

The Parable of the Lost Sons - Luke 15



This is one of the most beloved stories in the Bible. It is often entitled 'The Prodigal Son' (NASB) or 'The Parable of the Lost Son' (NKJV), etc. I would call it, 'The Parable of the Two Lost Sons.' We assume Jesus told this story as a sermon illustration from the pulpit to an interested audience. It was not. Jesus was addressing His enemies, the religious elites, who were condemning Him while He was with His friends at a communal meal table.

Note that Jesus constantly split people into two groups - friends or foes. There was no neutral ground. This is Jesus of the gospels. By the time Jesus finished telling the story, both His friends and His enemies understood exactly what He was saying. His friends loved what He said. His enemies hated Him even more.

A. Who was Jesus' Target Audience?

To understand this parable we must ask the following questions, and answer them in the reverse order.

- (i) Why did Jesus tell this story?
- (ii) Whom did Jesus direct this story to?
- (iii) What was the circumstance in which Jesus told this story?

1. Jesus had just spelled out to the enthusiastic crowd the true cost of being His disciple. Then he finished with, *'He who has ears to hear, let him hear.'* (14:35) So did anyone want to hear Jesus anymore afterwards? Amazingly the 'tax collectors' and 'sinners' did. All of them drew near Jesus to hear Him (v1), and it scandalised the scribes and the Pharisees. Now they were condemning Jesus for mixing with these unworthy lot!

Tax collectors were the most hated Jews in Jesus' days. They collected taxes from the fellow Jews for the Roman government, and enriched themselves by taking more than what was legally due. It was the unspoken arrangement with the Roman government who just turned a blind eye to it. So they were despised by their countrymen. Jesus not only made them His friends and ate with them, He even made one of them His disciple - Matthew - who must have been a lonely disciple.

Sinners were those people whose life and occupation were so incongruous with the Jewish religion, that they had to give up being a 'righteous Jew' who keep the ten commandments.

2. Jesus was probably sitting in the open courtyard of a rich tax collector, enjoying the hospitality of the 'sinners' at the meal table. The joy and happiness at this tax collector's house was probably a complete contrast to the cold stiff meal in the VIP Pharisees' home just a few days ago. These religious elites refused to join Jesus at the *sinners' table*, but looking in from the archway of the courtyard, and condemning Jesus to one another in the hearing range of those at the table, *'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'* (v2)

So (iii) what was the circumstance in which Jesus told the story? Jesus was sitting among His friends in a joyful courtyard party, and they were interrupted by the angry condemnation of the religious elites looking in from just outside.

And (ii) whom did Jesus direct this story to? It was to the religious and intellectual elites accusing Him from the courtyard archway.

B. The Parable of the Lost sheep & the Lost Coin

Jesus tells three parables in Luke 15, but they are really one. The parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin, prepare the hearers for the final parable of the two lost sons.

- a. The parable of lost sheep is an outdoor story that all men in Jesus' days could relate to.
- b. The parable of the lost coin is an indoor story that all women in Jesus' days could relate to.
- c. The parable of the lost sons is a family story that all people of any day can relate to.

The sheep was lost far away from the house, and the coin was lost right inside the house. The younger son was lost far away from the house, and the elder son was lost right in the middle of the house. Both were hopelessly lost.

Two themes stand out in the first two parables.

1. The Joy of Finding what was Lost - Losing something valuable brings great sadness, but finding it brings great joy that cannot be contained, so the joy must be shared with many.

In the first story, the good shepherd goes out of his way to search for the one lost sheep, leaving the nine-nine behind that are safe. When he finds the lost sheep, he throws a party and shares his joy with his friends and neighbours. The picture of God as a shepherd, e.g. Psalm 23, was familiar to the Jews. But God as the shepherd who was actively seeking the lost sheep was a foreign thought to them. There was a Jewish saying, 'there is joy before God when those who provoke Him perish from the world.' But Jesus painted a very different picture of their God, who goes out of His way to search for the lost. When He finds just one, He rejoices more over the one that was lost and then found, than over the ninety-nine who are safe.

In the second story, a woman loses one of her ten silver coins and she goes looking for it. A *drachma* was a day's wage. Some believe that married Jewish women put on her head the ten-silver-coin chain she received as her dowry. The woman went into an all-out search and rescue operation inside the house, sweeping the surface of the floor with her hand, and holding a lamp to light up the dark rooms. Middle eastern houses in those days didn't have windows, so the sunlight did not get into the house even during the day. When she finds the lost silver coin, she celebrates with her friends and neighbours, and shares her great joy.

