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Scripture: Luke 15:1-32

Title: When the Lost are Found

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Have you ever lost something? Sometimes we lose items and think, 'oh that's really no big deal.' We don't even worry about the loss. Other times we search high and low looking for the lost item. Finding it provides a sense of relief; not finding it creates frustration.

Once, years ago, I lost my wedding band. I just realized one day it was missing off my finger. Karen and I had been married some 12-13 years at that point, and it had hardly ever even been off my finger up to then; but now for some mysterious reason it was gone. I couldn't remember taking it off, and I had no idea where it was. I searched high and low but could not find it. For a little over a month I searched off an on through the house, at my office, in my car; yet that wedding ring was nowhere to be found.

Then, one day I was putting an electric blanket on our bed. To hook it up required me to get underneath our bed and fish power cords to the outlets and controls to their respective locations. As I was under the bed I saw something gleaming amidst all the dust bunnies between the headboard of the bed and the wall ... it was my wedding band. I pulled it out, wiped it off, and the party began. To this day I have no idea how it got there; perhaps it happened somehow in my sleep is all I can imagine. But believe me when I tell you I was excited when I found it.

Today's parable deals with the lost being found. Specifically with lost people being found. Verse seven of our passage says, **"... there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."** Finding lost stuff is exciting. But finding lost souls exhilarating. In today's passage Jesus speaks about the lost being found. Let's notice what we learn from this great parable told by Jesus:

We begin with The Context of the Parable. We find the context for the telling of this parable in vv. 1-2. Two groups are identified;

A. tax collectors and sinners (this would be the worldly crowd or what we might think of as LOST people) and;

B. Pharisees and scribes (this would be the religious crowd or the CHURCH folk).

It was the lost people who wanted to hear what Jesus had to say, but the church folks grumbled that Jesus would associate with such people.

To these groups Jesus tells a parable. It is not, as some have considered, three parables, but rather a connected whole. Verse three says that Jesus told them "this parable" (singular). It is one parable in three parts. Yet each part builds upon the other and culminates with the final part, that part we know as the parable of the Prodigal Son.

The parable commences with the story of a lost sheep (vv. 4-7). It's serious to lose a sheep, but this is only a 1% loss. There are 99 others still safe; yet the shepherd sought this sheep as if he were only one he possessed. The clear implication here is that out of all the billions of people in the world, you matter to God individually. God doesn't see a mass of humanity; He sees individuals. Jesus died for individuals. This first part of the parable is a picture of Christ, the Good Shepherd. John 10:11 says, **"I am the good shepherd.**

***The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.***” I wonder today, do we love lost sheep the way Jesus loves lost sheep?

The parable continues with the story of lost silver (vv. 8-10). If it's serious to lose a sheep, it's also serious to lose silver. This is a 10% loss. There were ten coins total; to lose one is to lose a lot, so the woman sought it like it were her only one. In the lost sheep we see a picture of God the Son. Here we see a picture of God the Spirit, sweeping clean the house (i.e., the church) and shining the light of His conviction upon that which is lost. Were it not for the light and the broom, this lady may have never found that coin. Were it not for those in the church whom the Spirit works through, many might not hear.

The parable culminates with the story of a lost son (vv. 11-32). It's serious to lose a sheep and silver, but it's most serious to lose a son. This represents a 50% loss; one of two. The shepherd wasn't content to hear, you have 99 other sheep. The woman wouldn't even consider that she still had nine other coins. How in the world would the father be satisfied with knowing he still had one other son? The father's heart went out to the lost son in spite of his willfulness and wickedness. The shepherd and the sheep suggest God the Son at work. The woman and the coin suggest God the Spirit at work. Here we see no less than God the Father at work to reclaim that which is lost.

Today, God is still at work to reclaim the lost. Perhaps there's one here today who's in need of reclamation. He works in the same progression we see here. It begins with the work of Christ who 2000 years ago came and died on the cross in the place of lost humanity. It proceeds forth through the work of the Spirit who convicts and convinces men and women to repent and come to Christ. And it is achieved as the Father opens His arms to welcome home a repentant child.

In the last part of the parable we meet two sons and a father. I believe that each of us here today is like one of these two sons. And the Father will respond to us as we see Him doing with these sons. So let's turn our attention then to The Content of the Parable.

We see both a foolish son and a faithful son. The differences between these two brothers are immense. We might immediately think that we should want to be a faithful son, not a foolish one. But a closer look at each, as well as at the Father will teach us much about lost people who need to be found.

Let's look first at the attitude of the foolish son. The foolish son is the younger son. Remember, there are tax collectors and sinners in the group originally hearing this. If there's anybody who can relate to the younger, foolish son, it's them. Like this younger son, they'd gone out on their own away from God. To hear that the Father stood waiting to welcome his lost son home must have surely warmed their heart to know that God would readily receive them if they returned to him. In the same way today, if you've wandered from God you can know that He stands waiting and willing to receive you back. Let's think for a few moments about this younger, foolish son.

