

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

A Kingdom of Grace: Luke's Trilogy of Lost and Found Parables

Given that the kingdom of God is spiritual and builds gradually, not visually observable and not cataclysmic, the character of the kingdom would be radically different than popular expectations. Perhaps the central feature of this radical new understanding concerns grace. The word grace does not appear in any of Jesus' parables, but the idea of grace is captured repeatedly by this broad concept in the stories about mercy, forgiveness, and the lost being found and restored. (It will be St. Paul who will use this word "grace" as the centerpiece of his theology.) While the Fourth Gospel has no parables, it does describe the ministry of Jesus by this same rich word. Jesus came from the Father "full of grace" (Jn. 1:14). From the fulness of his grace, we have all received one blessing after another (Jn. 1:16). Finally, while Moses gave the law, "grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (Jn. 1:17).

Jesus was severely criticized by some because he was a "friend of sinners" (Mt. 9:10-13; 11:19; Mk. 2:15-17; Lk. 5:29-32; 7:34). He responded that his message was expressly to sinners

SINNERS

In 1st century Judaism, the "sinners" generally referred to people who were regarded as under divine disfavor, such as, the sick, the poor, and the lepers. Tax collectors, prostitutes, and those unclean were deemed sinners because they had broken cultic obligations and brought calamity upon themselves because of their sins (cf. Jn. 9:2). In general, "sinners" referred to those who were less than scrupulous about observing the oral law, what Jesus called the "tradition of the elders" (Mk. 7:1-8, 14).

in behalf of sinners, those who were "sick" and needed a physician. This word "sinner" was an idiom for those who were less fastidious about legal observances. To his critics, Jesus gave the short **Parable About Uncleaness** (Mk. 7:14-23), where he bluntly indicated that outward observances were not the fundamental cause of uncleaness, but rather, those unclean motivations that come from within the heart. What goes into a person does not defile him or her, since it passes through the stomach and is excreted as waste. But it is human hearts that

produce evil thoughts, murder, sexual deviance, theft, adultery, greed, slander, and all such things. Hence, it was to these people—those afflicted with sin—that Jesus had been sent.

Luke's Trilogy of Parables

Luke records a trilogy of parables, all regarding those who were "lost" and then were "found." The setting was the criticism of the Pharisees and scribes that Jesus "welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Lk. 15:1-2). To understand this objection, one must have some idea of the meaning of table fellowship in the Middle East. To eat with someone was to bestow honor, to offer peace and trust, and to extend brotherhood and forgiveness. A religious elite might, out of some sentiment of generosity, give food to the poor, but he would never eat with them, and he certainly would not invite them into his own home. In short, sharing table meant sharing life. For Jesus to include "sinners" in his circle was a powerful message about the redeeming love of God.¹ In response to his critics, Jesus offered three consecutive parables.

¹ J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Charles Scribners, 1971), p.115ff.



Earliest Christian image of Christ the Good Shepherd with a lamb on his shoulders, depicted in the Catacomb of Domitilla in Rome (ca. 2nd century)

The first comes from the world of shepherding. Though Moses and David were ancient shepherds with approval, by the 1st century the social status of shepherders had decidedly fallen. Shepherds appear in Jewish lists of unclean occupations, along with butchers, dung-gatherers and physicians. So, making the shepherd the hero in the story was instantly counter-cultural. In the **Parable of the Lost Sheep** (Lk. 15:3-7; cf. Mt. 18:12-14), Jesus told the story of a shepherd who discovered a sheep missing from his flock. Leaving the others (presumably in the care of another shepherd, since it would be

highly unusual for a single shepherd to care for as many as a hundred animals by himself), he retraced the ground, searching until he found the lost animal. Carrying it on his shoulders (perhaps the sheep was young or perhaps wounded?), he brought it to join the others in the village where friends and neighbors gathered to celebrate. Jesus' conclusion was unmistakable: *In the same way, I tell you, that there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.*

In the second story, the **Parable of the Lost Coin** (Lk. 15:8-10), a woman with ten silver *drachmas* loses one of them (a *drachma* is the equivalent of one day's wages). While not a huge amount of money in itself, it nevertheless had a deeper value, since it likely was part of her dowry, where in the Middle East such coins were often worn by an unmarried woman between puberty and marriage as part of her headdress. The headdress was her most treasured possession, and it was not laid aside even for sleep.² She was frantic over the loss! Lighting a lamp, she searched the whole house, likely using a palm-twig broom to search every corner. When at last she found it, she was filled with joy and invited her friends to rejoice with her. Again, there is the same wonderful conclusion: *In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels over one sinner who repents.*

The third story is one of the most well-known of Jesus' parables, the **Parable of the Prodigal Son** (Lk. 15:11-32), or as some have titled it, the Parable of the Waiting Father or the Parable of the Father's Love. To better understand this parable, one must have some sense of the Jewish ritual of *qesasah*, which means "a cutting off." In the time of Jesus, it was a deeply serious thing for a son to violate community and family solidarity. A ritual of "cutting off" entailed the public breaking of a clay jar



Southern Palestinian headdress with coins, ca. 1840s

² J. Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (New York: Charles Scribners, 1966), pp. 106-107.

in the street with the proclamation that “so and so is lost to his family.” According to the Talmud, the sons of the family carried out this ritual.³ It was especially offensive for a son to abandon his



I highly recommend the deeply insightful work on this parable by Henri I. M. Nouwen, The Return of the Prodigal Son, as he reflects on the profound meaning in Rembrandt's classic painting exhibited in the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Jewish community and to live among Gentiles, for he was not only breaking relationship with his father and brother, but also, with the whole community.⁴ While Jesus' parable does not detail the *qesasah* ritual, it may well have happened when the youngest son left home.

