

## **He Was Lost, and Is Found (Luke 15)**

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Throughout the history of religion, there have been two topics that have been disputed: who God is and how we should respond to him. In fact, if you study different religions, you will see that while religions teach similar things about ethics, they say very different things about what God is like and how we can have a right relationship with him. And throughout the history of Christianity, most heresies, or wrong teachings, have involved who God is and how we can be reconciled to him.

Today, we're going to look at a story that gives us a glimpse of God's character and how we should respond to him rightly. This story will also give us a picture of two wrong and very common ways to respond to God.

One of the things I do here is talk a lot about the gospel of Jesus Christ. I teach the message of Christianity so that we understand it and can tell it to others. I encourage us all to share this news with others. And I encourage us all to live in light of the gospel. So, what I'm preaching here today isn't going to be very new to you, unless you're very new to church and to the Bible. But what matters most is not whether I teach something new, but whether I teach something that is true. And the fact is that whether you're someone who is not yet a Christian, or you're the most seasoned saint, we all need to hear the gospel, time and again, to learn it, remember it, and press it deeply into our minds and down into our hearts so that it affects the way we live. As Tim Keller has written, "The gospel is . . . not just the ABCs of the Christian life, but the A to Z of the Christian life."<sup>1</sup> The gospel isn't something we learn once and then leave behind for more important things. The gospel is the main event, not the undercard. It's the headliner, not the opening act.

To experience the gospel once again, today we're going to look at Luke 15. As we do that, we're going to see a few important things. We're going to see that there are two wrong ways to respond to God. We're going to see that there is a right way to respond to God. We'll see the heart of God. And we'll see Jesus, his mission, and our mission.

Let's begin by reading the first two verses of Luke 15:

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 119.

<sup>1</sup> Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. <sup>2</sup> And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”<sup>2</sup>

It’s important to see that Jesus is speaking to two groups of people here. The first group are the tax collectors and “sinners.” Tax collectors had a bad reputation. They were Jews who collected taxes for the Roman Empire. As you may know, during the time of Jesus, Palestine was under Roman rule. This meant that Jewish tax collectors were viewed as something like traitors. Tax collectors also had a reputation for being dishonest, collecting more money than they should (Luke 3:13). So, tax collectors are often lumped together with “sinners.” In the Pharisees’ view, “sinners” were people who didn’t keep their standards of purity—standards added to God’s commandments. “Sinners” could also refer to people who rather obviously broke God’s commandments.

But these people came to hear Jesus. Jesus had a message that attracted people who had made a shipwreck of their lives. He gave them hope, and they wanted to hear more.

The other group of people Jesus is talking to are the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, or the scribes. They represent the religious leaders of Judaism. Up to this point in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus has had a lot of conflict with these religious leaders. Jesus says they’re greedy hypocrites who care only about appearing religious while in reality their hearts are corrupt (Luke 11:37–52). They try to justify themselves before God by appealing to all their religious works (Luke 18:9–14). They adhere to the letter of the law while missing the heart of God’s commandments, which is simply to love God and to love other people.

We’re told that the Pharisees and the scribes are grumbling. That’s a loaded word in the Bible. It’s used of the Israelites when they complained about Moses after they were delivered out of slavery in Egypt.<sup>3</sup> So, Luke is showing that these people are aligned with those faithless, disobedient Israelites. They complained that Jesus hung out with “sinners” (Luke 5:30–32), and they were out to get him (Luke 11:53–54).

All of this is very important to understanding what Jesus teaches in this chapter. Jesus then tells this audience a parable. Notice that chapter 15 is one parable in three parts. I’m going to spend most of my time on the third part, but let’s first read verses 3–10:

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<sup>2</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>3</sup> Exod. 15:24; 16:2; 17:3; Num. 14:2; 16:41.

