

The Gospel of Luke

Lesson 20: The Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Son -- Luke 15:1-32

The wrong people keep showing up around Jesus, and the right people will not stop complaining about it. Luke tells us that “the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him” (v. 1), the cheats and the immoral and the disreputable, the very people a respectable religious teacher was supposed to keep at arm’s length. And the Pharisees and scribes mutter the line that turns out to be the unintentional summary of the whole gospel: “This man receives sinners and eats with them” (v. 2). They mean it as an accusation. Jesus will spend the next thirty verses turning it into the best news a guilty heart has ever heard.

In answer to that grumbling, Jesus tells one story in three movements. A shepherd loses one sheep out of a hundred and leaves the ninety-nine to go after it until he finds it. A woman loses one coin out of ten and lights a lamp and sweeps the house and searches until she finds it. A father loses a son who walks away with his inheritance and his heart, and waits, and watches the road. Three things lost. Three searches. And at the end of each, the same explosion of joy, a party thrown over something found, with the pointed reminder that “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (v. 7).

Then the third story breaks our hearts open. A younger son asks his father for his share of the estate, which is as good as wishing his father dead, and goes off to a far country and squanders everything. When the money runs out and the pigs eat better than he does, Luke says he “came to himself” (v. 17), rehearsed a confession, and started home. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck and kissed him. There is a robe, a ring, sandals, a fattened calf, and music. The boy who deserved to be a hired servant is welcomed home as a son.

But the story is not finished, and Jesus knew exactly who was standing in front of him. There is an older brother in the field, and when he hears the music he is furious, and he will not go in. He has served his father for years and never disobeyed, and no one ever threw him a party. The father comes out and pleads with him too. And there Jesus leaves it, with the door open and the elder son still standing in the dark, because the Pharisees who started this conversation are the elder brother, and Jesus is asking them, and us, the question the chapter will not answer for us: will you come in and rejoice that the lost are found, or will you stand outside, resenting a grace you have never thought you needed?

Group Discussion: The whole chapter is set in motion by a complaint: “This man receives sinners and eats with them” (v. 2). The Pharisees meant it as a charge against Jesus, but it is really a description of His heart. Why do you think the people furthest from God were so drawn to

Jesus, while the most religious people were so offended by Him? What does that tension reveal about how we sometimes think of God?

Personal Reflection: Somewhere in this chapter is a mirror for each of us. Some days we are the younger son who has wandered into a far country and needs to come home. Some days we are the elder brother, dutiful and resentful, standing outside the party. And sometimes we are called to share the Father's joy over someone else coming home. Which figure are you most like right now, and what is God inviting you to do about it this week?

Read Luke 15:1–32

Study Questions

1. Jesus answers the grumbling that “This man receives sinners and eats with them” (v. 2) with three parables that all end in a search and a celebration, and He says plainly, “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (v. 7). What do these stories teach us about the heart of God toward the lost, and about who takes the initiative in our salvation?
2. In the first two parables it is the shepherd who goes after the sheep “until he finds it” (v. 4) and the woman who lights a lamp and sweeps “until she finds it” (v. 8), searching diligently for what is lost. When you think about how you came to know God, how much do you tend to credit your own searching, and how does it change you to see how relentlessly God was seeking you?
3. Each parable closes with heaven rejoicing: “joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (v. 10), and the father declaring, “it was fitting to celebrate and be glad” (v. 32). What does it tell us about God and about the worth of a single soul that the response to one sinner returning is not mere relief but a celebration in heaven?
4. The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine in the open country to go after the one (v. 4), and the woman turns her whole house upside down for a single coin (v. 8). Is there someone in your life, a wandering child, a friend who has drifted, a person far from God, whom you have quietly written off as not worth the search? What would it look like to share the Shepherd's heart for that one?
5. When the younger son hit bottom feeding pigs and longing to eat their pods, Luke says “he came to himself” (v. 17) and resolved, “I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, Father, I have sinned” (v. 18). Trace the steps of what the son actually does in verses 17 through 20. What does this teach us about the nature of genuine repentance, and how is it more than simply feeling sorry or regretful?
6. The son had rehearsed a speech asking to be made “as one of your hired servants” (v. 19), but the father interrupts with a robe, a ring, sandals, and a feast, restoring him fully as a son (vv. 22–24). Are there ways you still try to earn your way back to God, offering to be a servant when He wants to call you a child? Where do you find it hard to simply receive grace you could never deserve?

7. While the son “was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him” (v. 20), and only then did the son finish his confession. What does the father’s running, embracing, and lavish restoration reveal about the character of God and the nature of the grace He extends to returning sinners?
8. The elder brother “was angry and refused to go in” (v. 28), insisting, “these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat” (v. 29). Where do you recognize the elder brother in yourself, the quiet keeping of accounts, the resentment when others receive grace, the joyless sense that your obedience has earned you something God owes you?
9. The chapter ends with two sons and one father. The younger son comes home through repentance, confession, and a humble return, and is met with the father’s free and lavish welcome, while the elder son stands outside in self-righteous resentment, refusing to rejoice (vv. 17–32). What does this final parable teach us about repentance, about grace, and about the deadly danger of a religion that is dutiful on the outside but proud and joyless within?
10. Look back across the whole chapter, from the grumbling Pharisees to the father pleading with his angry son in the dark. Jesus is showing us a God who seeks the lost, runs to the returning, and even goes out to plead with the self-righteous. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these three parables. What is the single truth from Luke 15:1–32 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Ezekiel 34:11–16, God Himself promising to seek out His scattered sheep and rescue them; 1 Timothy 1:15, Paul confessing that Christ came to save sinners, of whom he is the foremost; 2 Corinthians 7:9–11, the difference between godly grief that produces repentance and worldly grief that produces death; Romans 2:4, God’s kindness meant to lead us to repentance; Acts 2:37–38, the crowd cut to the heart who are told to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins.