

ENGAGE

This week we are looking at Luke 15

- The text covers the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Lost son.
- My emphasis will be on the celebration that comes when that which is lost is found.
- Most of my time will be spent on the Prodigal Son.

EXAMINE

First off, it's important to see the parable in its context:

Parable	Text	Action	Conclusion
Introduction	15:1-2	Murmuring by Pharisees and scribes about Jesus' association with "sinners" and tax collectors.	
Lost Sheep	15:3-7	Searching for the lost sheep	Celebration
Lost Coin	15:8-10	Searching for the lost coin	Celebration
Lost Son	15:11-24	Waiting eagerly for the lost son	Celebration
Older Son	15:25-32	Complaints of the older son	Invitation to celebrate

The Parable of the Prodigal Son follows two shorter parables in which something that was lost is searched for and found, followed by a celebration. Each of them is intended to illustrate that "There is rejoicing in the presence of God over one sinner who repents" (15:10). The Pharisees had grumbled about Jesus' attention to the "sinners" and tax collectors; Jesus' response is that God delights when these lost ones repent and turn to him.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son makes the same point -- God's joy at the repentance of a lost and wayward son. But most often we look only at the first part of the parable that focuses on the younger, wayward son, who represents the "sinners" and tax collectors. The second part of the parable focuses on the older son's reaction -- one of anger and jealousy - and represents the Pharisees' own reaction to Jesus seeking the sinners.

Sources

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Now that we've looked at the overall context, let's examine the details of the first part of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Next week we'll look at the second part of the parable.

Giving the Younger Son His Share (15:11-12)

"Jesus continued: 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.' " (15:11-12)

The three characters are introduced at once: a man with two sons -- a common enough occurrence. What was very uncommon was the youngest's request to inherit his share of the estate prior to his father's death -- and the father's willingness to grant his request.

The father is depicted as a wealthy farmer, with servants and lands, so that his sons would have enjoyed privileged status in the community. But the youngest isn't satisfied with his lot. He wants everything that will be his, and he wants it now. In some ways he fits the Middle Eastern stereotype of a younger son, "lazy, irresponsible, covetous, and greedy." [1]

Inheritance laws in Israel were designed to favor the older son, giving him a double share (probably with the purpose of keeping a family's land holdings together and preserving the family farm intact; Numbers 27:8-11; 36:7-9; Deuteronomy 21:17). If there were four sons, the older son would receive two shares, with each of the other three sons one share apiece. Typically, the older son would be the executor and assume the role as family head after his father's death. Sometimes an older son would decide not to split up the family holdings between the brothers (Luke 12:13).

Dividing up a father's estate before his death was known [2] but frowned upon. [3] In this case, the property would pass to the sons, but the father would continue on enjoying the usufruct, that is, "the right to utilize and enjoy the profits and advantages of something belonging to another so long as the property is not damaged or altered."

Squandering Wealth in Wild Living (15:13)

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living." (15:13)

The younger son's share of the estate may have been partly in land, but the phrase "got together all he had" indicates that he sold what he needed and turned his share into portable capital. The Greek word, *sunago*, here has the sense "turn into cash" rather than its normal meaning "gather together." [4]

With lots of money in his pocket, the younger son sets out on a journey to a far-away land - far away from his father, far away from his older brother, and far away from any sense of responsibility and moral restraint. So long as his father is alive, he has a responsibility to support his father with his share of the family wealth, but he ignores this and spends it all on himself.

He squanders his money. The Greek word is *diaskopizo*, "scatter, disperse" and in our passage "waste, squander." [5] His focus is "riotous living" (KJV). The Greek adjective is *asotos*, "dissolutely, loosely," from the noun *asotia*, "debauchery, dissipation" [6] (see Ephesians 5:18; Titus 1:6; 1 Peter 4:4). The English word "prodigal," which we often use to name this parable, comes from a Latin word *prodigere*, "to drive away, squander." [7] His brother protests to the father that the prodigal brother has wasted all his inheritance on

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prostitutes (15:30). No doubt the Prodigal Son enjoys wine, women, and song until his funds run out.

Reduced to Feeding Swine (15:14-16)

It probably takes him several years to go through his third of a wealthy father's money. But it doesn't last forever. Finally it is gone. His friends desert him, his Ferrari is repossessed, he is evicted from his penthouse apartment, and he is destitute.