<sup>3</sup> So he told them this parable: <sup>4</sup> “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? <sup>5</sup> And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. <sup>6</sup> And 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.’ <sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> “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? <sup>9</sup> 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.’ <sup>10</sup> Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

I think the point of these stories is clear: “sinners” are worth seeking. In both stories, something precious is lost, someone goes searching for what was lost, and when the lost is found, there is great rejoicing. Jesus says that’s the way it is when sinners, people who were separated from God, are found by God, when they turn away from their sin and turn back to God. It seems like Jesus is telling the religious leaders that they should be searching for the lost, not grumbling when they come to God.

Then Jesus tells what is often called “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” The parable might better be called, “The Parable of a Father and His Two Sons,” though that isn’t as catchy. But this parable is as much about the older son as it is the younger son. First, we’ll see what happens with the younger son. Let’s look at verses 11–16:

<sup>11</sup> And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> And 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. <sup>13</sup> Not 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. <sup>14</sup> And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

The younger son approaches his father and asks for his inheritance now. That’s shocking. What would you be doing if you asked your parents for your inheritance now? You’d be saying that you wished they were dead so you could take their money. He doesn’t want his father; he wants his father’s stuff. Amazingly, the father obliges. In Jewish law, the eldest son inherited a “double portion,” twice as much as the other sons. In this case, the younger son would have

inherited one-third of all the father's possessions.<sup>4</sup> The father gives this to the son, who then leaves for "a far country." There, the son engages in "reckless living." He lives it up and he squanders everything that his father has given him.

In this parable, the father obviously represents *the* Father, God. And the attitude this younger son has is one wrong response to God. We might call this licentiousness or law-breaking. If you want to know the story of the Bible and the story of humanity in a nutshell, you can find it in this story. God is a perfect Father who created the world and all that is in it. He made us in his image, to reflect his glory and to serve him, and he made us after his likeness, which he means he made us to be his children, to love him and obey him the way children should love and obey a perfect father. But from the beginning, people have said to God, "We don't want a relationship with you. We want your stuff. Go away. We'll call you if we need anything else." The first humans didn't trust that God was good, they wanted something other than what God had given them, and they were banished to a far country where they found famine and death. And that's our story, too. We live in his world, we enjoy his blessings, but we don't really want *him*. The heart of sin isn't just breaking God's commandments. The heart of sin is a rupture in our relationship with God. So, we, too, find ourselves in a distant country. We're exiles. That's why we often don't feel at home in this world.

Now, back to the parable: When the son has spent everything, a famine occurs. He has no one to turn to. There's no family around. So, he becomes a hired hand, working for a Gentile, feeding pigs. Things were so bad for him, he wished he could eat the pigs' food. Pigs were unclean animals (Lev. 11:7; Deut. 14:8). He was unclean, lower than the pigs. This would indicate to a Jewish audience that this son could go no lower. He had reached bottom.

But then comes a change. We see this beginning in verse 17:

<sup>17</sup> "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! <sup>18</sup> I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'"

The son comes to his senses! Before, he wasn't thinking rightly. He decided he could have a better life apart from his family. But once he hit bottom, he woke up to the truth. So, he

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<sup>4</sup> Deut. 21:15–17.

prepares a little speech. He will tell his father that he sinned “against heaven”—this is another way of saying he sinned against God. And he sinned against his father. He realizes that because of this, he is not worthy to be called a son. He asks merely to be a hired hand.

This is the right response to God. We must realize that because of our sin, we are not worthy to be called God’s children. We must confess our sin and turn back to God, appealing only to his grace. This is what repentance looks like: coming to our senses. We had once exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and our thinking was futile (Rom. 1:18–25). But when we come to see who God is and who we are, we come to our senses and turn back to God.

When we turn to God, he welcomes us back home. In this story, we already saw that the father let the son go his way. Now we see him welcome his son back home. This represents the loving character of God. I’ll read verses 20–24:

<sup>20</sup> And 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. <sup>21</sup> And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

The prodigal son returns home, and as he approaches, his father sees him. The father is filled with compassion and he can’t wait to be with his son, so he runs. He doesn’t care about how he looks or what anyone might think about him. The father embraces the son; he doesn’t wait for an apology or a confession. But the son does confess, repeating much of the speech he recited earlier.

