

“The Prodigal God”

Luke 15

One of the most well known and poignant stories in the New Testament is the story often called “The Prodigal Son.” It is a story of defiant independence, sensual living, desperate need, deep repentance, and full restoration. But it’s also a story of ethical living, spiritual pride, an ungrateful spirit, vindictive judgment, and bitterness of soul.

Undergirding the whole account is the overflowing magnanimity of the Father. Magnanimity is the best word I could find in this situation because it describes “the loftiness of spirit that enables a person to disdain meanness and pettiness, and to display noble generosity.” That surely describes the Father in this story.

In fact, I believe a better title for this story would be “The Prodigal God.” To be prodigal can be used negatively, as in the case of the younger son, to mean rashly or wastefully extravagant. Or it can be used positively, as of the Father, meaning giving in abundance, lavish, or profuse. God the Father is the true focus of this parable, not the wayward son.

This story is often used as a complete parable; but it’s not. It’s simply part of a larger parable that encompasses the whole 15th chapter of Luke’s Gospel. There is only one parable according to verse three; but it is divided into three scenes with each one building on the preceding one. If we take this teaching as Jesus gave it, it will open for us new insights into the loving heart of God and His longing for the lost.

In this parable we’ll see several recurring themes: something is lost, the lost thing is sought, the lost thing is found, and there is great rejoicing. And if you watch carefully I believe you’ll see the three persons of the Trinity active in their respective roles.

This parable is occasioned by a very specific event. There were large crowds of people flocking to hear Jesus; among them tax collectors and sinners. These people were disdained by the Pharisees as being unclean, worthless, and far from God.

Because Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them, the Pharisees disdained him. They referred to Him derisively as “this man.” They equated His willingness to eat with sinners to being of the same character and tastes. In their eyes, no respectable Jew would defile him or herself with this kind of people. This interaction between Jesus, the tax collectors and sinners, and the Pharisees set the stage for the story Jesus told.

I read that story now to you from Luke chapter fifteen. Because this is such a familiar story, I urge you to listen carefully; you may notice some things you've never seen before.

In this text Jesus told several stories about lostness in order to demonstrate the magnanimous heart of "The Prodigal God."

The First STORY is about

The Lost Sheep

In Jesus' day a person's wealth could be measured a couple of ways. One way was by the amount of livestock they owned. A shepherd with 100 sheep was fairly well-to-do.

Jesus asked the crowd what would happen if this man should lose one sheep. Today some people may say, "Don't worry about it, it's only one; you still have 99 left." Or "That one was always wandering off and causing trouble anyway; let it go and good riddance!" But Jesus' listeners understood the value of a sheep and His response to the loss.

In its own way the sheep probably knew it was lost. It couldn't hear the shepherd's voice nor see or smell the other sheep. Sheep are creatures of habit, they're followers. But either by careless grazing or curiosity, this one became separated from the other sheep and the shepherd. As I think about these qualities, it's not surprising Jesus referred to us humans as sheep.

As soon as he realizes the loss, the shepherd leaves the other 99 sheep in the wilderness and goes in search of the missing one. We need to understand that the wilderness is not a barren wasteland or a place of danger. It is used in Scripture of the normal pasture. Some translations say "open country." So the sheep left behind are safe. After all, it would be out of character for the shepherd to place the 99 in danger in order to save the lost one.

The shepherd, the owner of the sheep, searches for the lost one until he finds it. The task may be difficult and dangerous, but that doesn't hold him back. Knowing the danger to the lost sheep would've added to the urgency of finding it. In the shepherd we see the masculine virtues of courage, enterprise, and endurance.

When he finds the lost sheep he doesn't berate it for its foolishness, or handle it roughly, or beat it with a stick. What does he do? He lays it on his shoulders – not shoulder (singular), but shoulders (plural) with rejoicing! Laying a sheep on your shoulders would mean placing it around your neck. This is a place of security, of tenderness, of intimacy, of comfort. Yes, Jesus

was guilty of the very thing the Pharisees accused Him of – caring for the lost sheep with compassion and rejoicing in their rescue.