"After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything." (15:14-16)

Not only is he broke, but there was a prolonged famine that puts everyone, even average farmers, on the edge of survival. Where he might have gotten a job in normal times, now few are hiring. Crops have failed, and in the agrarian economy of the First Century, the landless are out of luck.

Remember, this is a story, a parable that Jesus is telling. But he paints it well and his hearers can imagine the man's desperate situation. They are waiting to see what happens.

But his situation gets even worse. He finds a job, but the job requires him to feed carob pods (*Ceratonia siliqua*, a Palestinian tree) to swine -- and he can't even eat the pods he is feeding the pigs. Only the very poor would eat such food. Rabbi Acha (about AD 320) remarks, "When the Israelites are reduced to carob pods, then they repent." [8]

Not only is his food almost non-existent, his job of feeding swine is considered unclean, since swine were unclean animals for Jews. For a Jewish man, nothing could be lower! There isn't even anyone to help him by giving alms. Jesus says, "no one gave him anything" (14:16b). He is in a "far country" and "the practice of almsgiving was little observed among the Greeks and Romans." [9] The picture Jesus paints is of a man reduced to the lowest of the low.

Rehearsing His Speech (15:17-20a)

Perhaps you've been this low and hopeless. Perhaps you know how it feels. The one advantage of this position is that there is no direction to go but up.

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father." (15:17-20a)

It's amazing how complex issues can suddenly become crystal clear. The man compares his own condition with that of his father's hired servants. He is starving and they have food to spare. And he is probably aware that the famine doesn't extend to his home area. He begins to compose a confession to say to his father.

You know, of course, how hard this is for him. It is his father and his father's way of life that he is rebelling against. He has snubbed his nose at his legal and moral obligations to his father. He has asked for his inheritance so he doesn't have to grovel to anyone. He went

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away rich and affluent, but must now come home with his tail between his legs. The very person he was so conflicted with he must now apologize to. There is no other way. How difficult this must be! How humbling!

His apology includes four essential points:

1. He confesses sin against God -- expressed in Jewish fashion as "against heaven" -- for his moral failures and sinful lifestyle.
2. He confesses sin against his father for squandering property that legally and morally should have been conserved to support his father.
3. He renounces any legal claim to sonship. Though he is a son by birth, his father would need to use his older brother's resources to support him, since his father has already divided the property. He recognizes that he has no legal claim to the rights of sonship.
4. He asks to be hired as a servant at the estate. While his father no longer legally owns the estate, he is still running it, and will do so as long as he is physically able.

The Prodigal has worked out what he will say and how he should say it. When we have to eat crow, rehearsing exactly what we need to say is important. So many apologies are not apologies at all; they are half-measures designed to admit some culpability but keep one's dignity and pride intact. To his credit, the Prodigal Son works out a full apology.

The Father's Compassion (15:20b-21)

"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. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' " (15:20b-21)

I love this verse: "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him" (15:20b). The father has been longing for his son's return for many years. His eyes often turn to the road coming into the estate. And his afternoon he glances up to the road as he has thousands of times before. Far down the road is the figure of a man coming towards the house.

I don't know whether the son was dragging himself slowly home, or walking more quickly as he saw the house. But the father recognized his characteristic walk when he was far off. It is my son! Compassion floods his heart, burying the pain and hurt of rejection. The old man gets up and begins to run to his son.

On the one side is the son, rehearsing his speech, coming with trepidation and fear that his father will not receive him, moving at an uncertain pace toward the house. And on the other side is the father running, running, his robes blowing behind him as he hurries to his son whom he has longed for.

This is no stiff, awkward meeting. The father throws his arms around his son in a happy embrace, and kisses him as a sign of welcome and love. I can sense though in the son a kind of stiffness. Things aren't the same as when he left. He has failed. He has sinned. He has changed. Will his father accept him if he knows the extent of it all?

And so he begins his rehearsed speech about sin and lack of worthiness, but the father stops him. The father has heard reports. The father knows what the son has done. The father doesn't seek to salve his injured psyche. He is just glad his son is home. He is overjoyed -- overflowing with joy.

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Kill the Fatted Calf (15:22-23)

The father breaks into the apology and turns to the servants excitedly:

"Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate." (15:22-23)

The son may need to say his speech, but for the father it is irrelevant. He has already accepted the boy back. For years he has longed for this day -- hoped against hope -- and now it has come. What is necessary now is a proper celebration of the father's joy.

