



Parables of the Joy of Recovery and Return

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Then Jesus told them this parable... (Luke 15:1-3).

Jesus’ association with tax collectors and sinners is one of the surest — and to the religious authorities most unacceptable — features of his ministry. Jesus considered that his mission was to seek and to see the lost (Luke 5:32; 19:10). Parallel to the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes in 15:2 is the attitude of Simon toward the sinful woman who anointed Jesus (Luke 7:36-50), the disdain of the Pharisee in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:11), the grumbling that occurs when Jesus eats with Zacchaeus (Luke 19:7), and most importantly, the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes at Jesus’ eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners at the banquet put on by Levi (5:27-32).

In response to this criticism, Jesus tells three parables. The first two parables focus on what was lost and then found, which is picked up in the refrain “was lost and has been found” regarding the prodigal son. It is worth noting the unexpected actions of the parable characters. A shepherd cares so much for one lost sheep that he leaves ninety-nine behind in the wilderness. A woman expends significant energy to find her lost coin, and then hosts a party that likely costs her more than the coin is worth. A father showers gifts upon his disrespectful, wasteful son, simply because the son shows up. Such are the ways of God.

Indeed, the parables that Jesus tells in Luke 15 are ways of saying, “This is why we’re celebrating!” This joy, illustrated fully in the party for the returned son, is the heart of the gospel. Four of the primary components of Jesus’ ministry are celebration, compassion, the restoration of Israel, and the present and future kingdom of God. The parables in Luke 15 are primary evidence of Jesus’ gospel of celebration and compassion. The other two themes are only implicit, but they are certainly there. As a result, this chapter is the most forceful description that exists of God seeking sinners and celebrating their return. The question is whether we will join in the celebration.

The Lost Sheep (Luke 15:1-7)¹

Background & Interpretation:

- Shepherding was a despised trade. In contrast to the positive image of a shepherd in both OT and NT writings, shepherds had acquired a reputation for thieving and trespassing by the end of the first century. In addition, Jesus' question, "Which one of you, having one hundred sheep...?" would have caused the Pharisees and scribes, people immensely concerned about uncleanness, to imagine themselves involved in a trade they considered unclean. Yet the shepherd image is used of God's tender care of his people. Leaderless or poorly led people are described as sheep without a shepherd.
- A lost sheep, we are told, usually lies down and gives up and will not find its way back. Possibly this is why the shepherd carries the sheep on his shoulders, but more likely it is intended to convey the care of a good shepherd. The parable is realistic except for the calling of friends and neighbors, which seems to be an intended exaggeration. This is especially true for the parable of the Lost Coin. Presumably calling the neighbors in to celebrate required some expenditure for food, which would add some financial cost to the recovery. This exaggeration draws the parable closer to the reality of Jesus eating with sinners and emphasizes the theme of rejoicing.
- The primary function of the parable for Jesus was a defense of his deliberate association with and eating with people known to be sinners. By his reception and eating with such people he demonstrated the presence of the kingdom and the forgiveness available to all. Indirectly this is a kingdom parable, for with this parable Jesus asserts that the promised activity of God to shepherd his own people was taking place. Further, with the parable he showed those complaining about his actions that their attitudes did not match the character and desires of God, and in effect, invites them to join in the kingdom celebration of the forgiveness being given.

Applying the Parable:

- **What is revealed about the character of God is the value God places on even the least deserving and the care God extends to such people.** The shepherd in this parable evokes the image of a God who not only actively seeks out individuals who are lost — note the emphasis on the "one" out of the ninety-nine — but also rejoices when they are found. This is a God who actively seeks restoration: "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6; Psalm 86:15, etc.).
- **God is not passive, waiting for people to approach him after they get their lives in order. God is the seeking God who takes the initiative to bring people back, regardless of how "lost" they are.** Unquestionably, God will seek the lost and restore them. Seeking and joy are twin pillars of the parable, and God's seeking does not come with conditions attached. The joy reflects both the attitude of God at recovering the lost and the celebration of the kingdom with its good news that God's promised redemption has begun. The joy is communal, and Jesus' hearers should join the celebration.
- **Few things are more important than our perception of God,** for from that understanding we perceive our own identity, how we should think and act, and how the world ought to be. **If God is a seeking, caring God, then his grace should characterize our self-perception and our treatment of other people.** The awareness that God *seeks us* brings freedom and confidence to life. That his grace is to determine how we treat others should cause us to be caring and sensitive. We tend to know these truths abstractly, but are they translated into practice either in how we view ourselves or in how we treat others?

