

Luke 15: The Parables of Loss and Redemption



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Today I want to read the parables of Luke 15 with you, the parables we call “The Parable of the Lost Sheep,” “The Parable of the Lost Coin,” and “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” I hope that by reading these scriptures together, you will learn something, perhaps not something new but I hope you’ll come to a deeper understanding. If nothing else, I hope you will be reminded that the scriptures are replete with spiritual wisdom and their study is one of the surest ways to bring the Spirit into your life.

I get the interpretive key I will use for thinking about these parables from Elder Jeffrey R. Holland. Speaking of the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-15), he said: “This parable—like all parables—is not really about laborers or wages any more than the others are about sheep and goats. This is a story about God’s goodness, His patience and forgiveness, and the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ.”^[1] I suggest that as we read these three parables we understand them, too, as reminders of the Atonement and the blessings and responsibilities that it brings.

So begin with Luke 15:1. It says:

Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him.

We have seen this before. Something very much like this happens at the beginning of the previous chapter. In fact, this is at least the third time that Luke has portrayed a similar scene: people gathering for a feast,^[2] with sinners gathering around Jesus, and Pharisees and scribes complaining about that as they do in verse 2, which says:

And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.

What they are complaining about is that Jesus talks and eats with despised people: those who collect taxes and who are sinners. When we hear the word *sinners* we think of those who commit assault, theft, adultery, and so on. Of course those would also have been sins in Jesus’ day. But being a sinner in the first century meant more than it does today. A sinner was any unclean person, and being unclean meant more than not living a moral life. A person could be unclean merely on the basis of his occupation. With no disrespect meant to your new president, tanners, for example, were unclean. People with certain diseases or disfigurements were unclean. So when the Pharisees and scribes say that Jesus eats with sinners, they were referring to a range of people from

thieves and murderers, at one end of the spectrum, to those in unclean professions, at the other. Jesus not only speaks with this large group of people, as we see Him doing in verse 1, he eats with them, which would make Him, too, unclean. Thus, Luke 15 begins with a familiar New Testament setting: Jesus is being criticized—behind His back—for the fact that He has dealings with those whom the scribes and Pharisees believe ought to be avoided.

We probably most often think that these parables are about the need for us to perform the rescue, as President Thomas S. Monson has called it. They are, indeed, about that need and a prophetic voice has reminded us.^[3] But they are also about more than rescue, and the first verse of the chapter suggests that we should try to understand the parables as a response to the setting we see there.

In that setting, whether a feast or a meeting on the road, Jesus meets with despised people and is criticized for doing so.^[4] The parables of the chapter are a response to that criticism. Of course, as He has often done, Jesus answers with a parable a criticism they have made only in whispers:

What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbors, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. ([Luke 15: 4-6](#))

For obvious reasons we call this “The Parable of the Lost Sheep.” All of us have seen artistic depictions of it, but for a few moments I want you to suspend your recollection of any depictions of this parable that you might be familiar with, and turn your attention to the story itself.

Notice that there are no lambs in the story, only sheep.^[5] Now think about how the shepherd gets the lost sheep back to the flock: he puts it on his shoulders. I assume that he carried it because the sheep was exhausted or wounded and could not return on its own, but why not in His arms? The non-canonical Gospel of Thomas tells us that the lost sheep was the biggest one,^[6] but regardless of its relative size in the herd, it would not be small if it is not a lamb. Google tells me that the average ewe weighs between 100 and 220 pounds while the average ram weighs between 100 and 350 pounds. Even at the light end, the shepherd must carry at least one hundred pounds for what I presume was some distance. He could only do that by putting the sheep across his shoulders, and carrying such a load would be taxing. But weight wouldn't be the only problem. Anyone who has seen a herd of sheep, whether in the dusty Utah and Arizona desert or the green hills of Ireland and Britain, knows that they are dirty, smelly animals. This is the story of someone doing a great deal of hard, smelly work for one sheep out of a hundred. Yet, Jesus tells us in verse 5, He does it joyfully:

[W]hen he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ([Luke 15:5](#))

The shepherd rejoices *in* the work before he gets home to his friends and neighbors, where he says:

Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. ([Luke 15:6](#))

The shepherd's joy begins as soon as he finds the lost sheep and it continues through the work of return.

