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## Context

Luke 15 is one of the most unique chapters in the Gospels in that it consists of three memorable parables: the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Prodigal Son. Many commentators locate these three parables (Luke 15) within a larger section of Luke that asks the question “who will participate in the reign of God?” (13:10-17:10). The section includes the foundational formation of the disciples – but often via the encounter with the Pharisees in which the assumptions of right relationship with God are put to the question. The Pharisees and others in the Jewish religious leadership assume folks such as tax collectors and sinners are outside the “faithful remnant” that awaits the return of the Messiah. At issue is the question of fellowship in the community of God’s people. Each encounter in this larger section seems to be an opportunity to form the disciples (and anyone who would listen) in the understanding of the reign of God.

The setting for teaching about this fellowship is so often the meal setting where questions of boundaries and community play out in terms of admission, honor, and hospitality. So often in this section the characters within the pericopes and parables are those who should attract respect and honor according to the conventional wisdom, yet within the parables are casualties of a reversal of values and misfortunes: “*For behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last*” (13:30). Joel Green outlines the reversal sayings as follows:

<b>Luke</b>	<b>Section Title</b>
13:10-21	The Unsettling Presence of the Kingdom
13:22-30	Who Will Be Saved?
13:33-35	The Intertwined Fates of Jesus and Jerusalem
14:1-24	The Kingdom and the Banquet <i>Jesus heals an insatiable thirst</i> <i>Recasting meal etiquette</i> <i>A wealthy householder and his invitation list</i>
14:25-35	The Conditions of Discipleship

Central to participation in the kingdom is the position of the poor and marginalized. Jesus’ teaching in chapters 14 and 16 (which includes the parable of Lazarus and the rich man) regarding the importance of welcoming into one’s homes those who live on the margins of society – “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” (25:24; cf. 25:32; 26:30) – underscores the central question raised in 15:1-32.

Beyond the poor and marginalized, one should also be aware that one should not neglect the category of sin when asking this same central question. This broad category would also include those considered “lost.” In Jesus’ time there were four categories of sinners: physical, racial, social, and moral. One can see the physical category in the story of man born blind (John 9) that highlights the belief that his blindness was due to either his sin or the sin of his parents. The racial aspect can be seen in the attitude towards foreigners because they did not observe the Law (e.g., Gentiles and Samaritans). The social category applied to tax collectors. The moral category can be seen in the attitude towards money lenders (usury), divorcees, and prostitution – to name a few. Because Jesus sits and eats with them, he too is accused of being a sinner and empowered by Satan.

The gospel text of Luke 15 immediately follows section highlighting the reversals in the Reign of God (13:10-14:35). Luke presents three parables that have a common theme: the joy of finding what was lost or recovering one who was estranged (the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son). These parables follow easily upon the extended section on the reversals of the kingdom because they respond to the Pharisees’ grumbling over Jesus’ practice of eating with outcasts.

Culpepper [294] notes that although the three parables share a common theme, the first two are paired while the third, which is more elaborate, balances the first two. The first two parables each begin with a question, “which one of you” (*tis anthrōpos ex hymōn*; v. 4), and “what woman” (*tis gynē*; v. 8). The third parable tells the story of “a certain man” (*anthrōpos tis*, v. 11). The pairing of the first two parables is evident not only in their common structure and theme but also in the link between them. Verse 8 introduces the second parable with the term “or” (*ē*) which conveys the commonality of the two parables.

The two parables have the same structure: (1) *a question*: What man? What woman? (2) *a story of losing and finding*: if he/she lost/loses one, does not go/seek ... until he/she finds; (3) *a celebration with friends*: and when he/she has found it, he/she calls together his/her friends and neighbors, saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep/the coin which was/that I had lost”; (4) *the moral*: Just so, I tell you, there will be/is joy in heaven/before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

The common themes that link the parables are evidenced in the repetition of the terms “lost” (*apollymi*) and “found” (*heuriskō*) in the three parables:

#### The lost sheep

- “and losing one of them” (v. 4)
- “and go after the lost one until he finds it?” (v. 4)
- “And when he does find it” (v. 5)
- “I have found my lost sheep” (v. 6)

#### The lost coin

- “and losing one” (v. 8)
- “searching carefully until she finds it?” (v. 8)
- “And when she does find it” (v. 9)
- “I have found the coin that I lost” (v. 9)

#### The lost son

- “he was lost, and has been found” (v. 24)
- “he was lost and has been found.” (v. 32)

In the parables, what was lost belonged to the owner from the start, but in both stories the owner expends diligent effort to recover the one lost possession.

The theme of joy and celebration also recurs in all three parables:

- “joy” (vv.5, 7); “rejoice” (v.6),
- “rejoice” (v. 9), “rejoicing” (v. 10);
- “celebrate/celebration” (vv. 23–24, 32), “feast (v.29), “rejoice” (v. 32).

Although admittedly, the parable of the “Prodigal Son” leaves us in suspense, not knowing if the older son will join the celebration.

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## **The Lost**

### ***Parable of the Lost Sheep***

<sup>1</sup> *The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to him,* <sup>2</sup> *but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”* <sup>3</sup> *So to them he addressed this parable.* <sup>4</sup> *“What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the lost one until he finds it?”* <sup>5</sup> *And when he does find it, he sets it on his shoulders with great joy* <sup>6</sup> *and, upon his arrival home, he calls together his*

friends and neighbors and says to them, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.' <sup>7</sup> I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance.

### **Parable of the Lost Coin**

<sup>8</sup> "Or what woman having ten coins and losing one would not light a lamp and sweep the house, searching carefully until she finds it? <sup>9</sup> And when she does find it, she calls together her friends and neighbors and says to them, 'Rejoice with me because I have found the coin that I lost.' <sup>10</sup> In just the same way, I tell you, there will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

## **Commentary**

The three parables of Luke 15 repeat the themes of the previous chapters as they respond to the Pharisees grumbling over Jesus' sharing table fellowship with sinner (v.1). The common themes that link the parables internally are evidenced in the repetition of the words "lost" (*apóllymi*) and "found" (*heurískō*). The themes of joy and celebration also recur in all three parables – and this is in specific response to repentance. Theologically they are also linked in the two persistent themes presented: (a) Jesus' ministry seen in the open invitation to the table and (b) the use of the parables for people to reflect on their own attitude towards sinners and the "other." These two loci point to repentance as key in the divine economy of salvation. But at the same time, neither of the first two parables necessarily represents the need for repentance. There is nothing to indicate that the sheep was "bad" or that the coin was "sinful." In fact, the sheep does nothing except be found. The burden of the restoration is on the shepherd. Stoffregen notes the work of Kenneth Bailey (*Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15*, 169): "The only possible action in this story which could constitute repentance is the finding of the lost. Repentance, therefore, may be defined as our acceptance of being found.... Repentance is our acceptance of the reality that God has found us in Jesus Christ. This means, of course, that we acknowledge our own 'lostness.'"

Jesus has been invited to dine with a leader of the Pharisees (14:1). It is notable that we find a new setting at the beginning of Luke 15. Now the Pharisees and scribes "*began to complain.*" The word (*diagonyzō*) had been used earlier in a similar context (5:30; cf. 19:7), but its more significant overtones arise from its use in the Exodus narratives, where the Israelites "grumble" against Moses (Ex 16:7–12) who enacted not only the moral code but also the code of ritual purity. The scandal against which they complain is the Jesus is receiving outcasts, sharing table fellowship, and even acting as host. The Exodus narrative lingers in the background because it is the place where God showed mercy to the apostate Israelites who became lost in their worship, replacing God with a golden calf. What is playing out before the Pharisees and scribes is (a) will they recognize that again God, through his Son, is again seeking out the lost and (b) will the leadership join the celebration?

### **Table Companions**

There is often a rush to the parables without considering the opening verses: "*The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to him, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain...*" (vv.1-2). The first group – those not considered among the righteous by the Pharisees – are persons in need of forgiveness, restoration and the good news. In Luke's gospel they are the ones who hear (cf. 14:35). The Pharisees are increasingly represented as resisting Jesus' words and complaining about his ministry of table fellowship and reconciliation. Their complaints echo against the wisdom of Jesus in 14:15-24 describing the emptiness of honor at banquets. *This man welcomes sinners and eats with them* – this is the central charge that Jesus answers in the parables that follow.

### ***Celebrating the Lost and Now Found***

Each of the first two parables:

- Identifies the main character
- Describes the loss and subsequent search
- Narrates the recovery of that which was lost
- Describes the rejoicing with friends and neighbors
- Closes with Jesus connecting such celebration with the heavenly rejoicing over the repentance of a sinner.

In the first parable (15:3-7), the shepherd leaves the 99 sheep to search out the lost one. Tending flocks, along with agriculture, represented a substantial portion of the economic basis of 1<sup>st</sup>-century Palestine – scholars thus take it that people, even urban dwellers, would have been familiar with the basics of shepherding. But all would have been aware of the OT's description of God as Israel's shepherd.

*Like a shepherd he feeds his flock;  
in his arms he gathers the lambs,  
carrying them in his bosom,  
and leading the ewes with care.* (Isaiah 40:11)

The image appears most frequently in the Psalms (e.g Ps 23) and in the later prophets (Jer 31:10; Ezek 34:11–22; Zech 13:7). By contrast, God is never called a shepherd in the NT, and the image is limited to Jesus' parables. But the imagery is powerful and finds a home catacomb art from the third century and then in later art from all Christian eras.

In contrast to the positive image of the shepherd in both the OT and NT writings, shepherds had acquired a bad reputation by the first century as shiftless, thieving, trespassing hirelings. Without a vested interest in the herd, one sheep was an acceptable loss? Also, shepherding was listed among the despised trades by the rabbis, along with camel drivers, sailors, and gamblers with dice, dyers, and tax collectors. The Pharisees' estimate of shepherds has a particular force in this context, since Jesus responds to the criticism over his acceptance of tax collectors and "sinners" by telling a story that casts God in the role of a shepherd. [Culpepper, 296]

There are some scholars that think too much is made of a single rabbinic writing that disparages shepherds. According to Green, average families had between five and fifteen animals. 100 sheep was a large herd. Perhaps we again are left with the "acceptable loss" theory.

