

# Luke 15: The Lost Coin, Sheep and Son

## BACKGROUND

- Jesus, speaking in ch. 14 of the cost of discipleship, concludes “let he who has ears to hear, let him hear.” Luke then begins this passage saying that the tax collectors and sinners are the ones gathering around to *hear* him.
- According to research summarized in Craig Keener’s commentary on Matthew, it wasn’t unrealistic for a shepherd to leave his flock (say, with another shepherd) to fetch an errant sheep.
- Kenneth Bailey points out, regarding the parable of the prodigal son<sup>1</sup>:
  - For the younger brother to ask for his inheritance was unthinkable and tantamount to wishing his father dead. (The Tyndale commentator says that sons sometimes did ask for their inheritance early, but only to get a lien against the land: the father would typically live on it and would still be legally entitled to its produce. To ask for his share of the land to be liquidated, say for travel abroad, was rare.) The father in this case would have been justified in beating him and throwing him out.
  - Feeding the pigs of a Gentile master was, of course, abhorrent.
  - In returning, the prodigal risked disgracing the whole family.
  - It was undignified for the father to *run* out to see any son, much less this one.
  - With such a calf, the party would have been for the whole village.
  - The older brother in turn shames the father by arguing with him in public and expressing his desire for his piece of the pie.



## QUESTIONS

1. These three parables deal with the finding of lost things: a sheep, a coin and a son. “But it is improbable that Jesus (or Luke) intended to do no more than make the same point three times over; and in the context of Scripture as a whole it is arguable that the three illustrations were chosen with an eye to the different shades of meaning they would convey.”<sup>2</sup>

Why did Luke include these three parables, and in this order?

2. How does the younger/older son story in the parable of the prodigal son differ from the other well-known OT brother stories: Cain & Abel, Isaac & Ishmael, Jacob & Esau (and even Joseph & his brothers)?
3. N. T. Wright observes that for first-century Jews the notions of forgiveness of sins and return from exile were inextricably linked:

Babylon had taken the people into captivity; Babylon fell, and the people returned. But in Jesus’ day many, if not most, Jews regarded the exile as still continuing. The people had returned in a geographical sense, but the great prophecies of restoration had not yet come true. What was Israel to do? Why, to

<sup>1</sup> Summarized by N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 129 [JVG].

<sup>2</sup> Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Luke*, 150. He then proposes that Luke intended a trinitarian reference: {shepherd, woman, father}~{Son, Holy Spirit, Father}. Ambrose, by the way, thought ~{Son, Church, Father} [ACCS, Lk 15].

repent of the sin which had driven her into exile and to return to YHWH with all her heart. Who would stand in her way, to prevent her return? The mixed multitude, not least the Samaritans, who had remained in the land while the people were in exile. But Israel would return, humbled and redeemed: sins would be forgiven, the covenant renewed, the Temple rebuilt, and the dead raised. What her god had done for her in the exodus... he would at last do again, even more gloriously. YHWH would finally become king, and would do for Israel, in covenant love, what the prophets had foretold.

Exile and restoration: this is the central drama that Israel believed herself to be acting out. And the story of the prodigal says, quite simply: this hope is now being fulfilled—but it does not look like what was expected.<sup>3</sup>

Given this backdrop, what would the parable of the prodigal have said to a first-century Jewish listener?<sup>4</sup> How did the Pharisees' initial complaint in 15:1-2 make sense in the first place? Given the context of Jesus' ministry to sinners, how is the return from exile (and the finding of the lost sheep and coin) being accomplished, and by whom? How do these three parables answer the question of the Pharisees and teachers of the law?

4. Both the older and younger sons are shown their Father's gracious love and forgiveness. If we follow tradition and see in the younger brother the path a sinner takes to salvation, what do we make of the older brother? Is there more than one way to God's grace, or do we all find ourselves kneeling before the pig's trough in a foreign land before making our way back home? (Consider the contrast in 15:7.)
5. *Required Xenos Question:* Jesus' association with "tax collectors and sinners" is criticized by the Pharisees (15:1-2). The Pharisees believed that association with tax collectors and Gentiles made one unclean, and avoided the company of sinners.

Dennis McCallum observes a similar phenomenon in North American Christianity, a desire to keep the company of like-minded people which produces homogeneous churches. Observing that this tends keep us from the company of the "sinners"<sup>5</sup> of society, he posits,

Sooner or later if you follow Christ you've got to answer this question: Which is going to be more important to me, that I make it as difficult as possible for me to sin or that I make it as easy as possible for people who don't know Christ to find him?<sup>6</sup>

Do you see this principle at work in our congregation? In North American Christianity in general?

6. How does Acts 15 (esp. up to and around v. 16) parallel Luke 15?
7. *Required Application Question:* Assuming we are to imitate Jesus, which lost sinners are you seeking, and how? (And does 2 Cor 6:14-7:1 mean we should avoid sinners?)

*Fun Quotation:* "Maybe it's just my imagination, but has the parable of the prodigal son become something of a bore lately? ...The story has all the bland predictability of a biblical theme park... We are untroubled by the son's anguished lament... because the aroma of fatted calf roasting on the spit wafts over the narrative, and covers up the fetid stench of the pigsty." –Thomas G. Long, *Christian Century*, Mar 14, 2001, p. 10.

*Fun Fact:* In the Gospel-of-Thomas (107) version of the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus retrieves it because it's the biggest and it's his favorite.

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<sup>3</sup> JVG, p. 126-7.

<sup>4</sup> Note also that Luke sets the stage for an exilic interpretation by the parallel between the parable of the lost sheep and the return-from-exile passage Ezek 34:11-16.

<sup>5</sup> "Sinners" could mean the wicked who truly flout Torah, or if you trust 2<sup>nd</sup>-cent. sources as relevant, could more generally be the average Jewish citizens, what the Pharisees pejoratively called "people of the land" [JVG, 264-268].

<sup>6</sup> Dennis McCallum is the other copastor of Xenos Christian Fellowship in Columbus, Ohio. See <http://www.xenos.org/teachings/nt/luke/dennis/luke18-1.htm>.