

THE PARABLES OF LUKE 15

The three parables of Luke 15 have to do with finding what was lost, the Parable of the Lost and Found Sheep, the Parable of the Lost and Found Drachma (Coin) and the Parable of the Lost and Found Son (commonly called the Prodigal Son). I am deliberately calling them the Parable of the Lost and Found...to highlight the joy that is intended by the parable. The parables are told in response to criticism of Jesus for eating with sinners (15:1-2). It is important to note that this is the setting for the parables, as it will colour our understanding of them, especially our understanding of the third parable. The parables teach on God's infinite love and mercy, rebuke Jesus' critics and defend his actions.

The Parable of the Lost and Found Sheep (Luke 15:4-7)

Although shepherds were regarded as dishonest Jesus used a shepherd as a figure for God. Remember also that angels appeared to shepherds to tell them the good news of Jesus' birth in Luke 2. Every evening a shepherd counts his flock. The shepherd searches for the one lost sheep because it is astray and cannot find its way back by itself. The emphasis is on the great joy of the shepherd in finding the lost sheep. God's joy over a repentant sinner is great.

The Parable of the Lost and Found Drachma (Luke 15:8-10)

In the second parable of Luke 15 a woman is a figure for God. The drachma was a Greek silver coin, and would have been the acceptable wage for a labourer. Here too the emphasis is on God's joy at a sinner who repents.

Parable of the Lost and Found Son (the Prodigal Son) (Luke 15:11-32)

This is one of the most beautiful parables. The parable has two parts; the first part, vv11-24, concerns the younger son, and the second part, vv25-32, concerns the elder son.

The first part of the parable, vv11-24, justifies Jesus' mission to sinners. According to Jewish custom the younger son received one third of the father's inheritance on the father's death although divided earlier. During his lifetime, the father retained the use of the produce. The younger son feeding the pigs abroad and eating their food shows to what an extent he had tumbled because pigs were regarded as unclean (Lev 11:7). The younger son was living like a Gentile, instead of like a Jew. He had hit rock bottom. What the pigs were eating (v16) were the long pods of the carob tree, eaten by animals, and at times by extremely poor people. But then he came to his senses (v17).

Compare vv18-19 and v21. The son had intended to say three things to his Father when he returned but he said only two. What is omitted?

Faced with his father's love, the younger son didn't offer to become a servant. His father had such welcome for him that he knew it would be offensive to suggest that he work as a hired servant.

The second part, vv 25-32, invites those who have always been faithful. We are not told whether or not the elder son went in to the banquet. Notice what it was that offended the elder son, it was the party for the younger son. Notice that the father went out to meet the elder son just as he went out to meet the younger son, vv20 and 28. If the elder son would accept his father's

invitation to enter he would gain a brother! The elder son was lacking in love; instead he had a spirituality of duty. In the second half of the parable Jesus invites those who are faithful to cease murmuring at the way sinners are received and rejoice instead in this good news. God is infinitely loving and merciful and that is why Jesus associates with sinners.

Notice that the elder son, despite the fact that he was with his father all those years, was shocked that his father threw the party. He still didn't know or understand his father's heart; maybe the servants understood his father better. The elder son never felt accepted, appreciated or loved by his father. That was the real issue. And so his resentment towards his younger brother was really pointing to a deeper wound: he felt like a forgotten orphan; he did not feel loved. The older son had no real relationship with his father. He was distant and aloof. He was an observer. He was like the Pharisees and scribes in 15:2, resentful and judgmental. He cannot enter into joy. He is a blind virtuous person. For years he had done the right thing but with the wrong attitude. "All these years I slaved for you" (v 29). He sees his father as a slave master. The elder son badly needs to meditate on the Parable of the Vineyard Labourers in Matt 20:1-16. He also reminds me of the Parable of the Pharisee in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14). The father has lost both sons. The elder son doesn't recognise his brother as his brother, "this son of yours" (v30). The elder son has been called the prodigal who stayed at home. He is also lost but his lostness is more difficult to see. So the parable is about a loving father and two prodigal sons!

Jesus told the parables of Luke 15 to defend himself before the Pharisees and scribes. They regarded themselves as righteous and Jesus mixing with sinners as offensive. The Pharisees would have regarded the first two parables of Luke 15 as being irrelevant to them since they were not lost. Likewise with the third parable which begins with a son who is lost. But the older brother is just like the Pharisees. They would have realised later that it was referring to them. Jesus was inviting the Pharisees to a change of heart. We are not told whether or not the elder son went in to the party. Perhaps the reason for that is because Jesus intended the Pharisees and scribes listening to him to decide for themselves whether or not they would go in to the party.

[Now that we know what Jesus meant by the parable, what about the relevance of the parable for our lives? We can ask ourselves are we like the younger or elder son. Presumably there is a bit of both in each of us.