When Jesus looked on the multitudes He was filled with compassion. He saw them as sheep without a shepherd; weary, scattered, and harassed by their enemies. He was the Good Shepherd, the one who would seek the lost sheep - even to the extent of giving His life.

As the shepherd returns to his home rejoicing he immediately calls his friends and neighbors and invites them to rejoice with him. He's elated that he found the sheep before wild beasts, or birds of prey, or some other kind of destruction could claim it. And he wants others to share in that joy.

By contrast, the Pharisees had no joy over repentant sinners. In fact their writings contained this saying: "There is joy before God when those who provoke Him perish from the world." Their words were in direct contradiction to the Lord's message given to the prophet Ezekiel. God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11). No wonder the crowds of people were astonished at Jesus' teaching; it was completely different than the Pharisees.

So it is easy to see why they had a pinched and lifeless religion. They believed through study and good works they could merit God's approval. All who did not meet their level of hypocritical righteousness were condemned in their eyes.

What then do we make of Jesus' words in verse 7? "*There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 just persons who need no repentance.*" The word sinner connects us back to verse one, but who are the 99 just persons who need no repentance?

There are, as I see it, two possibilities. The first suggests a hint of our Lord's descent from heaven. There He left the heavenly host who had kept their first estate and faithfully serve before God's throne. These had no need of repentance. But this world, a world of sinners lost and ruined by the fall, was the one sheep that made necessary the incarnation and death of the Good Shepherd. Because He cannot contain His joy He invites the whole celestial family to rejoice with Him in the finding of the lost one!

The other possibility is that Jesus, for the sake of argument, accepted the Pharisee's claim about themselves. And by their own words He condemns them for their criticism of His efforts to save the lost. They were blind to their own need of repentance. They didn't share the Shepherd's concern for the lost sheep; they saw themselves as spiritually superior to those erring ones.

If the first possibility is correct, why would there be more joy over one sinner who repents than over the legions of unfallen angels? The answer should be evident. The Shepherd did not shed His blood for angels. His life and death remain a mystery upon which they meditate with awe and wonder, First Peter 1:12.

But repenting sinners represent the reward of the Shepherd's compassion, His love, and His sacrifice. By the active grace of God on their hearts, they respond to the loving voice and tender touch of the Shepherd. He does not condemn them in their brokenness and misery but invites them with the words: *"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."*

This first scene of the parable highlights our lostness, our helplessness, our hopelessness. If the Good Shepherd does not seek us we are doomed. But the prodigal God sent the Good Shepherd. He left the glories of heaven, and the continual worship of the heavenly beings. He descended to the earth to seek and save lost sheep: that's you and me my friend.

As I ponder my lostness, the Shepherd seeking and finding me, and the great rejoicing occasioned in heaven, I'm reminded of the last verse of Will Thompson's song, "Softly and Tenderly." *"Oh, for the wonderful love He has promised, promised for you and for me! Though we have sinned, He has mercy and pardon, Pardon for you and for me."* What a beautiful reality for a lost sheep! Have you allowed the Shepherd to carry you home on His shoulders?

The Second STORY is about

The Lost Coin

As we begin this section I note again how Luke integrates women into his Gospel narrative. We know Jesus had many women followers and they especially could appreciate the meaning of this story. It highlights the feminine virtues of careful observation, patience, and diligence. It is a good reminder to us that the qualities of men and women are both needed to help us understand who God is and how we're made in His image.

A woman has 10 silver coins and loses one. Unlike the sheep, the coin is inanimate. It doesn't wander off and get lost. It's lost either through the carelessness of the owner or in the daily hustle and bustle of living. Furthermore, it doesn't know it's lost. But once again, no one suggests to her "You still have 9 coins, don't worry about that lost one."

The word used here indicates a coin of very little value; a quarter of a shekel, worth about 15 or 20 cents. Yet in the sequence of the stories the coin evidently holds more value than a sheep. How can that be?

I understand that women of the day often received these coins as part of a dowry. So they signified betrothal or marriage. They'd wear these as a decorative frontlet on their forehead. Can you imagine the embarrassment of wearing the frontlet with an obvious gap where the missing coin should be?

Furthermore, an unmarried or widowed woman in that culture had a difficult life. So the frontlet said "I belong to a man...someone is caring for me." It was a symbol of security.

