

Luke 15:1-10
February 2, 2020

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: What have you lost or misplaced lately that you fervently looked for until you found it? [Let people engage]

Q: How did you feel while your object was lost? And what did you feel when you found it? [Let people engage.]

Transition: The text we're getting ready to read is one of the most heart-warming series of parables because we see what brings joy to Jesus! The great message of this chapter is: Heaven rejoices greatly, heaven celebrates when a sinner is saved, when a lost soul is found and recovered and restored. And by the time we're done with this chapter you're going to find your own heart tested as to whether or not this is for you the consummate joy. We find our joy in this world in a lot of ways. But if you want to get in touch with God and you want to share the joy of heaven, you're going to find your greatest joy in the salvation of the sinner, in the recovery of the lost.

As we look at this great text, you can examine your own life and test yourself and ask the question: Am I closer to the attitude of Jesus and, therefore, to God or am I closer to the attitude of the Pharisees and the scribes in the very opposite direction of God? That really is the question here. Let's begin with the first two parables.

BOOK:

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

15 Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not 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.

The Parable of the Lost Coin

⁸ "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not 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."

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn't understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

It is easy for us today to read these two parables and take their message for granted, but the people who first heard them must have been shocked. *Jesus was saying that God actually searches for lost sinners!* These parables also reveal that there are *two aspects to this salvation*. There is *God's* part: the shepherd seeks the lost sheep, and the woman searches for the lost coin. But there is also *man's* part in salvation, for the wayward son willingly repented and returned home.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Vol. 1, pp. 233-234). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

When D.L. Moody was directing his Sunday School in Chicago, one boy walked several miles to attend; and somebody asked him, "Why don't you go to a Sunday School closer to home?"

His reply might have been used by the publicans and sinners in Jesus' day: "Because they love a feller over there."

It is significant that Jesus *attracted* sinners while the Pharisees *repelled* them. (What does this say about some of our churches today?) Lost sinners came to Jesus, not because He catered to them or compromised His message, but because He cared for them. He understood their needs and tried to help them, while the Pharisees criticized them and kept their distance (see Luke 18:9–14). The Pharisees had a knowledge of the Old Testament Law and a desire for personal purity, yet they had no love for lost souls.

Three words summarize the message of this chapter: *lost*, *found*, and *rejoice*. Jesus spoke these parables to answer the accusations of the Pharisees and scribes who were scandalized at His behavior. It was bad enough that Jesus *welcomed* these outcasts and taught them, but He went so far as to *eat with them!* The Jewish religious leaders did not yet understand that the Son of man had "come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). Even more, they were still blind to the fact that *they themselves were among the lost*.

This chapter makes it clear that there is one message of salvation: God welcomes and forgives repentant sinners. But these parables also reveal that there are *two aspects to this salvation*. There is *God's* part: the shepherd seeks the lost sheep, and the woman searches for the lost coin. But there is also *man's* part in salvation, for the wayward son willingly repented and returned home. To emphasize but one aspect is to give a false view of salvation, for both the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man must be considered (see John 6:37; 2 Thes. 2:13–14).

Since one of the major themes of this chapter is joy, let's consider the three different joys that are involved in salvation. C.S. Lewis wrote, "Joy is the serious business of heaven," and it is a joy in which you and I can share.

The Joy of Finding (Luke 15:1–10)

The story about the lost sheep would touch the hearts of the men and boys in the crowd, and the women and girls would appreciate the story about the coin that was lost from the wedding necklace. Jesus sought to reach everybody's heart.

The lost sheep (vv. 3–7). The sheep was lost because of foolishness. Sheep have a tendency to go astray, and that is why they need a shepherd (Isa. 53:6; 1 Peter 2:25). The scribes and Pharisees had no problem seeing the publicans and sinners as "lost sheep," but they would not apply that image to themselves! And yet the prophet made it clear that all of us have sinned and gone astray, and that includes religious people.

The shepherd was responsible for each sheep; if one was missing, the shepherd had to pay for it unless he could prove that it was killed by a predator (see Gen. 31:38–39; Ex. 22:10–13; Amos 3:12). This explains why he would leave the flock with the other shepherds, go and search for the missing animal, and then rejoice when he found it. Not to find the lost sheep meant money out of his own pocket, plus the disgrace of being known as a careless shepherd.

