

LUKE

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Chapter Fifteen

Luke 15:1-3

Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. (2) Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." (3) So He told them this parable, saying,

This is quite a group that had, ostensibly, come to hear the teachings of Jesus. These were the ones who collected the tolls, tariffs, customs, etc. and not the ones in charge of those operations. Tax collecting was a dishonorable profession so these people were not capable of finding other employment or they were drawn to it by the possibility of making some questionable income. The Pharisee in his prayer puts them together with others of ill repute: *"The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. (Luke 18:11)* Those categorized as sinners could be apostate Jews and the Pharisees categorized them as sinners because they did not obey the rules on purity standards and Mosaic Law requirements. Luke does not specify why he calls them sinners. Sharing a meal with someone was a sign of acceptance so the Pharisees and scribes thought Jesus was then accepting these outcasts into His circle of friends. However Jesus snubbed the entire ranking system of the Pharisees and this was especially troublesome to them since they worked so hard to attain to their accepted status. Having a meal with such sinners sets the stage for the later fellowship with Gentiles. The singular form of "parable" signifies that all three parables in this chapter are addressing the same issue regarding the challenge of the Pharisees. The antecedent of "them" includes the Pharisees, the scribes, the tax collectors, and the sinners. All would probably have different reactions to the parable.

Luke 15:4-7

"What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? (5) "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 which was lost!' (7) "I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

The image of the shepherd with the sheep is a common one in the OT symbolizing the relationship between God and Israel (Gen 48:15; 49:24; 2 Sam 5:2; Psa 23, etc.). Matthew also discusses this parable (18:10-14). Some might think that the answer would be "none of us" for there would be the danger of losing the 99 left behind while searching for the lost one. However a flock of 100 was considered rather large and no shepherd would travel with such a flock without help. He could then let someone stay with the rest of the group while he searched for the lost sheep. Jesus is then describing a rather typical behavior by the shepherd and all in attendance

would agree. It seems that the men counted the sheep in the wilderness and found that one was missing. It would not be possible for the lost sheep to find its way home so someone needed to go search for it.

Luke does not relate how long the shepherd searched for the sheep but he did finally find it. A sheep will often lie down helplessly and refuse to move so the shepherd had to carry it home on his shoulders. It would weigh about 70 pounds so he had a considerable load to take home but he still rejoiced at his success at finding the lost sheep and returning it home. In this communal society, personal joy had to be shared if it was genuine so the shepherd brings together his friends and neighbors to rejoice with him. The verb form of rejoice makes it an imperative for he strongly desires everyone to share his joy. The appeal to rejoice is the main point of all these parables.

Jesus then makes His main point by comparing this earthly scene to the scene in heaven over one repentant sinner. Only Enoch and Elijah did not die but were taken directly to heaven and that would leave 97 out of 100 who were not righteous! We know that the Bible clearly states there is none who is righteous:

- Isa 45:21 *"Declare and set forth your case; Indeed, let them consult together. Who has announced this from of old? Who has long since declared it? Is it not I, the LORD? And there is no other God besides Me, A righteous God and a Savior; There is none except Me.*
- Rom 3:10 *as it is written, "THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;*

So are there any who do not need to be repentant? Certainly the Pharisees think they do not need to repent (7:36-50; 18:9-14). But both Jesus and John insist that all need to repent. So it seems that Jesus is not being literal about the numbers who do not need repentance with the emphasis being on the one who admitted the need for repentance. In the context of this episode, the Pharisees need to repent of their grumbling and refusal to accept that God would let into His family only those sinners who repent.

Luke 15:8-10

"Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? (9) "When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!' (10) "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

The coins are drachma and were the price of a sheep or one-fifth the cost of an ox. Some have thought that it was part of a set and missing that one would have made the set less valuable. However, only the wealthy would have had such a necklace and she was clearly not a member of the socially elite. This coin then was a significant percentage of her savings (perhaps ten was all that she had). Again we see the necessity of sharing her joy with her friends and neighbors over the finding of the coin. Luke relates that Jesus again tells them the joy among the angels of God over the repenting of one sinner. Angels began the announcement of the good news and singing for joy:

Luke 2:13-14 *And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, (14) "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."*

They will again be singing for joy every time even one sinner repents and enters the kingdom of God.

Luke 15:11-12

And He said, "A man had two sons. (12) "The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them.

This is a much longer parable than the other two. The amount of loss changes from one out of a hundred to one out of ten to one out of two and this is even more important because individual people are involved as the collection. It also divides into two categories as one involves the younger son and the other involves the older son. To ask for your inheritance before the death of the father was like saying, "I wish you were dead now". Of course all Jewish listeners would have thought that the younger son should stay home and work for the family. The younger son was sowing discord in the family and this is one thing God hates:

Prov 6:16-19 There are six things which the LORD hates, Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: (17) Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, And hands that shed innocent blood, (18) A heart that devises wicked plans, Feet that run rapidly to evil, (19) A false witness who utters lies, And one who spreads strife among brothers.

