

To Seek and To Save the Lost

Introduction to the Parable of Luke 15

Luke 15:1-3

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Scripture

Jesus' entire ministry was only about three years long. He preached that the kingdom of God has come near, and he called upon people to enter the kingdom of God through faith and repentance (Luke 10:9; 12:31; 18:17).

Jesus was now on his way to Jerusalem and only had a few months left to live. He was determined to fulfill God's purpose for him by dying as a penal substitute for sinners. Luke portrayed Jesus as focusing his attention on fulfilling God's purpose by saying that "he set his face to go to Jerusalem" (9:51). Luke showed the growing drama in Jesus' life by his increasing confrontations with the Pharisees and the scribes. The Pharisees and the scribes did not understand the person and work of Jesus, and Jesus consistently clarified the good news of the gospel of God's salvation for sinners. That good news is beautifully clarified in the parable in Luke 15.

Commentator William Barclay puts it this way:

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.¹

Let's read the parable in Luke 15:1-32, although today we will focus only on the introduction in verses 1-3:

¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 236.

grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

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

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

¹¹ And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “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! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.” ’ ²⁰ 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. ²¹ And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned

To Seek and To Save the Lost

against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’²² 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.’²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.’²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.²⁷ 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.’²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him,²⁹ 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.’³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’³¹ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’ ” (Luke 15:1-3)

Introduction

When I plan a preaching series, I usually divide the book I am preaching through into weekly teaching sections. So, months in advance I generally know which section of the chapter I will be teaching each week. It doesn’t always work out exactly as I plan because as I get to each week, I may decide to divide one teaching section into two, or, conversely, to combine two teaching sections into one.

I originally planned to teach Luke 15 in three sections. Many of your Bibles divide Luke 15 into three stories: (1) The Parable of the Lost Sheep (15:1-7); (2) The Parable of the Lost Coin (15:8-10); and (3) The Parable of the Prodigal Son (15:11-32). However, as I began studying the chapter in preparation to

teach it, I realized that there is a great deal of rich truth in this chapter. I want to take some time to flesh out the beauty of this marvelous chapter. So, I will take a number of additional weeks explaining the glorious gospel riches in this great chapter.

Lesson

Today, I want to simply look at the introduction to the parable in Luke 15:1-3.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Approach by the Irreligious (15:1)
2. The Grumbling by the Religious (15:2)
3. The Parable by the Savior (15:3)

I. The Approach by the Irreligious (15:1)

First, look at the approach by the irreligious.

On his journey to Jerusalem Jesus has been teaching with increasing clarity about the cost of discipleship. In Luke 14:25-35 Jesus told the great crowds that were accompanying him what was involved in following him. He told them that in order to be a disciple of his, a person had to hate his family, carry his cross, and count the cost of following him. That is, in order to follow Jesus, a person had to love Jesus supremely, willingly experiencing humiliation, rejection, and suffering, and renounce his right to all that he has. Jesus did not soft-peddle what it meant to follow him.

Immediately after setting down the costly terms of discipleship, Luke noted in Luke 15:1 that **now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear** Jesus. Isn't that interesting? The irreligious **tax collectors and sinners** wanted to hear what Jesus had to say.

Now, this is the third time that Luke mentioned **tax collectors and sinners** approaching Jesus. The first time was in

Luke 5:30. Jesus had just saved Levi the tax collector (5:27-32). Levi, also known as Matthew, threw a great party at his house for Jesus. Of course he invited his friends, who were **tax collectors and sinners**. Interestingly, the Pharisees and the scribes noticed the attendees at Levi's party. And like they did in our present account (in verse 2), they also "grumbled . . . saying, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?' And Jesus answered them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance' " (Luke 5:30-32).

The second time Luke mentioned **tax collectors and sinners** was in Luke 7:34, where Jesus is said to be "a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"

In Luke's Gospel, the Pharisees and the scribes perceived **sinners** "as forfeiting their relationship to God because of a lifestyle unfaithful to God's law."² **Sinners** were considered to be murderers, robbers, deceivers, and those of dishonorable vocation, which would include tax collectors.

The Pharisees and the scribes, along with the other people in Israel, looked down on **tax collectors**. Commentator Philip Ryken notes, "In those days tax collectors were social and spiritual outcasts. Because they were part of the Roman bureaucracy, and because they collected money from fellow Israelites, they were considered traitors to the people of God."³

Tax collectors and sinners did not seem to have any interest in God or the things of God. They were irreligious.

And yet, as Luke noted in verse 1, these **tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear** Jesus. Why? It is, as Darrell Bock says, "They sense that Jesus cares for them and

² Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 1298.

³ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 103.

has something to say to them.”⁴

Friends, irreligious people don't usually attend worship services at a church. On the surface, they don't seem to have any interest in God or the things of God. Yet, because they are created by God and made in his image, they come to recognize a spiritual emptiness in their lives. How will they hear the good news of the gospel? They don't go to church. The way they will hear the good news of the gospel is if we, like Jesus, care for them and have something to say to them.

Do you know anyone who is not yet a Christian? He or she does not profess faith in Jesus Christ. He or she is irreligious. That person may not be a murderer, robber, deceiver, or someone with a dishonorable vocation. That person may appear to be very upright and moral from the outside. But, that person is not yet a Christian. Will you care enough for that person and have something to say to him or her about the good news of the gospel? Maybe you don't feel confident in sharing the gospel. Sign up for the next “Share Your Faith” workshop. Invite your friend to a worship service. Invite your friend to the Easter Sunday worship service. Many people will respond to that invitation. Or invite them to the *Christianity Explored* series that will begin the Friday after Easter Sunday.

II. The Grumbling by the Religious (15:2)

Second, observe the grumbling by the religious.

Luke said in verse 2 that **the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man [that is, Jesus] receives sinners and eats with them.”**

The word for **grumbled** (*diegongyzon*) means “to express discontent in an emphatic way.”⁵ **The Pharisees and the**

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, 1298.

⁵ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 432.

scribes were really unhappy with Jesus and made every effort to let it be known. They were upset that he ate with sinners.

Eating with someone indicated fellowship. It meant that there was an acceptance of that person. **The Pharisees and the scribes** were quick to point out that the rabbinic commentary on Exodus 18:1 cited an old rule that “a person should not associate with the godless” and pointed out that the rabbis would not associate with such a person, even to teach him the Law.⁶ So, according to **the Pharisees and the scribes**, Jesus should not be associating with tax collectors and sinners, let alone be eating with them.

The Pharisees believed that “the way to gain favor with God was by earning merit – and the best way to gain merit in God’s eyes, they thought, was through fastidious observance of the Law.”⁷ So, they tried to earn God’s favor by obeying his Law. The result was that they become self-righteous (Romans 10:3-4), and they disagreed with everyone – especially Jesus – who did not practice the Law as they did.

The scribes were “were professional copiers, editors, and interpreters of the Law. They were also the main custodians of the various traditions that governed how the Law was applied. Most of the scribes were themselves also Pharisees by conviction (although some of them belonged to a competing sect known as the Sadducees).”⁸

The Pharisees and the scribes were religious people. They regularly attended worship services and were active in every facet of religious life. We who are active in the life and worship of our church need to ask ourselves whether we are like **the Pharisees and the scribes**. And as we shall see, it is to

⁶ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 130–132.

⁷ John F. MacArthur Jr., *A Tale of Two Sons: The inside Story of a Father, His Sons, and a Shocking Murder* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008).

⁸ John F. MacArthur Jr., *A Tale of Two Sons: The inside Story of a Father, His Sons, and a Shocking Murder* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008).

this group that Jesus teaches the parable.

III. The Parable by the Savior (15:3)

And third, notice the parable by the Savior.

In response to the grumbling of the Pharisees and the scribes, Jesus **told them this parable** (15:3). Although the **parable** was told in the hearing of the tax collectors and sinners, it was really directed to the Pharisees and the scribes. So, it is helpful for us to remember that while the message is for all people – irreligious and religious alike – it is primarily directed to religious people.

Furthermore, I want you to notice that Jesus told them one parable and not three parables. Luke wrote that Jesus **told them this parable**. All of Luke 15 is really one parable with three parts, or three sections, or three stories. So, although the editors of our Bibles titled each story as a “parable,” we need to keep in mind that there really is only one parable.

The reason that is significant is because Jesus was making the same basic point in each of the three stories in the parable. In each story – of the sheep, the coin, and the son – something is lost, sought, found, and followed by rejoicing.

So, briefly, each story begins with a loss. A shepherd loses one of his sheep (15:4a). A woman loses one of her silver coins (15:8a). And a father loses a son (15:13), although when we get to that part of the parable, we shall see that both sons were actually lost.

Jesus said that immediately after the loss was discovered, a search began. The shepherd searched for his lost sheep (15:4b). The woman searched for her lost coin (15:8b). And although the father does not go to the far country to look for his son, he clearly has been looking for his son because he saw his son while he was still a long way off (15:20a).

Happily, in Jesus’ parable, each lost item is found. The

shepherd found his lost sheep (15:5a). The woman found her lost silver coin (15:9a). And the father welcomed home the lost son (15:20b).

Finally, and this is the main point of the parable, there is rejoicing over the recovery of the lost item. The shepherd rejoiced when he found his lost sheep (15:5b). The woman rejoiced when she found her lost coin (15:9b). And the father rejoiced when the lost son returned (15:20b). In each case, the shepherd, the woman, and the father call their family and friends to celebrate with them at the recovery of the loss (15:6b; 15:9; 15:23).

Listen to how Jesus expressed the point of the parable. When the shepherd found the lost sheep, he said in Luke 15:7, “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.” When the woman found the lost coin he said in Luke 15:10, “Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” And when the father received his lost son, he said in Luke 15:24, “ ‘For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.”

According to Michael Wilcock, “the plain meaning of the chapter is that just as there is joy when any shepherd or any housewife or any father recovers a loss, so there is joy in heaven when a sinner is reunited with God.”⁹

Philip Ryken expresses it this way, “This three-in-one parable is about the joy of God in finding what is lost – a joy that we will share only if we have the heart that Jesus has for lost and dying sinners.”¹⁰

And John MacArthur puts it this way, “This, then, is the

⁹ Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Luke*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 149-150.

¹⁰ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, 104.

central and culminating lesson of the parable: Jesus is pointing out the stark contrast between God's own delight in the redemption of sinners and the Pharisees' inflexible hostility toward those same sinners."¹¹

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the introduction in Luke 15:1-3, we should give thanks for Jesus' joy for the salvation of lost sinners.

Some time after Jesus told this parable, he said, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Jesus is the shepherd, the woman, and the father in the parable. He has come to seek and to save the lost. And every time he saves a lost person, he invites heaven and earth to join him in rejoicing for the salvation of the lost person.

Do you share in Jesus' joy for the salvation of the lost?

First, you share in Jesus' joy when you admit that you are lost and that you need him to come and find you. You share in his joy when you repent of your sin and believe that he is the only one who can save you and carry you home.

Then, once you have been found, you share in Jesus' joy by having his heart for the lost. You share in Jesus' joy when you love the lost and pray for the lost and care for the lost and invite the lost to hear about Jesus. You share in Jesus' joy when you tell others about him and how they can come to a saving knowledge of Jesus.

I pray that God will help each one of us to share in Jesus' joy. Amen.

¹¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *A Tale of Two Sons: The inside Story of a Father, His Sons, and a Shocking Murder* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008).

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the parable of Jesus in Luke 15 about the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. Thank you for the joy of Jesus for the salvation of the lost.

If there is anyone here today who is still lost, will you grant that person faith and repentance? Will you save that lost person?

And will you enable all of us who are no longer lost to tell others about Jesus and the salvation that can be found only in him.

And for this I pray in your name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!