2. Repentance on Earth and Celebration in Heaven – What happens here on earth impact heaven. God gets so excited that He throws a party to celebrate with His angels over one sinner who repents! Jesus explains why there was such joy at the lunch table with the tax collectors and sinners who drew near to hear Him talk about the kingdom of God. And the miserable atmosphere outside the courtyard was a shame to heaven! Furthermore, Jesus points out, 'lost' means misery, but 'found' means joy. Lost people are on their own and cannot share in the joy. But the people found by the Good Shepherd want to share with everyone the joy of heaven who is celebrating over the one sinner on earth who repents.

C. Parable of the Two Lost Sons

The story progresses with the camera zooming in on three different people and each person's point of view. (1) the younger son; (2) the father; (3) the elder son.

1. The Prodigal Son - This young man starts out by saying, 'Give me.'
 - a. He thinks life begins in 'getting, acquiring, grabbing, and seizing opportunities', so he unashamedly goes to his father and says, 'Give me now all that I am entitled to in the future.' He starts out by saying, 'Give me NOW.' *I can't wait until my father dies. Who knows if I will have tomorrow?* He was afraid he would miss out on life if he waited. He learned the hard way that life doesn't begin when we say, 'Give me'. Life begins when we say, 'Forgive me.'
 - b. In the Jewish inheritance law, (1) the eldest son received double portion in the family estate over the younger sons; and (2) the father would be supported by the family business until his death. So the young man's demand cheated his father of the income in his retirement years, maybe even forced his father to sell the family business and so into an early retirement. The younger son's demand was tantamount to death wish for his father.
 - c. Incredibly the father didn't say, 'No.' He had every right to refuse his younger son's request, but he divided his livelihood and gave the son's future inheritance early. Why? Because the younger son's heart had already left home. So, the father let his son go and let him have his way. Not many days after, the younger son 'gathered everything together' and left for a 'far country' to the Paris of the Gentile city, east of the Jordan. The young man left in search of freedom, new friends, and exciting experiences. And he forgot all about his father, though his father never forgot him.
 - d. What this young man was really looking for was 'life' and 'love'. But there are two questions to consider in a far country. (1) What will you have to show for at the end of it all? (2) How long will it last?
2. The Prodigal's Return - This young man's search came to an end pretty quickly because of his lack of experience in financial planning. He squandered his vast inheritance from his father. Then to make matters even worse, famine hit the land hard.

- a. This young man has never seen an economic recession or depression in his lifetime, much like the Australian millennials in the last ~29 years. For the first time in his life, he had to work with his own hands. The only job he could find was in a pig farm. Pigs were unclean animals to the Jews (Lev 11:7). One Jewish saying went, ‘cursed be the man who would breed swine.’ Even today, the smell in some pig farms cannot be described in words.
 - b. But the pay from this job wasn’t enough to fill the young man’s hungry stomach. He would have gladly eaten the pig’s feed, but ‘no one gave him anything’ (v16). What bitter irony! This young man said to his father, ‘Give me all now.’ Now in the land of his dream, no one would give him anything, not even the pig’s feed. The pigs were better off than he was!
 - c. But when the young man came to the end of his road, a new road was just beginning for him.
 - (i) ‘He came to himself.’ (v17) Why is it that we have to hit rock bottom before we look to God? But even if God is our last resort, He is our best resort.
 - (ii) He thought about his father’s house and his father’s hired servants. (v17)
 - (iii) He made a firm decision to return home. ‘I will arise and go to my father...’
 - (iv) He rehearsed the words of his confession, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.’ (v17) *‘I have forfeited my sonship, I have traded it in for the ‘freedom’ in the world.’*
 - (v) ‘And he arose and came to his father.’ (v20) This is the crucial step in repentance. Good intentions never saved anybody. The young man turned his intention into action. He said, ‘I am going back home,’ and he went back home!
3. **The Father** - ‘When he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.’ (v20)
- a. How did the old father see the son first? How long has he been waiting outside? We don’t know, but he must have seen his son coming home a thousand times in his heart, standing on that road where he saw his son leaving.
 - b. The son was probably both startled and ashamed, and he began his rehearsed words, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son...’ (v21) The father did not let his son continue. It hurt the father more to hear these words than it embarrassed the son to say them. He shouted to his servants, ‘Bring out the best robe and put it on him (to cover the years of shame), and put a ring on his hand (to mark him as part of the family), and sandals on his feet (to prove he is a son, not a slave). And bring the fatted calf here and kill it and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ And they began to be merry. (v22-24) What was the father saying? *You are not a servant. You are my son. You have truly come home. It’s enough.*
 - c. That day the young man learned he could be ‘dead’ even when he was ‘living it up’. The ‘life’ and the ‘love’ he went looking for in a far country, was all along at home with his father. There was another thing the young man learned that day. The happiest person out of all this was not him, but his father. All he had to do to get his sonship back, was to come home.

