a sinner when you are one.*** In response to this Jesus tells three parables.

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

So he told them this parable: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, '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 15:3-7, emphasis added)

Notice the words, I have FOUND my sheep that was LOST.

The Parable of the Lost Coin

"Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And 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 15:8-10, emphasis added)

Again, notice the words, I have FOUND the coin I had LOST.

The Parable of the Lost Son

This brings us to what is considered by many to be the finest of all the parables. What did the first two deal with? Something valuable being lost (sheep and coin) and it being found due to the diligent seeking out of its owner (shepherd and woman). The result in both cases is "joy." Losing means sorrow. Finding means joy. Keep that in mind as we work through this parable.

And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. (Luke 15:11-16)

We had 100 sheep, ten coins and now we have two sons. The story is a common one in many families. Perhaps you are living out a version of this in your own life or family. This youngest son dominates the early part of the story beginning with his outrageous demand. Dad's not dead yet but the son wants to treat him that way by asking for his inheritance early. The ancient rule was that the eldest son got 2/3 of the estate; the youngest got 1/3. Speaking as an oldest son, I think that's a wonderful idea.

Right away the younger son's character is suspect. This is confirmed as the dad gives him what he wants and he goes to a far away land and "squanders his property in reckless living." My dad used to say, *A fool and his money are soon parted.* This youngest son shows himself to be the fool. You can imagine what a man with little character and lots of money

would spend his time doing. I don't think he was feeding the poor. He was indulging in wine, women, and song; living carefree. Why? He had lots of money and lots of friends.

Two things happened to him. First of all, his money ran out. A second thing complicated this – a famine struck the land. Suddenly, there's no money, no friends, no food. Hunger and desperation drive him to get a job feeding the pigs. He goes from the penthouse to the pig farm and he's living out an episode of *Dirty Jobs*. He is feeding pigs. Jesus picks the perfect job to disturb His Jewish listeners. Remember, there is a prohibition for Jews against pigs in the Old Testament law (Leviticus 11:7). For a Jewish boy to feed pigs means he is at the bottom of the totem pole. Whatever faith he might have had is gone and he is at the end of himself. No family, no money, no friends, no food. On the social ladder, he is looking at the pigs with envy. They have more than he does.

In the words of the Shane and Shane song, he has "followed [his] feet to nowhere." He is without resource, all his props are gone, and there is apparently nowhere to turn.

I wonder if today you might be somewhat identifying with this young man in the story. You are in a kind of famine time. Perhaps it's been your choices or maybe circumstances out of your control, but either way, you are in the pigpen and you don't know where to turn.

"But when he came to himself..." (Luke 15:17)

There is so much truth in that little phrase, *when he came to himself*. We see this often. A man or woman begins down a path of making unwise decisions which spirals them into the painful natural consequences that foolish living produces. While they're in the death spiral, you cannot change their minds. Prodigals are spiritually irrational. I have talked with them and pleaded with them and prayed with them. Still, they have a kind of smirk and smile that says, "I am doing what I am doing." Life starts getting hard and eventually hard realities force them to do something they haven't done for a long time. They come to themselves. They start to think.

D.L. Moody said, *There is always hope for a man when he begins to think*. Prodigals can start to think again. Now there is hope. That is not the point here, but there are parents and prodigals here today who need the hope in that little phrase.

He said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."' (Luke 15:17-19)

The son knows something about his dad. It's the same something that made him think his dad might give him his inheritance in the first place. Let's see if he's thinking rightly.

And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' (Luke 15:20-21)

There is so much here. He doesn't come home. He comes to his "father." His father sees him while he is far away. Perhaps he recognized his walk or something. Why did Jesus tell the story this way? How do you see things far away? *You have to be looking for them*. At the Air Show last week, the Thunderbirds were approaching and everybody was straining

their necks, looking around for some sight of them. To see something afar, you have to be looking for it.

About now you ought to be thinking, *Who is this story really about? Is it the Lost Son or is it possibly the Longing Father?* His dad sees him while he is far in the distance and something happens in his heart. He 'felt compassion.' This is an old favorite Greek word of mine, *Splanknizomai*. It means, *to feel deeply in your belly*. It's translated "compassion" or "to have your heart go out." We might say, "My heart goes out to you." What do we mean? I am moved deeply within me and I feel compassion. The father sees and then he feels deeply.

