

## Luke's Special Parables: Why Finding Creates Boundless Joy

Luke 15 8-10

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First, let me begin with something of disclaimer. We won't get through with this parable today. In fact, I'd like for you to take chapter 15 with you into it this week. Like one of my old colleagues used to say, "Read it, Study it, Come Prepared!" This text will require two weeks of preaching. I hope you will want to come back and hear the conclusion. Make a note, if you will, that when you study these three parables you are looking at the words of Jesus while he was on his way to Jerusalem for the last time.

Though I only read the one story about the lost coin, there are three of these lost and found stories in Luke's gospel. The first about the one lost sheep. There were ninety-nine sheep who were counted in a flock of 100, but one was missing. The shepherd of this middle-sized flock by Palestine standards knew the value of the one sheep and searched until he found it. When the shepherd brought back the sheep, Luke tells us, there was great joy and celebration. This story appears in another gospel and draws much the same conclusion. The lost sheep and the lost coin are interesting in that coupled together they ask two different questions that seem to be situations recognizable by both men and women in the audience. The first begins by asking "which man among you." The second story begins by asking "which woman among you." Perhaps it was necessary, since it was unlikely in that culture that a woman could emotionally related to a man's care of his sheep, just as a man could not emotionally understand what it meant for a woman to lose a coin connected to her dowry. Also, notice that Luke's connects the two stories with the word "or." So, in Jesus's teaching these two stories are connected. Find a lost sheep and there is joy and celebration. Find a lost sliver coin in your dowry headdress and there is joy and celebration. The third story is the parable of the prodigal son. It is probably among the best known of Luke's parables and, especially, it is unique to Luke's gospel.

What connects these stories is that it is in the finding in the first two parables and coming home in the third that ignites the great emotion of joy in each case. Secondly, each joyful experience unfolds into a social event. And third, each event is characterized by the celebration that follows. In fact, all of heaven rejoices, and in another the angels in heaven rejoice. It is because of this last observation that takes these parables out of the mundane into a rich spirituality for Jesus's listeners. Each summary statement says something about how being found relates to a sinner who repents. Who was the sinner? Anyone considered so by the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. The reason is that each parable concludes that there are spiritual realities to be discovered: People who discover the kingdom and become disciples are no longer lost but found, thus making glad the heart of God and God's angels.

To get at the heart of these three specific parables we must ask a difficult question. What does lost mean? We think we know. We have heard it the expression for so many years of our lives. We sing one our favorite gospel songs time and time again that reminds those who sing and hear

it that Amazing Grace is such a sweet sound. It is a sweet sound because we consider it to be descriptive of the act of having once been lost, then having been found. But is this what Jesus meant the day he told this parable to his disciples? Why do you suppose that we so often take the word “lost” in the New Testament and apply it to our own spirituality? Isn’t there a verse that says that Jesus came to seek and save those who are lost? Hasn’t all humankind been spirituality lost and in need of being found? No doubt, all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. No doubt, all humans at one time or another wrestle with their estrangement with their creator. No doubt, there are countless thousands who explain their own spiritual transformations in terms we often hear: “I was lost but now I’m found.”

Unfortunately, if we want to explain these parables in general, we would be taking some liberties by reading into this story from outside their framework. It is doubtful that any of them thought of lost and found in terms of their own personal distance from God. Much less could they have understood how being lost and then being found might somehow be connected to our own ideas about heaven and hell, sin and judgment, or the atonement for sins through the death of a rabbi—albeit a rabbi who was demonstrating by his actions that he was the son of God.

Two of the prophets Jesus often mentioned preceded Jesus in declaring Israel’s lostness:

**Jeremiah 50:6** My people are lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray, causing them to roam the mountains. They have wandered from mountain to hill; they have forgotten their resting place.

**Ezekiel 34:4**

You have not strengthened the weak, healed the sick, bound up the injured, brought back the strays, or searched for the lost. Instead, you have ruled them with violence and cruelty. If anything, at the time, the disciples from Galilee would have known that Jesus commanded his apostles as follows: “These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the **lost sheep of Israel**.

And, we also find Jesus words that articulate his own understanding of his commission: He answered, “I was sent **only to the lost sheep** of the house of Israel.” The word “Lost” in these parables, then, applies to the Jews of Jesus’s day. He is quoted both by Matthew and Luke, saying: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” Jesus said to Zacchaeus: Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man too is a son of Abraham. **10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.**” Lost in the context of the teaching of the New Testament reflects the lostness of the house of Israel, not lost in the sense we often hear it. The Greek word is a compound word used in all the New Testament references and comes from the stem that means both literally and figuratively—destroy, die, lose, mar, and perish. The other side of this idea is important, too. Of the 11 verses that use the word “lost” (which included figurative references to sheep and the coin) in the New Testament none are applied to any one person. In fact there are only 12 references to lostness in the New testament altogether. One half are found in Luke.

. The best way to understand these parables is to go back to the very beginning of the three parables. There is a prologue that Luke employs that shows the tension between lost and found.

“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. <sup>2</sup> But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So, there are two groups who represent this audience, right? There are tax collectors and sinners that represented one group and Pharisees and teachers of the law that represented the other group. Jesus had chosen to spend his time with the tax collectors and sinners rather than the Pharisees and teachers of the law. It seems that though the tax collectors and sinners were listening, they were only secondarily the audience. Jesus was speaking primarily to the Pharisees and teachers of the law. There were lost and found ones in the group. Those who were lost were those who had not repented (in the Greek had a transformative change in their minds) and those who were found were those who had experienced that change. Which of the two groups most represented those who were lost? That’s right, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Which of the two groups represented those who were thought of as found? Again, right! It was the tax collectors and sinners. So with whom was Jesus connected? With whom did he celebrate joy? Why, then did heaven, and even angels rejoice? Imagine that: tax collectors and sinners were more suitable for the kingdom of God than Pharisees and teachers of the law!

You see, the point is Jesus was teaching an incredible, eternal truth. The distance between lost and found is a change of one’s heart before God. That message has never changed. We cannot rely on traditions, or religion to validate our journeys of faith. The great Dr. Martin Luther, instructing thousands who were making their way from Roman Catholicism to Protestant Reformation, said of this passage: “This Gospel contains the teaching we hold and boast of as our chief doctrine, which is called the true Christian teaching, namely, the doctrine of grace and forgiveness of sins, and Christian liberty from the law. It is a very loving and friendly admonition to repentance and the knowledge of Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

The idea of these three parables is sharing with his audience first, that he has come with a better way than the old law. Secondly, that to come across from the old way to the new way is a change of the mind in the form of repentance—coming around mentally and spiritually to the right way. And third, that choosing the better way is a cause for rejoicing—one among friends and neighbors, and celebration that involves all of heaven in the experience.

These parables, then speak to us. At some time or another in life are called to a decision. We either choose to live in our lostness or find joy in Christ’s new way of connecting to the kingdom of God.

Next week we will spend some time with the word “found” as used in the teaching of Jesus’s parables here.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=Luther|reference=Luke.15> (accessed February 23, 2019).