- **The best robe.** He honors the son who has dishonored himself.
- **A ring.** He lavishes on the boy a sign of his love and wealth.[10]
- **Sandals on his feet.** His boy is destitute, barefoot. The father is quick to clothe him and care for his needs. Sandals were the sign of a freeman as opposed to a slave.
- **The fatted calf.** A man of the father's station would have a calf that had been specially fed in order to be ready for a special occasion such as this.

Dead and Alive Again (15:24)

He calls for a feast and a celebration. It is only fitting considering the joy and magnitude of the occasion:

" 'For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate." (15:24)

The father expresses his joy in extravagant language. Dead, lost. That's the way it had seemed from the father's perspective. But now his son for whom he had despaired of hope was now alive and found!

What Does the Parable Teach Disciples?

As we probe for meaning, we need to be aware of a couple of caveats. (1) We've only looked at part one of a two-part parable. The second part is designed to illustrate the indignation of the elder son who represents the Pharisees and scribes. (2) We get into difficulty when we try to press any parable. Parables are only illustrations Jesus is using to make a point, but no illustration has complete correspondence on every point, as would a full allegory. This parable isn't a real allegory, but an analogy.

The father, of course, represents God the Father. The Prodigal Son represents those who have rebelled against God, who have repented, and return to God. Here's what I learn from this parable:

1. God does not prevent us from sinning and rebelling. We have **freedom** to do so.
2. **Repentance** is necessary for us to return to God. Without repentance we act as if we have a right to something. Repentance recognizes and confesses our moral bankruptcy and changes direction. Repentance is a strong theme here, since Jesus mentions it in each of these three parables (15:7, 10, 17-19).
3. Even though he loves us immensely, God waits patiently until we "come to our senses." We can't talk, pursue, or persuade people into repenting. It is a **conviction** they must come to by themselves with the help of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8). Of course, the Holy Spirit can

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work strongly through anointed preaching and witnessing, but without the Holy Spirit's work, such preaching can come across as judgmental.

4. The sinner is morally bankrupt and has absolutely **no claim** on the Father, only the Father's love.
5. God our Father is ready to show **abundant mercy**. The son deserves nothing, but the father heaps upon him the accouterments of sonship. It's not due to merit but to mercy. Part of the charm of this story is the utter graciousness of the father contrasted with the stinginess and jealousy of the older son.

If this is the way my Father in heaven feels towards the wayward and sinful -- full of compassion and mercy -- so must I nurture his attitude toward the lost around me. As a disciple I must not be proud or self-righteous, but boast only of the grace of God. It's not a matter of fairness toward sinners, but of love.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is a story, a wonderful story that Jesus told to illustrate the Father's joy at the repentance of a lost sinner. But these are more than stories -- of a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. Jesus lived out this seeking and rejoicing day by day. He sought out those who were wandering and gave them hope. He treated the lost and shunned of righteous society with respect and love. And at the conversion of Zacchaeus, one of those real-life sinner tax collectors, Jesus rejoices and sits down to a jubilant dinner with the man and his friends, saying, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:9-10)

Prayer

Father, this story touches me at deep levels, probably because I can see myself in the Prodigal Son, I can see you in the father, and I marvel at your love and willingness to forgive. I am amazed at your eagerness to restore to sonship those of us who do not deserve it. Father, you truly live beyond our own sense of right and righteousness, for you move beyond judgment to forgiveness, full forgiveness that never looks back. Help me to have your love and a willingness to show mercy rather than a tendency to judgment that is Pharisee-like rather than God-like. In Jesus' name, I humbly pray. Amen.

Key Verse

"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. " (15:20b-21)

Questions

1. What does this story tell us about the father's character? About the younger son's character?
2. Why do you think that the younger son asked for his share of the father's estate ahead of time? Why do you think the father granted his request?
3. How can the father be so patient? Why doesn't he run after the son and try to convince him to return?

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4. What are the four elements of the son's prepared speech? (15:18-19) In what ways do they model an appropriate apology?
5. Why does the father restore the son so quickly to full sonship?
6. What is the point of this parable in its context with the Parables of the Lost Sheep (15:3-7) and the Lost Coin (15:8-10)?
7. What do we learn about God in this parable? What difference should this knowledge make in our life and ministry?