

LUKE 15

WEEK 3



Historical Context & Background

We find Luke chapter 15 right in the middle of a section of Jesus' teaching. Jesus is traveling around the areas of Galilee, Judea, and Perea teaching many things that were considered controversial. The things Jesus was teaching were especially baffling to the Jewish religious elites at the time, who valued national identity (being part of the "in group") and ritual-purity laws as key to being God's people. And so these parables were a tough pill to swallow to for the religious leaders of the time. In this context Jesus uses three parables, which are stories that unveil a certain truth or moral to the listener.



Related Passages

Matthew 11:19 - Friend of tax collectors

1 Peter 2:25 - Lost sheep

Luke 5:32 - Callin the sinners

Deut 21:17 - Rights of a son

James 4:8 - Draw near to God



Key Terms

Prodigal: A person who spends money in a recklessly extravagant way. This parable is also called "The Lost Son."

Pharisees: A sect of Jewish religious leaders who emphasized obedience to the law. They thought that associating with people who broke the law was extremely offensive. They were all about holiness, but they had forgotten about God's unconditional love for all.

The Teachers of the Law: The scribes who taught in the synagogues on the Sabbath. They were considered the authorities on biblical interpretation.

Tax Collector: Tax Collectors were hated by most Jewish people at the time. The Roman Empire had control of Israel and made the Jews pay heavy taxes, driving them into poverty. Most tax collectors were Jewish people who worked for the Roman government, and were seen as traitors and sell-outs. They also had a reputation for taking more taxes than were needed and keeping it for themselves.



Key Themes

Framing the Stories: We see the tax collectors and sinners gathering to hear Jesus speak and we also see the religious leaders grumbling. The irony should be striking here. The people who would have been considered far from God are coming close and the religious people are distancing themselves. Jesus is introduced here as someone who welcomes and eats with sinners. Jesus sees the way that the religious leaders are responding to His inclusive love and chooses to speak to it. He points out the illogical behavior of the religious leaders by telling three stories. The number of stories is important because in Hebrew culture saying something three times was meant to emphasize something to the greatest extent. Jesus is really trying to make his point clear by using normal, every day things to describe the rejoicing that happens when something that is lost is found.

The Lost Sheep & Coin: These parables are interesting because of their subtlety. Rabbis at this time believed that God would receive repentant sinners, but the idea that God would go out of His way to search for lost sinners is radical. Jesus tells two stories to illustrate how wrong they are. The ending of each parable is almost exactly the same. They both end with rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents. The goal here is to highlight the character of God. He's after you! Sinners, tax collectors.

In the story of the lost coin, the coin mentioned is a "drachma" which would be a day's wage for a worker during this time period. The ten coins most likely represent a poor woman's savings, so losing one coin would be serious business. Women during this time were extremely marginalized and especially poor if they were not married. And so it's remarkable to note that Jesus identifies himself with the poor woman who is searching for the lost coin.

The Lost Son: Jesus brings it home with a longer and more involved parable about rejoicing over a repentant sinner. It is important to note at the beginning that this story is about two sons.

Inheritance/The Young Son: The youngest son asks for his inheritance, which he normally would not have received until his Father died. The younger son is basically telling his father that he wants his money more than he wants him. He is saying he wishes his father was dead so that he could have freedom to do what he wants.

The younger son goes to a nearby town to live it up and live recklessly which ends horribly. What he thought was freedom—women, gambling, "partying"—led him to slavery. He ends up in a Greek town (Jewish villages did not have pigs because they were unclean under the old Testament law), penniless, friendless, homeless. In his desperation, he stoops so low as to work on a pig farm, which would have been extremely looked down upon by the Jewish religious leaders listening to Jesus speak because pigs were infamously unclean. He is now desperate, defiled.

The Return/The Father: The father would have no obligations to accept the prodigal son back because he had already graciously given him his inheritance early. Yet the Father runs to his lost son. Men who were the head of the family would not have been seen running because running

was considered undignified in this cultural context. But his love compels him to run anyway.

The robe and the ring given to the son represent honor and authority. These were outward acts that represent the fact that the son was fully accepted and restored, given full authority in his father's household. The refrain of rejoices comes a climax here with a feast and a party. God Parties! It is impossible to miss the refrain of rejoicing and partying in Heaven. God celebrates when people walk out of brokenness and into His loving arms. The public nature of this display is over the top. The religious leaders would have been appalled by this type of celebration being wasted on a rebellious sinner.

