

# Luke 15

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## Introduction:

1. This chapter continues the struggle between the ruling religious class and Jesus, the One who was both Son of Man and Son of God.
2. The chapter consists of three parables, progressive in nature and collectively powerful tools for teaching, not only for those who were listening, but for all of through the centuries who have followed.

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The Scottish writer **William Barclay** describes this chapter: “There is no chapter of the New Testament so well known and so dearly loved as the fifteenth chapter of Luke's gospel. It has been called ‘the gospel in the gospel,’ as if it contained the very distilled essence of the good news which Jesus came to tell.

## THE AUDIENCE

**(15:1.) Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. (2) This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that He was associating with such sinful people--even eating with them!**

- The socially outcast **tax collectors and sinners** gave attention to Jesus. They loved His teaching. But “good Jews” did not associate with such **sinners** and traitors. The religious establishment grumbled directly, saying that **Jesus associates and eats** with these outcasts. This **complaining** generated more stories from our Lord who taught so much with stories that grew out of the moment.
- **Barclay** says here: “ It was the deliberate Pharisaic aim to avoid every contact with the people who did not observe the petty details of the law. Obviously, they would be shocked to the core at the way in which Jesus companied with people who were not only rank outsiders, but sinners, contact with whom would necessarily defile. We will understand these parables more fully if we remember that the strict Jews said, not ‘There will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents,’ but, ‘There will be joy in heaven over one sinner who is obliterated before God.’ They looked sadistically forward not to the saving but to the destruction of the sinner.”
- These three parables are characterized by **J.W. McGarvey** as “the yearning of redemptive love.” The religious leaders seemed totally unable to express such emotion.

## THE STORY OF THE LOST SHEEP

**(3.) So Jesus told them this story: (4) "If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won't he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it?"**

- If this was Perea, it was **sheep** country so the illustration was very understandable and relevant.
- Again, Jesus draws from the expected conduct—this time—of a shepherd. Every **sheep** was valuable and even **one** that has strayed was cause for personal concern.

(5.) And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. (6) When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.'

- **Finding** the missing sheep triggers great joy in the shepherd and he wants his **friends and neighbors** to **rejoice** as well.

Retrieving the **sheep** was grounds for a party.

- **McGarvey** writes:

The call implies that the loss was known to the neighbors, and that they felt concerned about it. Had the Pharisees been neighbors to the spirit of Christ, they would have sympathized with him in his joy; but they were false under-shepherds.

- Notice the strong rebuke from the Lord in Ezekiel 34:1-6 NLT.

**Then this message came to me from the LORD: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds, the leaders of Israel. Give them this message from the Sovereign LORD: What sorrow awaits you shepherds who feed yourselves instead of your flocks. Shouldn't shepherds feed their sheep? You drink the milk, wear the wool, and butcher the best animals, but you let your flocks starve. You have not taken care of the weak. You have not tended the sick or bound up the injured. You have not gone looking for those who have wandered away and are lost. Instead, you have ruled them with harshness and cruelty. So My sheep have been scattered without a shepherd, and they are easy prey for any wild animal. They have wandered through all the mountains and all the hills, across the face of the earth, yet no one has gone to search for them.**



**(7.) In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away!**

- **Heaven** has a party when **one sinner repents**.
- Those who **are righteous** may refer to the Pharisees and the scribes who were grumbling (vs. 2). They did not believe they needed to **repent**. Try to imagine the Pharisees **rejoicing** over someone being found after being lost.

### THE STORY OF THE LOST COIN

**(8.) "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Won't she light a lamp and sweep the entire house and search carefully until she finds it? (9) And when she finds it, she will call in her friends and neighbors and say, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost coin.'**

- The first illustration was directed to men while this one resonates with the women.
- One theory has it that married women wore a string of coins on their forehead or arm signifying marriage. To lose one would be like losing a wedding ring.
- As in the case of the shepherd, it was party time when she found it. She wanted **her friends and neighbors** to **rejoice with** her.



**(10.) In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents."**

- The application was made by our Lord: there is **joy** in the **presence of the angels** when one **sinner repents**.
- The leaders believed they did not need to **repent**, so naturally there was no rejoicing over them.
- **McGarvey** writes:

By thus reaffirming the heavenly joy, Jesus sought to shame the Pharisees out of their cold-blooded murmuring.

## THE STORY OF THE LOST SON

**(11.) To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: "A man had two sons. (12) The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.**

- **The younger son** asked for his portion of the father's **estate**. Because the Law of Moses allocated two portions to the firstborn son, this **estate** would have been divided into three parts. It may have meant that a portion of the estate had to be sold in order to raise cash. The father continued to control the remaining portion rather than turn management over to the older son.
- **McGarvey** says,
 

These two sons represent the professedly religious (elder) and the openly irreligious (the younger).

**(13.) "A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. (14) About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve.**

- The newly-rich **son** wanted to get away from home, so he journeyed to a **distant land** that was not Jewish, as seen in verse 15. **The younger son** would be able to escape the authority of his father.
- With no experience in handling **money**, he quickly wasted it on **wild living**. Nearly always, it is not how much a person has, but how he manages what he has that determines his net worth.
- A **great famine** occurred and he was out of **money**. There was not enough left to buy food for the day. The playboy needed a job as he became impoverished.