By leaving the ninety-nine sheep, the shepherd was not saying they were unimportant to him. They were safe but the lost sheep was in danger. The fact that the shepherd would go after *one* sheep is proof that each animal was dear to him. Jesus was not suggesting that the scribes and Pharisees were not in need of salvation, for they certainly were. We must not make every part of the parable mean something, otherwise we will turn it into an allegory and distort the message.

There is a fourfold joy expressed when a lost sinner comes to the Saviour. Though nothing is said in the story about how the sheep felt, there is certainly joy in the heart of the *person found*. Both Scripture (Acts 3:8; 8:39) and our own personal experience verify the joy of salvation.

But there is also the joy of the person who does the finding. Whenever you assist in leading a lost soul to faith in Christ, you experience a wonderful joy within. Others join with us in rejoicing as we share the good news of a new child of God in the family, and there is also joy in heaven (Luke 15:7, 10). The angels know better than we do what we are saved *from* and *to*, and they rejoice with us.

The lost coin (vv. 8–10). The sheep was lost because of its foolishness, but the coin was lost because of the carelessness of another. It is a sobering thought that our carelessness *at home* could result in a soul being lost.

When a Jewish girl married, she began to wear a headband of ten silver coins to signify that she was now a wife. It was the Jewish version of our modern wedding ring, and it would be considered a calamity for her to lose one of those coins. Palestinian houses were dark, so she had to light a lamp and search until she found the lost coin; and we can imagine her joy at finding it.

We must not press parabolic images too far, but it is worth noting that the coin would have on it the image of the ruler (Luke 20:19–25). The lost sinner bears the image of God, even though that image has been marred by sin. When a lost sinner is “found,” God begins to restore that divine image through the power of the Spirit; and one day, the believer will be like Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:10; 1 John 3:1–2).

These two parables help us understand something of what it means to be lost. To begin with, it means being *out of place*. Sheep belong with the flock, coins belong on the chain, and lost sinners belong in fellowship with God. But to be lost also means *being out of service*. A lost sheep is of no value to the shepherd, a lost coin has no value to the owner, and a lost sinner cannot experience the enriching fulfillment God has for him in Jesus Christ.

But to turn this around, to be “found” (saved) means that you are back in place (reconciled to God), back in service (life has a purpose), and out of danger. No wonder the shepherd and the woman rejoiced and invited their friends to rejoice with them!

It is easy for us today to read these two parables and take their message for granted, but the people who first heard them must have been shocked. *Jesus was saying that God actually searches for lost sinners!* No wonder the scribes and Pharisees were offended, for there was no place in their legalistic theology for a God like that. They had forgotten that God had sought out Adam and Eve when they had sinned and hidden from God (Gen. 3:8–9). In spite of their supposed knowledge of Scripture, the scribes and Pharisees forgot that God was like a father who pitied his wayward children (Ps. 103:8–14).

There are few joys that match the joy of finding the lost and bringing them to the Savior. “The church has nothing to do but to save souls,” said John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. “Therefore, spend and be spent in this work.”

Martin, J. A. (1985). Isaiah. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 244)

d. *Jesus' teaching about the hopeless and sinners in the kingdom (chap. 15)*

Jesus combated the religious leaders by teaching again that some who were considered to be hopeless and sinners will be in the kingdom. Here are perhaps the best known of Jesus' parables—The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, and The Prodigal Son. All three parables teach the same message—that God is vitally concerned with the repentance of sinners. But the third story goes beyond the others, applying that truth to the situation in which Jesus found Himself—being accepted by the outcasts of society while being rejected by the religious leaders.

15:1–2. Much to the disgust of the religious leaders, Jesus associated with those who were thought of as hopeless and “**sinners.**” The opposition to Jesus was once again, as almost always in Luke, **the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law.** Because of this opposition Jesus told three parables. All three speak of things or a person being lost and then found, and of rejoicing when the lost is found.

Some view these parables as teaching a believer's restoration to fellowship with God. One cannot lose something he does not own, they reason, so the first two parables must represent children of God who come back to Him. Also, a son is already a son, so the third parable must be teaching that people who are believers can be restored to fellowship with God.