At the end of the parable, in case the Pharisees and scribes didn't understand it, Jesus tells them its moral. Verse 7 says:

I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repented, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance. ([Luke 15:7](#))

The parable has at least three meanings: First, we must understand that heaven itself rejoices over human repentance. The recovery of those who are exhausted, wounded, and unable to return on their own because of sin—in other words, every human being—is the work of the Atonement. Thus, second, Jesus’ critics ought to rejoice for the return of those who seek Him out, just as the shepherd rejoiced for his sheep. And third, we must imitate the Savior by rescuing those who are lost and taking joy in that work.

What made the lost sheep different than the others? Was it loved more? There’s no reason to believe so. Was it more valuable? The parable says nothing about that. What made it different than the ninety and nine was only that it was lost. What about those whom the shepherd left behind to await his return? Are they really comparable to “just persons, which need no repentance,” but over whom there implicitly seems to be no great joy? Surely we must read that phrase about not needing repentance with a bit of a smile. If we ask who the ninety and nine supposedly just persons are, we have to recognize there are none—except Christ, the only just person. All the rest of humanity are sheep who have gone astray and need rescue. There is only one rescuer, Jesus Christ, whom we see here administering to lost sheep by eating and talking with them—and by offering parables to bring them to repentance.

After hearing this parable, the Pharisees and scribes, whose sneer about Jesus eating with publicans and sinners initiated it, remain silent. I imagine Jesus telling this story and then pausing, waiting for them to respond.^[7] He hopes that perhaps there is at least one among them who recognizes how the parable speaks to them. But nothing happens; no one says anything.

Is their silence a sign of guilt or incomprehension? Either is imaginable. But when they say nothing, I also imagine Jesus, as it were, trying a second time. If that didn’t get His point across, perhaps the next parable will. He tells what we call “The Parable of the Lost Coin”:

Either what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it? And when she hath found it she calleth her friends and her neighbors together, saying, Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece which I had lost. Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth. ([Luke 15:8-10](#))

This has the same narrative structure as the first parable: loss, search, recovery, and joy. It has the same moral comparing her joy with the joy in heaven over those who repent. But it is shorter, getting to the point immediately. By doing so, perhaps it will get the critics’ attention.

Once again, however, the Pharisees and scribes seem to remain silent. I imagine Jesus pausing again, perhaps somewhat longer, waiting for someone to say something. Then, realizing that neither parable appears to have taught what He wanted them to learn, He tells a third.

We often call this one “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” but doing so imposes an interpretation on it that isn’t true to the story as a whole. We find that title first of all in the notes printed in the margins of English Bibles in the sixteenth century,^[8] and it seems that we have adopted it from there. If we look for an alternative, thinking about the parallel of this story with the first two parables of this sequence might tempt us to give it a title like theirs, “The Parable of the Lost Son:” a son is lost and then found, and his father rejoices. The two earlier parables are important background for understanding the point of this final one. This, too, is a story about loss, rescue, and joy. But if we read the story only that way we forget that almost half of the parable is about the lost son’s older brother, something Jesus tells us at the beginning, when in verse 13 he says:

A certain man had two sons. ([Luke 15:11](#))

This is about three people, not just two. So, for now, let's call this "The Parable of a Father and His Two Sons."

The parable begins with the younger son's test of his father's love:

[T]he younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. ([Luke 15:12-13](#))

Using legalistic language, the younger son asks for his share of his father's property. It is important for us to remember that the only property this father appears to have is that of his farm. He has land, and goats and sheep. It is also important to think about how the younger son would be able to gather together his share of that property so that he could go on his journey: he would have to sell it. The son is asking his father to break up the family farm so he can sell his share for the cash he needs to finance his new life. Whatever percentage amounted to the younger son's share, any amount significant enough to count would also be a significant loss to the family livelihood. It looks to me like the younger son is asking his father to reduce the standard of living for the family so that he can live as he wants. But there is no suggestion of recrimination or hesitation on the father's part. The son makes his demand, and we read in verse 12:

He divided unto them his living. ([Luke 15:12](#))

The father divides his property between the two sons, though for now we hear only about the younger one. An ungrateful son rejects his father and his family, hurting the family economically and embarrassing them publicly, but the father is neither angry nor punitive.

For his part the son acts as we so often act when we think we have found a way to live as we wish, unencumbered by relationships and the obligations of those relationships. He leaves and wastes what he has been given. But this young man does not understand that he is lost, at least not at first. He cannot see it when he asks his father for his share. He cannot see it when he lives extravagantly in a foreign and probably sophisticated place. He cannot even see it when he has run out of money. Verses 14 through 16 tell us what he goes through before he comes to realize what it means that he has cut himself off from his father and family:

And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks [carob pods] that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

Only when he has been reduced to abject poverty, to the humiliation of being a swineherd, and to painful hunger does he understand his loss.

