**The Gospel of Luke**

**Lesson 12** Luke 15:1-32 Parables of the Lost Sheep, Coin and Son!

**Questions:**

1. What important truth did you learn from the lecture, and how does it apply to your life?
2. Read Wiersbe pages 31-42.

What common message links all three parables in Luke 15? What two aspects of salvation do each of the parables reveal?

1. Read Luke 15:1-10 along with the article below entitled, “What is the meaning of the Parables of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin?”.
2. Why did Jesus use parables to teach the people who gathered around him?
3. What truth do you discover in the following passages?
4. Isaiah 53:6
5. John 3:17
6. Romans 3:10-12, 23
7. 1 Peter 2:24-2
8. In the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin, who or what is represented by   
   the following:
9. The shepherd (owner of the sheep)/the woman
10. The lost sheep/lost coin
11. He joyfully puts it (the sheep) on his shoulder and goes home
12. The ninety-righteous persons (repentant believers or non-repentant moralists). Explain your answer and give Scriptural support.
13. Verse 7 states, “I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents that over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need   
    to repent.”
14. Define *repentance*.
15. From the following verses, describe the different aspects of true repentance:

* 2 Chronicles 7:14
* 2 Chronicles 30:9b
* Joel 2:12-13
* Acts 3:19
* Acts 26:20
* 1 John 1:9

1. What do you learn about the heart of God from these parables (see also John 3:16;   
   Luke 19: 10; Romans 5:8; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9)?
2. Read Luke 18:9-14.
3. Which man, the Pharisee or the tax collector, revealed a truly repentant heart? Explain your answer.
4. Why is God so attracted to anyone who demonstrates a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:16-17)?

The Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin (Luke 15:3–10) are the first two in a series of three. The third is the “lost son” or the “prodigal son.” Just as in other cases, Jesus taught these parables in a set of three to emphasize His point. To properly understand the message of these parables, we must recognize exactly what a parable is, and why it is used.

**What is a parable?**

At a basic level, a parable is a short story designed to convey a concept to be understood and/or a principle to be put into practice. This, however, tells us more about the intent of a parable than what it actually is. The word “parable” in Greek literally means, “to set beside,” as in the English word “comparison” or “similitude.” In the Jewish culture, things were explained not in terms of statistics or definitions as they are in English-speaking cultures.   
In the Jewish culture of biblical times, things were explained in word pictures.

**Why did Jesus use parables?**

Word pictures do not draw attention to technicalities (like the Jewish law) but to attitudes, concepts, and characteristics. Jesus was speaking a language that all Jews could understand, but with an emphasis on attitudes rather than the outward appearances that the Pharisees focused on (John 7:24). Parables also have an emotional impact that makes them more meaningful and memorable to those who are soft of heart. At the same time, the parables of Jesus often times remained a mystery to those with a hardened heart because parables require the listeners to be self-critical and put themselves in the appropriate place in the story. The result was that the Pharisees would “be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving” (Isaiah 6:9; Psalm 78:2; Matthew 13:35).  
  
By using parables, the teaching of Jesus remains timeless despite most changes in culture, time, and technology. For example, these two parables convey commonly understood concepts like grace, gentleness, concern, pride and others, all of which we can be understood by us, even though the story is over two thousand years old. In Jewish culture character traits are often described in relation to objects that are universally recognized like the regularity of the sun or the refreshing nature of rain (Hosea 6:3). This also explains why poetry is the   
most common mode of language used in the Bible. In the case of parables specifically, the elements mentioned in them are usually representations of something else, just as in an allegory. However, an overemphasis on a particular detail in a parable tends to lead to interpretive errors. Repetitions, patterns, or changes will often help us in identifying when   
we should focus on a particular detail.

**Why Jesus taught these parables**

Let us look at the particular details of these parables. The situation in which Jesus is speaking can be seen in Luke 15:1–2. “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’” (NIV). Notice that the Pharisees did not complain that Jesus is teaching sinners. Since the Pharisees thought themselves to be righteous teachers of the law and all others to be wicked, they could not condemn His preaching to “sinners,” but they thought it was inconsistent with the dignity of someone so knowledgeable in the Scriptures   
to “eat with them.” The presupposition behind the statement of the Pharisees, “this man welcomes sinners,” is what Jesus addresses in all three parables.

