

The Prodigal God

Luke 15:1-32

Series: The Journey to Jerusalem (Luke, Fall 2019)

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Worship: Extravagant Father

Key Sentence: God seeks the lost and rejoices at their return

Outline:

I. Seeking the lost (Luke 15:1-10)

II. Seeking by waiting (Luke 15:11-24)

III. Seeking by going out (Luke 15:25-32)

Luke 15:1-32 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” ³So he told them this parable: ⁴“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. ⁸“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? ⁹And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

¹¹And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. ¹³Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.’” ²⁰And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹And the son said to him,

‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’²² But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet.’²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵‘Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.’²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.²⁷ And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him,²⁹ but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.’³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’³¹ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

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Luke 15:1-32

Our family has had a lot of experience with lost things. Not just keys and phones, though we've had plenty of those, but also lost friends. Newt's attachment to Puppy, which we saw during children's corner, is the same kind of attachment his mom and her sisters had with special friends a generation ago. Gail and I were cleaning our closet and ran across the tale of Pink Boo, Hannah's special friend, written by Hannah's older sister Abigail. She was ten. Hannah was six. The plot was about Hannah playing all day with Pink Boo, all over the house, but then at bedtime he could not be found. Soon everyone was running around the house calling "Pink Boo where are you?" The illustrations give out before the story ends but when he was found, there was much rejoicing.

One thing we've learned from these friends is how much we rejoice, when we find something precious that is lost. God himself knows the reality of seeking that which is lost and the joy of finding it, as we'll see in the three famous parables of Luke 15: the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the lost sons, usually called "the prodigal son." Because the two shorter parables are so alike we'll take them together, seeing the features they share, seeing that God seeks the lost and rejoices at their return.

The chapter is introduced by verses 1 and 2 *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."* Notice how these verses are tied back to the previous chapter. At the end of Chapter 14 Jesus says "Him who has ears, let him hear" Now Luke says that the tax collectors and sinners were gathered around to hear him. They were listening. But the Pharisees and the scribes didn't have ears to hear, and they complain that Jesus receives tax collectors and eats with them. They're offended by his fellowship with sinners. To share a table, and to act as host, as Jesus seems to have done, was to offer peace, brotherhood, and forgiveness to tax collectors and sinners.

But for Jesus, these meals with the publicans and sinners are an expression of his mission and message. One great scholar of the parables says "the inclusion of sinners in the community of salvation, expressed through table fellowship, is Jesus' most meaningful expression of his message of the redeeming love of God." Do you see what he's saying? In sharing the table with sinners Jesus is acting out, not a parable, but a reality, the reality of God's gracious love. In the same way, these parables that teach in love God seeks the lost and rejoices when they are found.

Look at the first half the first parable. Luke 15:4-5 *What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.* Then the second parable, verse 8: *Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it?*

In the first parable a shepherd is taking care of a hundred sheep. These are probably not all his sheep, but may be all the sheep owned by the village. The loss of a sheep would be a big deal, not only for the man, but for the village. So, this caring shepherd goes off into the wilderness, voluntarily facing dangers and discomforts. In the second parable, the loss of one coin in a savings of ten is a big deal. Though the coin was only worth about a day's wages, in a society where cash was scarce it would still be a precious thing. And sinners are precious in God's sight. Just as Puppy is precious to Newt, just as the sheep to the shepherd, just as the coin to the woman, so sinners are precious to God.

Therefore God actively seeks after them. Throughout the Old Testament God is constantly calling Israel back from sin, often using the imagery of the sheep and the shepherd. Psalm 23 comforts us because it tells us that the Lord is our shepherd. And because the leaders of Israel were often false shepherds, he himself will become shepherd to the flock. Surely a verse like Ezekiel 34:11 was in Jesus' mind as he ministered to the lost of Israel "For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out."

In both parables God, represented by the shepherd and the woman, seeks diligently after the lost thing. The sheep is not seeking the shepherd. The coin is certainly not seeking the woman. But the shepherd leaves the 99, braves the wilderness to seek the lost sheep. The woman spends precious fuel to light a lamp, and seeks diligently for the lost coin. In the same way God seeks the lost. The witless sheep, lost and alone, will not even return when the shepherd appears, but must be carried. Just so we witless lost sheep, must be carried.

And when God finds us, he rejoices, and all of heaven with him. Verses 6-7 conclude the first parable: *When he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'* ⁷*Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.* Verses 9-10 conclude the second parable: *And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.'* ¹⁰*Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

Both parables have something precious that is lost, a diligent search, and rejoicing when what is lost is found. In the first case, the community rejoices together with the shepherd. In the second, you might expect rejoicing to be limited to the woman, but she chooses to rejoice with her friends and neighbors.

Now Jesus could have stopped there, but he adds two interpretative verses, 7 and 10, which unpack the imagery. The lost thing is a sinner and the one who seeks is God. Notice though, that the sinner repents. God seeks lost sinners, but we do have responsibility, to repent, to turn away from ourselves toward God. The first parable adds that there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 who need no repentance. It's likely Jesus is using irony here, poking at the Pharisees who think they are righteous. He is saying "there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 who think they need no repentance." But the point is God rejoices over the repentant sinner. The second parable adds that the community of God, the angels, also rejoice. And I think that, though taught in a parable, is literally true. The angels rejoice at every sinner who gets found and rescued, to the glory of the seeking God.

But sometimes God finds it wisest to seek us by waiting for us to return to him. Jesus goes on to tell the we call "the prodigal son," but which is really the story of an extravagant father. We'll split it in two pieces, beginning with verses 11-24 *And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹²And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. ¹³Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷"But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" ²⁰And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²²But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.*

This parable, with the concluding portion we'll look at it later, is widely considered one of the most significant Jesus ever told. This first part conveys the same sense of joy of the lost being found as the other two parables. In contrast, the second part deals with the sour attitude of the elder brother. One of my favorite commentators says "The parable is one of the world's supreme masterpieces of storytelling. Its details are vivid; they reflect actual customs and legal procedures and build up the story's emotional and spiritual impact."

As the parable begins, we learn that there is a man who has two sons. The younger son is like many in literature: he chafes under the burden of family life and longs to leave his drab existence, and find a life of his own, even if to do so is to rebel against his father and against custom. So, he says to his father, "give me the share of property that is coming to me." In that culture, this is the same as wishing the father dead. "Why don't you just die and give me my part?" The share of the estate a younger son would receive on the death of the father would be one-third, because the oldest always received a "double portion." If the property were given, as in this case, while the father lived, the heirs would have use of it; but if they sold it, they could not normally receive the profit as long as the father lived. The son may have been asking for an immediate total cash out, and it appear he received it, for the property is divided. Jesus leaves the conflict associated with this to our imagination: the disdain of this young man's brother, the anguish of his father, the scorn of the community.

The younger son gathers all he has received, takes a journey to a far country, where he can spend his new fortune without censure. And he does. He squanders his property in reckless and wild living. The first phrase implies lavish spending, and the second phrase probably implies sexual sin. So, he lived high on the hog, if you'll excuse the expression, for a while. But then he was hit by two disasters, verse 14. He ran out of money and a family came. You can imagine him going to all the people he had partied with and trying to get help, but now they wanted nothing to do with him. So, sooner than most others, he began to be in need. He had to find work, but the job he ended up with was especially demeaning for a Jew. He glued himself, verse 15, to one of the citizens of that country, and became the caretaker of that man's pigs. Pigs, of course, are unclean. They represent the breaking of the ceremonial law which the Pharisees associated with "tax collectors and sinners," and common people.

It seems this citizen wasn't very generous. Whatever he was given left him so hungry he longed to be fed with the pods the pigs ate. These were probably wild carob, which is common in the Middle East, but differs from the domestic kind by being thorny, dry, and of little food value. The pigs could eat it, but he could not. And no one, in the midst of the famine, would give him anything more.