Eloquently, verse 17 describes that moment of understanding as him coming to himself:

And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! ([Luke 15:17](#))

Recognizing that he has lost his place in the family and now doesn't even have what his father's hired hands have, namely daily bread, the young man makes a plan, described in verses 18-20:

I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. ([Luke 15:18-20](#))

Rather than joining himself to a citizen of a far country, he will join himself to his father. So he goes.

In verse 20 we see how he was received:

[W]hen he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. ([Luke 15:20](#))

To my mind this is one of the great scenes in all literature. The father has been waiting. We don't know how long. We also don't know how he sees the son when he is still a long way off, but he does. And the moment he sees his son he has compassion. As some of us in academia say, the father always already had compassion. He runs to his son, embraces him, and kisses him. The father does not ask what has happened or what the son did with his money. With his return the past no longer matters. The only thing that matters is that the son has come back.

The young man then begins to do exactly what he said he was going to do. He begins the speech that he had rehearsed in verses 18-19, saying:

Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. ([Luke 15:21](#))

He gets as far as confessing that he has given up the right to be called "son," but before he can finish, his father interrupts by turning to the servants and ordering the feast of celebration described in verses 22-24:

[T]he father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, 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.

Giving the son signs of his sonship — a robe, a signet ring, and shoes—the father restores him to the family. In the end, he couldn't even eat carob pods in the foreign country to which he had gone to live as he wished. With his return home, he feasts at his father's table.

If the parable ended there it would still be an important part of our spiritual literature. It would be an enriched variation on the pattern of loss, recovery, and joy that we see in the first two parables of the chapter. What it means to fail, repent, and be received by our Heavenly Father with joy, remembering our need to welcome our brothers and sisters who also return—these are central to the gospel message. They are about the Atonement.

But the parable does not end there. It turns to the elder son. Jesus has given two parables that show how things ought to be, three if we include the first part of this one. He finishes this parable by aiming directly at the way his critics are. It is about anyone who has the temerity to think they are among the "ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance" ([Luke 15:7](#)).

So the parable continues in verses 25-28:

Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and entreated him. ([Luke 15:25-28](#))

We know that something is amiss from the beginning of these four verses, for instead of going in to ask his father why the feast, the older brother stays outside and asks a servant. He quickly goes from suspicion to anger when he hears the reason. Now he not only does not go in, he *will not* go in. What does his father do? Does he

say, “Then fine, stay outside if that’s what you want!” No, his response to his son’s anger is to go outside and urge him to come in to join the feast. He treats both sons the same: when they separate themselves from him, he goes out to meet them. He responds to their separation from him by moving toward them with compassion and entreaties.

But entreating the older son is not enough. Angrily he replies to his father:

Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: but as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. ([Luke 15:29-30](#))

It is hard not to notice the accusatory tone of what the older son says. The Greek literally says “Lo, these many years I have slaved for you.” And he adds, “Neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment.” This son sees what he does for his father as mere servitude; he serves out of obedience rather than love. Notice, too, how the older son distances himself from his brother with the phrase “This thy son,” as if to say, “He may be your son once again, but he is not my brother.” Finally notice that the older son accuses the younger of more than there is evidence for in the story. The story tells us that the younger son wasted the money he got from selling his father’s property in extravagant living. It says nothing more about how he spent the money. But the older son, angry and humiliated, goes farther, saying that his brother spent that money on prostitutes. His anger carries him beyond both charity and the truth, as anger always does.

The older brother feels cheated, and he can give good reasons for feeling as he does. It is as if he is saying, “Why should I have bothered being the good son and keeping your commandments if you reward the son who has humiliated us and wasted your estate? I could have done what he did, run off and had a good time. But instead, I stayed and slaved for you.” The parable of the laborers in the vineyard ([Matthew 20:1-16](#)) raises a similar question. The feeling behind it is not hard to recognize in ourselves. Why bother living righteously if those who repent later in life—having been able to sin freely until then—receive the same reward? Haven’t they had an unfair advantage?