**(15.) He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. (16) The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.**



- Pictured are the carob pods, both dried and green in the tree. (Available on *eBay* and *Amazon*.)
- His job was feeding **pigs**. Probably a worse job could not be located for a Jewish lad because **pigs** were unclean meat under the Law of Moses.
- It seems that he was feeding the **pigs**, but did not have access to their food for himself.

**(17.) "When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! (18) I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, (19) and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.'"**

- **When he came to his senses.** It is like he recovered from a mental disorder. Read Ecclesiastes 9:3:

**It seems so tragic that everyone under the sun suffers the same fate. That is why people are not more careful to be good. Instead, they choose their own mad course,**

**for they have no hope. There is nothing ahead but death anyway.** (Ecclesiastes 9:3)

- The young prodigal compared his condition with the **hired servants** on the farm back home. They were far better off. He was at the bottom of the degradation pit. The man he was working for did not value him enough to provide sufficient **food**.
- He devises a one-sentence appeal to tell his **father** when he returns **home**. He acknowledges that he was **sinning** against God as well as his **father**. He doesn't want the position of being a **son** returned, he just wants to be like a **hired servant**.

**(20.) "So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him.**

- He carried out his plan and **returned**. Repentance is usually a journey rather than an event.
- **His father** saw him and had a heart feeling for his son. He ran to him, **embraced and kissed** the wayward lad. We see the father's humility and openness here.
- The boy knew he was welcome **home** and **his father** treated him like the son that he was.

**(21.) His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.'**

- While the **son** made his speech, it did not get the results that he intended as we see next. The **father** cut the rest of the rehearsed story short. He was reinstated by the events that followed immediately. He was not a hired hand but a free man.



(22.) "But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. (23) And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, (24) for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began.

- The prodigal son was given the **finest robe**. His was probably in tatters. The boy was given a **ring and sandals**. Was he barefooted? He was offered choice food and a celebration. He had been lacking proper nutrition for a while.
- **The father** treated his return like a resurrection from the **dead**. The condition of sinners who will not repent is pictured as death in other scriptures. Romans 6:13; Ephesians 2:1; Revelation 3:1.
- **Barclay** observes: "It tells us much about the forgiveness of God. The father must have been waiting and watching for the son to come home, for he saw him a long way off. When he came, he forgave him with no recriminations. There is a way of forgiving, when forgiveness is conferred as a favour. It is even worse, when



someone is forgiven, but always by hint and by word and by threat his sin is held over him.”

- The Christian song *Reckless Love* touches on this theme.

**(25.) "Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, (26) and he asked one of the servants what was going on.**

- Not every family member agreed with the father. The **older son** found out about the celebration because of the **music and dancing**.

**(27.) 'Your brother is back,' he was told, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.' (28) "The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him,**

- The servant explained the celebration, but the older son **was angry**. The father loved the older brother, too, but his attitude was like that of the Pharisees.
- He demonstrated his **anger** by refusing to enter the festivities. It was necessary for father to plead with him to go in.

**(29.) but he replied, 'All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. (30) Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!'**

- The bitter older son had words for his father. He said his dad was at fault for not providing even a **goat** so he could party with his **friends**. “I have never neglected a command of yours.” This is so unlikely. See Luke 18:11.
- **This son of yours** designation shows contempt for his brother. He accuses his brother of spending the family wealth on

**prostitutes.** Where did that information come from? And the money was no longer family wealth, it had been owned and wasted by the prodigal.

**(31.) "His father said to him, 'Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. (32) We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!'"**

- The older brother had a privilege not available to the prodigal: **you have always stayed by me.** The father said **everything I have is yours. Your brother** was (like) **dead** and has come back to **life**, the **lost** has been **found**. We are not told how the elder brother responded to the father, but some conclusions can be drawn from the remaining history of Israel.
  - The religious leaders had Jesus crucified at the next Passover.
  - In A.D. 70, they lost their land inheritance, too.

The three parables teach powerful lessons about the God we serve.

- The shepherd cared for the one single sheep even though it was only one out of 100 sheep. Finding it again was a cause for rejoicing.
- A lifeless piece of metal is lost. It was just one piece out of 10. Finding it again was a cause for rejoicing.
- In the third story, a lad took property and went abroad, avoiding his father's authority. His eventual return was a cause for rejoicing. The story now is not one in one hundred, not one in ten, but one out of two.

◆ **William McDonald:**

The older son is an eloquent picture of the scribes and Pharisees. They resented God's showing mercy

to outrageous sinners. To their way of thinking, if not to God's, they had served Him faithfully, had never transgressed His commandments, and yet had never been properly rewarded for all of this. The truth of the matter was that they were religious hypocrites and guilty sinners. Their pride blinded them to their distance from God, and to the fact that He had lavished blessing after blessing upon them. If they had only been willing to repent and to acknowledge their sins, then the Father's heart would have been gladdened and they too would have been the cause of great celebration.