

Bringing Jesus to Your World

Heaven's Lost and Found Luke 15

What is it that has led some believers into relative isolation *from* the world around us, rather than into participation in the surrounding culture as the salt and light of Jesus Christ? Or put more positively, what is it that moved Jesus into such a radical, compassionate involvement in the lives of sinners, outcasts, the despised, the poor, the “rejects” of traditional religion?

Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Luke 15:1-2

The year is AD 33. Jesus had just left Jerusalem where he had been attending one of the great Jewish feasts, the Feast of Dedication. He now comes to the region of Perea, on the eastern banks of the Jordon River. (show map)

I want you to picture what is happening in this account. On the one hand we have the tax collectors and “sinners” and on the other the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. The tax collectors of that day were renegades, cheaters who – who under the authority of the Roman government and supervision of a local “tax farmer” – overcharged the populace and pocketed the surplus. They were known for their extortion and injustice.

But then there are also the “sinners,” the text says. This was a sort of catch-all category for those who failed to measure up to the meticulously imposed standards of the religious experts. Of course, many of these standards were founded more on human tradition rather than divine revelation.

Such intimate association on the part of Jesus with such people was not a one-time occurrence. It was an habitual practice, as we see from passages such as Matthew 9, 21 and Luke 18. Jesus hung out with these kind of people on a regular basis.

On the other hand we have the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. These are the religionists, the traditionalists, and at least in their own eyes, the righteous. And while those of doubtful reputation are closing in on Jesus, anxious to hear what he has to say, these self-righteous Pharisees can only complain and condemn: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

To eat with someone in the culture of Christ’s day spoke of intimate fellowship and familiarity. These Jewish “separationists” (we might call them) were not simply surprised, they were horrified and stood in arrogant judgment of Jesus’ lifestyle.

In response, Jesus gives them (and us!) this triad of parables. In the first two, he *explains* his radical lifestyle of involvement with the lost, the sinners. And in the third, he goes further, *exposing* the “hang-up” of these pharisaical leaders.

As we look at these three stories, we can each ask the question: “With whom do I identify?” Do you identify with the Pharisees and their holy huddle? Do you identify with Jesus, who – understanding the Father’s heart – compassionately involves himself with those in need? Or do you identify with the tax-collectors and sinners themselves, sensing your own desperate need of God’s gracious intervention in your life?

THE LOST SHEEP

Then Jesus told them this parable: “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ Luke 15:3-6

Picture yourself as a Palestinian shepherd. You own a hundred sheep, a medium size flock for that day. Evening comes and you and the assisting shepherds count the flock, making sure that all are there before calling it a day.

But one, just one is missing. So without a second thought, you leave the ninety-nine under the watchful care of the assisting shepherds and set out with resolute determination to find that one lost sheep. When you find it, in typical mid-eastern fashion you place it over your shoulders with its stomach snug against the back of your neck and its four feet securely bound in front of your face. Then, when you return to the fold, what do you do? You throw a party, saying, “Celebrate with me! I’ve found my lost sheep!”

Living in a pastoral society, these religious leaders could easily identify with this little story. I imagine that most of them were standing there shaking their heads in full agreement: “Sure, Jesus, if we had lost one sheep, we would do the same!”

Jesus, having posed the question and received a positive response, drives home the application:

I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. Luke 15:7

Maybe some of these self-righteous religionists caught the subtle analogy and tried to respond. But Jesus moves quickly on.

THE LOST COIN

“Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ Luke 15:8-9

Again, use your imagination with me. You’re a poor, Jewish widow possessing ten coins worth about 16 cents each. These coins are your most precious possession, your “nest-egg” for a rainy day. But one, just one is lost. You light a lamp, as the low door lets very little light into the

windowless, miserable dwelling. And you begin to frantically sweep the room with a palm twig in search of that one lost coin. When it's found, you too – as the shepherds did – call together your friends: “Celebrate with me! I have found my lost coin!”

I can just imagine that, again, the response of the religious leaders was similar to the previous story: “Yes, yes, we would do that. After all, 16 cents is 16 cents!”

But again, Jesus drives home the application:

In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. Luke 15:10

In these two short stories, Jesus has vindicated himself, explaining his association with such people of doubtful reputation. Just like a shepherd celebrates the discovery of his one lost sheep or a widow throws a party because her lost coin is found, so there is a great party in the presence of God whenever one sinner repents. All of heaven is happy!

So why did the religious establishment stand in such judgment of Jesus' lifestyle? Bottom line, they totally misunderstood the heart of God. Their legalism and traditions blinded them to God's infinite mercy and supreme joy in forgiving those who recognize their need.