To understand the significance of the opening statement in chapter 15, we must consider that the Jewish culture is a shame/honor-driven society that used shame/honor in a way that developed a sort of caste system. Virtually everything that is done in Jewish culture brings either shame or honor. The primary motivation for what and how things are done is based on seeking honor for oneself and avoiding shame. This was the central and all-consuming preoccupation of all Jewish interaction.

In the first parable, Jesus invites His listeners to place themselves into the story with, “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep.” In doing this Jesus is appealing to their intuitive reasoning and life experiences. As the story completes, the Pharisees in their pride refuse to see themselves as shameful “sinners,” but eagerly take the honoring label of being “righteous.” However, by the implication of their own pride, they place themselves in the position of being the less significant group of ninety-nine: “There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.” There may be a bit of sarcasm in the reference to the Pharisees “who do not need to repent” (see Romans 3:23).

In the “lost coin” parable, the ten silver coins refers to a piece of jewelry with ten silver coins on it worn by brides. This was the equivalent of a wedding ring in modern times.

Upon careful examination of the parables, we can see that Jesus was turning His listeners’ understanding of things upside down. The Pharisees saw themselves as being the beloved of God and the “sinners” as refuse. Jesus uses the Pharisees’ prejudices against them, while encouraging the sinners with one clear message. That message is this: God has a tender, personal concern (“and when he finds it, he puts it on his shoulders,” v. 5). God has a joyous love for individuals who are lost (in sin) and are found (repent). Jesus makes it clear that the Pharisees, who thought they were close to God, were actually distant and those sinners and tax collectors were the ones God was seeking after. We see this same message in 18:9-14. There, Jesus is teaching on attitudes of prayer, but the problem he is addressing is the same as in chapter 15. In 18:14 Jesus provides the conclusion for us: “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

**Patterns of progression in the parables**

By identifying things in common in the parables, we can gain context to help us understand the significance of otherwise subtle elements in the story. As the old saying goes, “Proper context covers a multitude of interpretive errors.” 1) The progression of value: in the first parable a sheep is lost, then a silver coin in the next, followed by a son in the third. As mentioned before, part of the power of these parables to reach the audience comes from the shame/honor aspect of their culture. To lose a sheep as a shepherd would be a very shameful thing, a coin from a piece of bridal jewelry lost in her own house would be more shameful, followed by the lost son, which was the worst of all in Jewish culture. 2) The personal progression from seeking after only 1 of 100 sheep, then 1 of 10 coins, then 1 of 2 sons. This shows the scope of God’s personal concern for individuals and would have been of great comfort to the “sinners” Jesus was teaching. 3) A change in tense in each parable regarding the rejoicing at that which was found, from future tense, to present, and then to past tense: “will be more joy” to “there is joy” and finally “had to be.” This may have communicated the certainty of God’s acceptance of those who repent. 4) The progression of earthly references to what the thing was lost in (a subtle reference to sin). The sheep was lost in open fields, the coin was lost in the dirt that was swept up, and son was in the mud of a pigsty before coming to his senses. 5) The relational power of each parable: Poor men and young boys would have related best to the shepherd and the lost sheep. Women would have related best to the lost bridal coin. The last parable dealt with everyone present by dealing with the relationship of a father and son.

**Patterns of Consistency in the parables**

1) The main character possesses something valuable and does not want to lose it.

2) The main character rejoices in the finding of the lost thing, but does not rejoice alone.

3) The main character (God) expresses care in either the looking or the handling of that which was lost.

4) Each thing that was lost has a personal value, not just a monetary value: shepherds care for their sheep, women cherish their bridal jewelry, and a father loves his son.  
  