Yet the father doesn’t say, “You’re right: you’ve sinned!” There is no penalty. There is only acceptance. The father asks his servants to put his best robe, a ring, and sandals on the son. These things illustrate that the son is received back into the family. His relationship with his father is restored. And this is celebrated. The father calls for a feast to be prepared. This would have been a very rare occasion, because a fattened calf was expensive. The whole village was probably invited to this feast. Why does the father celebrate? “For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

When sinners turn from their sin and put their faith in Jesus, they become spiritually alive. We once were dead in our transgressions and sins (Eph. 2:1), but now have been made

alive with Christ (Eph. 2:5). We once were lost, but now we're found. This is a great reason to celebrate.

The idea of a feast is fitting, because eternity with God is sometimes described as a feast. One day, Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead, and all who have put their trust in Jesus will live with God forever in a new world, a world in which all evil is removed. The idea of a feast is far more than just eating a lot of good food. It's being welcomed into God's home, joining him at his table. It's communing with God, sharing in his abundance. In fact, the Bible even says that when this great feast is served, it will never end. It won't end because when the feast is served, death itself will be removed (Isa. 25:6–9).

Now, if we stopped here, it would be a nice story, but we would miss one of the major points of this parable. So, we must see how the elder son reacts. The elder brother shows us another false response to God. One way to reject God is to be like the younger brother, to break all the rules, to seek meaning in life through entertainment and pleasure, to squander everything in "reckless living." But there's another way to reject God, and this may come a little closer to home. Let's look at verses 25–32:

<sup>25</sup> "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. <sup>27</sup> 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.' <sup>28</sup> But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' <sup>31</sup> And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup> It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

When the older son hears that his brother has returned home, he doesn't come running. Instead, he gets angry and he refuses to join the feast. Why is the brother angry? It's possible that he thought he might lose part of his inheritance. Before, he was to receive two-thirds of his father's estate. But his younger brother is now restored. That suggests that the younger son might get a third of the current estate. If that's true, then the older brother just lost a third of his inheritance.

But perhaps the brother is simply jealous of his brother. Look at how he talks to his father. He says, "I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. But you've never

celebrated that. You've never even given me a little goat." It looks like he resents the attention his brother is getting. He calls his brother "this son of your yours," and he says his brother wasted money on prostitutes. How did he know that? Was he speculating, or did he hear it through the grapevine? At any rate, he's angry and resentful.

Perhaps the older brother thinks his father is playing favorites. At any rate, this doesn't appear fair to him. Sometimes, people don't think the gospel is fair, but they don't understand that it would be fair for God to condemn all of us for our sin. But he doesn't. That's mercy. Sometimes, people don't understand the point of grace: no one deserves salvation. That's why it's grace—it's a gift.

Now, if you haven't figured it out yet, the younger brother represents the tax collectors and the sinners, and the older brother represents the Pharisees and the scribes. The first group of people had sinned, but they were coming to Jesus. They were coming home. The second group was grumbling, like the older brother. You see, there is a very religious way to reject God. We might call this legalism. You can try to earn God's favor. You can try to obey all the rules. You may even think God owes you something for all your work. But if you are merely trying to earn something from God, you don't really want God. You don't really love *him*. But God doesn't just want our obedience. He wants our hearts. He wants a relationship with us. This older brother looks like he didn't care about his relationship with his father. By not coming to the feast, he was dishonoring his father. He was so consumed with working to earn his inheritance that he rejects his father and his brother.

If we fail to see that salvation is by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, we will become like the older brother. If we believe we are Christians because we're good people, because we're moral, we may be in greater danger than the "sinners" around us. Christianity is not moralism. Christianity doesn't say, "If you're good enough, you can get to God." That's what a lot of other religions say. Christianity says something more shocking. It says "You'll *never* be good enough to earn God's favor. Your best deeds are polluted by selfish motives and your sin (Isa. 64:6). In fact, you're so bad that God had to become man and die in your place." But that's the great thing: Jesus did that for us. The Father loves us so much he would send his Son, and the Son loves us so much that he would leave his home and go to a distant country to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10).