### **The Lost Sheep**

Jesus addresses his listeners directly: "What man among you ...?" What he suggests all will do in going after the one lost sheep is actually not what many of us would do, but the attractiveness of this extravagant individual concern makes the listener want to agree. In a split second we are drawn into God's world, seeing and acting as he would. The description of the shepherd echoes Ezek. 34:11–12, 16:

*<sup>11</sup> For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will look after and tend my sheep. <sup>12</sup> As a shepherd tends his flock when he finds himself among his scattered sheep, so will I tend my sheep. I will rescue them from every place where they were scattered when it was cloudy and dark...<sup>16</sup> The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal, shepherding them rightly.*

The shepherd's joy is like God's joy; his dedication to the individual sheep, carrying it back to the flock, is a reflection of God's love. One should note that the parable ends in v.6. The verse that follows begins Jesus' comment to Pharisee regarding the meaning of the parable.

*"I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance."* The joy in heaven is over the change of heart (*metanoia*: cf. 3:3; 5:32) of the sinner (v.2). The phrase *"have no need of repentance"* is ironic and tragic: *"So I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."* (Lk 7:47)

God does not commend the righteous for remaining righteous (vs. 7), and Jesus has not come to compliment them for what they ought to be in the first place. Nor has he criticized their standards. The tension in the story is not their attitude toward God, it is their attitude towards those God also loves.

Culpepper [296] writes, "The contrast with the ninety-nine righteous persons creates a tension that requires a reversal in the position of Pharisees and scribes and the tax collectors and sinners. On the one hand, the Pharisees and scribes are likened to the ninety-nine who were not in jeopardy. On the other hand, God takes more delight in the return of the tax collectors and sinners than in the others, and because they take offense at Jesus' celebration with the tax collectors and sinners, they show that their spirit is far from God's. The parable poses a double scandal for the Pharisees and scribes; not only are they reminded of the biblical image of God as a shepherd but also God takes more delight in celebrating with a repentant sinner than with the scribes and Pharisees. Their 'righteousness' did not make God rejoice. The celebration of the coming of the kingdom was taking place in Jesus' table fellowship with the outcasts, but because their righteousness had become a barrier separating them from the outcasts, they were missing it."

### **The Lost Coin**

<sup>8</sup> *"Or what woman having ten coins and losing one would not light a lamp and sweep the house, searching carefully until she finds it? <sup>9</sup> And when she does find it, she calls together her friends and neighbors and says to them, 'Rejoice with me because I have found the coin that I lost.'* <sup>10</sup> *In just the same way, I tell you, there will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

A different image is used in a second parable to the same effect. What woman who has lost one of her ten drachmas, Greek silver coins will expend so much energy, turning her house upside down in search of this one coin in ten? Perhaps it was part of her dowry and thus had added sentimental value. In a barter society perhaps it represents that fund for a "rainy day." There is a part of the question that begs a "no one would," but where the shepherd lost 1% of the flock, the woman has lost 10%. (In the next parable the father will lose 50% of his sons.... perhaps a stretch in thought, but...)

There are some scholars who posit that Luke, as he often does, parallels the shepherd (male) story with another in which the same dynamic is operative through a female protagonist. Other commentators see a subtle difference in that in the first, the sheep wander away on their own, whereas in the second the coin is lost by the carelessness of the owner. In either case the shepherd/woman represent the church and its poor shepherding by not ensuring the Gospel is being proclaimed, the lost being found, and repentance occurring.

When the woman finds the coin, her joy is like the joy in heaven over one repentant sinner. It needs to be shared. It is too great for one person. She and the shepherd invite their friends and neighbors for the thanksgiving party. What about the other nine silver pieces and the ninety-nine sheep — are they not important, too? Surely, but the joy of the kingdom breaks out of the ordinary categories of reason and good business. What was given up as lost has been found. It is like a new life, a resurrection, and must be celebrated. Note here there is no reference to repentance, but only finding the lost.

Clearly these first two parables are fundamentally about God and their aim to reveal the nature of the divine response to the recovery of the lost. A question that then lingers from the context of their telling, is how will the listener respond? Will the listener join the celebration? These first two parables are silent to this implied question, but not so the third parable – the father celebrates, but not so the older son.

### **Joy in heaven and on earth?**

A present participle generally denotes action that occurs at the same time as the main verb. The main verb in the first conclusion (v. 7) is *estai* a future = "There will be". The main verb in the second conclusion (v. 10) is *ginetai* a present = "There is". So, when a sinner repents, at that moment there is joy in heaven. Will there be joy on earth, then seems to be Jesus' question.

It would seem that the ways to keep joy out of heaven are: (a) be so righteous that repentance is unnecessary, or (b) be a sinner and fail to repent. However, I don't think that Jesus' main point is about joy in heaven, but joy on earth. The joy in heaven is a given. It is the corresponding joy on earth that can be nearly impossible to attain. The self-righteous, critical, judgmental attitude of the scribes and Pharisees sought to kill the joy of Jesus' parties. I guess that when they couldn't kill the joy of the party, they killed the party-host -- which stopped the joy for only a short three days. Then we again see Jesus eating with sinners. The "party" goes on.