Incidentally, this first illustration of the shepherd carrying the sheep on his shoulders was the original figure used to identify Christians before people began identifying Christianity with crosses. In these parables Jesus paints with words a beautiful picture of God’s grace in His desire to see the lost return to Him. Men seek honor and avoid shame; God seeks to glorify Himself through us His sheep, His sons and daughters. Despite having ninety-nine other sheep, despite the sinful rebellion of His lost sheep, God joyfully receives it back, just as He does when we repent and return to Him.[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. Read Luke 15:11-32 along with the article below entitled, “What is the meaning of the Parable of the Prodigal Son?”.
2. Although this parable is famously called the parable of the lost son, it could properly   
   be called the parable of the gracious father. In this parable, we see the love of God for lost sinners.
3. What are some of the father’s actions that show his grace towards his wayward son before he departs? Upon his return?
4. It has been said that “Sin will take you further than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay.” How do you see this fulfilled in the story of the prodigal son?
5. Romans 2:4 states, “Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you toward repentance?”
6. Once the son came to his senses (v. 17), what did he ponder?
7. How are some ways people today show contempt for the riches of God’s kindness, tolerance, and patience (Romans 1:18-25)?
8. How did the prodigal son reveal a repentant heart?
9. Who do you believe the prodigal son represents in the world (a wayward believer or a truly lost sinner)? Explain your answer.
10. When a wayward believer sins, what should he do (1 John 1:9) and how will God always respond?
11. How is the father in this parable a good picture of our heavenly Father?
12. Verses 25-30 address the heart and words of the elder son, who chose to stay at home   
    and work for his father.
13. Who do you believe the elder son represents in the world (a saved man who   
    is resentful or an unsaved self-righteous man who is blind and lost)? Explain   
    your answer.
14. How does the father show grace to his elder son?
15. The G-R-A-C-E of God has been defined as ‘God’s Riches at Christ’s Expense.’
16. Explain this definition.
17. How has God been gracious to you (1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Ephesians 2:8-9;   
    Titus 3:4-7)?
18. What great lesson have you learned through these parables, and how will you   
    alter how you live?

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is found in Luke chapter 15, verses 11-32. The main character in the parable, the forgiving father, whose character remains constant throughout the story, is a picture of God. In telling the story, Jesus identifies Himself with God in His loving attitude to the lost. The younger son symbolizes the lost (the tax collectors and sinners of that day, Luke 15:1), and the elder brother represents the self-righteous (the Pharisees and teachers of the law of that day, Luke 15:2). The major theme of this parable seems not to be so much the conversion of the sinner, as in the previous two parables of Luke 15, but rather the restoration of a believer into fellowship with the Father. In the first two parables, the owner went out to look for what was lost (Luke 15:1-10), whereas in this story the father waits and watches eagerly for his son’s return. We see a progression through the three parables from the relationship of one in a hundred (Luke 15:1-7), to one in ten (Luke 15:8-10), to one in one (Luke 15:11-32), demonstrating God’s love for each individual and His personal attentiveness towards all humanity. We see in this story the graciousness of the father overshadowing the sinfulness of the son, as it is the memory of the father’s goodness that brings the prodigal son to repentance (Romans 2:4).  
  
We will begin unfolding the meaning of this parable at verse 12, in which the younger son asks his father for his share of his estate, which would have been half of what his older brother would receive; in other words, 1/3 for the younger, 2/3 for the older (Deuteronomy 21:17). Though it was perfectly within his rights to ask, it was not a loving thing to do, as it implied that he wished his father deaåd. Instead of rebuking his son, the father patiently grants him his request. This is a picture of God letting a sinner go his own way (Deuteronomy 30:19). We all possess this foolish ambition to be independent, which is at the root of the sinner persisting in his sin (Genesis 3:6; Romans 1:28). A sinful state is a departure and distance from God (Romans 1:21). A sinful state is also a state of constant discontent. Luke 12:15 says, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” This son learned the hard way that covetousness leads to a life of dissatisfaction and disappointment. He also learned that the most valuable things in life are the things you cannot buy or replace.  
  
In verse 13 we read that he travels to a distant country. It is evident from his previous actions that he had already made that journey in his heart, and the physical departure was a display of his willful disobedience to all the goodness his father had offered (Proverbs 27:19; Matthew 6:21; 12:34). In the process, he squanders all his father had worked so hard for on selfish, shallow fulfillment, losing everything. His financial disaster is followed by a natural disaster in the form of a famine, which he failed to plan for (Genesis 41:33-36). At this point he sells himself into physical slavery to a Gentile and finds himself feeding pigs, a detestable job to the Jewish people (Leviticus 11:7; Deuteronomy 14:8; Isaiah 65:4; 66:17). Needless to say, he must have been incredibly desperate at that point to willingly enter into such a loathsome position. And what an irony that his choices led him to a position in which he had no choice but to work, and for a stranger at that, doing the very things he refused to do for his father. To top it off, he apparently was paid so little that he longed to eat the pig’s food. Just when he must have thought life could not get any worse, he couldn’t even find mercy among the people. Apparently, once his wealth was gone, so were his friends. The text clearly says, “No one gave him anything” (vs. 16). Even these unclean animals seemed to be better off than he was at this point. This is a picture of the state of the lost sinner or a rebellious Christian who has returned to a life of slavery to sin (2 Peter 2:19-21). It is a picture of what sin really does in a person’s life when he rejects the Father’s will (Hebrews 12:1; Acts 8:23). “Sin always promises more than it gives, takes you further than you wanted to go, and leaves you worse off than you were before.” Sin promises freedom but brings slavery (John 8:34).  
  