This boy first considers the far horizons. Note carefully his going away prayer to his father in verse 12: He says, ***“Father, GIVE ME.”*** All he can think about is himself. He wants what he perceives to be his and he wants it now. According to Jewish inheritance laws the first born son was given a privileged portion. This would have gone to the “other son,” the one who stayed home, whom we'll consider shortly. So this was not a 50/50 split. Rather this son took his lesser share and left home. He ***“took a journey into a far country and there he squandered his property in reckless living”*** (v. 13).

In his commentary, John Phillips notes that the distance he had wandered was measured by God in terms of morals, not miles. He's right folks – we don't have to travel a great distance geographically to be in the far country. More times than I care to remember I've had a parent tell me about their adult child and describe them as being "in the far country." They're clearly referencing this parable here and expressing their concern that their child has wandered away from a relationship with God. They might be living in an immoral relationship. Or they're engaged in dishonest business practices. Sometimes it's been that they struggle with lifestyle choices and get caught up in alcoholism, drug addiction, pornography, or worse. At times, none of these things are true; it's just that they simply have no desire for the things of God.

Where are you today? Are you living in the far country? You see, you can even be in church but be in the far country. If you're not daily walking with Christ, enjoying fellowship with Him, feasting upon His Word, you just may be in the far country. A relationship with God is not just going to church and saying you believe in God. Even the demons believe says the Bible (James 2:19). I personally believe far more people are in the far country than even realize it. Possibly, some here today are living in the far country. Today God gives you an opportunity to examine your life and determine if you're truly walking in fellowship with Him or living in the far country.

This young man went to the far country and became the life of the party – eat, drink and be merry was his mantra. But when the money was gone, so were the friends. Folks, the far country is nowhere to be when the funds run out, your friends take off, and the famine moves in. That's what happened to this young man. He found himself slopping hogs – a situation deplorable for any self-respecting Jewish man. Things became so desperate he even began desiring to eat the pig's food.

So he began to reconsider his father's house. The Scripture says "**he came to himself**" (v. 17). Or as some translations say, "he came to his senses." He determined he'd go home to his father, but he goes back with a completely different attitude. His going away prayer was "give me." Now his coming home prayer is "**Father MAKE ME**" (v. 19). He was willing to be a hired hand, to forfeit all his rights as a son. Even that would be better than the desperate state he was in.

The Scripture says, "**Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked**" (Psalm 84:10). Listen, friend, there's no advantage to dwelling in the far country. It will only inevitably bring you heartache and pain. Conversely, there's no place like our father's house. There we find peace and contentment. This foolish son made a wise choice to return to his father's house. Today, you can make a similar wise choice by returning to God.

Can picture him giving his employer his bucket back and saying he's going home? He was probably derided and made fun of. "You think your father wants you back? After all you've done? Who are you kidding?" But we can also hear the prodigal simply answering, "Mister, you don't know my father." And we'll see more of him in just a minute.

But first, let's look next at the accusation of the faithful son. Again, remember, there are not only tax collectors and sinners present who could identify with this younger, foolish son. There were also Pharisees and scribes present. I don't think it's a stretch to say that they clearly knew Jesus was identifying them in the character of the elder son. Just as this elder son was unwilling to come in to the banquet because he wanted nothing to do with his younger brother, so they were unwilling to come in and have fellowship with those they considered outside the realm of respectability. Like the elder brother, they knew nothing of the grace of God.

Theirs was a life of legalism, rules, and regulations. They thought that through such “self-righteous” living that surely God would be pleased with them and accept them. They couldn’t have been more wrong.

Look briefly at this elder son and his accusations. Note carefully his argument in vv. 29-30: **“*Look, these many years I have served you and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never even gave me even a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!*”** At that very moment his younger brother was wearing a robe of righteousness based solely upon the grace and mercy of the Father, but this elder brother reveals his wardrobe of self-righteousness through his words: “I, me, my.”

What was it about this elder brother? What does his accusation reveal about him? Notice briefly today, six things:

First, he saw service as a substitute. **“*These many years I have served you,*”** he said. But it’s clear from the way the father related to the younger son that what he truly wanted was a relationship, NOT a servant. It’s the same with God. It’s a good thing to serve God, but our service is no substitute for a genuine relationship with Him.

Next, he saw obedience as an obligation. **“*I never disobeyed your command,*”** he says. But his was an obedience born of obligation, not relationship. I tend to see this elder son like the little boy whose mother repeatedly told him to sit. But he couldn’t be still and kept getting up. Finally, the mother went and plopped him down in a chair and strapped him in. The little boy said, “I may be sitting on the outside, but I’m standing on the inside.” That’s pretty much how I read the obedience of the elder son here. He may have been obeying externally, but it was only because it was an obligation, not because he had a relationship that made him want to obey!