That thinking about others is a kind of jealousy. We wish we had been able to sin as much as they and then could repent later and get the same reward, as if living in sin were something good that we missed out on by living the commandments. When we think that way, we forget that obedience is a blessing rather than a privation. And when we think that way, then we, like the older brother, misunderstand the reason for our service. We do not serve merely because we have been commanded. We do not serve because we will be rewarded. We have been commanded and we will be rewarded. But Jesus gave us the reason for our service in [John 14:15](#):

If ye love me, keep my commandments.

When we genuinely serve, we do so because we love our Savior and our heavenly Father. Of course obedience is important, but our heart should keep the commandments rather than our will or our calculation of reward. We should do what we do out of a loving heart.

It is easy to imagine the father responding to the older son’s jealousy and accusation by explaining what is wrong with his attitude or arguing with him about the facts of what has happened. Anger would also not be surprising. But the father does none of those things. He doesn’t dispute with the son about whether what he has said is right. He doesn’t argue with him about the younger brother’s faithlessness or repentant faithfulness. He doesn’t offer to treat the older brother better in the future. In verse 31 he answers simply and factually:

Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. ([Luke 15:31](#))

What more could the older son want than everything—which the father has already given him? The father offers promise rather than rebuke. The closest he comes to rebuke is when, in verse 32, he gently says “this thy brother” in response to the older son’s earlier “this thy son.”

It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found. ([Luke 15:32](#))

Our response to sinners wanting to commune with and eat the bread of the kingdom with our heavenly Father must be joy—even merry-making—rather than anger, criticism, and (implicitly) jealousy. After all, repentance means resurrection from spiritual death; it means recovery from loss. If we would be joyous over the rescue of a sheep or recovery of a coin, why not be much more joyous over the repentance of a brother or sister? And why not be equally joyous over the possibility of our own repentance?

We read of no more response to this parable than there was to the previous ones. Jesus leaves those who have criticized him in their silence to reflect on the three parables. He leaves a textual blank space, as it were, a moment for his listeners and readers to ask which child we are, the younger, the older, or (what I think is most likely) in some ways one and in other ways the other. He expects us to hear what He has said and come to an understanding of it: “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear” ([Luke 14:35](#)).

If there were some nice, neat bundle of paraphrase into which we could wrap these parables, then they would not teach as much as they do. That makes it difficult to come to a conclusion, though I must, for your sake as well as mine. So let me conclude by listing some of the things that I think these parables teach:

- As I reread the “Parable of the Father Who Loved His Two Sons,” the name I now prefer, it struck me as wonderful that though the work of our salvation was difficult, the Savior finds joy in it. We often recall the pain he suffered in the Garden and on the cross, but perhaps we ought to focus more often on the joy he feels in what he has done for us.
- Which means, of course that *we too* should find joy in the work itself as well as in its results.
- In particular, we must take joy in the rescue of our brothers and sisters who are lost.
- And, perhaps as important as remembering to rescue those who are lost, we must remember that there is more than one way to be lost: even the supposedly righteous and obedient may be in need of rescue as much as those who have been prodigal. The Father waits to welcome all with joy and rejoicing.
- Finally, perhaps the most important point is that though we are lost, we can be found and returned to the Father. That is what Jesus Christ’s Atonement does. If we have strayed from him, he waits to welcome us. Indeed, he comes toward us with compassion and entreaty, whether we are a prodigal child or an older, supposedly obedient one.

Thank you for coming to listen today. Thanks to the university for inviting me. Thanks to our Savior, Jesus Christ, for providing us the opportunities we share. In particular thanks to him and the Father for the rescue and promise of the Atonement.

[1] Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Laborers in the Vineyard,” LDS General Conference, April 2012.

[2] Here, and in Luke 14:1-2 and Luke 5:29-32.

[3] President Monson has made that need clear on numerous occasions, among them Thomas S. Monson, “Search and Rescue,” General Conference, April 1993; and “To the Rescue,” Priesthood Session, General Conference, October 2001.

[4] Compare Luke 5:30.

[5] Luke uses the word *probaton* (usually adult sheep or goats, rather than the more general term *arnion*), which can refer to both adults and lambs.

[6] Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke X–XXIV: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, vol. 28A, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 1074.

[7] I am indebted to Bruce W. Jorgensen for first showing me how the meaning of these parables is opened up by seeing them this way.

[8] That title is derived from the Latin title in the Vulgate: *de filio prodigo*, [8] which means “the spendthrift son,” very much like our own title, which means “the wasteful or extravagant son” (rather than, as we sometimes think, “the sinful son”).