

Lost and Found (Luke 15:1-32)

The story of the prodigal son is one of the most familiar stories in the Bible. To a great degree, our understanding of it is filtered through our own experience. Parents who have or are presently struggling with rearing children might tend to identify with the father of the prodigal, and look at there for guidance and comfort. Those struggling with temptations and sin will focus upon the wayward son and on the loving and forgiving heart of the father. Few of us will choose to identify with the older brother, and yet, he is the central figure.

Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Even after our Jesus’ strong words about the cost of discipleship there are many coming to Jesus to hear what He was teaching. It was a different matter with the Pharisees and scribes who grumbled about the fact that Jesus “welcomed sinners and ate with them.”

Then Jesus told them three parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son! The parable of the lost sheep presents us with some questions. Would it be wise a shepherd to put 99 sheep at risk, leaving them unprotected in an open field, to search for one lost lamb? And would finding this one sheep be such an occasion of joy that one would want to celebrate with all his friends. The celebration will undoubtedly be a banquet feast, with lots of meat served. Let’s say that five sheep and a couple of goats are slaughtered, not to mention the cost of the other food. One might have to sell off or kill five sheep to celebrate the finding of one – not good economics. It is a very sentimental story, but once the reality of it sets in it just doesn’t seem to square with real life.

And just as the sheep rancher would be touched by the loss of but one sheep, the loss of part of the family finances would deeply touch the woman of the house. Perhaps the loss of that one coin was equal to one day’s wages. The woman would “turn the house upside-down” to find that one lost coin. She would light a lamp to help in her search, and then she’d sweep and clean until she found it. When the coin is found, she would rejoice greatly at finding it and she, too, would call her friends and neighbors, so that they could rejoice with her. Once again, it is assumed by Jesus that all of His audience would be nodding their heads in agreement. They would search for the lost coin, just as they would rejoice in finding it. The search and the rejoicing seems to be overdone, when it comes to the sheep and the coin.

The difference between Jesus and the Pharisees is that they cared about possessions, while Jesus cared about people. The Pharisees grumbled that Jesus could gladly receive repentant sinners and rejoice in their salvation, yet they would diligently search for lost possessions and celebrate when they found them. They were “out of sync” with heaven.

Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. The young man hid his heart and took off to a distant country. He soon learned what many high-paid athletes and rock stars discover when the money is gone the entourage quickly disappears. In the midst of his poverty and despair, the young man came to his senses and decided to return to his home. He planned a little speech of apology, but his father saw him from far off and immediately welcomed him home with the outward signs of restoration – a robe, a ring, and sandals. And because the father was so filled with joy, he spontaneously announced a party. This son’s repentance touched the heart of his loving father, and paved the way for his restoration and rejoicing.

When the older brother heard about the celebration, he became angry and refused to go to the celebration. His father went out and pleaded with him, but he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

This parable is Jesus’ response to the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes because of Jesus’ acceptance of and rejoicing with repentant sinners. If the first two parables reveal to us that the Pharisees cared too much about “lost possessions,” this parable exposes why they are not concerned about lost people. It serves as the Jesus’ forceful response to the grumbling of the Pharisees at His response to sinners.

The father gave the younger son what he had asked for - he allowed the son to go his own way. The heart of that father never forgot his wayward son. It was no accident that the father saw the son coming “from a long way off” and ran to meet him. He didn’t force the son to grovel or even allow him to finish his confession, but quickly restored him as a son. The father ordered a celebration, and when the older brother refused to participate, the father sought him out and appealed to him to join in the celebration. The father was as gracious to the older brother as he was to the younger. How great is the love of this father. How much like our God.

The older brother, like the Pharisees and scribes, grumbled at Jesus' reception of sinners. The older brother failed to see that he was a sinner, and he also failed to understand that God has provided salvation for all sinners who truly repent. What the older brother did not think he needed (repentance and salvation) he resisted and resented in others, so he would not share in the celebration.

The Pharisees and scribes had too much compassion on their own lost possessions, but they cared little for lost people. This is why they could not rejoice at the repentance of lost sinners. It isn't that the Pharisees and scribes found it impossible to rejoice; they actively resisted—they grumbled. The older brother was angry with the father because he felt he did not get what he deserved while the younger brother got what he didn't deserve. That is the way God's grace works—it is bestowed on unworthy people...sinners who trust in God's grace.

And let's not forget the prodigal father...a man who was extremely generous, lavishing his love on his sons; a man of infinite compassion, unconditional love, spontaneous forgiveness that emanated from a kind and gracious heart.

Here, in this man, we see the essence of the God that Jesus came to reveal for us...a God who, from the beginning of creation, stretched out his arms to bless and to protect...a God who never forces himself on anyone but waits in patience.

The central purpose of this parable is not the return of the younger son but the amazing nature of the father's love. Jesus told this story to help us understand the nature of God's love in action. It's a love that forgives without condition, a love that restores without counting the cost, a generous love that holds nothing back.

This story challenges us to see that there is no time when we can be more God-like in the living of our lives than in those moments when we are truly generous when we forgive those who have offended us and when we do all in our power to be instruments of peace and reconciliation. How do we measure up?

prod·i·gal/ *prädəgəl/* *adjective*

1. spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant
2. having or giving something on a lavish scale.

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