That the coin in question was valuable beyond its monetary worth is shown by the woman's response. As soon as she realizes the coin is missing she lights a lamp (peasant houses of the day had no windows) and begins a thorough housecleaning! The text says she seeks diligently until the coin is found.

Once again, when the lost is found there is great rejoicing. So she calls her women friends (the noun is feminine) and invites them to rejoice with her. They would've readily understood her response to the loss and to the recovery. The loss was an occasion for shame; and the recovery a restoration of honor. They would've felt the same way in a similar circumstance. And notice her acceptance of responsibility; "I have found the coin that **I had lost.**"

The shepherd seeking his sheep displays divine *tenderness*. The woman seeking her coin displays divine *earnestness*. Here we see the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the one who reveals the condition of lostness and seeks the lost. In First Corinthians 2:10 and 11 Paul writes "...*the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.*"

The sheep strayed away from the shepherd and was lost in the field. The coin was lost at home; not by its own volition, but by carelessness or indifference by its owner. Lost at home! What is implied by that detail?

Could it refer to the Pharisees? They claimed Abraham as their father. "*To them [belonged] the adoption, the glory, and the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.*" But though they had all these things they rejected the One to whom all these things pointed. They were truly lost at home.

Today, there are those, like the coin, who are lost at home. They've grown up in homes where God's Word is taught, revered, and obeyed. Perhaps for a time they embraced the truth and trusted in Jesus as the only way of acceptance with the Father. But at some point they've become careless and indifferent to the value of their possession. Perhaps they've allowed offenses to steal their joy and that void has been filled with bitterness and animosity. There are far too many like that today.

Once again, Jesus closes this section with an important reminder about the joy of discovery and restoration! "*There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*" It's God's great, overflowing joy that the angels observe and share. It's not their joy because they don't understand the meaning of lostness and the glory of being found. But the joy of the Father is contagious; no one in His presence can escape its effects! He is truly a prodigal God.

The Final STORY is about

The Lost Sons

I assume some of you have heard sermons from this text. I also assume, based on my own experience that most of those sermons focused on the younger son. And, to be sure, his story takes up most of the text. But as I noted just a moment ago, both sons in this part of the parable are lost. One is lost away from home, and one is lost at home.

Familiarity with Scripture can be a great blessing; like being able to recall it to mind and use it in daily living. But that same familiarity can be dangerous. How so? Because we think we already know what the text says or means - we fail to give it due consideration.

As I was studying this text I noted something I never saw before. When the father divided his wealth he gave the younger son his portion; but the older son also received his. Notice the end of verse 12; "*And he (the father) divided his property **between them.***" Or as the KJV says "*He divided unto **them** his living.*" That detail holds implications otherwise missed.

Let's look at the sons in the order they're introduced; first, what I call, the *sensual* son.

This son demanded that his father give him the portion of the property that was rightfully his. While the inheritance laws did specify what he should receive, he had no right to claim it while the father was still living. But here we see the magnanimity of the Father. The father didn't need to do this, but he graciously did it anyway.

As I read of the Father's acquiescence to the demands of the younger son, I thought about Psalm 106:15. There, in response to the desires of the children of Israel, the Psalmist records how "*God granted their request but sent a wasting disease among them.*" That is an accurate description of the life of the sensual son.

So he took his inheritance and headed off to "live it up;" to experience what the world had to offer. We can only speculate about why he left, but the text yields some clues. His demand for his share of the property shows a level of disrespect for his father. And his lifestyle, once he was away from home, suggests that he didn't care for the order and discipline there. People who are controlled by their desires, they don't want limitations. We can also assume that the self-righteous attitude of the older brother was particularly galling to him.

As the sensual son arrived in the far country the predictable consequences of his choices soon became apparent. With wild recklessness he went to the limit of sinful excess. And he squandered his resources. The word picture here is that of winnowing grain – his resources were scattered to the wind. And as soon as his money was gone, his so-called friends were gone too. The party's over!