It would have been lovely if the story finished here. But it doesn’t. Sadly, there was someone not at all happy to see this young man come home – besides the fatted calf!
4. **The Elder Son** - He was furious to see his father throwing a party for his young brother who’d come back. ‘But he was angry, and he would not go in.’ (v28)
- a. ‘Therefore, his father came out and pleaded with him.’ (v28) The son speaks, ‘Lo, these many years I have been serving you (*doulos*, i.e. slaving away); I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.’ (v28-30)
- Truth #1 - The only rightful heir left in the house was not at all a son, but a slave trying to become a son all these years, and never became one.

Truth #2 - In all these years the elder son never really knew the father. He only had to ask, and he too would be given the fatted calf and more! But the calf was safe with elder son because he would never ask!

Truth #3 - This son had an overly righteous view of himself, and an overly sinful view of his brother. 'I have never transgressed.' (v29) Really? 'He devoured your livelihood with harlotry.' (v30) How does he know?

Truth #4 - He disowns his younger brother. He says to his father, 'this son of yours' (v30). The father pleads with him, 'your brother.' (v32) Even the servants say to the elder son, 'Your brother.' (v27)

The father pleads with his elder son just as tenderly as he did to the younger son, to enter into his joy and join the celebration. The story ends with a question mark. Did the elder son join the party? Or would the sad story repeat all over again for the father?

- b. Why was the elder son angry? (1) Was he afraid his inheritance might get divided again with his younger brother? But the father assures him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours.' (v31) (2) His younger brother was getting away with so much, and was getting things so easily? While he had to earn every penny, slaving away for the father?
- c. Who is the younger brother in this story? The tax collectors and sinners. Who is the elder brother? The scribes and Pharisees. How does the story finish? Did the brothers reconcile?

Jesus didn't finish the story. He was saying in effect, 'You finish the story.' If you are the younger brother, you need to return home to God your Father. But if you are the elder brother, you need come in and celebrate with your Father over your younger brother, 'Get another fatted calf because I am joining the party!'

But what does 'this elder brother' do? They kill Jesus instead a few weeks later.

5. The Father's heart

- a. Can you see the story from the father's perspective? The father is the most misunderstood person in the Bible! Who among us understands the father's heart? Who has come home truly to the father? The father is the greatest, the strongest, he owns everything! And yet, he is the least understood, least wanted, and least loved. And he is the most vulnerable, suffering in silence and waiting for His sons to come home. If a sheep or a coin is lost, he would just get up and find them all. But his sons' hearts cannot be claimed like animals or money. They must be won in love. So, the Father suffers and waits in silence in the midst of the misunderstanding of his sons.
- b. Why were his two sons lost? Because both sons had wandering hearts. Even when physically at home, their hearts were never home. This is the condition of the lost humanity. Why? They never understood the father's heart for them. They were born as sons in the house, yet one would gladly trade sonship for 'freedom' – he couldn't wait to leave home, and the other was a slave in the house who never matured into sonship.

The younger son thought life is found in adventure, new experiences, and fun far away from home.

The elder son thought life is found in 'earning' things *from* the father, rather than enjoying being *with* the father. Maybe his heart wandered far away to a future when he would inherit all he'd worked hard for, and he would not need to answer to the father anymore. His heart became prone to self-righteousness and pride, so he easily accuses his brother of getting 'undeserved favours' and the father of 'unfairness' and 'injustice' towards himself.

- c. But what about the father? Who will understand the father's heart? Who has come home to the father? God's house too is full of people with wandering and restless hearts, with the fear of missing out on life. We are constantly looking far away for certain 'freedom' we do not feel we have. We are searching for some 'blessing' and 'inheritance' while completely missing the heart of our heavenly Father.

Can we ask ourselves today the following?

Has your heart come home to the father's heart?

Can you say, 'My heart has finally come home to my Father in my Father's house'?