



WEEKLY STUDY

WEEK 4: Prodigal - God Loves Lost Things

The past few weeks we have slowly walked through the verses in Luke 15. We have learned what Jesus was trying to teach us through this story of a loving father and his two sons that were both stuck in their sin, but in different ways.

Background:

Luke 15:1-2

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

In the beginning of Luke chapter 15, we learned that Jesus was speaking to a crowd. In this crowd, there were tax collectors and those that would have been considered sinful or "unclean". Jesus had been teaching and eating with these openly sinful people and this had upset the religious leaders that were in the crowd. They had come to pass judgement on Jesus for keeping such "unclean" company. Jesus knew this and spoke through parables, both to the religious leaders who couldn't see their sin, and also to the "unclean" around him that already knew the weight of their sin. Jesus shares 3 parables with the crowd. Each parable is about something that was lost, and then celebrated once it was found. Jesus clearly states at the end of each parable that this is how our Father in Heaven celebrates when one person who is lost repents of their sin and comes back to Him.

MONDAY:

Luke 15:3-7

***3** Then Jesus told them this parable: **4** "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he 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.*

Ezekiel 34:11-16

***11** "For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. **12** As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. **13** I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. **14** I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. **15** I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord. **16** I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.*

Many times in scripture, God refers to himself as the Good Shepherd. In a society that depended on this occupation for survival, shepherding would have been a very common role. Today, however, we might not fully understand the context of this metaphor. A shepherd in

Biblical times would have been fully responsible for the well-being of their sheep. They had to provide food by leading them to green fields or water sources, be their doctor when they were sick or hurt, and had to keep them safe from predators. Many times this meant fighting a wolf, lion, or bear to protect the flock. This wasn't like our modern day farm, where the farmer had a cozy bed to sleep in. These shepherds often stayed outside in the same harsh conditions that their flock had to endure. Many times it was a 24/7 occupation. Even the gate to the sheep pen wasn't a gate at all, just an open space in a stone wall where the shepherd would lay across and sleep at night. This would serve as an ancient security system for the sheep against any predator or thief that might literally step on the shepherd, and wake them up. Reading John 10:1-18 takes on a whole new meaning when we understand this concept. The rod and staff mentioned in the popular Psalm 23 was for the shepherd to either hook the sheep's neck and re-direct them, or to ward off predators. It was equal parts correction for the sheep and protection against their enemies. As we dig deeper into this context, we can begin to appreciate this beautiful metaphor and picture of God's love and care for us even more. Being our Good Shepherd means He's our provider, our protector, the one who guides us, and who will never leave us.

The other key duty of being a shepherd was searching for wandering sheep. Sheep are naturally prone to wander, and they are also prone to follow other wandering sheep. They are naturally curious, and often don't sense danger. Culturally at this time, shepherds would account for each sheep at the end of the day. If any were missing, they would go out to search for them. Many times multiple households would be watching multiple flocks together, leaving their flocks to search for one wasn't unusual. The shepherd would have entrusted that the 99 were safe and being watched over by another household. It wasn't that he didn't care for the 99. It was the fact that the one who wandered away was in immediate & urgent danger, or feared dead. Each and every sheep was extremely valuable and important to the shepherd, just as each of us is extremely valuable to God. No matter how far we wander, God is always pursuing us. He doesn't give up searching for us and He's ready to throw us over His shoulders and bring us home when He finds us. This is a beautiful picture of God's pursuing love for us. The original hearers of the story would have more fully understood this. Just like the parable of the prodigal son, we can easily see how the metaphor of the wandering sheep relates to our own lives. **How often do we get distracted, curiously wandering away from our shepherd in search of something else? How often do we accidentally lead others astray in our wanderings?**

We can also see that Jesus was using the 99 sheep as a metaphor for the Pharisees in the crowd. Especially when he talks about the celebration at the end. Just like the Father having a party, this was intended to show the Pharisees how we should act when anyone turns back to God. **Can you remember a time that someone in your life that was lost in sin made a turn towards God? Did you struggle with celebrating this change? Did you struggle with judging them, or a lack of forgiveness like the Pharisees? There are times we will see ourselves as the 1 lost sheep, or the younger son...and there are times we will see ourselves as the 99 or the older son. Both need the Father, both need the Good Shepherd, and God equally loves and pursues them all!**

TUESDAY:

Luke 15: 8-10

8 "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins[a] and loses one. Doesn't she 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."