Culpepper [298] includes this Jewish story to illustrate a truth of our text:

“A Jewish story tells of the good fortune of a hardworking farmer. The Lord appeared to this farmer and granted him three wishes, but with the condition that whatever the Lord did for the farmer would be given double to his neighbor. The farmer, scarcely believing his good fortune, wished for a hundred cattle. Immediately he received a hundred cattle, and he was overjoyed until he saw that his neighbor had two hundred. So he wished for a hundred acres of land, and again he was filled with joy until he saw that his neighbor had two hundred acres of land. Rather than celebrating God's goodness, the farmer could not escape feeling jealous and slighted because his neighbor had received more than he. Finally, he stated his third wish: that God would strike him blind in one eye. And God wept.”

He concludes: “Only those who can celebrate God's grace to others can experience that mercy themselves.”

It is this final insight that is perhaps key to the inclusion of these parables in our Year of Mercy Bible Study. Consider this: what is mercy begrudgingly given and half-heartedly received?

Hebrew does not have just one word to define mercy, at least not the Mercy of God. There are three Hebrew roots that are frequently translated “mercy.” The first of these, *hesed*, carries a broad range of meaning. It refers to the kind of love that is mutual and dependable. It both initiates and characterizes the covenant bond between God and the people. This *hesed* always implies action, both on God's part (Gen 2:12, 14; 2 Sam 22:51) and the part of humans (Josh 2:12, 14; 2 Sam 2:5). It is mutual and it is enduring (Ps 136; Hos 2:20–22; Isa 54:8). The second Hebrew word, *rāhamîm* is related to the word for “womb” (*reḥem*). It designates “womb-love,” the love of mother (and father) for a child –love that is intrinsic, intuitive, ineffable. The word is used to describe God who has mother-love (Isa 49:15; Jer 31:20) or father-love (Ps 103:13; Isa 63:15–16) for Israel. The “womb-love” of God leads to forgiveness for the wayward children. The third important Hebrew word that is translated “mercy” is *ḥn/ḥnan* with its derivatives. This word means “grace” or “favor.” It is a free gift; no mutuality is implied or expected.

Mercy is this ineffable response from God because of his love for all His children – those who wandered away and those who are lost. Mercy is action on God’s part with no mutuality expected – only hoped for. Mercy approaches completeness when the love that results: “*So I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.*” (Lk 7:47) – becomes mutual. And perhaps the lesson of these two parables is that Mercy is complete when the whole of the people of God can truly rejoice with the angels in heaven.

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## Notes

**Luke 15:1 *listen to him*:** The purpose of this simple phrase with the word listen/hear (*akouō*) identifies this group as the ones who are responding to the challenge of 14:35 – “*Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear.*”

**Luke 15:2 *and eats with them*:** *synesthio*. This phrase should echo the entire of Luke 14, the preceding chapter in which table fellowship is one of the central controversies of the narrative.

**Luke 15:4 *what man among you*:** the man refers to someone who is a shepherd. Commentaries are divided on what to make of the occupational reference. Some hold that shepherds were considered to be looked down upon as people not worthy of trust. Thus the listener is ironically asked to associate themselves with the unclean. Others hold that given there were 100 sheep, this is clearly a wealthy owner-shepherd. Thus the listener is given to draw comparisons with the promised Good Shepherd of Ezekiel 34. Another argument for the “wealthy man” assumption is that the parable that follows represents a “poor woman.” This contrast has been a pattern in Luke’s telling of the gospel story (*cf.* 1:6-7; 2:25-38; 4:25-27; *et. al.*)

**lost:** *apólymi* The literal meaning is “to destroy,” “kill,” in battle or prison; - or “to suffer loss or lose”; “to perish”; “to be lost” (*cf.* Lk. 15). The three parables are told from God’s standpoint and while the meaning used is more passive in our English translation “lost” as in wandered off, in the Greek it can be understood as “lost” in the war between good and evil. Notably, in Matthew’s version (18:12-13) the sheep “went astray.”

**Luke 15:6 *joy...Rejoice*:** The words used in these parables are all from the same root word that gives us Eucharist - *chairō* (to rejoice), *chará* (joy), *synchairō* (to rejoice with).

**Luke 15:8 *coins*:** *drachma*, a silver coin worth about a day’s wage

**light a lamp:** assuming her house is typical of the times, there are no windows, hence the need to light a lamp even during the daytime.

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### **Parable of the Prodigal Son**

<sup>11</sup> Then he said, "A man had two sons, <sup>12</sup> and the younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.' So the father divided the property between them. <sup>13</sup> After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. <sup>14</sup> When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. <sup>15</sup> So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. <sup>16</sup> And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. <sup>17</sup> Coming to his senses he thought, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. <sup>18</sup> I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.'" <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.' <sup>22</sup> But his father ordered his servants, 'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, <sup>24</sup> because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' Then the celebration began. <sup>25</sup> Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean. <sup>27</sup> The servant said to him, 'Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' <sup>28</sup> He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup> He said to his father in reply, 'Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.' <sup>31</sup> He said to him, 'My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.'"

### **The Prodigal Son**

The parable, the longest in the Gospels, consists of three main parts: (1) the departure of the younger son to a distant land where he squanders his inheritance (vv.11-19, "squanders" is the core meaning of "prodigal"), (2) the homecoming of the son and welcome by his father (vv.20-24), and (3) the episode between the father and the older son who stayed at home (vv.25-32). How this parable differs is that

what is lost is a human person – one who has existing human relationships with his father and his brother. The younger son's *metanoia* is not simply a change of his mind in absence of these relationships. Repentance necessarily involves those relationships.

