

The Lost Is Found!

(The Gospel According to Luke, Part IV)

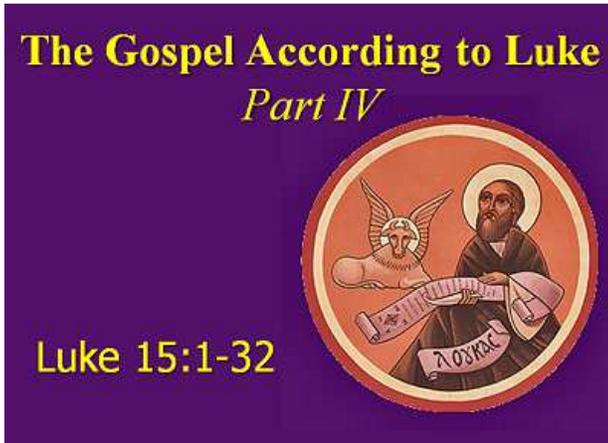
First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois — March 26, 2017

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Luke 15:1-32 ESV

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable: "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? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 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.' 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.



"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? 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.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. 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. 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.

And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

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

"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.

"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.' 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. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 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.'

"But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, 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. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!'

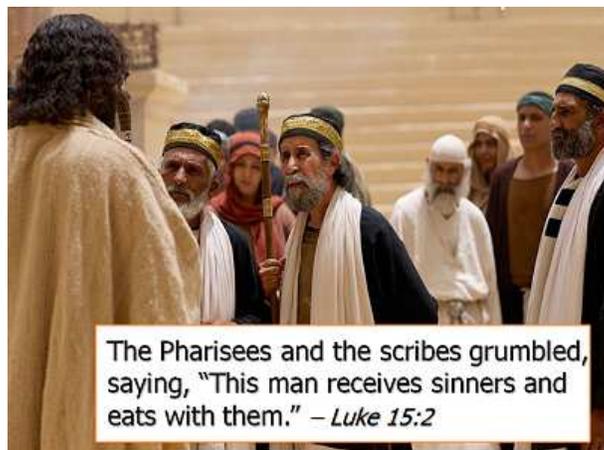
And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

We're in installment 4 of our journey with Jesus through the Gospel of Luke, and today we come to some of Luke's most characteristic material he uses in assembling his Gospel narrative. Here in chapter 15 we have three parables — those stories Jesus tells drawn from everyday life that make a point about how God is building his kingdom here on earth. Only one of these parables, the first one, finds its way into another

Gospel; Matthew includes the parable about the lost sheep in what we call his chapter 18. The parables about the lost coin and the "prodigal son" appear only in Luke, because evidently he alone had access to the eyewitness sources that related this material to him.

Luke has grouped these three parables here in one unit because they each have the same theme: finding something that has been lost, and recovering it. So we need to keep this theme in mind, and relate it to God's purpose as Jesus demonstrates it through his preaching and his activity. And we need to ask, along with this, how does this "loss and recovery" theme fit into the historical and cultural environment in which Jesus uttered these words, the world of first-century Judaism? That issue is posed for us in the very opening words of chapter 15, in which we read that the Pharisees and scribes were complaining about Jesus because, as they said, "This man receives sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2).

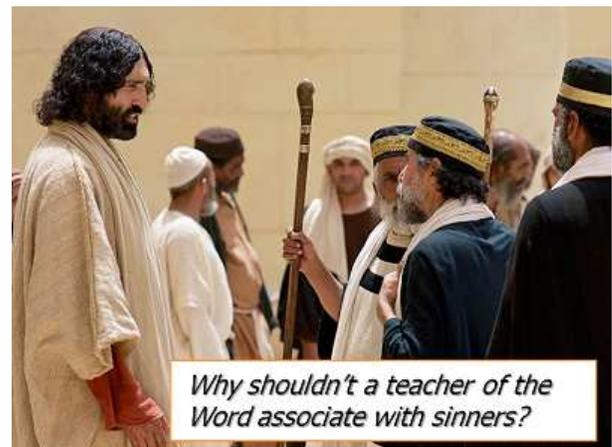
Let's look, then, at the first two parables in our chapter. Jesus tells of a shepherd who loses one of his flock of a hundred, and leaves the rest unprotected "in the open country" till he finds the lost sheep and returns it to the flock. He tells of a woman who loses one of her ten silver coins and turns her house upside down till she finds it and returns it to the others. In each case the finders call upon their friends to join in their rejoicing because what was lost has been found, and restored to the whole.