Thirdly, he saw things as a thank you. **“*You never even gave me a young goat.*”** A young goat would have been far less expensive than a fattened calf. His complaint is he hadn’t even gotten the lesser expensive gift, so he felt unappreciated. I wonder how often we feel unappreciated by God? We give our tithes and offerings, but find ourselves going deeper into debt? We work hard at our job, but the lazy non-Christian gets the promotion and we get nothing. We serve the Lord faithfully, but things keep breaking down and we can’t replace them. Are we, like this elder son, viewing things as God’s way of thanking us?

Next, he saw reward as his right. **“*That I might celebrate with my friends,*”** was what he saw as his right. It is true that God will reward us on judgment day. But the only thing we have a “right” to is judgment and separation. Whatever we receive is all because of the mercy and grace of God. Reward is not our right.

Then, he saw family as futility. In verse 30, he speaks of **“*this son of yours.*”** That has a resentful, contemptuous ring to it, doesn’t it? Think about it - really, this elder son is guilty of the very charge he lays at his brother’s feet. He is livid that his brother denied his family and left to squander his father’s money. And all the while, that’s exactly what he’s doing. He can’t even call him “my brother.” Rather it’s, “this son of yours.”

Finally, he saw his brother’s return as a reproach. Note the charge he levels. He says his brother, **“*devoured your property with prostitutes.*”** Woah! How did he know what his brother had been doing? Was this a factual statement or is he just leveling ad hominem charges against his brother to tear him down. I remember one church I was in years ago where a young man who struggled with drugs was saved and needed

help. So the church took a love offering to help him. But one older gentleman scoffed at that and said he wasn't giving because, "he'll just take the money and go buy more drugs." Why that response? It wasn't concern but rather contempt. He saw the young man as a reproach so he wasn't about to offer any help.

Here again we see the sad truth that you don't have to wander far geographically to be away from the Father. This supposed faithful son was right there with the Father the entire time, yet it's clearly evident that he's as far from his father's heart in spirit as his younger brother had been when he had gone to the far country.

Friend, please don't think that just because you're in church week in and week out that you're right with God. In reality that's nothing but self-righteousness. You're no different than the elder, faithful son. I find it interesting that we're never told whether the elder son went in to the party or not. I think that's because some elder son types will become like the younger son. They **will** repent and return to the Father. Others will remain hard hearted and unrepentant. They'll continue to reject the grace of God and refuse to return to the Father. If you're an elder son type today, which type will you be?

In each case, with both sons, our attention is directed back to the Father and how he responds, so let's consider the action of the Father. There's a different response for each son. First of all, the Father rebukes the faithful son. In verse 28 we're told the Father goes out "**and entreated him.**" Some translations use the phrase, "plead with." The Greek word used means to beg. It's the Greek word *parakaleo*, the same word for the comforter (who is the Holy Spirit). You see, it's the Spirit of God that pleads with us drawing us to Christ. When we're Christians, it's the same Spirit that draws us to return when we wander. Today the real issue is how is the Spirit of God moving in your life calling you? Eternal implications hang in the balance of your response to His calling.

We see another response as well. The Father receives the foolish son. Verse 20 pictures this: "**While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.**" The picture here is of the father looking. Can't you feel the heartbeat of an aching heart longing for a missing son? Can't you see the worried father pacing the grounds each day? Then, one day, a form appears. The workers go immediately back to work; it's just another beggar coming. The father, however, darts off – he would know that walk anywhere. That's his son, and he's coming home!

Here's the amazing, glorious truth we see: Acceptance is not based on the worth of the prodigal but on the love of the Father. Your acceptance by God is NOT based on who you are or what you've done. If that was the case, we'd all be doomed! It's based solely upon what Christ did for us and how we respond to that. You see, our sin separates us from a holy God. That sin has to be punished. Jesus came and was punished in our place. He died to pay for our sins. When we repent and turn to Him, God receives us readily AND as we see in v. 22, He also rewards us richly. "**Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet.**"

The Father gives this prodigal three things. A robe; believers are robed with righteousness of Christ. A ring, something given to seal a covenant or agreement; believers have been sealed by the Spirit of God. And shoes, given only to children, not servants; believers are adopted as children into the Father's family. What greater reward is there than to be an adopted child of the Father by being robed with the righteousness of Christ and sealed by the Holy Spirit of God?

Which son are you today? Are you the elder son, thinking you're faithful to the Father but, in reality, possessing a self-righteousness that will ultimately condemn you? Or do you recognize that you've been a foolish, younger son, one who's willing to return to the Father who waits with open arms to receive you?

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There's a story written by Ernest Hemmingway that's set in Spain. It's called, Capital of the World, and it tells about a father and son who were estranged. The son had run away, and the father set off to find him. He searched for months to no avail, and in a last desperate effort, he put an ad in a Madrid newspaper. It read, "Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Papa." On Saturday, 600 men named Paco showed up, looking for forgiveness and love from their father.

There's a sad irony to that story. Two thousand years ago at Calvary, God clearly placed the ad. It said, "All is forgiven; please return to me." Yet many Pacos read it and say, "Maybe later. I gotta live now!" What about you today? What are you saying?

Let's pray ...