Miserable, miserable situation, brought on by his own foolish sinfulness. But, verse 17, when he came to himself, when he came to his senses, he said “How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger!” The prodigal, his self-sufficiency finally broken, realized that his father’s servants were treated better than this. He resolved to go home. His initial motive was not noble, simply the desire to be fed, but the confession he planned is great. “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.” The son saw his sin. He had failed to honor his parent, and in doing so had sinned not just against his earthly father, but against his heavenly father as well. He had forfeited all claim to be treated as a son and he looked only for the possibility of being made like one of the paid servants. Verse 20: “He arose and came to his father.” Notice that he returns not to his country or his home or even his family but to his father. This is true repentance.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” It seems clear this loving father was waiting, perhaps searching the road daily, hoping for his son’s appearance. And when he sees his son, he is filled with compassion, a phrase often used of Jesus in his ministry. So he runs, which is not something a father in that culture would do, and he embraces and kisses his son, which is not something a wronged father would do. Jesus fills this sentence with the father’s love.

The son never even gets to complete his speech. He says “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son,” but then the father cuts him off with prodigal generosity. “Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.” In that culture the robe was a ceremonial gift to an honored guest, the ring signified family authority, and the sandals were those only a free man would wear; slaves went barefoot. The killing of the fattened calf shows that the father felt there could scarcely be a more special occasion. Finally, verse 24 “For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.” This is the heart of the father. He seeks and he rejoices.

But don’t miss that in this case, where the lost thing was neither a witless sheep nor a lifeless coin, but a son, he seeks by waiting, by watching, by looking with compassion for the glimmer of repentance. Remember the first two parables closed by saying that God will rejoice in a sinner who repents. Jesus doesn’t need to repeat that: this longer story has made it explicit in the behavior of the father. For we have a prodigal father, an extravagant father who forgives in the face of blatant provocation, and who lavishes love on the returning sinner.

I've been re-reading Henri Nouwen's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Nouwen, inspired by Rembrandt's painting of that name, sees himself in the younger son. He says "I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found," and "The farther I run away from the place where God dwells, the less I am able to hear the voice that calls me the Beloved, and the less I hear that voice, the more entangled I become in the manipulations and power games of the world." But he sees the forgiving love of God in the welcoming hands of the father. He makes a shocking connection, "Home is the center of my being, where I hear the voice that says, "You are my beloved. On you my favor rests." The same voice that . . . spoke to Jesus, . . . speaks to all God's children and sets them free to live in a dark world while remaining in the light. The voice of love speaks from eternity and gives life wherever it is heard." Have you heard that voice, the voice of him who calls you beloved, who forgives all the prodigal sin, rebellion and selfishness you've committed with an even more prodigal, extravagant perfect forgiveness? As Nouwen says "Jesus wants to make it clear that the God of whom he speaks is a God of compassion who joyously welcomes repentant sinners into his house."

But the parable doesn't end there. The verses we've just looked at address one kind of sinner, the kind who runs in pursuit of pleasure or rebellion or radical selfishness. Jesus came to seek and save these lost. But he was also concerned about another kind of sinner, the self-righteous and proud. These parables were directed at the scribes and the pharisees who grumbled, "this man receives sinners and eats with them." They condemned his forgiveness, so he depicts them in the older son, but shows how God's love goes out to him, too.

Verses 25-32. *"Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' ²⁸But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' ³¹And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"*

Jesus says the elder son was in the field. He was working on the estate, on the farm, and he came and drew near to the house at the end of the day. By this time the fattened calf had been butchered and the meat roasted.

According to Kenneth Bailey, whose book *Poet & Peasant* gives a deeply informed account of the parable, this meat would have been roasted in the bread ovens of the estate. As soon as the meat was ready the music would start, to draw the men returning from the fields. But the older son, rather than rushing with the rest, seems suspicious. He calls over one of the servants and asks what's happening. The servant replies, concisely, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound." I love the "safe and sound" in that verse. Doesn't that show us the father's heart? He gives us the opportunity to return to him "safe and sound."