¹ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, pp. 99-110.

The Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10)²

Background & Interpretation:

- The word “drachma” occurs in the New Testament only here in vv. 8-9. In the first century a drachma was about the equivalent of a denarius, usually one day’s pay for a day worker. The woman is usually viewed as fairly poor, which may be overstated; a day’s wage is not a small amount. She is probably just a typical woman one would find in any Galilean village. Houses typically were small and, if they had any windows, the windows would be small, so light would be limited.
- **The woman’s searching is an analogy of God’s initiative and diligence in seeking to recover his people.** The verbs of action, that she seeks carefully, and her persistence until she finds underscore the effort to which she goes. This diligence is the new factor only hinted at in the other two parables. If a woman will expend herself until she finds something lost and rejoice when she finds it, will not God much more expend himself and rejoice at finding his lost people? Both the searching and the joy are essential features; parables cannot be limited to one point. Like the celebration of the shepherd, the celebration of the woman with her friends is exaggerated to bring the picture more closely in relation to the reality of the celebration of Jesus with sinners.
- Implicitly, as with the parable of the Lost Sheep, this is a kingdom parable. Both parables function the same way. Both assume the presence of the kingdom and that in Jesus’ ministry God is at work to redeem his people and to fulfill his promises to restore Israel. Both present a defense of Jesus’ association with sinners and show that those complaining about his actions reveal their lack of understanding of God’s attitude and actions. **God is the diligent searcher, the one who takes the initiative to recover what is his. God gives no grudging or hesitant acceptance of sinners but eagerly seeks them and finds cause to celebrate their recovery.** The kingdom comes with limitless grace, even for those that others may look down upon.
- The explanation in 15:10 makes the same two shifts as the explanation of the parable of the Lost Sheep (15:7): **it is God’s joy, and the cause of the joy is repentance, the way the recovery takes place.** Jesus does not merely say, “I am celebrating like a woman who found a lost coin.” He implicates God in the celebration — “Joy will be in the presence of the angels of God for one sinner repenting.” God rejoices over what is happening in Jesus’ reception of sinners. With the theme of repentance, the explanation moves beyond the parables to make an additional point, but it is a necessary and legitimate point.

Applying the Parable:

- **The Lost Coin’s image of God diligently searching is important. If that is the character of God, it should be our own character as well.** These parables do not tell us how to search for the lost, but they do imply that we should. Unfortunately we have various and sometimes strange ideas about what it means to search for the lost. Some are more likely to have images of accosting people than images of the limitless grace in Jesus’ reception of sinners. Others worry that sinners do not change fast enough or, even worse, that association with sinners will give Christians a bad reputation or be a bad influence on them. The necessity of separating from sin is a reality, but so is the necessity of being involved in seeking the lost.
- What wisdom will suffice to guide both necessities? Jesus neither condoned sin, left people in their sin, nor communicated any disdain for sinners. He mirrored the image of his Father and invited them to receive God’s forgiveness and participate in God’s kingdom. **Whatever else we say, the initiating grace and acceptance of God displaced by Jesus must be evident in all we do.** And once again, the note of joy, an essential feature of the kingdom, cannot be neglected. Where joy is absent, the kingdom is absent.

² Snodgrass, pp. 111-17.

The Compassionate Father & His Two Lost Sons (Luke 15:11-32)³

Background & Interpretation:

- This parable is one of the most influential and best loved of all the parables. For some it is “the gospel within the gospel,” or even the most beautiful short story ever told. Most grant that the traditional title “the parable of the Prodigal Son” is not adequate since this ignores the parable’s second half. At least as Luke presents the parable, it is best labeled “the parable of the Compassionate Father and His Two Lost Sons.”
- In the ancient world disrespect toward parents (especially fathers) or failure to care for parents was condemned. Respect of parents was associated with respectability, honor, and conversely, the lack thereof was associated with shame. Attitudes toward prodigals were strongly negative. According to ancient sources, prodigality was a crime that entitled a father to disown his son and, along with neglect of the father, a basis for censure by society. By first-century standards, the prodigal son is out of bounds. Not only does he ask for his share of the inheritance before his father has passed (a highly presumptuous request that puts the whole family’s resources at risk), he runs off to a “distant country,” separating himself from the people of God. He gets a job feeding unclean animals. He squanders all his money. His life choices are not the sort that parents would make public by inviting the neighbors to a party.
- The Greek verb for repentance (*metanoeo*; noun *metanoia*) means to change one’s mind. That is, it represents a new way of understanding, a change of view, a way of seeing things that is different from before. Parables about repentance are designed to evoke repentance; that is, they reveal a new way of understanding. As for the younger son, does he repent? Or is he simply looking for a way out of a terrible situation?
- On one hand, the father extends his gracious welcome *before* the son even has a chance to finish his confession speech. In addition, there is no explicit mention of repentance in this third parable. The parable says simply that the younger son “came to himself.” We could say that he remembered who he was. His journey home ends with the father. The father runs to meet his son before the son can even voice his confession, and the father’s response is far more receptive than the son had dared to imagine. The father’s love requires no confession and no restitution. The picture is one of sheer grace.
- From the eldest son’s perspective, such generosity is simply not fair. *He* is the good son. *He* shows up for work every day. *He* does his job, lives properly, follows the rules. When he discovers the feast and celebration being offered to the younger son, who most certainly does not deserve it, he launches into a bitter tirade. The father reminds him: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” In one sentence, the father affirms the closeness of their relationship and gently reminds his eldest son that he loses nothing by welcoming his own brother home and joining in the celebrations. In the end, neither son deserves a party. The younger son breaks all the rules and violates his relationship with the father, while the older son lives in joyless resentment. Neither deserves a party, but both are welcomed. Will they celebrate together?
- The father not only had two sons *but loved* two sons, *went out* to two sons, and *was generous* to two sons. The embrace of the younger son did not mean the rejection of the older; the love of tax collectors and sinners does not negate God’s love of Pharisees and scribes. Such is God’s love. Perhaps the most radical statement Jesus ever made is: “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate.” God’s compassion is described by Jesus not simply to show us how willing God is to forgive our sins and offer us new life and joy, but to invite us to become like God and to show the same compassion to others as God is showing to us.

³ Snodgrass, pp. 117-42.

Applying the Parable:

- **The first purpose of the parable is to emphasize the compassion and the unquestioning love of the father, who mirrors the attitude of the God.** Verse 20 underscores that the prodigal did not merely return home: he returned to his father. The eagerness of the father to recover and restore the erring son is poignantly and tenderly described. The parable is a narrative demonstration of the grace with which God reaches out to embrace sinful people. Jesus did not need to introduce the idea that God accepts sinners, but his message of the kingdom emphasized that *he* was restoring Israel, that forgiveness was being offered now, and that this was the critical time for repentance. The God that Jesus represents and proclaims is precisely the forgiving and merciful God reflected in the parable. Our familiarity with the message should not keep us from appreciating it.
- **A second purpose of the parable is the invitation to celebrate and rejoice**, which is explicit in 15:23-24, 32. Some would even say that joy is the primary concern of the parable. If God rejoices at the return of sinners, can God's people do less? As one writer points out, in response to the Pharisees' question how Jesus could celebrate with such sinful people, Jesus answered, **"The lost is found. This must be celebrated. I am joining in celebrating God's feast. And what are you doing?"** Like the parable of the Banquet in Luke 14:16-24 this parable in effect says: **"God is giving a party, are you going to come?"**
- **The parable functions with a third purpose then as a defense of Jesus' association with sinners.** If God accepts such people — not just generally, but specifically because of the presence of the kingdom, and if Jesus' eating with these sinners enacts God's forgiveness and mercy, then complaints about his actions are clearly misguided and out of touch with what God is doing. But more is involved in that defense. The parable, especially with its incomplete ending, functions as an invitation for the hearers to take the same attitude toward sinners as the father toward the prodigal. That change of attitude carries with it a missional force so that one is motivated not only to accept sinners but also to find them.

Discussion

1. Whether big or small, what is one thing that you celebrated recently?
2. What is something that a follower of Jesus could do today that would make people ask in surprise, "Why in the world are you doing that?" — just as the Pharisees asked Jesus at the beginning of Luke 15.
3. Typically, we want mercy for ourselves and justice for others — what causes us to feel this way? What is the relationship between celebrating God's mercy to others and experiencing God's mercy ourselves?
4. What do each of these parables reveal about the character of God?
 - Practically speaking, what does it look like for our lives to resemble that same character?
5. Which son do you think it is easier to have compassion for? Why? For the son you think it is more difficult to have compassion for, why is that?
6. What makes the father the most remarkable character in the final parable of Luke 15? In what ways does this parable challenge you to become more like the father...what would that look like?
7. What is Jesus' purpose for telling these three parables? What attitudes and actions was he seeking to change? As you hear these parables today, how do they challenge you to evaluate and perhaps change your own attitudes and actions?