The older son: We said this story is about two brothers. The second brother is entitled and angered by the Father so lavishly welcoming the sinful younger son. The older son represents the Pharisees and the scribes and how they are reacting to Jesus' love for the sinful people directly in front of him. The truth is that the father longs for both brothers to accept his love and delight in their positions in his household.

📖 Quotes & Illustrations

"Indeed, as son and heir I am to become successor. I am destined to step into my Father's place and offer to others the same compassion that he has offered me. The return to the Father is ultimately the challenge to become like the Father. This call to become the Father precludes any 'soft' interpretation of the story. I know how much I long to return and be held safe, but do I really want to be son and heir with all that implies? Being in the Father's house requires that I make the Father's life my own and become transformed in his image."

HENRI NOUWEN

"The father loves each son and gives each the freedom to be what he can, but he cannot give them freedom they will not take nor adequately understand. The father seems to realize, beyond the customs of his society, the need of his sons to be themselves. But he also knows their need for his love and a "home." How their stories will be completed is up to them. The fact that the parable is not completed makes it certain that the father's love is not dependent upon an appropriate completion of the story. The father's love is only dependent on himself and remains part of his character. As Shakespeare says in one of his sonnets: "Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds."

ARTHUR FREEMAN

! Three Main Points

1. God searches for the lost. God is the shepherd, the woman, and the Father who seeks to find those who are lost, down, and out.
2. You are the lost son; we all are lost. You are the older son; we all carry entitlement and

pride. You are called to be like the Father; we all must embrace broken people and show great compassion.

3. God sees us at our worst and still loves us. He sees us when we are a long way off and he still feels compassion for us. He runs to us, throws his arms around us and kisses us even while we are still in our sin. This embrace is the only thing that can heal our brokenness.

Discussion Questions

- Why do you think God inspired this story to be included in Scripture? What do we see most clearly in this chapter that we might miss elsewhere?
- What do we learn about God in this passage? What do we learn about people in this passage?
- How do you think the tax collectors and sinners would have received these parables?
- How do you think the religious leaders would have responded to Jesus' teaching here?
- Which character do you identify with the most in these parables?
- Which parable describes your experience with God the best?
- Does it strike you as odd that the shepherd is willing to leave the 99? Does God not care about those who are safe in his fold?
- How are you like the prodigal son? How have you wandered off or squandered what God has given you? How are you lost?
- How are you like the older brother? Where has envy, bitterness, or entitlement crept into your life?
- How are you called to mature into the father? Who are the lost or weary people you are called to embrace?
- Jesus got in trouble for hanging out with sinners. Who are the people today we'd get in trouble for eating with?
- How is this picture of God different from other religions? What makes our God, testified to in our Bible, different?
- What does this passage of Scripture offer that speaks to the deepest longings of our hearts?
- Jesus talks about coins and sheep. Why do you think he chooses these symbols? What does it tell you about us and him?
- Jesus says that heaven rejoices *more* over sinners repenting than many righteous people living? Why? How does this make you feel? Does it seem right, wrong, just, unjust?

Application & Practice

The Lost Parts: Walk the lost parts of your life into the Father's arms this week. Spend an hour this week praying about parts of your life you've not taken back to the father. Having done this, take this to a father: go to church this week and ask the pastor/priest if you can confess to them sometime in private. Then ask them to pray for you and assure you God has forgiven you. (Note: as a leader, be careful in implementing this. We aren't a Roman Catholic ministry and

don't look at confession like Roman Catholics do, but confessing to a pastor is a great practice for spiritual health.)

Lay Down Your Pride: The path to restoration for the older brother (because he's alienated himself from his father's house, too) is to lay down his bitterness, entitlement and pride. This week exchange entitlement and pride for gratitude. Practice being grateful for what God has already given you by spending 30 minutes listing out the gifts of God in your life—from mundane joys to specific people in your life or ways you've seen God work.

Compassion: Practice the compassion of the Father. Allow yourself to be compassionate to those people who are down and out and lost. Make a list of 2-3 people that you feel moved to show the love of the father. Do something nice and unexpected for them. Celebrate them (write a nice note, invite them to eat, give them a gift, etc.)



Going Deeper

The Return of the Prodigal Son by Henri Nouwen

Prodigal God by Tim Keller

"The Love of The Father" - A sermon from Judah Smith:
<https://vimeo.com/70512256>