

Luke 15 has three parables: The Parable of the Lost Sheep, The Parable of the Lost Coin, and The Parable of the Lost Son. All three record heaven's reaction when the lost are found. All three follow the same pattern: lost, found, restored, and celebrated.

These parables are a response to the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling that Jesus received sinners and tax collectors (15:1, 2). Although they were upset with Jesus, God wasn't, for He Himself seeks the lost.

15:1 Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him.

15:2 Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

15:3 So He told them this parable, saying,

15:4 "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?"

15:5 "When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.

15:6 "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 which was lost!'"

15:7 "I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

15:8 "Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?"

15:9 "When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!'"

15:10 "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

In a culture where sinners and tax collectors were hated and avoided, Jesus' behavior seemed blasphemous to the Jews, for sharing a meal together with sinners suggested a level of fellowship and acceptance. Thus, the leaders complained as they had done before (see Lk. 5:30 and 7:39).

Although the Old Testament warned against associating with the godless (Deut. 21:20–21; Psa. 1; Prov. 1:15; 2:11–15; 4:14–17; 23:20–21; Isa. 52:11), Jesus' association with sinners was in perfect harmony with His mission. In Luke 5:32 Jesus had said, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." Then He will say in Luke 19:10, "for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

The passage is ironic. Jesus said, "he who has ears to hear, let him hear" (14:35), but the only ones who paid attention to Him were the tax collectors and sinners; those who should have desired to draw close to God rejected Him.

Jesus responded to their grumbling with three parables. The first parable is about a lost sheep. The picture is of a shepherd who in counting his sheep finds that one is missing. The parable begins with a rhetorical question that asks the listeners to consider what they would do if they were in the shepherd's shoes.

It was common for a shepherd to count his sheep before putting them up for the night in the pen. In the story one of the sheep is missing so the shepherd gives all of his attention to finding it. The search has good results in that the shepherd finds the animal, places it on his shoulders, and carries it back to the fold (Isaiah 40:11; 49:22).

Not only does the shepherd rejoice, but he also calls his friends and neighbors to rejoice with him. The joy over the lost sheep is greater than the joy over the 99 in the fold.

The imagery portrays the tender care and concern of God for those who are lost spiritually. The rejoicing of the crowd prepares the reader for verse 7 where there is joy in heaven in the presence of God over the sinner who repents.

The second picture, the parable of the lost coin, illustrates the same point.

The parable is about a woman who had ten coins but loses one of them. The coin that was lost was equivalent to a day's wage for the average worker, and represents a modest sum of money. Nevertheless, when it is lost, she does everything possible to find it. All of her attention is directed toward that one coin. She lights a lamp and sweeps the house until it is found. Although she had nine coins in her possession, her joy parallels that of the shepherd when he found the single missing sheep, and like the shepherd, she invites her friends to celebrate her joy.

The conclusion of the parable is nearly identical to the previous parable as well. The heavenly host rejoices over a single sinner coming to repentance.

Thus, verses 1 to 10 explain why Jesus associates with sinners; namely, because the heart of God is directed toward the lost; in fact, all of heaven rejoices when a single unbeliever comes to faith. Jesus' heart is the heart of God.

The third parable in Luke 15:11-32 is known as the Prodigal Son. It illustrates God's receptivity toward the sinner who repents but it also condemns the attitude of those who react negatively toward God's kindness and mercy given to the sinner.

The basic theme centers on God's character, and the parable offers vindication of criticism for associating with sinners. God's forgiveness is always available. No history of sin is too great to be forgiven. Our need is to turn to God and to take what He offers on His terms. We also need to accept those who seek forgiveness, for there is joy in heaven over those who repent. One should not compare how God blesses, but be grateful that He does bless. In turning to God, one gains total acceptance and joyful reception into God's family (Bock, 1308).

15:11 And He said, "A man had two sons.

Verse 11 introduces the characters in the story – a father and two sons. The sons dominate the dialogue, but it is the father's action that provides the lesson of the parable.

15:12 "The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them.