The traditional title of the parable focuses on the younger son who left home, yet it is the father who is the central figure. Perhaps a better title would be “The Parable of a Father’s Love.” Culpepper [300] goes farther: “The name one gives to this parable already telegraphs an understanding of its structure and theme. To call it ‘The Prodigal Son’ is to emphasize the first half of the parable (vv. 11–24) to the neglect of the second half (vv. 25–32). ‘A Man Had Two Sons’ focuses on the father’s relationship to the two sons and recognizes that this is ‘a two-peaked parable,’ a parable with two stories. ‘The Compassionate Father and the Angry Brother’ compares two ways of receiving the lost. The virtue of the title ‘The Prodigal Son, the Waiting Father, and the Elder Brother’ is that it recognizes the significant role of each of the three characters and calls attention to the shifting point of view in the parable—from the prodigal son (vv. 12–20a) to the waiting father (vv. 20b–24) and to the elder brother (vv. 25–32). Alternatively, one may regard the parable as having two parts: the father’s response to the younger son (vv. 12–24) and the father’s response to the older son (vv. 25–32).

Jewish Inheritance Customs. The relationships with the Father are the central axis of the parable, yet it is good to know something about inheritance customs. In the ancient world, not less than now, a person’s property is transferred at death. Fathers were discouraged from distributing inheritance during their lifetime (Sirach 33:20-24). But if he did, a father still was entitled to live off the proceeds while he lived. This can be seen in the following wisdom advise:

*To son or wife, to brother or friend, do not give power over yourself, as long as you live; and do not give your property to another, lest you change your mind and must ask for it. At the time when you end the days of your life, in the hours of death, distribute your inheritance (Ecclesiasticus 33:19-23).*

Other scripture includes that according to Deuteronomy 21:17, the firstborn son was to inherit twice as much as any other heir. The Jewish Mishna, which was probably developing in the time of Jesus, gives this rule: “If one assign in writing his estate to his son to become his after his death, the father cannot sell it since it is conveyed to his son, and the son cannot sell it because it is under the father’s control” (*Baba Bathra* viii.7). Even if a father decided to divide up his property among his heirs, neither the father nor the heirs could dispose of the property while the father was still alive.

In our parable, the younger son presumes upon the father’s prerogative and initiates the events with his request for his inheritance. Not only did he ask for his inheritance, which was bad enough, but he did something that was unthinkable and contrary to scripture and custom: he sold his inheritance, converted it to money (see note on 15:13) and moved to Gentile lands. The younger son’s actions spoke volume. By demanding his share and leaving, the younger son is cutting his ties with his family, with no regrets. He takes everything with him; there is no reasonable hope that he will be back. His departure with a substantial share of the family estate also means a loss to his father and brother, adding to the latter’s animosity.

**The Departure of the Younger Son.** The parable begins with the younger son asking for what he considers his share of the inheritance – something that is for the father to decide. In the asking, the son communicates that he does not view the inheritance as a gift given because of his father’s good graces; rather he sees it as his due.

Kenneth Bailey, a NT scholar who lived for years in the Middle East, asked many people in the Near East cultures how one is to understand the younger son’s request. The answer is consistent and harsh: the son would rather have his father dead so as to gain the inheritance. In a honor/shame society it

would be appropriate to ask, “What father having been asked by a son to give him inheritance...” Again the Lucan answer is not the answer of the society. The father grants the request. Where the younger son asks for “*the share of your estate (ousia) that should come to me.*” Luke tells us that the father “*divided between them his property (bios, literally “life” – see note on 15:12).*”

Imagination can fill in the familiar story line that is compressed with great economy: the extravagant spending, the attraction of freeloading friends, the crash. It should be noted that the young man squandered (*diaskorpizo*) the money. This does not imply a use for immoral reasons (which the brother suggests in v.30), but rather a thoughtless use of the funds. The term “dissipation” (*asotos*) does imply immoral choices. There is a loss of his mindfulness and his moral compass. But there is more.

The family rejection which began in his request, heightened when he goes to a foreign, gentile land, becomes even more disparate. He attached his life and fortune to a Gentile family – and not as son and heir, but as servant. He is penniless and reduced to tending swine for the Gentiles. For the Hebrew, caring for pigs (Lv 11:7 and Dt 14:8) evoked the idea of apostasy and the loss of everything that once identified the younger son as a member of his family and of God’s people. He is even lower than the swine — they have access to the husks, but he does not. “He has reaped the bitter fruit of his foolishness.” (Culpepper, 302)

**The Beginning of the Return.** The conversion begins in the muck and mud of the pigpen. It is there that he “came to himself.” While there is ambiguity in the moment, the trajectory of the story points to the moment of coming to point of desire to return home – the place where he has a place to be whom God calls him to be. The moment shows the human capacity to renounce foolishness, to begin anew to reclaim one’s heritage and potential. Calamity finally brings him to his senses. He understands that he has no claim on his father and no right to be called son. But if not a son, then he will return to his home as a hired servant. He carefully rehearses his speech: “*Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.*”

He is not seeking to reclaim what he has renounced. Yet he knows that he, in any condition or circumstance, returning to the Father and his father. It is a classic penitential moment: address, confession, contrition, and a petition of healing.