But we can also ask: Why do we as believers today sometimes fail to step into the lives of those around us who so desperately need the message of grace, hope and forgiveness that Jesus offers? Why do we so often prefer to hand out in our own “holy huddle,” busily engaged with the ninety-and-nine, rather than share a meal with lost neighbor, or compassionately penetrate the inner-city, or enter a local bar to share God's antidote to human addiction?

I fear we too have misunderstood the heart of God. We lose sight of the fact that our God is the eternally outgoing God of mission, constantly seeking and saving those who are lost.

What motivated Jesus to such hands-on involvement with such a crowd of people who were so outwardly different in their values and lifestyle? He did it because He was the very incarnation of God's infinite mercy and love. No wonder we read four chapters later in this gospel: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost.”

It's as if Jesus is saying, “Oh you religious folk, you bigoted, self-righteous hypocrites. Why do I eat and drink with such people? It's because my mission is to seek-and-to-save, not search-and-destroy. It's because my Father's mercy is so infinite that He takes supreme joy in forgiving!” And it is this truth that is illustrated so clearly in the third of these three parables.

THE COMPASSIONATE FATHER

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. “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. 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.
Luke 15:11-16

Obviously this prodigal son pictures for us not only the sinners and tax-collectors of verses 1-2, but also the lost coin and the lost sheep of the first two parables. In his sinful rebellion he essentially reduces himself to a sub-human level, wanting to eat the husks that were left over by the pigs. This association with pigs must have been particularly offensive to the Pharisees.ⁱ In this sense, the younger son typifies the awfulness of sin and the desperate condition of each of us apart from Christ. (develop)

However, as the lost sheep of verse 7 and the lost coin of verse 9, he is found! He repents.

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. Luke 15:17-20a

Develop repentance and faith

Notice how this son’s father responded:

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. Luke 15:20b

What a moving, vivid picture of forgiveness and compassion. While the son is still a long way off, the father sees him. He had not forgotten his rebellious son. He was patiently waiting. More than that, the father’s heart is “pounding.” The NIV says that he was “filled with compassion.” And then he runs toward his son, a most unusual and undignified gesture for an aged oriental. And the he embraces him and kisses him, literally over and over again, as a sign of forgiveness.

The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ “But the father said to his servants, ‘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. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. Luke 15:21-24

Amazingly, this prodigal is welcomed home, not as a wage-earner, but as an honored guest. He’s not given probation, but a party! The father gives him a clean set of clothes, a robe which is a mark of distinction, a signet ring indicating a conferral of authority, and sandals, worn only by free men, not slaves. And then on top of this, the grain-fed heifer is roasted, a delicacy reserved only for special guests. In other words, this is party time and they’re going to celebrate!

No matter how far you and I are away from the Lord, we can run through that door and into His arms. And the Bible says that before coming to Christ, we are *very, very* far.

Song: When You Come Home

From a comparison with the two previous parables, it seems that Jesus could have stopped at this point. He's vindicated himself. He's explained that his motive in associating with such people was squarely rooted in his Father's infinite mercy and supreme joy in finding the lost.

If Jesus had concluded the parables at this point, all three would have ended on a positive note – rejoicing over recovering the lost. But Jesus chooses to “twist the knife” a little further. He moves now from vindicating his own actions to condemning those of the Pharisees.

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. You brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ““My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’” Luke 15:25-32

Jesus' critics have been silenced! They clearly see in the elder son their own pride and self-righteousness. The older brother becomes angry and refuses to celebrate the salvation of his brother. Maybe he complains that his father is lowering standards and compromising principles.

The older son (just like these religious leaders) seeks acceptance on his own terms rather than the father's terms: “Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders...” He finds refuge in his prideful legalism that only reinforces the walls of isolation.

And he rejects his younger son, refusing any type of relationship with him: “This son of yours...” he says. He essentially has a good eye on himself, a bad eye on his brother, and no eye at all on God.

The father has only one thing to say: “Stop it! We’re not playing good boys and bad boys anymore. Your brother was dead, and is now alive. The name of the game is resurrection, not record keeping of wrongs.”

Do you catch the deliberate progression in these three parables? Would these religious leaders celebrate over a lost sheep that was now found? Why of course. And would they celebrate over a coin, lost but now recovered? Certainly!

But would they rejoice over a human life, once dead in sin, but now alive; once lost, but now found? Not on your life. You see, what was natural and expected in searching for lost sheep and coins, is now grossly perverted when it comes to searching for lost people.

Is it not the same for you and me? The passion and intensity that is so natural and expected in searching for a lost *thing* that we consider valuable, is diminished or entirely distorted when it comes to searching for *lost people*.

ⁱ Leviticus 11:7