

Luke 15: THE LOST SHEEP, THE LOST COIN, THE LOST SON

{*The Ultimate Man & the Lost*}

Introduction (v1-3)

v1-3 provide the context for (& to a measure the interpretation of) the 3 parables Jesus tells in the rest of the ch. All three parables reveal God's love for and pursuit of the lost, and his joy over one (every) sinner who repents. But they also reveal how far the heart of self-righteous religious people towards the lost can be from the heart of God (indeed, Jesus tells the parables at least in part to expose the Pharisees' hearts): they neither love nor pursue the lost, and have no joy in 'sinners' seeking (v1) or finding (v28) salvation, only displeasure. Each time the 'sinners' accusation is laid against him, Jesus teaches about the lost (e.g. 5/29-32, 19/6-10): that he has come for them (a 'doctor' for the 'sick') to call them to repentance; that he therefore loves to be with them; and that he rejoices in the salvation of the 'disqualified' ("this man, *too*, is a son of Abraham"). In the Mw 9/12-13 || of Lk 5/31-32, Jesus tells the Pharisees, "But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'" – i.e. a heart that wants to show mercy to the undeserving (in other words a heart that reflects his) rather than one that thinks ritual correctness is sufficient (along with a disqualification of those who are not 'correct'). This in essence is the difference between his heart (towards the lost) and theirs. The Pharisees were so self-righteous that their lack of "gathering round to hear him" was not apparent to them. They thought 'sinners' could be of no importance or value to God. God thinks otherwise – as he now explains...

The Lost Sheep (v4-7)

(i) *Value*. If we were to find 1% of our stock missing, we might be inclined just to cut our losses and move on, grateful that we still have the remaining 99%. Even with sheep Jesus does not think this acceptable. How much more with people (what the parable really is about). Each human being is of infinite value (because created in the image of God with an eternal destiny), regardless of whether they are a 'good' sheep or a 'bad' sheep. It's not about numbers/quantity but the value of each one, 'just' one.

(ii) *Search*. People are of such value that each missing person warrants an all-out search, a search that is both intentional ("go after the lost sheep") and persevering ("until he finds it").

(iii) *Rejoicing*. People are of such value that when they are 'found' (when a sinner repents) there is joy in heaven ("joyfully...rejoice...rejoicing") – one pictures Jesus walking into heaven carrying a once-lost, now-found 'sheep'; he calls the angels together and says, 'Rejoice with me'! But Jesus surely infers that there will (or should) also be rejoicing on earth amongst those with like heart – his people.

P.S. There are, of course, no "righteous persons who do not need to repent" (cf.5/32), only those who *think* they are righteous and so do not need to repent. Jesus is telling the Pharisees there is no joy in heaven over them!

|| Mw 18/12-14

The parable is almost identical, but the context (v1-10) is different. Here Jesus is underlining the infinite value of each person to God, however marginal (e.g. children) as well as however sinful. Young, old, widows, orphans, poor, aliens, sick, disabled, retarded – all those pushed aside as of little value/consequence: no one is excluded from God's value rating. Again: value => search => joy at finding.

The only other difference is that the motivation for the search is located more explicitly in the heart of God.

Why the Lost? [1] Because "one goes after a lost sheep until one finds it" (Lk); [2] because "our Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost" (Mw).

The Lost Coin (v8-10)

This is a very similar parable to the first, following the same 'movement' and teaching the same truths.

Note again the value of the one (we are to think of the lost as 'each one' not 'only one').

Note the 'careful' search, which is both costly (light a lamp) and labour intensive (sweep the house), as well as persevering (until she finds it).

Note again the joy on finding and the need to share that joy with others. When Jesus says "there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels" he seems to suggest not only that there is rejoicing among the angels (this much is inferred in the previous parable) but that God (Father, Son & Holy Spirit) rejoices in the presence of the angels!

Why the Lost? [3] Because one searches carefully for a lost coin until one finds it; [4] because there is rejoicing in heaven over every sinner that repents – over 'one' sinner that repents: heaven doesn't need a batch to rejoice!

The Lost Son (v11-32)

The longest, richest and most famous of the three parables – and perhaps the most loved of all Jesus' parables. v11 introduces three people; each in turn is the focus of the story.

