

Luke 15.^{1-2, 11-32}
to seek and to save the lost
1. 'Christmas dinner!'

Background

This Christmas as we celebrate again the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, we'll be picking up on the great truth that He 'came to seek and to save the lost.' This whole chapter in Luke's gospel follows through on that theme of 'lostness'.

On the back of a year which has witnessed a terrible war in Ukraine, and increasing fears about the impact of climate change, which has brought the death of the longest ever reign of a UK monarch, and the shortest ever premiership of a UK prime minister in the middle of a year which saw 3 different prime ministers, little wonder that many have been left feeling lost and bemused.

There has been much in the way of disturbing and unexpected change in the world, and along with that a growing sense of 'crisis' in so many different regards. Vague and nebulous questions float around the minds and hearts of many in these days: How did we get where we are? What does the future hold? Why has it all gone pear-shaped and wrong? Where is it all going to end? The sense of 'lostness' is perhaps more pervasive than we fully appreciate.

It's worth noting the context (vv.1-2) into which Jesus tells these three stories, and the consistent climax to them all – the rejoicing in heaven, the rejoicing among the angels, the rejoicing of the Father: Jesus' point in the stories is to highlight not just the grace of the gospel but the effusive joy of God in the exercise of such grace.

This study concentrates on the third, and by far the longest, of the three parables. Although it's known as 'the parable of the lost (or prodigal) son' (even the NIV heads it up like that), it's important to note that Jesus tells it very deliberately as the story of *two* sons (v.11), reflecting the two very different groups of people who Luke records as being gathered round Him – 'the tax collectors and sinners', on the one hand, and 'the Pharisees and the teachers of the law', on the other (vv.1-2).

Given that the theme of each of the three parables is that of lostness (and the delight there is in finding that which is lost), we are meant to understand that both sons in the story are as lost as one another, albeit in ways which are ostensibly very different, but which are actually very similar.

For further reading, Henri Nouwen's *The Return of the Prodigal Son* is a stimulating, extended meditation on the parable. Parables, almost by definition, are generally very limited in scope insofar as they are essentially stories told to make a single point (unlike allegories, where virtually every detail of the story corresponds to a Bible truth – *The Pilgrim's Progress* being a classic illustration of such a story). Of all the parables Jesus told this is perhaps the most comprehensive in its scope.

The parable is a masterpiece in its genre, and remarkably extensive in its proclamation of the gospel. May it serve to kindle in your heart a joyous celebration of Christmas, matching the rejoicing to which the whole chapter alludes! **'Days' (1), (3) and (5)** are the ones with which to start.

1) Monday 5th December – grace

Read [Luke 15.1-2](#)

“.. *this man welcomes sinners and eats with them ..*” (Lk.15.2)

The stories Jesus will tell have the ‘shocking’ reality of *grace* as their backdrop. How can a holy God even *tolerate* sinful creatures, far less *welcome* them to His table? The stories will underscore the fact that the Bible’s whole message is the gospel of grace.

To what extent do you think the ‘tax collectors and sinners’ of Aberdeen are drawn to, or repelled by, Christ’s church in the city?

Jesus was ‘full of grace and truth’ ([Jn.1.14](#)): how can grace be shown without compromising truth?

How might we the better and more fully display and make real for people the grace of Jesus in ‘welcoming sinners’ and ‘eating with them’?

Prayer: *How glad and thankful I am, O Lord, to learn that You welcome sinners – for that’s what I am. Help me to savour today the wonder of Your friendship and welcome.*

2) Tuesday 6th December – lost

Read [Luke 15.11-12](#)

“.. *there was a man who had two sons ..*” (Lk.15.11)

Lost! It’s the story of humanity: we’ve lost the plot, lost our way, lost touch with our God and Maker. The story Jesus tells is about two sons, both of whom are so very lost, albeit in markedly different ways: the one self-indulgent and the other self-righteous.

What characteristics of the younger son can you recognise in yourself?