Others understand the parables to teach that lost people (i.e., people who are not believers) can come to Christ. This view seems preferable for two reasons: (1) Jesus was speaking to Pharisees who were rejecting the message of the kingdom. Their objection was that sinners were coming to Jesus and believing His message. In no way could these two groups be adequately represented in the third parable if the point of the parable is a restoration to fellowship by a believer. (2) Verse 22 indicates that the son who came back received a new position which he did not have before. The Jews were God's “children” in the sense that they had a special covenant relationship to Him. But each individual still had to become a believer in God. It was their responsibility to accept the message Jesus was preaching—that He was the Messiah and that He would bring in the kingdom for the nation.

15:3–7. The Parable of the Lost Sheep teaches that **there is ... rejoicing in heaven** when a **sinner ... repents.** Jesus was not saying **the other 99** sheep were not important. Instead, He was emphasizing that the one **sheep** not in the fold corresponded with the sinners with whom Jesus was eating (vv. 1–2). The **99 righteous persons** refer to the Pharisees who *thought* themselves righteous and therefore in no **need to repent.**

15:8–10. The Parable of the Lost Coin teaches that **there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels** when a **sinner ... repents.** This is the same message as the first but it emphasizes the thoroughness of the search. The woman continued to **sweep the house and search carefully until she** found the **coin** which was a thing of great value. A *drachma*, a Greek silver coin referred to only here in the New Testament, equaled about a day's wages. The point would have been clear to Jesus' listeners: the sinners with whom He was associating were extremely valuable to God. (Cf. similar wording in vv. 6, 9.)

Jesus then told the Parable of the Lost Son and His Older Brother to explain that God is inviting *all* people to enter the kingdom.

Cabal, T., Brand, C. O., Clendenen, E. R., Copan, P., Moreland, J. P., & Powell, D. (2007). *The Apologetics Study Bible: Real Questions, Straight Answers, Stronger Faith* (p. 1545). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

15:7 Jesus was not suggesting there actually are some needing no repentance. The religious leaders needed to repent, but they were far from recognizing it. Jesus saw their need with clarity, but they didn't (e.g., 11:39; 16:15). On the need of all to repent, see Rm 3:1–31.

Stein, R. H. (1992). Luke (Vol. 24, pp. 400-404). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Context

In this chapter we encounter a new scene in which the Pharisees and scribes complain of Jesus' association with publicans and sinners (15:1–2). We have already encountered this criticism in 5:27–32 (Matt 9:11; Mark 2:16), in Luke 7:39, and will encounter it again in 19:7. Three parables follow that serve both as a defense of Jesus' ministry to such outcasts (cf. 14:15–24) and an appeal to his opponents to join in celebrating their entrance into the kingdom (15:7, 10, 28, 31–32). We find a similar collection of two short parables followed by a longer one in 13:1–9.

The parables are connected by theme (the joy of the lost being found) and by key words (“lost” and “found,” 15:6, 9, 24, 32; “rejoice” and “celebrate,” 15:6, 9, 24, 32). Together the three parables form a tightly knit unit with a single, strongly Lukan theme—God's love for outcasts and sinners. The arrangement of this unit is almost certainly due to Luke's hand. (Note how each parable contains a similar concluding application: 15:7, 10, 32.) The tie to what precedes is not as clear. Luke may have placed this material at this point because it further demonstrates the hostility of the Pharisees and scribes toward Jesus (cf. 15:2 with 14:1–6, 15–24; cf. also 16:14–15, 19–31) or because, like the parable of the great banquet (14:15–24), it speaks of the entrance of the outcasts into the kingdom and the exclusion of the religious elite. Luke may even have decided at 14:15 to bring together a collection of parables extending to 16:31. Whereas it is difficult to know the exact reason Luke connected these three parables with the preceding material, they fit well the material found in chap. 14.