The story begins with the younger son requesting his inheritance early. Interestingly, words translated "the estate" is literally, "the life" (τὸν βίον; *ton bion*). "The son requests his portion of what his father's life will leave him" (Bock, 1309).

If this were a typical request in a Jewish setting, the father's assets would not be given until the father died; however, some Jewish texts suggest that the father had the right to give the son's portion of his inheritance to him early. Furthermore, the eldest son held the privileged position in the family and would receive twice as much as other sons; in this case, since there were only two sons, the younger son received one third of the inheritance. This would include one third of the livestock, land, and any other material possession.

By demanding his inheritance early, the son is treating the father as if he had already died. His action is clearly severing the relationship with his father. Nevertheless, the father grants the son's request and the son is free to go.

The picture suggests that the heavenly Father allows the sinner to go his own way.

15:13 "And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living.

The son evidently sells whatever was given to him and converts it to cash, and then goes to a distant land. Immediately his life begins to decline as he squanders all that he has. The word for squander means "to scatter or disperse," but with property it means "to waste or squander." The same word is used of sowing seed when seed is broadcast into a field. "The picture is of tossing one's possessions into the wind" (Bock, 1310). In short, the son throws away all that he has and lives an undisciplined, godless life. Hence the title of the parable, "The Prodigal Son" (prodigal means "characterized by profuse or wasteful expenditure; being carelessly extravagant").

15:14 "Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished.

15:15 "So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

After spending all that he has, his circumstances go from bad to worse; famine strikes. He has no resources available to sustain him through the calamity. For the first time he can't supply what he needs. With no money or family, and living in a distant land, the boy has nowhere to turn.

He is desperate, but still not repentant. Instead of returning to his father, he accepts the most despicable job that a Jew could imagine – taking care of a gentile's pigs.

15:16 "And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.

Even with the job, his income was not enough to meet his needs. The pigs he fed were better fed than he was. The pods the swine were eating were most likely a sweet bean from a carob or locust tree, or a bitter, thorny berry (Bock, 1311). The son longed to eat some, as well, but he was not given any. In effect, he has gone as low as anyone can go.

He pictures the rebellious, immoral sinner, the very kind of person that Jesus was associating with.

15:17 "But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger!

15:18 'I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight;

15:19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."'

15:20 "So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

15:21 "And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

The son's horrible condition leads to thoughts of the father; or, to state it differently, the father first reenters the son's life in his mind. Verse 17 says, "he came to his senses." It finally hits him that even the father's hired help lives better than he does. They are eating well while he is dying from hunger.

This also tells us something of the father he had. A hired man was a day laborer. Typically, they were paid the bare minimum; a day's wage was just enough to buy the bare necessities for a small family to live off of for one day. However, the son realized that his father was much more generous than that; his father's hired men had "*more than enough* bread." His father had given them more than they needed to survive. He was loving, good, and kind. He was generous.

Verse 18 is the key turning point in the story. The son acknowledges his foolishness before God and his sin against his father. There is true humility and regret; he is not simply turning to his father because he is in a desperate situation; he realizes how self-centered and evil his behavior has been. He is truly regretful. His prayer is similar to Ezra's in Ezra 9:6: "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens."

His course of action is appropriate. His intent is to return to his father's home, confess his sins, seek forgiveness and reconciliation, and ask for mercy.

In verse 19 he recognizes that he has no rights or claims to his former position. He is unworthy of being received back as a family member. He will simply beg for daily care and sustenance. He desires no more than the other laborers under the father's care. He accepts the consequences of his choices and makes

no excuses for his behavior. "The picture shows what repentance looks like: no claims, just reliance on God's mercy and provision" (Bock, 1313).

The son immediately departs for home having no idea what the response of his father will be. However, while he is still some distance away the father spots him and responds with compassion and acceptance.

The father at this point becomes the center of the story. He is the one who initiates the reconciliation. He is the one who shows great compassion. He *runs* to embrace and kiss the son. He is the one who is filled with joy over the son's return. Before the son has said anything the relationship is restored. The picture dramatically and powerfully portrays the love and acceptance of God toward the repentant sinner.