Now, is Jesus talking about sheep, or about coins? Of course, we know he's talking about *people* — but what people? The context shows us that the people he has in mind are the people the Pharisees and scribes don't think Jesus should associate with. These teachers are upset because Jesus "receives sinners and eats with them." Why wouldn't it be a good thing for a teacher of the Word of God to spend so much time with such people?

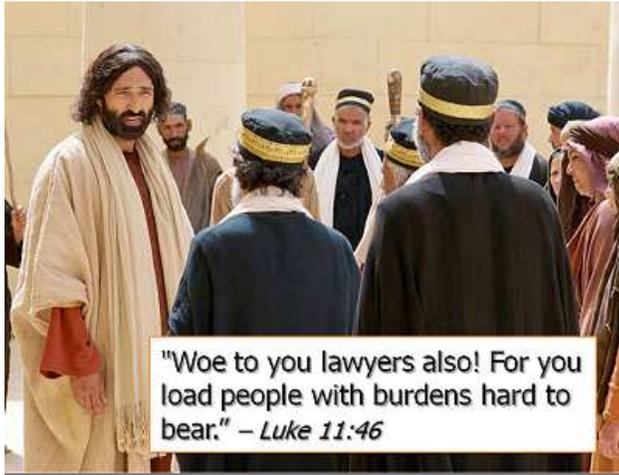
obey the Lord and serve him only. How can that problem be solved? Only by purifying the people of Israel, bringing them into conformity with the laws of God so that he can finally forgive their sins and send his promised Messiah to lead them to freedom once again. That was the Pharisees' program: to lead the people back to the obedient service of the Lord. And, from their point of view, you can't bring the "sinners" to obedience if you pal around with them and excuse their lifestyle that doesn't measure up to "our" standards.

But now Jesus has come to upset their applecart. The rules and regulations the Pharisees want the rest of the people to follow aren't found in the Word of God, he's telling them; instead, you're "teaching as doctrines the precepts of men," and laying on the people a burden they're unable to bear (see Matthew 23:4). Why couldn't they follow the rules the Pharisees laid down? Because they couldn't afford to! The Pharisees were tradesmen or



artisans; they had more money than most people, and they could afford to keep all the detailed rules they thought everyone should keep — what they called “a fence around the Torah” to make double sure the Law of Moses would be observed. But most of the people in that time and place were not so well off; they were too pressed about scraping up a livelihood as peasants, fishermen, or whatever to give much time and effort to

observing the Pharisees’ rules. They’re “lost,” shut out of the vision the Pharisees have for the kind of exclusive community the Lord will supposedly bless.



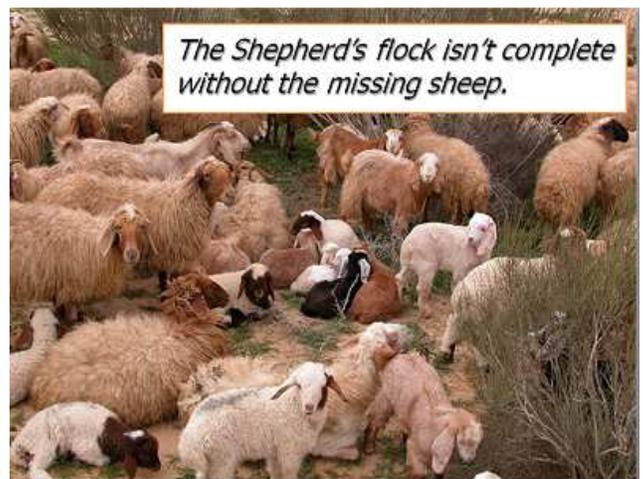
But Jesus is preaching a different kind of community, because God is returning to his people at last even though the Pharisees can't see it. The Lord has come back to his people in Jesus' message of the kingdom of God, and the power of the kingdom he demonstrates in his care for people in healing their diseases and driving out the evil forces that oppress them. Jesus is rebuilding Israel around himself, restoring it to the purpose God always had for his people: not to triumph over other nations, but to bless them and bring them into God's family. So the “common people,” the everyday people of the land, may be “lost” to the Pharisees’

