

The Parables of the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, and the Prodigal Son  
Luke 15:1-32

Introduction

Looking for the speaker hangers for weeks and rejoicing when I found them

A. Context

1. The context is found in the first two verses of our passage (READ 15:1-2):
  - a. Jesus was attracting and spending time with the wrong kind of people:
    - 1) One kind was tax collectors who were some of the most hated people in Israel:
      - a) They were seen as traitors because they worked for the Romans who were considered oppressors
      - b) They were often dishonest, collecting more than required and pocketing the rest to become wealthy (we see this reflected in Zacchaeus' confession in Luke 19:8)
      - c) This often resulted in tax collectors becoming wealthy which further separated them from the average citizen
    - 2) The other kind of people Jesus attracted and spent time with were **"sinners"**:
      - a) Biblically, everyone is a sinner, but that's not what Luke has in mind here
      - b) Rather, **"sinners"** here represented those who had been identified in the Jewish society as not living up to the expectations of OT Law and the traditions and teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees
      - c) The Talmud even had a list of who qualified as a sinner: those who gambled with dice, raced pigeons, lent money at interest, sold produce during the Sabbatical year, and included robbers, herdsmen, customs officials, and tax collectors in the list
      - d) Such **"sinners"** were ostracized, denied entrance to the synagogues and temple, and generally excluded from the religious community
  - b. Jesus' association with such people riled up the religious leaders (15:2): **"Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying 'This man receives sinners and eats with them'":**
    - 1) The word for grumble here means to express contempt or disdain for someone and to do so emphatically, and the verb is in the imperfect tense which more literally means they were engaging in grumbling; it was ongoing (not something they simply began to do as the NASB renders it)
    - 2) As far as they were concerned, Jesus was guilty on two accounts:
      - a) First, He welcomed sinners into His presence: the NASB word **"receives"** refers to accepting or receiving to oneself and in this context indicates a welcoming (as translated by the NET, Holman, and NIV)
      - b) Second, and worse yet, He ate with them: sharing a meal together in the ANE was viewed in a similar fashion to how we view it today; it connotes a certain comfort level with the guests, even an intimacy, and this was especially true in the ANE where meals were shared in homes
    - 3) This was all highly offensive to the Pharisees and Sadducees because they would never stoop to associate, let alone eat, with sinners:

- a) We get a pretty good idea of how they viewed such people in the Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector from Luke 18:9-14 (READ)
  - b) In fact, one of their commentaries on the Law stated that they shouldn't associate with sinners **EVEN** for the purpose of teaching them the Torah (Snodgrass)
  - c) They believed that to associate with sinners would violate their own righteous status and standing before God and the people
- 2. This wasn't the first time they had complained about Jesus' association with such people:
  - a. One of the first times was when Levi (Matthew) held a big reception for Jesus at his home (READ Luke 5:30-32)
  - b. Later, in Luke 7:34, we see they had accused Jesus of being a **"gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners"**
  - c. Something similar happened when Simon the Pharisee invited Jesus to his home (Luke 7:36-39)
- 3. This disdain by the religious leaders for Jesus' attitude and behavior toward tax collectors and sinners is what led Him to speak these three parables to them

<h2>B. The Parables</h2>
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- 1. The first is the parable of the Lost Sheep (READ 15:3-7):
  - a. This parable is an interrogative parable which means it begins with a question; the purpose is to setup a hypothetical situation, force the listener to answer the question (at least in their mind), and then transfer that answer to the current situation
  - b. The hypothetical situation here is that one of the Pharisees or Sadducees has 100 sheep and loses one:
    - 1) We know this is hypothetical because none of the religious leaders would ever own sheep or shepherd a flock
    - 2) They despised shepherds, and one of their own rabbis had written, "In the whole world you will find no occupation more despised than that of the shepherd, who all his days walks about with his staff and his pouch" (Snodgrass)
    - 3) You can almost hear the objection of the Pharisees and Sadducees, **"Well, we would never..."**
  - c. But the question still stands (4), **"What man among you...does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?"**
    - 1) Even though they would never own sheep themselves, the answer would have been obvious to them
    - 2) Any shepherd worth his salt would go after the one because of what he knows about the nature of sheep:
      - a) Contrary to the popular claim that sheep are stupid, they are actually fairly intelligent; in fact, they are smart enough to normally stick together as a flock to protect themselves from predators
      - b) However, when they wander off or get separated from the flock they do stupid things; a guy I worked with during seminary raised sheep and he confirmed this
      - c) There was an article in Christianity Today a while back written by a sheep farmer who had experienced the following with his own flock:

- Sheep that wandered off from the rest of the flock would “often walk in circles, going nowhere and not eating, until they die”
  - He once found one of his perfectly healthy ewe lambs dead, leaning up against a fence post; it had gotten separated from the flock and just stood there until it died even though the rest of flock was within 100 yards
  - On another occasion he found a big lamb dead under a log in the paddock; it found a morsel of food just out of reach in the stack of logs, but instead of giving up and backing out it kept pushing forward to try to get the food and died right there from apparent starvation
- d. Jesus followed up His question with the response by the shepherd once he recovered the lost sheep (RE-READ 15:5-6):
- 1) The response seems over the top—carrying the lamb on his shoulders, calling all his friends together to rejoice with him
  - 2) This sort of exaggeration is common in parables and is used to make a point and sets up what Jesus said next
- e. There is more rejoicing over a sinner when he repents than over the righteous who do not need to repent (RE-READ 15:7):
- 1) There’s no mention of repentance in the parable itself but the lost sheep represents a lost sinner who repents
  - 2) His statement about the ninety-nine righteous who don’t need to repent is not a theological statement, but rather represented the Pharisees and Sadducees who were self-righteous, proud, and saw no need for repentance in their own lives
  - 3) This would have obviously been a shocking statement to the religious leaders because it went against everything they believed, and suggested God favored the repentant sinner over them
2. Jesus repeated this assertion in the second parable, that of the Lost Coin (READ 15:8-10):
- a. This is another interrogative parable and is nearly identical to the first one
  - b. Rather than a shepherd who loses his sheep, this one involves a woman who loses one of her ten coins and searches carefully until she finds it
  - c. Like the shepherd when he found his lost sheep, she calls all her friends and neighbors so that they can rejoice with her
  - d. And, also like the first parable, the point is the same: God rejoices over repentant sinners (RE-READ 15:10)
3. The final parable is the parable of the Prodigal Son (15:11-32):
- a. This is the longest and most complex of all of Jesus’ parables, and probably the most well-known
  - b. It begins with a father who had two sons and the younger son demanded his father give him his inheritance, so he does (READ 15:11-12):
    - 1) This would have been an unusual request because the inheritance was normally divided up after the death of the father
    - 2) The estate would have included money, land, possessions, and any herds or flocks, and generally 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of that would go to the eldest son, and 1/3 to the younger