Even as his resources ran out a great famine arose in the area where he lived. As a result he begins to experience the pangs of hunger. Here's the guy who lived solely to gratify his senses and now their screaming for fulfillment and he can't provide it. How sharp are those pangs for those who've lived exclusively for the purpose of gratifying their lust! And though it must've galled him terribly to think of working, he had no other choice if he was going to survive.

But guess what, when there's a famine in the land everybody else is looking for work too. So nobody hires him. You say "wait a minute, didn't he get hired by the owner of the pigs?" No, he didn't. The text says "he forced himself on a citizen of that country..." The farmer didn't want him but the sensual son said "I'm here and I'm not going anywhere else; what can I do?" So the farmer sends him into the fields to feed the pigs.

Can you imagine? A Jewish boy from a good family, accustomed to having a comfortable life at home, now feeding pigs? This is the most degrading work possible! And to add to his misery he's reduced to eating the carob pods that the pigs are eating. Notice the end of verse 16 "...and no one gave him anything." This guy was really at the bottom: taking care of pigs, eating their food because no one will give him anything better - and no cares! Do you think this miserable scenario ever entered his mind when he was scheming to leave home?

So what can he do? How can he survive? Look at verse 17. “When he came to himself...” This is a striking expression in the original text. It equates rebellion against God as a kind of madness, of lunacy. It is a wonderful stroke of language art, to represent the beginning of repentance as the return of a sound consciousness. The son is beginning to leave behind the make-believe world he’d been living in for the cold reality of his present condition. And that my friend is the beginning of repentance.

And what is his first rational thought? His father’s house and the plenty there, even for the servants. The very place he couldn’t wait to escape from now beckons him as a beacon of light in his great darkness of soul. The text has him picturing his father’s servants surrounded by many loaves of bread while he, the son, is perishing with hunger.

Now, in this moment of returning to rational thinking he sees his circumstances clearly. Though he is still a son, he has no right to return home as one. Remember, we’re dealing with a culture based on honor and shame. He has brought terrible shame to the family name; he knows he deserves to be disowned. All he can do is appeal to the mercy of his father and ask, not to be restored as a son, but to be taken on as a hired servant. And so this is what he resolves to do. So he leaves the pigs behind and turns his weary steps toward home - toward *his own* father.

Here, the story takes what must’ve been a surprising turn for Jesus’ audience. In their minds the father would’ve been justified in ignoring the son. They would’ve expected the father to say to him “You’ve dragged my good name through the mud; you’ve disgraced the family. I warned you not to live this way; you’ve made your bed, now lie in it! And get out of my sight.”

But look what happened. While the son was still far off, coming toward home, the elderly father saw him. He was so moved with compassion for his lost, miserable son that he threw his dignity and his health concerns to the wind and went running out to meet him. When he finally got to him, panting for breath, he threw himself on the son’s neck. In spite of the filth and stench of the pigs and the son’s poor hygiene, the father covered the son’s neck and face with kisses!

The son is so shocked by this reception that, at first, he cannot speak. When he finally finds his voice he begins to give his prepared speech. But he doesn’t get very far. Before he even gets to the part about becoming a hired servant his father cuts him off; and he begins issuing a series of staccato orders to his servants.

His joyous voice booms out “Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him; yes, right over his tattered rags. Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. And get the fatted calf,

the one we've been saving for this very occasion; kill it and prepare it. Let's eat and have a party because my son who was dead is alive again; he was lost but now is found." And with those words the party began!

Can you imagine the publicans and sinners in this crowd listening to Jesus? They see themselves clearly in this younger son. They know their lives are a mess. They know they deserve condemnation and they've certainly received it from the lips of the Pharisees. But Jesus' story astonishes them. Now some of them begin to understand why Jesus spends time with them and eats with them. He does not hate them; he does not want to disown them. He is only longing for the moment when they realize the error of their ways and turn toward Him. In that moment He will run to meet them.

The loving heart of the Heavenly Father is clearly on display. Here in all its generosity is the heart of the Prodigal God! As soon the son acknowledged his sin and turned his face toward home, the father was on his way to meet him. And God the Father will do that for you too.

The unconditional love of the Father convicts me of my self-righteousness and pride. I too often want to say to those like the sensual son "come home and prove yourself; then maybe I'll think about accepting you." But that's not God's heart. He longs to see all His children restored in their relationship to Him. He knows the power for transformation doesn't come from living a good life; it comes from a repentant, changed heart.

