

PARABLES OF FORGIVENESS IN LUKE

Luke 15

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

15 Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

3 So he told them this parable: ⁴'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." ⁷Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

The Parable of the Lost Coin

8 'Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'

The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother

11 Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.' " ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." ²²But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it,

and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

²⁵Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" ³¹Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." '

COMMENTARY

Luke 15 - Parables of the Lost being Found

1) The context of the parables in this chapter is important to understand. Jesus responds to the religious leaders who are upset with him. He is keeping company with the morally flawed of Jewish society. The Pharisees in particular believe that if all Israel got their act together morally and lived the religious law daily, God would act to save them from the Romans. So, Jesus welcoming sinners rather than condemning them was undermining their vision of a renewed nation under God, having dominance over their enemies. Jesus offers these parables as a response to their criticism.

2) The first two parables use different metaphors for people - sheep and coins. Something is lost, and the value of what is lost is incommensurate with the sacrifice of so much time, energy and risk to find it. Moreover, when it is found (a lost sheep or coin) there is such inordinate celebration and joy. Yet if we think of these lost things as individual human beings, and even more, as morally flawed human beings set aside by the religious leaders as hopelessly condemned and rejected by God, we can see the message differently. Not only does God care for every single human being, but God puts extra care into those who need extra care. Morally flawed human beings are not to be blamed but loved. Only through love will their conversion take place, if and when that happens.

3) This last point leads us to the third and most well-known of the parables - the prodigal son. Here we have an actual person that is used as the subject of the parable, yet the setting is of a family farm with a father and two sons. The younger son is not presented to us as someone who deserves sympathy. Not only does he demand his share of the inheritance (which is essentially land, which normally would go to him after his father died), but he wants to leave his family and home permanently. Such a rejection of all he has received deserves a strong counter-

rejection in return. The father, however, accedes to his son's demands. He liquidates half the land (gets a mortgage on it) and gives that to his son. He sends him off with best wishes.

4) The younger son loses everything, not because of bad luck, but because he wastes it on partying. He has no-one to blame but himself for ending up with nothing. And he feels no sympathy for what trouble his father has gone into to get him the cash. Anyhow, it takes us, the readers, a while to feel any sympathy for him. He has to reach rock bottom, desperate, hungry, on death's door. But then, and only then does he realize what he has done and what he must do. He will go back, but he will not shirk absorbing all the shame and condemnation he deserves. He will offer himself as the humblest of servants and hope for a minimum of mercy.

5) What the son gets, though, is not minimum but astonishing grace and welcome. He gets full restoration as a son. His restoration, moreover, must be based purely on grace/love. He has nothing to give for it. What he is given and the re-establishment of his place as a son, is pure gift. It's hard to imagine such a response by his father. Yet this is what we are meant to believe is God's approach to us and our failures to be the human beings we are called to be. We are loved fully and completely beyond anything we can ever try to do to deserve it.

6) The older son is not as sympathetic as his father. He represents the religious leaders. He doesn't want his lost brother back. He is resentful and bitter. He doesn't feel he is adequately appreciated either. If a person feels resentful in their heart, is there any amount of praise and adoration from the outside that will eliminate that resentment? Only an inner conversion can do that, an inner infusion of divine love flooding the heart. The older son needs restoration too. That's what Jesus wants to tell the religious leaders. But they are too proud and too angry at Jesus to acknowledge their need. And who is Jesus to teach them and represent God to them anyway? It is no surprise that only those who know their need and experience God as grace and love, rather than judgement, recognize the justice of the father's actions in this parable. Justice without love becomes hate that is justified as deserved. The problem with hate is that it sticks to you and chokes the love in you.