(i) The Younger Son (v12-20a)

v12 At the very least, his request was unusual, unwise, insensitive and selfish; at worst, it was an insult to his Father ('I wish you were already dead and I had what's coming to me now'). He was not a nice guy.

v13 He was also not a very good guy – he was both immoral ('wild living') and irresponsible ('squandered').

v14-16 A parable of life without God: plenty => need; freedom => slavery; palace => pigsty; fed => starved; family => isolation, loving otherness => pitiless self-centredness ('no-one gave him anything')(cf. 1 Co 5/5).

v17-18a 'When he came to his senses' – in the language of the parable, the moment of revelation/conviction, when by the Spirit we see our own stupidity and sinfulness, and the goodness of the One we have abused and turned away from, but who nevertheless we know will receive us back again; so we decide to return to him.

v18b-19 Note the 'speech' which the son prepares: he recognizes he has sinned, is unworthy and can make no demands. There is nothing wrong with either the motive behind or the wording of this 'prayer': it is both fitting and necessary.

P.S. We often identify the younger son with backslidden (prodigal) Christians who return to God. The parable allows for such an application but its primary reference is to all men, who were created to be sons of God but who in proud rebellion went their own way, before (it is hoped) coming to their senses and returning to him. This is a parable of God and man: in this part we see the ingratitude and rebellious independence of man, the subsequent and consequent foolishness and wickedness of man (who squanders the inheritance God gives him), and the resulting alienation, impoverishment, powerlessness and mastery of the devil suffered by man.

(ii) The Father (v20b-24)

v20 One of the Bible's most profound and moving revelations of the heart and response of the Father to repentant sinners. The son's father seemed to have been watching longingly for him, for 'while he was still a long way off' his Father saw him. His Father was filled with compassion for him (not anger or condemnation) – compassion for everything his son had suffered (albeit by his own stupidity) and for the humbled, broken, changed person he now saw approaching him. His father did not wait for his son to reach him but (in a particularly powerful image) ran to him. His father threw his arms around him and kissed him – he embraced, accepted and loved him in the most intimate manner possible.

v21 The son begins his repentance speech, word for word as he's rehearsed it (cf. v18-19).

v22 But the Father interrupts it (he does not get to complete it with 'make me like one of your hired men').

The point is not that the son shouldn't have felt and said those things but that a loving father (v a piqued headmaster) doesn't need to make us grovel: as soon ('Quick!') as he sees we're repentant he reinstates us – he puts on us the best robe (the robe of righteousness), a ring on our finger (the authority of one belonging to his family) and sandals on our feet (the status of sons in the house, v slaves who go barefoot). [Robe: covers nakedness, removes shame; gives dignity; covenant/salvation. Ring: value; family crest; my lineage/representative. Sandals: mission/purpose.]

v23-24 Not only is the son loved and reinstated but there is a feast and a celebration, because (the heart of the parable) "this son of mine was dead [he was as good as / to me] and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

P.S. In this parable of God and man, we now see the compassion, grace and joy of the Father for the repentant sinner. Jesus is telling us that no matter what we've done or where we've been, we can return to God (+ how to)

(iii) The older son (v25-32)

Some biblical scholars contend that the story so far is not original: a parable much like it was widely known and told in Israel. It's the final bit that was new – and which would have come as a surprise to Jesus' hearers. The context tells us why he added it: it is another indictment of the Pharisees and their self-righteousness.

When the older brother learnt what was going on (v25-27), he became angry and sullen (v28), because he had been "slaving" for his father for many years and had always obeyed his orders, but had never been given anything in return (v29); yet when "this son of yours" (the spiritually proud do not admit their kinship with sinners) comes home he is given everything (v30). The older brother thought that his relationship with his father was based on performance and merit. His service and obedience (good things in themselves) were thus motivated by desert and reward (not love and gratitude). A father's acceptance and blessing were a matter of desert/justice, not grace/mercy: he deserved, his brother didn't. He thought like a servant, not a son. Because of this, he lost sight of the greatest blessing of sonship (fellowship – "you are always with me") and never realized that as a son he could have asked his father for anything at any time ("everything I have is yours" v31). And he was unable to celebrate his brother's salvation: spiritually proud legalists resents the undeserving receiving grace. But the Father will not be swayed by his sourness: I had to – and will – celebrate because "this brother of yours" (we are kin with sinners, whether we like it or not) was dead/lost but is alive/found (v32).

Why the lost? [5] Because the Father, filled with compassion, runs to every lost son who returns.

'If you do not desire to see the lost saved, then I doubt whether you are saved.' (Spurgeon)

Appeal to lost: No matter where you've been, or what you've done, you can return to God your Father!

Appeal to found: don't begin as the younger son and turn into the older son! (grace for you => merit for others)