The first two parables, like the parables of the mustard seed and leaven (13:18–21), refer to a man (shepherd) and a woman in the same order. It is evident that Luke understood them as a matched pair from the “or” in 15:8 (cf. the “again” in 13:20). In the first parable a shepherd seeks for his lost sheep until he finds it. Returning he rejoices that the lost sheep is found, i.e., returned to safety and the other sheep. The picture part of the parable clearly refers to Jesus' ministering to Israel's outcasts and to their entering God's kingdom. Through the parable Jesus both censured and appealed to his opponents: “The lost of Israel are finding forgiveness; sinners are finding salvation. It is time to rejoice. In heaven God rejoices over this. Why won't you enter into this joy?” The second parable makes this point using in its picture a woman who has lost a silver coin and finds it.

The third parable is perhaps the most famous of all Jesus' parables. The question has been raised about whether 15:11–32 originally consisted of two separate parables (15:11–24 and 15:25–32). The fact that 15:11–24 is frequently treated in isolation from 15:25–32 supports such a view. Furthermore, no one would think that the parable was incomplete if it ended in 15:24. Yet the parable is clearly a contrast parable (cf. 7:41–42; 18:9–14; Matt 21:28–31; 25:1–13) that contrasts *two* brothers (Luke 15:11). Without 15:25–32 this contrast would be lacking. Furthermore, whereas the first part of the parable can stand by itself, the second cannot. One need only read 15:25 and 15:27 to see how this part of the parable requires and builds upon the first part.

As one might expect, this parable has been extensively allegorized throughout history. Such allegorization, of course, completely loses sight of the parable's context (15:1–3), the point of the former two parables, and the fact that Jesus' audience would never have been able to associate various parts of the parable, such as the ring and the feast, with the Christian ordinances.

In seeking to understand the main point of the parable, two important principles come into play. The first has been called "the rule of end stress." This means that in a parable, as in most stories, the climax comes at the end. What comes at the end of this parable involves the antagonism of the older son toward his father. This fits well the context in 15:1–3. A second principle involves the importance of direct discourse in a parable. In 15:29–32 such a discourse is found between the father and the older son, and this focuses attention on the older son's protesting his father's love toward his outcast brother. There is no similar conversation between the father and the younger son. The end stress of the parable and the presence of a lengthy discourse at the end indicate that the parable's main point is to be found in the interaction of the father and the older brother.

As in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1–16), we have in the picture part of the parable (1) a "faithful" son (first-hour worker) (2) protesting the father's (vineyard owner's) (3) gracious reinstatement of his son (giving of a denarius to the worker who worked only one hour). Jesus used these parables both as a defense of his ministry to the outcasts and as an invitation to grumbling older brothers, such as the Pharisees and teachers of the law (Luke 15:2), to share in the joyous participation of outcasts in the kingdom (cf. also Matt 21:28–32). Thus, this parable continues the same theme, God's love for the lost, found in Luke 15:4–10. Whereas in the first two parables the presence and hostility of Jesus' opponents is gleaned from the context (15:1–2), however, here it appears in the parable itself in the form of the older brother (15:25–32). In light of this, the parable should be named after the main character in both halves of the parable—the parable of the gracious father.

Comments

15:1 The tax collectors and "sinners." These are "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame" of 14:21. The two groups are found together in 5:30 and 7:34. For "tax collector" see comments on 3:12.

Were all gathering. Note the hyperbolic use of "all." The paraphrastic (literally *were ... nearing*) indicates that this was a habitual experience in Jesus' ministry.

To hear. This connects the following material to the teachings in 14:26–35. The tax collectors and sinners have "ears to hear" (14:35).

15:2 The Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Compare 5:30 and 5:21; 6:7; 11:53, where in the Greek text the order is reversed. Compare also 5:17; 7:30; 14:3.

Muttered. Compare 5:30; 19:7; Matt 20:11.

This man welcomes sinners and eats with them. Compare Luke 5:29–32; 7:39; 19:7. For the significance of such eating, see comments on 5:30. The OT warnings not to associate with sinful people were no doubt applied to Jesus' association with tax collectors and sinners. Yet Jesus associated with such people to offer them salvation through repentance and faith, not to participate in their sin. Compare the derogatory "this man" with 14:30.

15:3 Compare the similar introduction in 5:36.

Parable. As in 5:36, the singular "parable" is followed by more than one parable. Here it may mean *a parabolic discourse*.