And that longing leads us to the father's response to the *ethical* son.

The older son who, as I mentioned earlier had already received his inheritance, came from the field where he'd been working. As he got near the house he heard the sounds of a celebration. Place yourself in the shoes of this older son. Wouldn't you want to know what's going on? What would you have done?

Here we begin to see the heart of the ethical son. We begin to see that he too resented his father; he served him for what he could get out of it. Remember, he'd already received his two-thirds of the inheritance so he knows any party that's going on is using **his** resources. So he calls a servant and tells him to go quickly into the house and find out what's going on.

The servant soon returns and tells him the younger brother has come home, and that Dad has joyously thrown a party for him. Hearing this news the older son is outraged and refuses to go into the house. And once again we see the loving heart of the Father.

The father cares for the older son just as much as he cares for the younger one. So he begs the older son to join the festivities. At this invitation the deep-seated pride and bitterness spill out of the older son. “All these years I’ve served you. I’ve NEVER transgressed your commandment. But you NEVER even gave me a goat, yet alone a fatted calf, to celebrate with my friends! But as soon as **your son**, who ate up the fruits of your hard work with prostitutes, comes home; you kill for him the fatted calf.” His careful obedience to the father wasn’t motivated by love; it was motivated by what he could get out of it.

The older son’s perspective was that of the Pharisees. He didn’t love the father for who he was, but only for what he could gain from him. He regarded life on the basis of merit and reward; as work that promises a return. Because of this he mistook the celebration as a reward to the younger son for his sensual living. No wonder he was bitter! Because he was so grasping he could not fathom the generosity of the father. He did not understand the basis of the feast was the heart of the father rejoicing in this newfound relationship with his younger son.

The father’s love for the older son is demonstrated even in the face of such vitriolic disrespect. He overlooks the insult and calmly reasons with him. *“Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. That was true; he had his share of the inheritance. It is only proper that we should celebrate and rejoice; because this one, your brother, was DEAD and is ALIVE again. He was LOST and is FOUND.”*

I find it interesting that Jesus leaves the final question of the story unanswered. How did the older son respond? We don’t know. I believe that’s a warning; a warning to the Pharisees who were listening, and a warning to you and me.

Did you think about it that when the sheep and the coin were lost someone immediately set out to search for them? Did you think about it that the search went on until the lost was found? Do you think Jesus’ listeners were wondering who is going to look for the lost son? Whose responsibility was that anyway? Was it the father’s or was it the older brother’s? Do you remember what God said to Cain? In essence it was “You are your brother’s keeper.”

Shouldn’t the older, ethical brother, the one who is in the continual presence of the father, be the one to go looking for his younger, sensual brother? In other words, isn’t it we who claim to be in the house with the Father who should be looking for the one who is lost? It is; but too often we’re like the older brother, staying at home and adding to our inheritance instead of going

out to seek the lost and hurting. Smug in our self-righteousness we pride ourselves that we haven't made such choices and lowered ourselves to such debauchery.

We look at those who are returning from the pigpen of sinful degradation and we hold them at arm's length. We say "prove yourself, clean up your act, and then maybe we'll think about accepting you into our respectable fellowship." You see, we mistakenly believe that because we've tried to live a good, moral, ethical life, because we've never run away from home and lived it up that God owes us. That makes God our servant rather than us being His servants; and God is servant to no one!

My friend, where are you in this story? Both brothers were lost and estranged from their father. The younger one realized it, turned around, and in repentance headed home. His return was lavishly celebrated by the father. The older one did not see any need for repentance; he had always obeyed the rules. But because of his sense of entitlement he resented the celebration for his returning brother.

I see myself most clearly in the older brother. I see some of the things I just mentioned a moment ago; spiritual pride, a judgmental spirit toward others, and a lack of joy in my relationship with the Lord. I repent of those things and thank God for His forgiveness. I want to rejoice in the magnanimity of the Father who has been so gracious, so compassionate, and so generous to me.

Wherever you find yourself in this story will you join me in seeking, experiencing, glorifying, and sharing the love of this prodigal God?