The Pharisees listening to the story want confrontation and condemnation. "Son, how dare you!" But they don't know how special this father is. Notice the action words. He saw. He felt. Next, he ran. When he reaches his son, there is an embrace and kisses. The son begins his apology and the Father essentially interrupts him...

'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and 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)

The son comes home without anything. He has wasted it all. We could even assume his appearance was severely altered. Yet the father quickly gives him a robe, a ring, and sandals. Each of these gifts is important. A **robe** meant status in that culture. A **ring** meant authority. And **sandals** were to distinguish a son from a slave. Slaves went barefoot. Sons wore sandals. Essentially, the father immediately reinstates the son in his home and most importantly, in his heart. Like the lost sheep and the lost coin, the finding of a son is cause for celebration so they fired up the barbecue and brought out the band. This was a serious party!

The parable could end right here and essentially teach the same thing as the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin. The son was lost and now is found. But remember verse 1 - what is the context? The Pharisees were grumbling that Jesus would hang out with sinners. So the parable continues....

"Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered 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. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!'" (Luke 15:25-30)

Do you hear him? ***This son of yours!*** He doesn't even identify him as a brother. He's seething with hurt and jealousy. Does this sound vaguely familiar anywhere in your family? Jealousy? Greed? Isn't this humanity on display? A jealous brother who senses that maybe dad doesn't appreciate him for all he's done and might love the other brother more? The older brother comes in from the field and hears the music and dancing and wonders what it could be. When he hears his brother is home and dad is celebrating, he is incensed and refuses to share in his dad's joy. *What about me? You've never thrown me a party! You've*

never kill the fattened calf for me! And I have been the perfect son while he's been the prodigal! The older son isn't happy that the lost son has been found.

*And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was **lost**, and is **found**.'*" (Luke 15:31-32, emphasis added)

The repetition is there for a reason. *He was lost and now he is found.* The Father rejoices at finding the lost son.

Who is this parable really about? Is the parable of the Lost Sheep about the lost sheep? Is the parable of the Lost Coin about the lost coin? Is the Parable of the Lost Son about the lost son? What is Jesus teaching with these stories? Sheep are valuable? Coins should be found? Or are these trying to tell us something about the heart of the One who is searching for them and how He feels when He finds them? That is precisely the point.

In the stories, God is compared to a searching shepherd, a coin-seeking woman, and a longing father. The reason the third parable is so powerful to us is that I can't relate to a sheep or a coin but I can relate to a sinful son. How? I am one. How about you?

In these stories, the sheep and the coin and son are all metaphors for lost sinners. We aren't the eldest son in the story, we are the foolish son and Jesus wants us to realize something about what God is like. God is like the father of the lost son. Remember those action words. He looks. He feels. He runs. He embraces.

When was the last time you saw an old man running? It's not something you see very often. If you are in a store and an old man goes running by you, it would be safe to assume it's an emergency. Old men don't run.

But that is what Jesus wanted the tax collectors and the others listening and us to know today. God is the one doing the seeking, and who He is seeking is sinners who are coming home, like a dad seeking his son. ***Divine truth in a human story.***

What makes the prodigal son so reassuring to us is that even when the disaster of our lives is self-inflicted, God's heart still longs for us. My dear friend, you've come to church with an aching heart wondering what might be known here about God and here it is: ***God longs for you and when we turn to Him in repentance, God runs to us.***

Let me show you what God running to us means. [Someone stands up in the back.] This isn't God [hands on hips]. This isn't God toward the repentant sinner [arms open wide]. This isn't God [index finger indicating "come here"]. This is God [Pastor Steve runs down the aisle to the person in the back]. Look. Feel. Run. Kiss. Shepherd. Woman. Father. In each case, God is doing the seeking and He rejoices to save the lost! The key verse in the whole book of Luke is 19:10, *For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.*

The result for God and for us is repeated in each parable. Joy at finding the sheep. Joy at finding the coin. Joy at finding the son. The Father says, *We had to celebrate!* All heaven does when a sinner repents and puts his or her faith in Jesus who dies on the cross for our sins. It's an explosion of divine joy!

Pharisee types don't get that, but we need to today. So sinners, rejoice! Your Father longs for you. Come to Him by faith in Jesus Christ and you will be welcomed. Christian, if our Father loves us in our sin, how much more must He love us in our salvation? What can

separate us from his love? Absolutely nothing. Luke 15 – It's a great chapter for sinners, which means it's a good chapter for us.

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