The Connections Between The Younger Son And Our Lives Today

Like the younger son, do we rejoice in the welcoming love of God like the younger son? If there is dissatisfaction in us, a longing for something that we don't have (like the younger son going abroad), we could look on that as longing for God. St. Augustine said "our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee". The unfortunate thing is that the further we are from our Father, the more difficult it is to hear his voice. The father did not go in search of the younger son. The son had to make the decision himself to come back. If the father had gone in search of him, no doubt he would have resented it. He had to make the decision himself, "I will leave this place and go to my father" (15:18). That is a decision we all have to make, to leave the illusion of false happiness and go to our Father. Josh 24:15 is relevant: "today you must make up your mind whom you mean to serve, whether the gods whom your ancestors served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are now living. As for me and my family, we shall serve Yahweh". Also read Deut 30:15-20.

The parable can be interpreted as a parable about the seduction of the false self and the rediscovery of the true self. Though we might applaud the industrious independence of the son, there is something inherently selfish in the whole affair. But that is the nature of the false self. It feeds upon itself, thrives on instant gratification, is blindly invested in the agenda of the ego and isolates a person from others. This venture ultimately leads the younger son to the pigs, a shocking image of the final destination of those who invest heavily in the false self. How can the younger son - any one of us - become free from the obsessions and agenda of the false self and thus leave the pig pen where we are truly foreigners? That's where asceticism comes in." "To come back to the true self is to come back to the inner sanctuary where the Divine presence dwells; it is to recover the original stance of Adam and Eve.

(above paragraph taken from **Swimming in the Sun** pages 19 and 23 by **Albert Haase**, published and copyright **1993** by St Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati, OH, USA and used by permission of the publishers.)

Never to grow up - never to outgrow God. That is a goal of the spiritual life. Never to foolishly think that we can make it on our own without God or grace. The false self tries to convince me that the really important things in life are based upon what I do, upon my abilities. If I buy into that illusion, I begin to take charge. I begin wielding power. I become manipulative. I insist upon things being done my way. I demand what I think is rightfully mine and, like the prodigal son, off I go! This independent, self-sufficient approach to life is the fundamental sin of so many of us...It is the refusal of grace. It is the failure to acknowledge Abba as the Divine Almsgiver. It is Adam and Eve reaching for the apple all over again. But, luckily, self-sufficiency can take us only so far. Sooner or later we run up against a brick wall. We get a sudden glimpse into our existential self-deficiency. We finish eating the apple and discover, a few hours later, that we are hungry again. We gradually realize where we actually are and where we truly belong.

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The whole Christian life is a life in which the further a person progresses, the more he has to depend directly on God...The more we progress, the less we are self-sufficient. The more we progress, the poorer we get so that the man who has progressed most, is totally poor - he has to depend directly on God. He's got nothing left in himself.

(above paragraph taken from **Monastic Spirituality: Citeaux** Tape AA2083 by **Thomas Merton**; recorded and copyright by Credence Cassettes, Kansas City, MO, USA, and used by permission of the publishers.)

"Addiction" might be the best word to explain the lostness that so deeply permeates contemporary society. Our addictions make us cling to what the world proclaims as the keys to self-fulfillment: accumulation of wealth and power; attainment of status and admiration; lavish consumption of food and drink, and sexual gratification without distinguishing between lust and love. These addictions create expectations that cannot but fail to satisfy our deepest needs. As long as we live within the world's delusions, our addictions condemn us to futile quests in "the

distant country,” leaving us to face an endless series of disillusionments while our sense of self remains unfulfilled. In these days of increasing addictions, we have wandered far away from our Father’s home. The addicted life can aptly be designated a life lived in “a distant country.” It is from there that our cry for deliverance rises up.

(above paragraph taken from **The Return of the Prodigal Son** pages 42-43 by **Henri Nouwen**, published and copyright **1992** by Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd and used by permission of the publishers.)

Merton once distinguished two kinds of spirituality. The first way, based in the Synoptic Gospels, is characterized by active faith: A person “does” things. The second - more contemplative, more mature and more childlike - is based upon Jesus in John’s Gospel... in this second approach, one is content simply to wait for the Lord, expect the Lord and then abide in the Lord. This Johannine approach requires a person to develop a more receptive stance towards the Divine, traditionally a characteristic of the feminine side of the soul. Perhaps this is why Saint Teresa of Avila points to the Franciscan Peter of Alcantara’s statement that women make much more progress on the spiritual road than men. Women have the contemplative stance of receptivity carved into their very flesh. Men, on the other hand, are more inclined to remain on the path of “active faith.” They take control in the spiritual life and do things. They are in charge. They tend to equate spirituality with external behaviour. But this active Synoptic approach can take us only so far. To advance further along the spiritual road, we must surrender control, become receptive and have the humility to be led. We must discover and embrace the feminine aspects of our personalities in order to journey into the mysteries of the more contemplative way. Sadly, some men are just not “man enough” to do that.