- c. A short time later, the son took off to a distant country, squandered his inheritance through wasteful and reckless living, and ended up destitute (READ 13-16):
  - 1) The phrase “**squandered his estate with loose living**” likely would have stood out to the religious leaders because some considered it a crime to be wasteful and reckless with money and possessions:
    - a) When it involved a son, a father was even entitled to disown the son
    - b) If such recklessness caused one to neglect caring for their parents, it was the basis for censure by society
    - c) No doubt the Pharisees and Sadducees were already judging this man as Jesus told the parable
  - 2) Things got so bad that he hired himself out to feed pigs and was so hungry that he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pigs’ food, but no one was even willing to give him that!
- d. Finally, he came to his senses and decided to head back home (READ 15:17-19):
  - 1) Initially his motives appear to be selfish and motivated by self-preservation; he realized his father’s hired hands had it better than he did
  - 2) However, they were accompanied by genuine repentance:
    - a) He claimed he not only sinned against his father, but against heaven
    - b) He recognized that he had not acted like a son and was no longer worthy to be treated like one
    - c) Rather, he was ready and willing to serve his father as a hired hand
- e. As the young man approached home, his father reacted in the same way the shepherd and woman did over finding their lost sheep and coin (READ 15-20-24):
  - 1) This would have shocked the religious leaders because this man had abandoned his father and squandered his wealth; he was a sinner and the father had every right to disown his son and he should have been shunned by society
  - 2) Instead, even while he was still far off, and even before he confessed his sin, the father celebrated his return:
    - a) He had compassion on him, ran and embraced him, and kissed him
    - b) He had his slaves dress him in the best robe, put a ring on his hand, sandals on his feet, and even kill a fattened calf for a feast that included music and dancing
  - 3) Like the shepherd and woman who rejoiced over finding their lost sheep and lost coin, the father celebrated the return of his lost son (24): “**for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found**”
- f. However, unlike the father, the older son refused to have any part in the celebration (READ 15:25-32):
  - 1) Instead of rejoicing that his brother had come to his senses, repented of his sin, and returned home, the older son became angry and refused to join the celebration
  - 2) Even when his father begged and pleaded with him, all he did was boast about his own loyalty and remind his father of his brother’s sin
  - 3) To which the father responded, “**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**”

### C. The Lessons and Takeaways

**\*\*I believe we can identify three reasons why Jesus told these parables and they will provide our takeaway**

1. The first is that they justify Jesus' behavior toward sinners and serve as a rebuke of the attitudes and behavior of the religious leaders:
  - a. The religious leaders in Israel wanted nothing to do with tax collectors and sinners; they considered them the scourge of society
  - b. Instead of serving as God's shepherds and leading them back to Him, they stigmatized, ostracized, and rejected them believing God wanted nothing to do with them
  - c. But Jesus was different; He was the Good Shepherd and declared that He had **"come to seek and to save that which was lost"** (Luke 19:10)
  - d. In 1 Timothy 1:15, Paul wrote this was the SPECIFIC purpose for which Jesus came: **"It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all."**
  - e. Jesus didn't shun the tax collectors and sinners like the self-righteous religious leaders because He ultimately came to save sinners
2. The second reason for the parables is that they emphasize the overwhelming love and compassion God has for sinners and the joy it brings Him when they repent and return to Him:
  - a. It seems obvious in the first two parables that Jesus Himself is represented by the shepherd and the woman who diligently seek out and find what's been lost, and rejoice when it's found
    - 1) In fact, we didn't have time to turn to Ezekiel 34:1-31 but you should when you have time
    - 2) It's a prophecy against the shepherds of Israel and many believe Jesus used as the backdrop and inspiration for the parable of the Lost Sheep because of the significant parallels, especially vs. 11, 16, and 22 which say, **"Behold, I Myself will seek My sheep and care for them", "I will search for the lost, bring back the scattered..."**, and **"therefore I will save My flock..."**
  - b. It's also obvious in the third parable that God is represented by the father who runs out to meet his son, embraces and kisses him, and ultimately celebrates his repentance and return home
  - c. This is exactly what we should expect from God who loved the world enough to send His only begotten Son, to take on human flesh and serve as the sacrifice for sins, and to do so while we were yet sinners
  - d. In fact, Jesus suggested in the first two parables that God isn't the only one who rejoices; all of heaven rejoices including the angels
3. The third reason for the parables is that they were a call to the religious leaders, and us as well, to have the same attitude and behavior toward the lost as Jesus and God do, and to celebrate along with God when they repent and are found:
  - a. The religious leaders didn't like being around those nasty sinners, so they shunned them
  - b. Jesus, on the other hand, sought them out in the hopes of saving them
  - c. Can I ask a blunt question? How about us? Are we more like the Pharisees or like Jesus?

- d. There's no doubt we rejoice when the lost get saved, but how comfortable are we around those who are unsaved?
- e. More to the point, how willing are we to seek them out so that they might be saved?