After “coming to himself,” he rises and returns to his father. At this point in the narrative the focus shifts to his father

**The Homecoming of the Son and Welcome by His Father.** Tashjian notes “As Westerners we cannot really understand what the father has done unless we put ourselves in the context of Eastern culture and way of thinking. The son had dishonored his father and the village by taking everything and leaving. When he returns in tattered clothes, bare-footed and semi-starved, he would have to get to the family residence by walking through the narrow streets of the village and facing the raised eyebrows, the cold stares, the disgusted looks of the town people. So when the son is still far off, before he has entered the outskirts of the village, the father sees him and decides immediately what he must do. In compassion for his son and to spare him the pain of walking through the gauntlet of the town alone, he runs to him, falls on his neck, and kisses him.”

As the earlier parables had asked, “What father would do such a thing? Already being shamed by the actions of his impudent son, again shaming himself by running through the town making a spectacle of himself.” But this father has been keeping vigil and sees his son coming “*a long way off.*” Anything but coolly reserved, he runs to meet his son, hugging and kissing him. What father would do this? Human? Likely, none. But no other image comes closer to describing the character of God.

The son has “addressed, confessed and expressed contrition” but does not get to the petition. He cannot get through his rehearsed speech. Ironically he does complete the “confessional” part of the speech, but the reconciliatory part is not the son’s role, but rather that of the Father, who makes his intentions immediately known: “*Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.*” These show that the young man’s father fully accepted him as his son. The robes and the ring were signs of high position in the family. Sandals showed that he was a son instead of a slave, since slaves did not usually wear sandals. There is no thought of recrimination, no policy of making the young man prove himself worthy. The only important thing is that he is alive. The son himself is more important than anything he has done: “*because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.*”

One curious element of this portion of the parable is this: did the father interrupt the son before the young man reached the “hired worker” portion of the prepared speech? Or did the young man simply stop, already seeing the action of his father to run to him, perhaps the joy on his face, and come to know that he was already forgiven and restored as a member of the family?

**The Episode Between the Father and the Older Son Who Stayed at Home.** The story would be complete as it stands with the return of the prodigal son and the father’s open-armed acceptance. But another story interlocks with this one. The elder son’s anger and self-righteousness make him resentful; not even the return of his brother will make him share the family celebration. Here we again refer to the vv.1-2 and opening table scene between Jesus and the Pharisees. Like the Pharisees, the older son has social norms and propriety on his side – the younger son has shamed his father and deserves to be shunned rather than rewarding such dishonorable behavior with a feast.

The tragedy here is that while the older son has never left home, never disobeyed, and has “slaved” faithfully – he has also never felt rewarded and thus resents the father’s joy at his brother’s return. Ironically, the older son acts outside the social norms as he refuses to go the father and enter the house, “calls out” his father, and then does not address him as “Father.” Once again the father has to leave the house to go out a meet one of his sons.

In contrast to joy, the older son feels anger or rage that is freely expressed in every gesture (refusal to enter the house) and word (his responses to his father). The anger he feels for his father is transferred to his brother. The older son has not only failed to recognize his privileged position with his father, but he is also blind to the fact that his father offers him the same constant care and concern – the father, again shaming himself, comes out to him also, seeking what is being lost.

Again the pivot is the father’s love. He goes out to the elder son as he went out to the younger. He wants both of them to be happy. The elder son cannot see beyond propriety and is trapped in his own righteousness. The father does not deny the faithfulness of his elder son. He implies that all that is beside the point at this special moment. Something far more important is going on: a son and brother has returned from the dead. Everything else fades before that fact: “*But now we must celebrate and rejoice!*” Within the father’s words is this key message: “one cannot be a son without also being a brother.”

The father has extended unconditional forgiveness to both sons *prior to their repentance*. Despite each son’s contemptuous behavior, the father assures them they are loved and belong. The attitude of the father is not determined by their attitude, but by his own attitude. Martin Luther’s first theses was that “the entire life of the believer should be one of repentance.” While doctrinally correct, it is not achievable in human effort. Even the mostly stoutly religious, in the end, must rely on the grace of God. When all is said and done in this life, having lived well or no, one must leave all in the hands of a merciful and gracious God.

**Final Thoughts** (from Culpepper, 304-5)

It is no hyperbole to say that this parable is a gem; all of its facets deserve to be considered. It is no simple simile with a single point but a compressed slice of life with complexity and texture. In the following paragraphs, we will take note of various of the parable's facets, but in preaching the interpreter should probably avoid such a "shotgun" approach and develop only one or two themes for emphasis. Let the parable be one of those beloved texts that always repays a return visit.

Much of the fascination of this parable lies in its ability to resonate with our life experiences: adolescent rebellion; alienation from family; the appeal of the new and foreign; the consequences of foolish living; the warmth of home remembered; the experience of self-encounter, awakening, and repentance; the joy of reunion; the power of forgiveness; the dynamics of "brotherly love" that leads to one brother's departure and the other's indignation; and the contrast between relationships based on merit and relationships based on faithful love.