Even though he is warmly received, the son feels the need to confess and expresses his regret with humility, openly and clearly stating what is in his heart.

15:22 "But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet;

15:23 and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;

15:24 for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate.

The father's reception is beyond belief. His forgiveness is complete, expressed by immediately restoring the full privileges to his son that he had before he left. A ring is placed on his finger, sandals on his feet, and a long robe is given to him – he is given the best clothes to wear. He is treated as if he had never shamed the family.

The picture of joy continues as the father calls for a special celebration to honor the son's return. The fattened calf would be slaughtered for the occasion (a fattened calf is an animal that has been especially cared for and fed well in order to be used for special occasions). The father offers more than a meal; he offers a lavish feast in honor of his son's return.

Verse 24 gives the reason for the celebration. The father declares that his son has been resurrected. He has regained what was lost and never expected to see again. This draws an obvious connection to the two parables that preceded it.

15:25 "Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.

15:26 "And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be.

15:27 "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.'

15:28a "But he became angry and was not willing to go in;

In verse 25 the attention turns to the older brother's response. As he returns from his labor in the fields he hears the party going on; he hears the music, laughter, and the smells of roasting beef.

He is surprised to find a celebration going on and has no idea what it is all about. He is met by a servant who explains the reason for the party: the father has killed the fattened calf because the younger brother has returned home.

The oldest brother is not pleased with the father's decision. In fact, he is angry. He looks at the celebration as a sign of favoritism and disregard for all that he has done so faithfully. He refuses to go in and celebrate.

15:28b - and his father came out and began pleading with him.

15:29 "But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends;

15:30 but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.

The father again is the one who takes the initiative in bringing reconciliation, only this time to the angered elder son. The son feels slighted since he has always been faithful to the father, doing his duty, and laboring hard in the fields.

As Bock points out, there is an irony in the story as the situations become reversed. The son who was lost and on the outside is now on the inside, while the son on the inside complains from the outside. In addition, the son who was faithful and obedient has received no reward or celebration, while the son who wandered and squandered the father's wealth is given a huge celebration.

As it turns out, the elder son is also self-centered and self-righteous, assuming that he deserves something more from the father. The younger son had repented and was accepted by the father. The older son is now in opposition to the father's will. It shows that the son lacks compassion and thinks nothing of repentance, let alone forgiveness. He isn't happy and he doesn't care that his father is glad. Nevertheless, the father is gentle toward the son. He does not condemn or reject him. He recognizes that the elder son's concern for justice is natural, but where there is repentance, kindness and mercy wipes the slate clean and there is reason to rejoice (Bock, 1318).

A proper response is not to compare how you were treated in relationship to the penitent, but to remember that repentance yields the same gracious fruit for all, so it is just. Repentance also represents a new direction in life, and one might share in the joy of a changed direction. The brother is so consumed by the issue of fairness that he cannot rejoice at the beneficial transformation that has come to his brother.

The brother's anger emerges clearly as he complains directly and publicly to the father. He contrasts his own faithfulness with that supposed lack of generosity of his father. He does not formally address his father, thus indicating his anger, but immediately launches his attack by declaring his faithfulness in terms that portray himself as a slave: he "served" and obeyed "every command." But the elder's refusal to serve as host and welcome his brother is an insult to the

father in this patriarchal culture. Irony abounds: the obedient son is disobedient here, and the gracious father is made to look unfaithful and unfair.

The son's rebuke is expressed in strong terms, for not only does he complain about the lack of generosity toward him but he also notes that not even a goat - an animal worth very little - was made available, much less a special fattened calf (Bock, 1318).

The faithful son's feelings are hurt, and the father's integrity and evenhandedness are called into question. He separates himself from his sibling entirely and faults his father for being so kind to the reprobate family member

The complaint continues in 15:30.