The story itself concerns a father and his two sons. For the Middle Eastern listener, the story had several surprising, even shocking elements. When the younger son asked for his inheritance while his father was still living, which would have comprised a third of the estate (cf. Dt. 21:15-17), it was tantamount to saying, “I wish you were dead.” The normal response of a Middle Eastern father would be immediate punishment. Nonetheless, the father divided his estate with both sons. In the Middle East, such a request by any son was unthinkable, but especially by a younger son. Jesus' listeners would also have expected the older son to protest loudly and engage in reprimand at this affront. (All reconciliation in the Middle East is accomplished through a third party, preferably a family member.) His

silence is shocking! Indeed, he accepted the outrageous request without protest, allowing his father to divide the estate between them. The father inexplicably granted the request.

The younger son did not stay around very long, which is culturally understandable. The news of what he had done would have spread quickly, and everyone in the community would now look upon him with revulsion and rejection. In a few days, he cashed out his share of the property, and with his newly-gained wealth he left the village, traveling to “a far country.” The identity of the far country is not revealed, but the fact that the younger son ended up feeding

³ Berakhot, 28b.

⁴ K. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant's Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 167-168; K. Rengstorf, *Die Re-Investitur des Verlorenen Sohnes in der Gleichniserzählung Jesu Luke 15:11-32* (Cologne: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1957).

swine, once he ran through the money, suggests it was a Gentile community, and probably would have been assumed to be one of the Gentile cities in the Decapolis on the east side of the Jordan.

Everyone knew the desperation of famine, so when the son's wealth was depleted, it came as no surprise to find him clinging to a local citizen, almost certainly a gentile, where, in order to survive, he became a swineherd. It was a fearful fall from his former social status, especially for a Jewish young man. He was desperate enough to steal carob pods from the pig fodder (κεράτιον = carob pod),⁵ and no one came to his aid. His fair-weather friends, when he was flush with cash, had now all disappeared. Realizing his desperate circumstances, he determined to return home. When he arrived, he hoped that he could be hired on as a servant and spared starvation. He fully understood that his relationship to his father could never be what it was before, so he intended to forestall any embarrassing discussion by frankly admitting, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men." And so, he went back home.

This is where the story becomes most fascinating! Upon his return, he discovered that his father had been watching for him. While still at a distance, his father saw him and ran to him, embracing him and kissing him. This is decidedly not the expected response in the Middle East for a prodigal. For one thing, no man of standing ever runs with flowing robes, since it would be undignified. Further, his reception by the villagers would have been taunts and mocking. The father forestalls all this by publicly accepting his son. Instead of ruthless hostility and outright rejection, which the son surely deserved, the father runs the gauntlet for him in a public demonstration of love, humility, and forgiveness. Even more incredible, the father calls for the best robe, probably his own robe, and now he treats his wayward son as an honored guest. He gives him a ring, possibly his own signet ring, and sandals in a culture where shoes are a luxury. This son was not to be treated as a barefoot slave! Finally, he orders a meal, a festival for the whole household and village. A fattened calf implies that many friends from the village would be invited, since that amount of meat would spoil in a few hours if not eaten.

This, then, is the language of grace. The heavenly Father does not merely wait for the lost sheep to return, he goes out into the wilderness to seek and find him. The one who is lost is still deeply precious to him, and he will search every dark corner to find him and restore him. To the wayward son he has an open heart of forgiveness and welcomes him home with joy. Probably not a single Jew in Jesus' own generation had ever thought of God and sinners in quite these terms!

Still, there is one more ceremonious moment, for the story goes on to speak of the older son. He was working in the field when his younger brother arrived, so he was not aware of what was happening until he asked one of the servants.⁶ When he heard, he was bitterly resentful and would not join the others. His father came out and entreated him to come in, but instead, he publicly humiliated his father and disparaged his brother, calling him "this son of yours." Once again, the Middle Eastern listener would expect harsh punishment for a son who publicly denounced his own father. But no, once again, there is gentleness and grace.

So, this parable ends with the implied question: Who was lost and who was found? Those who were intent on criticizing Jesus for being a friend of sinners would have to answer it, too!

⁵ There are two kinds of carobs, a wild and a Syrian variety, the latter of which is edible. However, in a time of famine, only wild carob pods would be fed to pigs, and this variety was bitter and without nutritional value.

⁶ The imperfect tense is used in 15:26, which suggests that he asked repeatedly.