The son begins to reflect on his condition and realizes that even his father’s servants had it better than he. His painful circumstances help him to see his father in a new light and bring him hope (Psalm 147:11; Isaiah 40:30-31; Romans 8:24-25; 1 Timothy 4:10). This is reflective of the sinner when he/she discovers the destitute condition of his life because of sin. It is a realization that, apart from God, there is no hope (Ephesians 2:12; 2 Timothy 2:25-26). This is when a repentant sinner “comes to his senses” and longs to return to the state of fellowship with God which was lost when Adam sinned (Genesis 3:8). The son devises a plan of action. Though at a quick glance it may seem that he may not be truly repentant, but rather motivated by his hunger, a more thorough study of the text gives new insights. He is willing to give up his rights as his father’s son and take on the position of his servant. We can only speculate on this point, but he may even have been willing to repay what he had lost (Luke 19:8; Leviticus 6:4-5). Regardless of the motivation, it demonstrates a true humility and true repentance, not based on what he said but on what he was willing to do and eventually acted upon (Acts 26:20). He realizes he had no right to claim a blessing upon return to his father’s household, nor does he have anything to offer, except a life of service, in repentance of his previous actions. With that, he is prepared to fall at his father’s feet and hope for forgiveness and mercy. This is exactly what conversion is all about: ending a life of slavery to sin through confession to the Father and faith in Jesus Christ and becoming a slave to righteousness, offering one’s body as a living sacrifice (1 John 1:9; Romans 6:6-18; 12:1).  
  
Jesus portrays the father as waiting for his son, perhaps daily searching the distant road, hoping for his appearance. The father notices him while he was still a long way off. The father’s compassion assumes some knowledge of the son’s pitiful state, possibly from reports sent home. During that time it was not the custom of men to run, yet the father runs to greet his son (vs.20). Why would he break convention for this wayward child who had sinned against him? The obvious answer is because he loved him and was eager to show him that love and restore the relationship. When the father reaches his son, not only does he throw   
his arms around him, but he also greets him with a kiss of love (1 Peter 5:14). He is so filled with joy at his son’s return that he doesn’t even let him finish his confession. Nor does he question or lecture him; instead, he unconditionally forgives him and accepts him back   
into fellowship. The father running to his son, greeting him with a kiss and ordering the celebration is a picture of how our Heavenly Father feels towards sinners who repent.   
God greatly loves us, patiently waits for us to repent so he can show us His great mercy, because he does not want any to perish nor escape as though by the fire (Ephesians 2:1-10;   
2 Peter 3:9; 1 Corinthians 3:15).  
  
This prodigal son was satisfied to return home as a slave, but to his surprise and delight is restored back into the full privilege of being his father’s son. He had been transformed from   
a state of destitution to complete restoration. That is what God’s grace does for a penitent sinner (Psalm 40:2; 103:4). Not only are we forgiven, but we receive a spirit of sonship as His children, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, of His incomparable riches (Romans 8:16-17; Ephesians 1:18-19). The father then orders the servants to bring the best robe, no doubt one of his own (a sign of dignity and honor, proof of the prodigal’s acceptance back into the family), a ring for the son’s hand (a sign of authority and sonship) and sandals for his feet (a sign of not being a servant, as servants did not wear shoes—or, for that matter, rings or expensive clothing, vs.22). All these things represent what we receive in Christ upon salvation: the robe of the Redeemer’s righteousness (Isaiah 61:10), the privilege of partaking of the Spirit of adoption (Ephesians 1:5), and feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace, prepared to walk in the ways of holiness (Ephesians 6:15). A fattened calf is prepared, and a party is held (notice that blood was shed = atonement for sin, Hebrews 9:22). Fatted calves in those times were saved for special occasions such as the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:26-32). This was not just any party; it was a rare and complete celebration. Had the boy been dealt with according to the Law, there would have been a funeral, not a celebration. “The Lord does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his   
love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.” (Psalm 103:10-13). Instead of condemnation, there is rejoicing for a son who had been dead but now is alive, who once was lost but now is found (Romans 8:1; John 5:24).

Note the parallel between “dead” and “alive” and “lost” and “found”—terms that also apply to one’s state before and after conversion to Christ (Ephesians 2:1-5). This is a picture of what occurs in heaven over one repentant sinner (Luke 15: 7, 10).  
  