15:4 Suppose one of you. This was a common way for Luke to introduce a parable.

The metaphor of a shepherd is used for God in Ps 23:1–4; Ezek 34:11–16. In the picture part of the parable a shepherd is counting his sheep at night and finds one missing.

Hundred sheep. “A hundred” is a round number.

Leave the ninety-nine. The question of who would take care of these sheep while the shepherd searched for the lost one would be relevant if this were a true story. In a parable, however, it is irrelevant. The storyteller “takes care” of the ninety-nine.

Open country. Literally *desert*. Matthew 18:12 has “on the hills,” but since most shepherding was done on “desert mountains” east of Bethlehem, either term could be used to describe this area.

Go after. Compare Ezek 34:11–12; John 10:11–15.

Lost. Compare 15:4, 6, 8–9, 24, 32; cf. also 13:3, 5, where the same term is translated “perish.” For the reality to which this word refers, cf. 19:10.

Until he finds it. This phrase reveals the persistence of the shepherd. Compare Matt 18:12–13, which leaves open the possibility of not finding the lost sheep.

15:5 Puts it on his shoulders. This aspect of the parable’s picture expresses the shepherd’s loving care and has been a favorite artistic theme through the centuries. Frequently a sheep that became lost was weak and could not keep up with the rest of the flock. Thus, the shepherd needed to carry it on his shoulders.

15:6 Calls his friends and neighbors. Compare Luke 15:9. This detail is lacking in the Matthean parallel (cf. 18:13).

Rejoice with me. Compare 15:9, 23–24.

Lost sheep. In Matt 18:10–14 the sheep are not “lost” but “wandering.” If Matthew and Luke are two versions of the same parable, Luke’s version seems to fit Jesus’ situation better.

15:7 In the same way. Compare 15:10.

There will be more rejoicing. The future tense can refer to the time of the final judgment or may be a “proverbial” future referring to the present time. The latter seems more likely since the parallel in 15:10 uses the present tense “is rejoicing” (*ginetai chara*). The use of the third person “there will be” functions like a divine passive, for “God rejoices.” See comments on 16:9. “More” does not translate a Greek term but must be supplied because of the “than” later in the verse.

In heaven. “In heaven” is a circumlocution for “God” (cf. 15:18, 21; cf. also 6:23; 10:20).

Repents. Repentance is a strong Lukan emphasis (see comments on 3:3). The verb occurs fourteen times in Luke-Acts and the noun eleven times.

Righteous persons who do not need to repent. Compare 5:31–32. From 10:13; 11:32; 13:3, 5; Acts 2:38; 17:30 it is evident that for Luke everyone had need of repentance, whether Jew or Greek (Acts 11:18; 17:30). If the ninety-nine refer to the Pharisees and scribes, then these words must be understood ironically as *those who think they are righteous and have no need to repent*. Less likely is the view that Jesus assumed for the sake of argument the claim of his opponents that they were righteous. In the context of Luke 15:1–3 the parable is in fact a call for “the righteous” to repent by sharing God’s joy in the salvation of “sinners.” Most probably one should not press this detail in the parable and seek meaning with respect to who the ninety-nine represent. The basic reality to which this parable points is God’s great joy over the repentance of the lost as they receive life.

15:8 Or suppose a woman. Even as 14:28–32 contains two parables, the second of which begins “Or suppose a king,” so we have again two parables involving a similar introduction for

the second parable. For Luke's tendency to balance men and women in his examples, see comments on 13:19.

Silver coins. The exact value of such coins (literally *drachmas*), which are not mentioned anywhere else in the NT, is difficult to estimate. They may have been equal to a denarius. Speculation about whether these were part of the bridal headdress and dowry is unnecessary and irrelevant to the story, as is the exact value of a drachma. No comparison is intended between the hundred-to-one or ten-to-one ratios.

Light a lamp, sweep ... search. These are necessary actions to find a lost coin in a dark, windowless house.

Until she finds it. Compare 15:4. This parable could well be called the parable of the seeking woman.

15:10 In the same way. Compare 15:7.

In the presence of the angels of God. Like "in heaven" (15:7), this is a circumlocution for God. See comments on 12:8.

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (Lk 15:1-10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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