Luke 19:10

10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Psalms 139:1-2

You have searched me, Lord, and you know me.

You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.

Psalms 23:6

Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life

Genesis 3:9

But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?"

1 Samuel 3:10

The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Before Jesus begins the parable of the prodigal, he tells the parable of the lost coin in Luke 15:8-10. A woman loses one coin and desperately searches for it. Even though she still has 9 more coins, similar to the 99 sheep from yesterday, Jesus is making the practical point that anyone in her situation would surely search for the lost coin. Those in Jesus' audience that day would relate to searching and rejoicing over finding these lost items. No one would let a sheep wander away and not search for them. No one would lose a coin and not search for it. By using these two very simple practical examples, Jesus is setting the stage for the very upsetting and impractical example of the lost son. The first two parables are basic common sense. However, He begins to make some waves when He emphasizes the connection that God also celebrates when lost people are found. This begins to lay the groundwork for the radical prodigal love shown in the lost son story to follow.

In all three parables of Luke 15 (and throughout scripture) we see how God in His goodness pursues us. In the passages from yesterday, we see how God, as the Good Shepherd, pursues His lost sheep. Today, we see this in how the woman pursued the lost coin. We can even see this in Genesis 3 following the original sin, as God pursues Adam and Eve. They were hiding and God calls to them asking where they are. Of course, God already knew the answer, but He calls to them and allows them to come to Him. It's important to remember as much as we talk about us seeking God in our daily lives, that God always seeks us first. God is the initiator of all things and He is always pursuing a closer relationship with us. **Can you think of a time in your life that you were lost, and God pursued you? Is God pursuing you now? Maybe you aren't totally lost, but is God pursuing a closer, deeper relationship with you? Spend some time in listening silent prayer today. Allow God to "find" you, allow God to speak to you, and truly listen to what He says. Say out loud the very bold statement that Samuel said "Speak Lord, your servant is listening".**

WEDNESDAY:

Luke 15: 20-31

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. 21 "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. 25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of

the servants and asked him what was going on. **27** 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' **28** "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. **29** But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. **30** But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' **31** "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. **32** But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

Revelation 3: 15-20

15 I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! **16** So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. **17** You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. **18** I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

19 Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. **20** Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

Matthew 7:3-5

3 "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? **4** How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? **5** You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

In the lost son parable, Jesus shows us two ways we can be lost. The first way is easy to understand. In all three parables, Jesus talks of being lost like the younger son, the sheep, or the coin. We all can relate and point to the times in our lives that we have literally wandered away from God. We can all remember being that lost sheep, or the son walking up the road in our brokenness seeking forgiveness. The tax collectors and the "unclean" in Jesus' time would have similarly related to this form of lostness. Being found when we are lost in this way is always Good News. It's the moment when we are trudging up that dirt road after losing everything, and laying at Jesus' feet with nothing to offer Him. When we are found as the younger son, we have nothing to lose and everything to gain in the Father's pursuit, acceptance and love.

However, the second way of being lost is harder to understand, and even harder for us to admit. When we are the older son, being found humbles us, hits our pride in the gut, and can turn our world upside down. This form of lostness can be a bit more dangerous because of its deceptive nature, and how hard it is to accept when we are found. When Jesus speaks about the older son, He is bringing accountability to the religious leaders in the crowd. On the outside, the older son was doing all the right things, just like the religious leaders. He was outwardly checking every box, but inwardly he wasn't changed, or at the very least his faith had grown stagnant. His heart had become hard and bitter towards his brother, therefore, he couldn't celebrate when he was found. Jesus was making this point because the religious in the crowd were grumbling about the "unclean". Jesus was showing them that their hearts were lost and hardened. They had the type of lukewarm faith that Paul warns about in Revelation 3. We can get lost in "plain sight" like this more than we probably want to admit. How many times have you judged someone that was struggling outwardly in sin while you yourself are struggling inwardly? Just like the verses in Matthew, we often try to pick a speck out of someone else's eye, while we have a log in our own. When we are lost in plain sight we have to 1. Recognize our lostness, 2. Repent from our self-righteousness, 3. Accept being found.