Why does Jesus stress from the start that the story is about *two* sons?

Prayer: *You have made us for Yourself, O God, and my heart is restless until it finds its rest in You [[Augustine of Hippo](#)]: help me rest and rejoice today in Your Father’s love.*

3) Wednesday 7th December – need

Read [Luke 15.13-16](#)

“.. *but no one gave him anything ..*” (Lk.15.16)

Self-indulgent living is a dead-end road: it promises everything and delivers nothing. The awareness of need, however, is the doorway to renewal: the spiralling emptiness of the life of sin stands in striking contrast to the generous love of his father.

How has the Lord used your circumstances to bring you to an end of yourself?

What can you identify as the main features of the younger son's 'lostness' from what these verses narrate?

To what extent, and in what ways, are these features of 'lostness' evidenced also in the older son (vv.25-30)?

The generosity of the father is contrasted with the meanness of the society in which the younger found himself: how might you (and we) feed the hungry?

Prayer: Lord, You look upon our misery with compassion: You hear our groans: You feel our pain. How thankful I am that You have come to meet us in our destitute condition.

4) Thursday 8th December – renewal

Read [Luke 15.17-19](#)

".. I will set out and go back to my father .." (Lk.15.18)

The call of the Scriptures is a call to come home, to return to our Father in heaven, whose goodness we have arrogantly scorned. Acknowledging both our sins ('I have sinned') and our inherent sinfulness ('I am no longer worthy') is where renewal begins.

How readily and regularly do you engage in confession of sin?

Is your sorrow over sin a 'godly sorrow' ([2 Cor.7.8-12](#)) – what characterises such godly sorrow?

Prayer: I, too, have sinned against You, my God and King: I, too, am not worthy to be called Your child. Forgive my sin, for Jesus' sake, as today I return to You, my Father.

5) Friday 9th December – celebration

Read [Luke 15.20-24](#)

".. Let's have a feast and celebrate .." (Lk.15.23)

Grace is infinitely bigger, hugely more expansive in its scope than what we ever could anticipate! Grace includes the bold initiative of God, the warm welcome of the Father, the restored blessing of relationship and a lavish expression of the Lord's generosity.

The whole chapter is full of celebration: how does/should the church celebrate when people return to the Father?

In what ways does the father in the story Jesus tells show his love for his son?

What do these expressions of love on the part of the father in the story teach us about the love of God?

In what ways do you, or might you, display the grace of the father to others?

[Micah 6.8](#) reminds us that the God with whom we're bidden to 'walk humbly' not only loves mercy but acts justly: does the parable give expression to that?

How might we display this 'balance' between acting justly and loving mercy?

Prayer: *You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise You and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to You forever* ([Ps.30](#))

6) Saturday 10th December – dance

Read [Luke 15.25-27](#)

".. when he came near the house, he heard music and dancing .." (Lk.15.25)

The older son in the story is a sobering reminder that you can be far from the Father despite being near to His house. 'Music and dancing' – the language and liturgy of heaven (remember C S Lewis' *'the great Dance'*) – the older son knew none of that!

How well do you know God as 'Father'?

Do you spend too much time out 'in the field', and too little time with the Father?

Prayer: *What a privilege You've given us in Your Son, that through Him, by the Spirit, I now have access to You, my Father in heaven. Help me enjoy Your company today.*

7) Sunday 11th December – glad

Read [Luke 15.28-32](#)

".. you are always with me and everything I have is yours .." (Lk.15.31)

Both sons essentially presumed that sonship was a thing to be both earned and then sustained by 'works' (*"make me like one of your hired servants .. I've been slaving"*): but the father was glad to have the presence of his sons, not their performance.

Has your walk with the Lord become for you a duty and a drudgery?

In what ways does the knowledge that 'everything the Father has is yours' affect the way you live?

Prayer: *Help us as Your children, Father, to share in the joy that is Yours today as we come in to Your house together to celebrate Your goodness and Your grace.*