Unfortunately, we usually learn to demand our rights before we learn to value our relationships. The younger son was acting within his rights, but he was destroying his closest relationships in the process. How many times a week will a parent hear one child say to another, "It's mine. Give it to me"? Children quickly learn to demand their rights, but it often takes much longer for them to learn how to maintain relationships. Governments and law courts defend our civil rights, but how do we learn to defend our civil and familial relationships?

From a distance, the "far country" can be very appealing. Young people leave home for fast living. Spouses move out to form liaisons with exciting new partners. The glow that surrounds the far country is a mirage, however. Home never looks so good as when it is remembered from the far country.

The journey home begins with coming to oneself. That means that the most difficult step is the first one. The younger son had to face himself in the swine pen of his own making before he faced his father on the road. Pride can keep us from admitting our mistakes; self-esteem may require us to take decisive action to set right the things we have done wrong.

Although the opportunity to restore relationships and remedy wrongs begins with coming to oneself, it requires more. We must go to the person we have wronged. Was the younger son just seeking to improve his situation, or was he seeking a reconciliation with his father? The direct confession in his interior monologue confirms the sincerity of his intent. Neither the younger son's pride nor his shame mattered as much as his need to restore his relationship to his father. He did not ask for his filial privileges to be restored. He did not even ask for forgiveness. He merely stated his confession (cf. the attitude of the tax collector in 18:13).

Howard Thurman, who shared his struggles and pilgrimage of spirit as an African American minister and educator in his autobiography, *With Head and Heart*, found that this parable offered a new insight as he reflected on the meaning of the Christian faith in bringing us to ourselves:

For I believe that Jesus reveals to a man the meaning of what he is in root and essence already. When the prodigal son came to himself, he came to his father....

My mind and spirit churned in a fermentation of doubt and hope. I was convinced there was no more crucial problem for the believer than this—that a way be found by which his religious faith could keep him related to the ground of his security as a person. Thus, to be a Christian, a man would not be required to stretch himself out of shape to conform to the demands of his religious faith; rather, his faith should make it possible for him to *come to himself* whole, in an inclusive and integrated manner, one that would not be possible without this spiritual orientation.

The temptation a parent faces is to allow the child's separation to become reciprocal. If the child separates from the parent, the parent may be tempted to respond in kind. The parable's model of parental love insists, however, that no matter what the son has done he is still the father's son. When no one else would even give the prodigal something to eat, the father runs to him and accepts him back. Love requires no confession and no restitution. The joyful celebration begins as soon as the father recognized the son's profile on the horizon.

Insofar as we may see God's love reflected in the response of the waiting father, the parable reassures all who would confess, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you." The father runs to meet his son even before the son can voice his confession, and the father's response is far more receptive than the son had dared even to imagine. The father's celebration conveys the joy in heaven. The picture is one of sheer grace. No penance is required; it is enough that the son has come home.

If this is the picture of God's joy in receiving a sinner coming home, then it can also give assurance of God's love to those who face death wondering how God will receive them. In the end we all return home as sinners, so Jesus' parable invites us to trust that God's goodness and mercy will be at least as great as that of a loving human father.

The elder brother represents all of us who think we can make it on our own, all of us who might be proud of the kind of lives we live. Here is the contrast between those who want to live by justice and merit and those who must ask for grace. The parable shows that those who would live by merit can never know the joy of grace. We cannot share in the Father's grace if we demand that he deal with us according to what we deserve. Sharing in God's grace requires that we join in the celebration when others are recipients of that grace also. Part of the fellowship with Christ is receiving and rejoicing with others who do not deserve our forgiveness or God's grace. Each person is of such value to God, however, that none is excluded from God's grace. Neither should we withhold our forgiveness.

The parable leaves us with the question of whether the elder brother joined the celebration. Did he go in and welcome his brother home, or did he stay outside pouting and feeling wronged? The parable ends there because that is the decision each of us must make. If we go in, we accept grace as the Father's rule for life in the family.

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## Notes

**Luke 15:12 *share of your estate***: literally "the share of the property (*ousia*) that falls to me"

***divided his property between them***: where in the first part of the verse Luke uses *ousia*, here the word *bios* (life) is used. Some scholars point out there is precedence for the *ousia* and *bios* being synonyms for the word "property." I would suggest this play on words points to an aspect, not the most important for sure, but an aspect of the story that involves inheritance laws and traditions in the ancient Near East.

**Luke 15:13 *collected all his belongings***: literally, "after gathering everything together." This identical phrase is used in the works of Plutarch (*Cato Min.* 6.7) that means converting everything to silver. It is likely, given his travels, to have converted his inheritance into money.

***a distant country***: indicating a psychological as well as geographical distancing.

***squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation***: *diaskorpizo* (squandered) does not imply a use for immoral reasons (which the brother suggests in v.30), but rather a thoughtless use of the funds. Yet the term "dissipation" – *asostos* – is used 3 other places in the NT and it refers to drunkenness, licentiousness, passion, carousing and lawless idolatry.

**Luke 15:14 a severe famine:** Biblical literature suggests that this was a frequent occurrence in an area in which agriculture was always a hazardous enterprise. In any case it hastens the son's return home

**Luke 15:15 to tend the swine:** As in the story of the Gadarene demoniac (8:32), the herd of pigs represents something unclean for the Jews ( cf. Lev 11:7; 14:8). To tend the pigs of a Gentile is as alienated as a Jew could imagine. Raising pigs was forbidden by the Mishnah.