But the older son was not pleased by this development. He was angry and refused to go in. The likeness to the Pharisees is unmistakable. His anger and refusal to share table fellowship is evidence of self-righteousness and of judgment, not only of his brother but of his father. Then comes a detail which struck me hard this week. "His father came out and entreated him." In the first two parables the shepherd sought the sheep, the woman the coin. In the first part of this parable the father first waited and then ran to the prodigal son. Here he goes out to the elder son: left the banquet, left the prodigal, and like the shepherd went out to seek this lost sheep as well. His love for this son was just as great.

But this compassionate seeking father was met with a torrent of pent-up feelings: "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command." Leon Morris says "he saw himself as the model son, but his use of the verb *douleuo*, 'to serve as a slave' gives him away. He did not really understand what being a son means." Verse 29 "you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends." The proud and the self-righteous always feel that they are not treated as they deserve. Verse 30, "But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!" He says your son spent your money on prostitutes, which hasn't been said, though it may have been implied. But we imagine him shouting when he says it was for this "low-life" that the father killed the fatted calf. He bitterly condemns both his brother and his father.

This, of course, is a picture of the Pharisees. "Your master receives tax collectors and sinners." We should be the ones with the party. We're the ones who are trying to keep the law that God gave. And remember many of the Pharisees were sincere in loving God's law. Yet they are driven to madness by this teacher because he doesn't seem to share their values, and he will not support their approach. He loves whom they hate. He loves these sinners. Heals them. Feeds them. Teaches them not the rules of the Pharisees but the mercy of God. By this depiction of the elder brother Jesus points his finger right at them.

But far too often he is also pointing at us. Henri Nouwen says “The parable that Rembrandt painted might well be called ‘The Parable of the Lost Sons.’ Not only did the younger son, who left home . . . get lost, but the one who stayed home also became a lost man.” “There are many elder sons and elder daughters who are lost while still at home.” He says, “The more I reflect on the elder son in me, the more I realize how deeply rooted this form of lostness really is and how hard it is to return home from there.” I find a little of myself in Nouwen’s self diagnosis: “My resentment has attached itself to the underside of my virtue. At the very moment I want to speak or act out of my most generous self, I get caught in anger . . . Just when I want to be most selfless, I find myself obsessed about being loved. Just when I do my utmost to accomplish a task well, I find myself questioning why others do not give themselves as I do. Just when I think I am capable of overcoming my temptations, I feel envy toward those who gave in to theirs. It seems that wherever my virtuous self is, there also is the resentful complainer.”

And yet the father, the father, the father shows compassion even to the self-righteous prideful son. Verse 31 “And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’³²It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.” To this son as to the other the father’s words are tender. He makes it clear he appreciates this son’s constant attendance. He says plainly that this son is still his heir “all that is mine is yours.” That son could have had a young goat to entertain his friends any time he wanted. He had it all. But he, like the Pharisees, did not realize the extent of his privileges: “all that is mine is yours.” Yet the father does not back down in his welcome of the younger brother. It was fitting, he says, it was necessary. The loving welcome of the younger son was not just a good thing, it was the right thing. The father had to do it. Joy was the only proper reaction in such a situation. And he finishes by repeating the wonderful thing that has happened. The dead has come to life. The lost has been found.

And that’s where the parable ends. That may be the most remarkable thing of all. We are not told what the response of the older son is to this last plea by his father. Does he turn away in judgment, or does he recognize his own need for forgiveness? Does he turn toward the father and say “Father I have sinned against heaven and against you?” We don’t know. Nor do we know how the younger son lived in response to his father’s welcoming love. As Leon Morris says “In leaving these points unresolved [Jesus] throws out a challenge to all his hearers, be they like the elder brother or like the younger.” Will we come to him in repentance and faith, or will we go on in sin and rebellion or in self-righteousness and judgement. Jesus desperately wants us to know that God seeks the lost and rejoices at their return.