Now to the final and tragic character in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the oldest son, who, once again, illustrates the Pharisees and the scribes. Outwardly they lived blameless lives, but inwardly their attitudes were abominable (Matthew 23:25-28). This was true of the older son who worked hard, obeyed his father, and brought no disgrace to his family or townspeople. It is obvious by his words and actions, upon his brothers return, that he is not showing love for his father or brother. One of the duties of the eldest son would have included reconciliation between the father and his son. He would have been the host at the feast to celebrate his brother’s return. Yet he remains in the field instead of in the house where he should have been. This act alone would have brought public disgrace upon the father. Still, the father, with great patience, goes to his angry and hurting son. He does not rebuke him as his actions and disrespectful address of his father warrant (vs.29, “Look,” he says, instead of addressing him as “father” or “my lord”), nor does his compassion cease as he listens to his complaints and criticisms. The boy appeals to his father’s righteousness by proudly proclaiming his own self-righteousness in comparison to his brother’s sinfulness (Matthew 7:3-5). By saying, “This son of yours,” the older brother avoids acknowledging that the prodigal is his own brother (vs. 30). Just like the Pharisees, the older brother was defining sin by outward actions, not inward attitudes (Luke 18:9-14). In essence, the older brother is saying that he was the one worthy of the celebration, and his father had been ungrateful for all his work. Now the one who had squandered his wealth was getting what he, the older son, deserved. The father tenderly addresses his oldest as “my son” (vs. 31) and corrects the error in his thinking by referring to the prodigal son as “this brother of yours” (vs. 32). The father’s response, “We had to celebrate,” suggests that the elder brother should have joined in the celebration, as there seems to be a sense of urgency in not postponing the celebration of the brother’s return.  
  
The older brother’s focus was on himself, and as a result there is no joy in his brother’s arrival home. He is so consumed with issues of justice and equity that he fails to see the value of his brother’s repentance and return. He fails to realize that “anyone who claims to   
be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him” (1 John 2:9-11). The older brother allows anger to take root in his heart to the point that he is unable to show compassion towards his brother, and, for that matter he is unable to forgive the perceived sin of his father against him (Genesis 4:5-8). He prefers to nurse his anger rather than enjoy fellowship with his father, brother and the community. He chooses suffering and isolation over restoration and reconciliation (Matthew 5:24, 6:14-15). He sees his brother’s return as a threat to his own inheritance. After all, why should he have to share his portion with a brother who has squandered his? And why hadn’t his father rejoiced in his presence through his faithful years of service?  
  
The wise father seeks to bring restoration by pointing out that all he has is and has always been available for the asking to his obedient son, as it was his portion of the inheritance since the time of the allotment. The older son never utilized the blessings at his disposal (Galatians 5:22; 2 Peter 1:5-8). This is similar to the Pharisees with their religion of good works. They hoped to earn blessings from God and in their obedience merit eternal life (Romans 9:31-33; 10:3). They failed to understand the grace of God and failed to comprehend the meaning of forgiveness. It was, therefore, not what they did that became a stumbling block to their growth but rather what they did not do which alienated them from God (Matthew 23:23-24, Romans 10:4). They were irate when Jesus was receiving and forgiving “unholy” people, failing to see their own need for a Savior. We do not know how this story ended for the oldest son, but we do know that the Pharisees continued to oppose Jesus and separate themselves from His followers. Despite the father’s pleading for them to “come in,” they refused and were the ones who instigated the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus Christ (Matthew 26:59). A tragic ending to a story filled with such hope, mercy, joy, and forgiveness.  
  
The picture of the father receiving the son back into relationship is a picture of how we should respond to repentant sinners as well (1 John 4:20-21; Luke 17:3; Galatians 6:1;   
James 5:19-20). “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). We are included in that “all,” and we must remember that “all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” apart from Christ (Isaiah 64:6; John 15:1-6). It is only by God’s grace that we are saved, not by works that we may boast of (Ephesians 2:9; Romans 9:16; Psalm 51:5). That is the core message of the Parable of the Prodigal Son.[[2]](#footnote-2)R F

1. “What is the meaning of the Parables of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin?” Got Questions Ministries, accessed July 1, 2022, [https://www.gotquestions.org/parable-lost-sheep-coin.html] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “What is the meaning of the Parable of the Prodigal Son?” Got Questions Ministries, accessed July 1, 2022, [https://www.gotquestions.org/parable-prodigal-son.html] [↑](#footnote-ref-2)