The elder son now turns from the father's lack of support for him to his gracious treatment of his brother. His anger is clearly apparent, as he will not even acknowledge his relationship to his brother: he calls him "your son" and "this one". He contrasts the son's activity and the father's response in an unfavorable light. Describing the lifestyle of the brother in most unflattering terms, he charges him with devouring the father's earnings with immorality, namely harlots, a charge echoing Proverbs 29:3. . . The elder's attitude is clear: his brother is the rebellious son of Deuteronomy 21:18-21 who should be disowned, not honored. How can his father give such a celebration, including a precious fattened calf, for such a despicable character? In fact, the brother is complaining that immorality holds more merit with the father than faithfulness. Where is justice? If ever a complaint should put one on the defensive, it is this one (Bock, 1318-1319).

15:31 "And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. 15:32 'But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"

The father replies by speaking to his son's concerns first. His response is gentle. He addresses the angry son tenderly with the word "child" (τέκνον; *teknon*- translated as "son" here). He affirms the faithfulness of the elder brother and a special place he has for him in his heart. He acknowledges that the son has always been by his side. He reminds him that all he has belongs to him. Nothing has diminished the elder's status, wealth, or his father's love. All of this should remind him of the benefits he has and the access to the father that is his.

The father then addresses the issue of the younger son. He addresses him as "your brother" (subtle words that do not allow the brothers to be separated). He is not just the father's son; he is the elder son's brother.

Lastly, he explains the necessity and appropriateness of celebration; it's proper to rejoice, for resurrection has occurred. The brother who was dead is now alive. That which has been lost has been found. Such circumstances should result in joy, not questions about fairness. (Bock, 1320).

Bock does an excellent job summarizing this parable, so I quote him at length.

Jesus teaches two major truths in this parable. First, an absolute reversal results from repentance, in that not only is the repentant one restored, but also welcomed by the heavenly Father with joy and total acceptance. The Father receives such a one with open arms and offers his home. Great celebration erupts when a sinner comes to the Father to enter into His care (5:32). Second, there is a call to respond to the repentant one, not with comparison or jealousy, but with joy that reflects the Father's response. If God can be gracious and forgiving, so can people.

The story leaves us hanging, for we are not told what the elder son does. The parable is left so that Luke's readers may reflect on the proper response. Would they, if they were in the brother's shoes, go inside? Will they share in the joy? Will they join in the opportunity to help the lost find God? Will they join the Father or stay outside? Will they learn from and imitate the father? Grumblers and readers are now faced with a moral choice, and mere speculating is no longer possible. One must choose how to respond to Jesus' challenge to seek out sinners.

The parable of the forgiving father and his two sons is one of the most illustrative of Jesus' stories. It truly is a parable of reversal, which pictures the beautiful transformation that comes with humble repentance before God. The picture of the Father is particularly instructive. He is running to the one with arms outstretched, ready to hug the returning child, and rejoice in the return. He dispenses gifts richly to those who turn, welcoming them into the family. No matter how destitute the circumstances under which one turns, the Father is there to receive the child back. Such is the joy in heaven over one who repents.

This detailed parable complements the two earlier parables of Luke 15 and adds one additional lesson: the response of those who see the Father's gracious generosity is also to be joy. They are not to act like the elder brother. They are to share in the mission and the joy. It is the hope of restoring the lost and leading people back to the joy of the Father that causes Jesus to receive sinners and dine with tax collectors (15:2). What is lost must be pursued until it is found. People should not grumble about Jesus' or His followers' associations. They should realize that God calls on disciples to encourage the "rejected" to be accepted by God. Part of that call means associating with sinners, not by sharing in unrighteous activities, but by having a relationship with them that is available and approachable. The gospel is not to be hoarded by the righteous, but is to involve them in reclaiming the lost for God. After all, how did those who share the benefits of the gospel come to share in it, except by receiving the same generosity they should now offer to others? God's love for His community requires that His love for people be displayed by those who claim to know Him. Those who grumble should be criticized, for they refused to display God's concern. The prodigal reminds disciples that God calls them to seek the lost (19:11) and to rejoice when the search is successful. As the Father is gracious, so it should be with His offspring (Bock, 1320–1321).