**Luke 15:17 Coming to his senses:** literally, "came to himself." It should be noted that Luke does not use his normal word for repentance – a word he uses over 25 times in his writings. One might argue that this is the son's moment of repentance, but a more likely suggestion is that the young man is not in misery because of his sense of sin, but because he has fallen on hard times. The young man is not repentant, but practical.

**hired workers:** *misthos*, refers to day laborers, i.e., people without steady employment, who have no ongoing relationship to a particular farm or family. This status would be even less than an indentured servant.

**Luke 15:18 I have sinned...no longer deserve...treat me:** The planned three-fold statement is (a) a confession of guilt, (b) admission of the destroying the father-son relationship, and (c) a possible solution for the father's plight. But one wonders what the young man thought his sin was? His insolence? His realization that he is unable to provide for his own father in the father's retirement years?

**Luke 15:19 your hired workers:** The contrast here is between a member of the family (and heir to the property) and a *misthos*, and hired laborer with claim of permanence. Notice in v.22 that the father calls to one of the *doulos* (servant or slave) to wait upon the returned son. In v.29 "all these years I served you" incorporates the noun *douleúō* "to serve as a slave."

**Luke 15:20 filled with compassion:** compassion (*splanchnizomai*) occurs a dozen times and only the Gospels. Elsewhere the term expresses the divine compassion of God.

**ran...embraced...kissed:** Even though the father has compassion, the proper response would be for him to let the young man fall to his knees and humble himself before his father. The father would respond with forgiveness and a review of the new expectations – in other words, probation. The father's action lack the expected decorum. In some Arabic translations of this parable, the translators refuse to describe the father as "running" so inappropriate and shameful is the action. The literal translation of what follows is the father "fell upon his neck" and began to *kataphiléō* (kiss passionately). The kiss as a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness can be seen in the encounter between Esau and Jacob (Gen 33:4) and in David's kiss for Absalom (2 Sam 14:33).

**Luke 15:22 finest robe...a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet:** indicate that the young man's status is as that of a member of the household and not that of a servant. The description of the robe could also be suitably translated as "most prominent robe." There are texts which indicate that the giving of the ring means the prodigal son has supplanted the older brother as the heir (cf. Gen 41:42; 1 Macc 6:15, Esther 3:10; 8:2). The sandals are a sign of freedom and mastery. In the semitic languages, the most formal of greetings literally translates as "I hold your feet," the action of a slave to his master.

**Luke 15:23 the fattened calf:** Meat was not part of the daily diet. The whole animal would have to be eaten in a short time or the meat would spoil, so the father is expecting a large group. Perhaps the whole village will be invited. The father is not planning a quiet family gathering but is making a public gesture to proclaim his acceptance of his son so that the whole community will follow suit.

**Luke 15:24 dead...come to life...lost...found:** A son who dies and is found again can not but have deeper resonances for Christian readers of all ages and times.

**Luke 15:25 in the field:** the older son is hardworking and loyal. Note that he is not told of his brother's arrival, but on his way home realizes there is a festive celebration already underway.

**Luke 15:27 safe and sound:** The meaning of the Greek word is to be healthy, to be sound. But it is also the word that the Septuagint uses to translate the Hebrew word *shalom*, peace, which is much more than physical health.

**Luke 15:29** note that the older son never greets or addresses his father as "father." This is in contrast to his prodigal brother in v.27.

**served you:** *douleuo* is derived from the Greek *doulos*, a slave. The older son does not see his own status as son, but sees himself even lower than the servants/hired hands (*misthios*; vv.17, 19) called to prepare the feast. In Greek the verb is rendered in the present tense giving the sense that the son still feels bound in slavery. Such an expression by the oldest son reveals great bitterness.

**not once did I disobey your commands:** within the Gospel, these words point to the attitudes of the Pharisees and scribes who did not need "repentance" as they kept Moses' law.

**never gave me even a young goat:** the language again reflects the older son's bitterness. The *eriphos* (kid goat) is in comparison to the fatted calf (*moschos*) of v.23 prepared for the prodigal son. The former is a more common and cheaper commodity. But also note that the kid goat was for celebration with his friends, not his father. He is alienated even though he never left home.

**Luke 15:30 your son:** He does not say "my brother" but literally says "this son of yours here, the one who..." The language is angry and distancing. In vv.29-30 the older son has essentially excoriated his father for not being grateful for his obedience and so tries to humiliate and shame his father.

**Luke 15:31 my son:** despite the abusive and shameful words, the father does address his oldest as *technon*, a term perhaps better translated as "beloved child."

**you are here with me always; everything I have is yours:** Where the oldest saw himself as a "slave" the father affirms he is companion and co-owner of all that the father has.

**Luke 15:32 your brother:** subtly the father corrects the older one's "this son of yours.." to remind him that the one who has returned, been restored, is also in relationship with the whole of the family.

**with prostitutes:** The older son provides a lurid, imagined version of the younger son's ways while abroad – something the narrative had not given. Is this an echo within the parable of the charges levied against Jesus and the disciples for those with whom they would share table fellowship?

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