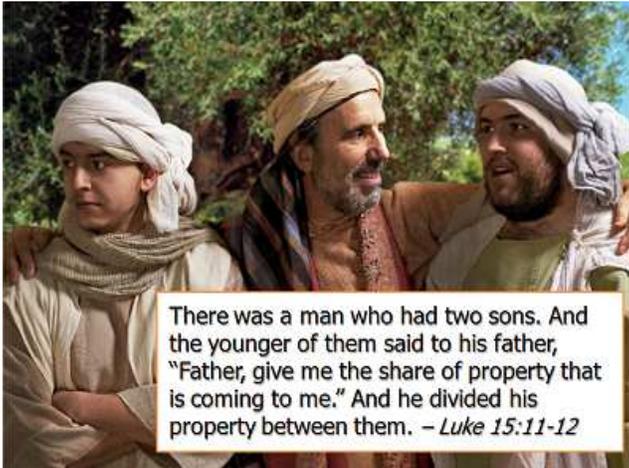
vision, but they're not lost to the vision the Lord has for them. And when they come into the kingdom by becoming part of Jesus' movement and experiencing the blessing of knowing him, they're no longer “lost,” they're found — and that's cause for rejoicing.

You and I, today, live in a culture that at least *claims* to reject the kind of elitism the Pharisees display in the Gospels. That's because our cultural values, up to now, have been influenced by the Christian message. But it wasn't like that in the ancient Roman world. Equality wasn't a social value; instead, snobbishness and looking down on the “lower classes” was the order of the day, even among the most enlightened philosophers and noble families. The Pharisees' scornful attitude toward their less observant fellow Jews was just what would be expected in the culture of that day and age. But Jesus changed all that for you and for me, and even for people who have no interest in the Christian faith. The impact of Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God has been felt far and wide across the globe, even where people don't recognize it. Today we welcome anyone into the family of God who acknowledges his need and calls on the name of the Lord to give him a new life, because as Peter says in Acts 2:21, “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

I want you to notice another aspect of these two parables about the lost sheep and the lost coin. The shepherd and the woman in these parables aren't just glad they have found the one lost item. They're glad because finding the lost sheep makes *the flock* whole again; restoring the lost coin restores *the woman's purse*, or

“savings account,” to its full value. Jesus isn't just concerned about the individual “sinner” who repents. He's concerned to make the people of God whole again by bringing back what has been lost from it. Often we present the gospel of Jesus as a message to individuals, and forget the larger context. It's not enough for a person to come to the Lord *by himself*, as if you and Jesus were the only two people involved. If you're lost and Jesus finds you, that's because the body isn't complete without you — just as the shepherd's flock wasn't complete without the missing sheep, or the woman's stash of money wasn't complete without that one lost coin. To be *found* by the Lord means to be restored to your place in the body, the community that's living out his life in the world.