We have to truly humble ourselves, to be able to go into the party with our brother. We have to take ourselves out of the seat that rightfully belongs to God alone.

We are all older sons in some areas. Spend some time in prayer today. Search your heart for the spaces where your heart isn't at peace, where your faith has grown cold, stagnant and lukewarm. Ask God to reveal your lostness, even in plain sight. Take time to repent, ask for His forgiveness, and accept being found.

THURSDAY:

Galatians 5: 22-23

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

Matthew 7: 9-11

"Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? 11 If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"

Ephesians 4:32

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Ephesians 3: 16-21

16 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. 20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Today let's look at the Father's love in the parable. Often we hear this parable called the "prodigal son", which isn't the most accurate title for this story. The definition of prodigal is: giving in abundance, lavishly, wasteful, extravagant, or in reckless abandon. Timothy Keller wrote a book called "Prodigal God" where he talks about this parable and the extravagant prodigal love that the Father shows his sons, and ultimately to us. Throughout scripture we see this type of unconditional prodigal love. In fact, there are over 600 verses about love in the Bible depending on your translation. In the parable, we notice 3 radical prodigal traits about the Father's love:

1. The Father's love is patient. He waits, He pursues, He watches, and He waits some more. God is never going to give up on you, no matter what.
2. The Father's love is forgiving. The very instant we turn back to Him, we don't need to earn our way or prove ourselves worthy. We could never earn our way, or do anything worthy enough to receive His grace. His forgiveness, grace, and love are gifts.
3. The Father's love is pursuant. God always pursues us. The Father ran to the younger son, and He left the party to come and find the older son. The Father pursued both sons while they were still lost in their sin.

Spend some time today praying and thanking God for the way that He loves you with a prodigal, lavish, patient, unconditional, forgiving and pursuant kind of love. How have you rejected His love like the older son, and how have you accepted it like the younger son?

Since we are called to love others the way that God loves us...who do you need to show a prodigal love towards today? Remember that you can't do this in your own strength... you can only show God's love through God's power and strength.

FRIDAY: Luke 15: 6-7; 9-10; 32

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."

6 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.

32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

At the end of each parable in Luke 15, Jesus celebrates. Just as we celebrate together on our "Celebration Sundays", God calls us to rejoice each time someone enters into His kingdom. We should always be joyful when others make a decision to follow Jesus, to become more dedicated to their faith journey, or even just repent from a single sin in their lives. This should bring us such unimaginable joy knowing that someone who was lost, and headed for destruction in their lives has made a choice to turn towards life.

Sometimes, we can get stuck in bitterness, un-forgiveness, judgement, or condemnation for others. We can even have an "I told you so" type of attitude. Most often this type of judgement happens when the sin someone else is struggling with is not something we personally struggle with. The lack of understanding can lead to the temptation of comparing ourselves and condemning them in order to make ourselves feel better about our own sins. It's a good reminder that all sins are equal to God, and all sins separate us from God. We all need forgiveness, we all need to be found, and we all need to celebrate when others are found!

In your journal today make a list of people in your life that need prayer over their lostness, include yourself as well if needed. Whether it's like the older son, lost in plain sight, or the younger son, lost in a far away land...we all need finding sometimes. Pray that they would hear God's voice, that they would see the Father waiting for them on the front porch at a distance, that they would accept the Father's prodigal love in their lives. Keep praying for them over the next few weeks, or years. No matter how long it takes, God is patient, so we can be as well. God is forgiving, so we can be as well. God is pursuant, so we can be as well.

Then get ready for the celebration. Forgive them if you need to, repent for your judgment of them if you need to, and listen for ways that God can use you to plant seeds in His pursuit of them today.