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The Connections Between The Elder Son And Our Lives Today

We have tried to see the connection between the younger son and our lives today. Now let’s try to see the connection between the elder son and our lives. Like the elder son are we offended by God’s grace towards another, especially if we have questions about that person’s conduct and character? Slipping into self-righteousness, like the elder son, is a danger for good people. Instead our hearts should be constantly grateful to God for his gifts and we need to be humble before him, like the tax collector in the Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector (Luke 18:10-14). If we find it difficult to rejoice when the younger son returns, is that because we have so quickly forgotten when we were lost and found by God? I think yes. Think of how hurt the younger son must have felt when his elder brother refused to come in. Those who repent today must feel hurt if they are not welcomed or taken seriously.

Let’s look at the elder son from another viewpoint. There are some people who would love to live a more reckless life, but are afraid to because of public opinion. This has been described as ‘sacred cowardice’. Who knows whether or not the elder son was suffering from sacred cowardice? He was the one who always did everything right, yet when the crunch came he was not able to enjoy the party. With all of his right living he was not really enjoying life. He was surrounded by

blessings but didn't recognize them. Are there any grumpy priests or religious or committed lay faithful? In a sense the elder son was wasting his life too. In the end it was he who was really the poor one. Maybe the prim and proper nowadays think that the drunks and druggies are wasting their lives while they themselves are wasting their lives with materialism etc.

In his jealousy and bitterness, the elder son can only see that his irresponsible brother is receiving more attention than he himself, and concludes that he is the less loved of the two. His father's heart, however, is not divided into more or less. The father's free and spontaneous response to his younger son's return does not involve any comparisons with his elder son. To the contrary, he ardently desires to make his elder son part of his joy. Our God, who is both Father and Mother to us, does not compare. Never. Even though I know in my head that this is true, it is still very hard to fully accept it with my whole being.

(above paragraph taken from **The Return of the Prodigal Son** page 103 by **Henri Nouwen**, published and copyright **1992** by Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd and used by permission of the publishers.)

The Parable and God's Desire for Us

Looking at the three parables of Luke 15 we could say they are parables of God's desire for us. Isn't it amazing how much God, who made the vast expanse of the universe, cares about us. Isn't it mind-boggling that we are so important to God (Remember Ps 8). Yet that is the point of the three parables of Luke 15. We are so important to God. The power of God's desire for us breaks through human barriers, such as those imposed by the Pharisees and scribes (15:2). We see that God loves each person specially and equally, no matter how illogical that may seem. The desire of the father is so strong that it drives him out to meet the son returning. John points out that God loved us firstly (1 John 4:10), so our response to God, like the prodigal returning, or elder son going into the house if he eventually does, is accepting the love with which we were firstly loved. We might also remember the words of John 15:16; "You did not choose me, I chose you." Heaven is not earned, it is given.

We notice from these parables that God is somehow incomplete if not loved by us! When we come back to God he throws a party! Love is a risk, it depends on the response of the other person. Yet God has taken that gamble with us. How does God feel when we don't respond? Jer 2:5 and Hos 11:3-4 tell us. Someone has described God as a Jilted Lover! Does God ever grow tired of loving us? God keeps believing in love and in our potential to respond. Love is a risk, but love is the method God has chosen to use, so it must be worth trying. If love doesn't win now, it may win in the future. Even if it doesn't, love is still the right way to live. God is the unparalleled Lover.

It might sound strange, but God wants to find me as much as, if not more than, I want to find God. Yes, God needs me as much as I need God. God is not the patriarch who stays home, doesn't move, and expects his children to come to him, apologise for their aberrant behaviour, beg for forgiveness, and promise to do better. To the contrary, he leaves the house, ignoring his dignity by running toward them, pays no heed to apologies and promises of change, and brings them to the table richly prepared for them.

(above paragraph taken from **The Return of the Prodigal Son** page 106 by **Henri Nouwen**, published and copyright **1992** by Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd and used by permission of the publishers.)

Concluding Remarks

The younger son was humiliated and suffered. He was worn out in body. He still realized he was the son of his father but lacked faith in his father to re-instate him. He lacked faith in his father to forgive him and love him unconditionally. Often we are told that we are not good enough, that we have to earn love. Our experience of sin gives us a warped outlook on life and on God. Perhaps we only see God in our own image. But Jesus' picture of the father in the story of the Prodigal Son is the picture of a loving merciful father with arms thrown wide, ready to forgive and forget. Only Jesus, the sinless one, could have drawn such a picture of God.

Many of us find it difficult to forgive. The prodigal son did not expect to be forgiven by his father when he returned and only wishes to be a servant: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men" (15:18-19). The father disregards the offences of both sons. The father kissing his son was not done at that time in society. He is acting more like a mother than a father. The father in the parable shows us that God is both Mother and Father.

How many times must I forgive? Jesus said we are to forgive seventy seven times (Matt 18:22; see Luke 17:4). Imagine the prodigal son going off another 76 times and the father welcoming him back another 76 times!

Notice what the father says to the elder son "All I have is yours" (v 31). I think that is the most beautiful statement in the parable. Our heavenly Father keeps opening his arms to us also and saying "All I have is yours".