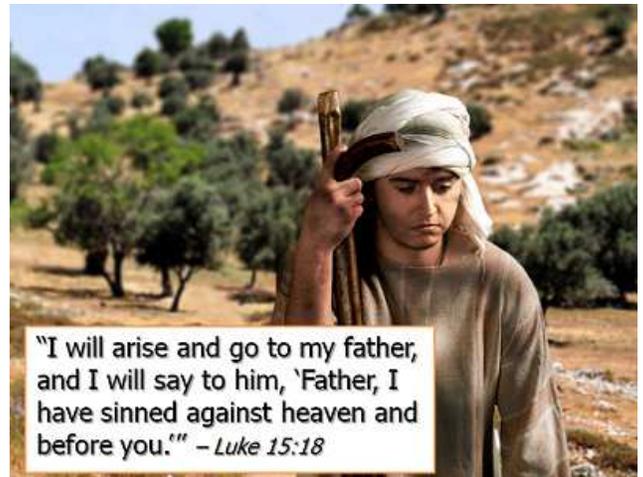




Now we turn to the third parable in Luke's chapter 15, the parable commonly called the story of the "prodigal son." But, as we will see, that's a misnomer because there's more to this parable than the story of a wayward son. And, once again, we'll see that putting this parable into its first-century Jewish context reveals a wealth of insights we might not catch at first glance.

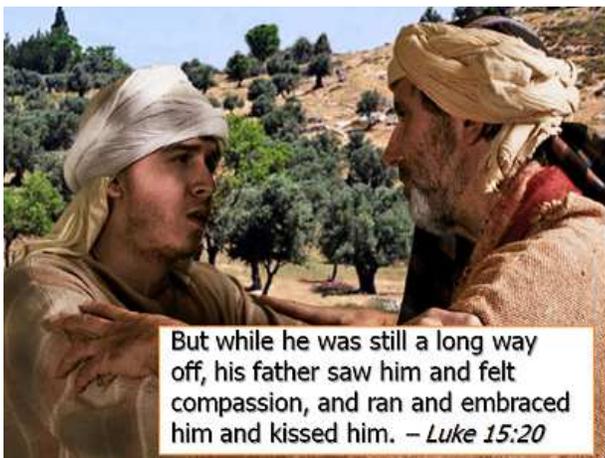
Jesus begins by saying, "There was a man who had two sons." Already we see that we have to look at what happens to *both* sons in the story. But let's take the younger son first. He receives from his father half of his inheritance, which according to custom he's entitled to ask for. But instead of using it wisely, he wastes it in reckless spending in a land far from home, so that finally this Jewish

boy is reduced to the lowest state — taking care of pigs, and even wishing he could eat the silage the pigs eat. He is truly "lost," like the lost sheep and the lost coin, because he's no longer part of the whole that he belongs to — in this case, his family. But in this sorry state, as Jesus says, "he comes to himself." He realizes where he went wrong, leaving the protective and nurturing environment of his home. Even his father's lowest-grade servants, he realizes, have plenty to eat while he has nothing. So he comes up with a plan: he will go back to his father and admit his mistake. And he has a little speech all prepared: "I've sinned against God and against you, I'm not worthy to be called your son, just treat me as one of the servants."



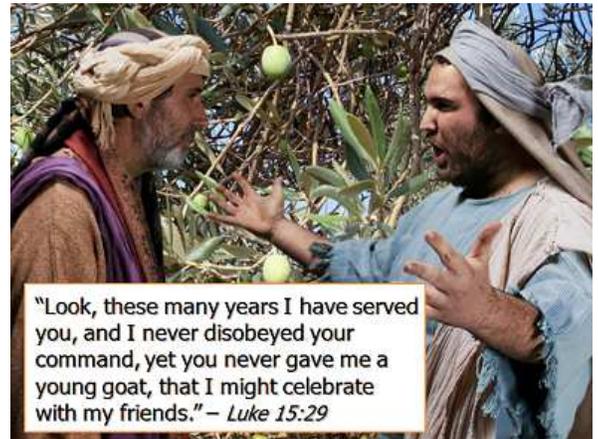
But then the most remarkable thing happens. While he's still a good distance from home his father sees him, has compassion on him, and runs out to meet him! You see, his father has been looking for him all this time, hoping to see his return. The father didn't just sit there saying, "Well, maybe he's learned his lesson, maybe he'll come back some day." No, his father was out looking for him, scanning the horizon, peering into the distance for some faint, faraway sign that his son is coming home. And when he sees him, the father runs out to meet him.