That's brings me to Jesus. Of course, Jesus is telling this story. But the story hints at what Jesus himself does. You see, the first two parts of this story were about someone finding something precious. A shepherd goes to find a lost sheep. A woman searches for a lost coin. You would expect that in the third story, someone goes to find something. But that doesn't happen.

If you think more about it, it seems that the older brother should have been the one to go find the younger brother. The father might have been too old, or too busy managing his property, to go and seek his youngest son. But the older brother knew that his brother was living a life of sin, and he didn't seem concerned. Again, he was too busy trying to earn something from his father to leave and find his brother.

But perhaps the older brother of this story isn't the true older brother. Perhaps Jesus doesn't tell us about someone going to find the younger brother, because he wants us to see that he is the one who has come to find his younger brothers. Later in Luke's Gospel, Jesus describes his own mission: "the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10).

There's another way to see that this story is about Jesus. The story doesn't tell us the basis for salvation. But perhaps it hints at it. I said earlier that Jewish law states that the eldest brother gets a double share of the inheritance. That law is found in Deuteronomy 21:15–17. But I want us to look at what comes right after that passage. Deuteronomy 21:18–21 says a rebellious son deserves death:

<sup>18</sup>“If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and, though they discipline him, will not listen to them, <sup>19</sup>then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives, <sup>20</sup>and they shall say to the elders of his city, ‘This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.’ <sup>21</sup>Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones. So you shall purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear, and fear.

The younger son in Jesus' story deserved to die, according to this law. And the older son, with his own rebellious heart and his refusal to come to the feast, deserved death, too. We're all like those sons, stubborn and rebellious children who deserve the death penalty for our sin. But if you are a Christian, you have received eternal life. How is that possible? Look at the next two verses (Deut. 21:22–23):

<sup>22</sup>“And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, <sup>23</sup>his body shall not remain all night on the

tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.

Now, if you don't see Jesus there, don't worry. It's not immediately obvious, by any means. But the apostle Paul, in Galatians 3:13, quotes part of that passage to show how we are reconciled to God. He writes, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.'" When Jesus died on the "tree"—the cross—he died so we don't have to receive God's wrath. He paid for all our sins on the cross. He sought us and bought us with his precious blood. If we have faith in Jesus, he is our true elder brother.

You'll notice that the parable ends without a response from the older brother. Jesus is pleading with the Pharisees and scribes to come to the feast, to surrender their pride and rely only on God's grace.

And I'll end by pleading with you. I don't know if we have any younger brothers here today, because I don't know you all personally, and I can't see your hearts. If you're seeking meaning in life by breaking all the rules, if you're trying to be your own god, if you think you're the ultimate authority in your life, I promise you that path will only lead to destruction. Running away from God may feel fun for a while, but this reckless living will leave you empty, and you'll find yourself in the muck and mire, far from home, without comfort and hope. I urge you to come to your sense, to come home to God, to turn to Jesus.

I think it's far more likely that there are older brothers here. If you're an older brother, you may look down at other people. You may be bothered if a messy "sinner" comes to church on Sunday. You might think God owes you something for all your years of service. You may resent it when things don't go your way. We should rejoice when sinful people show up at the church. My hope is that you'll see more of those people here in the future.

If you're neither a younger brother nor an older brother, but if you're a true child of God, then consider how you can be like Jesus. He came to seek and save the lost. What are you doing—what are *we* doing—to seek and save the lost around us? Jesus' brother, James, writes this at the end of his letter: "My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins" (James 5:19–20; see also Gal. 6:1). We should go after people who have wandered from the truth. We should go after people

who have never known the truth. Start with prayer. Ask God to bring people who need Jesus into your life. Think about the people around you who aren't yet Christians and pray for their souls. Pray for opportunities to talk to them about Jesus. And, when the opportunity is right, plead lovingly with those around you to consider Jesus.

My hope is that this church would be one that sees younger brothers coming to their senses, but this can only happen if we aren't older brothers. Start praying that people around you would come to your senses. Seek them out, love them, tell them the good news about Jesus, and invite them to the feast.