You have to understand that in that culture an adult man, the head of a household with servants, livestock, and the rest — such a man *does not run in public*. To do so would be to lower himself to the status of a hired



messenger, a slave, or something similar. But this father lays aside his dignity. He *runs* to intercept his lost son while the son is still a good way off! You see, this parable is not the parable of the "prodigal son." It is really the parable of the "forgiving father," for the whole point is how eager the Lord is to welcome back into his family whoever "comes to himself" and returns to where he really belongs. And notice, too, that when the son starts to give his little speech, the father doesn't let him get out the whole thing. He cuts him off before he can say, "Treat me as one of your hired servants." The father won't take him back on that basis, but as a son. He calls for a celebration, because "my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

So now we come to the second part of the story, the part about the elder son. He's out working in the fields and hears the party going on back at the house. He sends someone to find out what's going on, and he's told, "Your lost brother has come back, so your dad has 'killed the fatted calf' and thrown a big celebration." Instead of being glad that his wayward brother has come home, the older son becomes angry and refuses to join the festivities. So notice the remarkable thing that happens next. When the father learns about his older son's disgruntled attitude he doesn't just sit there at home and say, "Well, if he wants to miss the party that's his problem, we'll just let him stew in his own juice." No — astoundingly, the father *goes out to meet his elder son* to invite him into the family celebration. The older brother responds with his own pity party: "I've never left home, I never disobeyed you, but you never even gave me a goat — let alone a fatted calf — to have a party with my friends!" Of course, likely the older son never asked to have a party! And he goes on: "But this son of yours" — he won't even call him his own brother — "came back after wasting your resources with prostitutes, and yet you threw a feast for *him!*" By the way, he made up that part about prostitutes; that was never mentioned before.



We can see who Jesus is thinking about in giving this parable — back to the beginning of this chapter 15 where we hear that the Pharisees are angry because Jesus, a teacher whom they think ought to be upholding their tradition of exclusiveness, is instead spending his time with ordinary people who can't bear the burdens the Pharisees want to lay upon them. "This man receives sinners and eats with them." Obviously the older son, with his attitude of superiority and his scorn for his brother who couldn't measure up, is like the Pharisees in his attitude. The younger son *repented*, he "came to himself" and owned up to his mistake and came back to his father. But that's not good enough for his older brother; he wants to see the wayward son punished, reduced to second-class status in the household, because of his past misdeeds. He refuses to be glad that the family is now reunited, through the love and acceptance of their father.



Is that the attitude of some folks today who say, for example, that if you've done something wrong in the past you can never again enjoy first-class status in the family of God? We deal with that, for example, in the issue of divorce and remarriage. No, divorce isn't a good thing and Scripture says the Lord hates it (Malachi 2:16). And, frankly, many people who've been through a divorce hate it, too; it's not fun. But when a person, whatever his past deeds, wants to serve the Lord and accept his responsibilities in the family of God, shouldn't he or she be accepted and celebrated, just as the father accepts his younger son in this parable? Isn't that so much better than saying to them, "Sorry, you goofed — one strike and you're out, we don't want you in our family"?

What if we do hold that attitude, that of the older brother who has always thought he's been serving the father? What if we don't want to join the party with the prodigal who has returned? This is the part of Jesus' parable we don't usually notice: the father goes out to the older brother in the field and invites him into the family celebration. And this is what he says to him: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." You see, it wasn't the younger son only who was lost, separated from the family and alienated from the father. *The older son was lost, too*, and his father had compassion on him and went out to him to invite him into the feast.

Jesus has come proclaiming that God has at last returned to his people, is rebuilding his family, and wants all his children to come home to him — because that's how Israel will finally begin to fulfill its mission and be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. As members of Jesus, baptized into his death and raised with him into new life, we're part of that same mission whoever we are.

I don't know where you see yourself in this parable, whether you're the younger brother who went astray and came back, or the older son who has always done your best to serve the Lord. It doesn't matter. There's a party going on. There's a celebration of the greatness and glory of God, and the victory of Jesus over sin and the grave, and the oneness and wholeness of the family of God. That's what the church is, a festival gathering. As the writer of Hebrews tells his readers, "You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering" (Hebrews 12:22). There's a festival going on because of what the Father has done for his family in Jesus the Messiah. The Lord is inviting you to that party; please don't turn down his invitation.



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