The father met his son's impatience with patience and divided the inheritance according to Jewish law. The Law stated that the older son was to receive a double inheritance: *"But he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the beginning of his strength; to him belongs the right of the firstborn. (Deut 21:17)* This was to protect the actual first-born even though the husband may have a greater love for a wife who gave him another son such as occurred with Isaac over Ishmael, Joseph and Benjamin over Reuben and his brothers are examples.

Luke 15:13-14

"And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. (14) "Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished.

Some scholars think that "gathered everything together" means to liquidate all of the property so that he would have as much spending money as possible. The trading centers away from his home would have offered some favorable economic advantages for someone wanting to invest but also there were many more ways for the son to waste his money. Jesus says that the son did waste his inheritance with loose living, which can mean getting drunk with wine and his older brother states that he participated in whores (15:30). Both of these are clearly taught against:

- Pro 29:3 *A man who loves wisdom makes his father glad, But he who keeps company with harlots wastes his wealth. (Prov 29:3)*
- Pro 21:17 *He who loves pleasure will become a poor man; He who loves wine and oil will not become rich.*

Against what he expected, there was a severe famine in the country making employment and food difficult to obtain. He became disparate as he had wasted all his inheritance and now found himself penniless and unable to find appropriate employment.

Luke 15:15-16

"So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. (16) "And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.

The Jews had a well-organized system of almsgiving in the Diaspora and he could have put himself at the mercy of a Jewish community but instead he hired out to one of the Gentiles in the country. The Jews considered pigs to be unclean (Lev 11:7; Deut 14:8) and eating them was tantamount to renouncing their faith. Luke uses the imperfect tense for the word “gladly” meaning a continual state of feeling. The pods were the food given the pigs to eat that consisted of the sweet pulp of the carob tree. The giving of alms was not considered a virtue that the gods would reward so the Gentiles did not even offer him anything to eat. He had even fallen to the lowest level in the Gentile world as nobody cared to help him. He should have known the promises of such behavior:

- Pro 13:18 *Poverty and shame will come to him who neglects discipline, But he who regards reproof will be honored.*
- Pro 13:25 *The righteous has enough to satisfy his appetite, But the stomach of the wicked is in need.*

Luke 15:17-19

"But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! (18) 'I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; (19) I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.'"

From verse 15, some people think Jesus meant that the man repented but that is not likely. It probably just means that he finally started thinking properly based upon all of the Jewish teachings of his younger life. This state that he is now in could be the beginning of his realization that he must repent. He reasoned that his father's hired men are given more than the basic food supply and so why should he be here in this strange land starving to death. In verse 18 it does seem that he does finally understand the state of his sin and he repents of his former state of rebellion. He has become willing to say that he has sinned against heaven and in the sight of his earthly father. This reminds us of David's prayer about sinning against God: *Against You, You only, I have sinned And done what is evil in Your sight, So that You are justified when You speak*

And blameless when You judge. (Psa 51:4) The son also understands his sinning against his earthly father and even the whole family. He does not blame anyone else but accepts the blame for his actions. He does not ask to be taken back into the family that he had dismissed but even will ask his father to make him a hired man who is not a member of the family and even is of a lower status than a slave. He understands that he will be better treated as a hired man under his father than as a laborer under his Gentile master.

Luke 15:20-21

"So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. (21) "And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

He then put his words into action as he left where he had been and started off to be with his father. The Jewish audience would have been very surprised at this result for the father could have the son stoned:

Deut 21:18-21 "If any man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or his mother, and when they chastise him, he will not even listen to them, (19) then his father and mother shall seize him, and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gateway of his hometown. (20) "They shall say to the elders of his city, 'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey us, he is a glutton and a drunkard.' (21) "Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death; so you shall remove the evil from your midst, and all Israel will hear of it and fear.

However Jesus prepared them for this result when He told them in the previous parables about the joy in heaven over one repentant sinner. The story began by saying “A man had two sons” and the rebellion of one son did not take away from the father the understanding that he still had two sons. He had never lost his love for the wayward son and when he saw him coming home he felt such compassion that he ran toward him, embraced him, and kissed him. This reminds us of Esau when he saw Jacob: *Then Esau ran to meet him and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.* (Gen 33:4) The son then began his speech of contrition as he admits to his father how he had sinned against God and him so that he recognized he should no longer consider himself a member of the family. However the father interrupts the son and does not allow him the opportunity to work his way back into favor with the family by working. Just as God forgives us for our sins without requiring some works of salvation, this father showed his forgiveness that does not require any works on the part of the son.

Luke 15:22-24

"But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; (23) and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; (24) for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate.

The father then completed the transformation by telling his slaves to quickly bring out the best robe (a ceremonial sign of authority), a ring (it confirms his full status as a son of the family),

and sandals showing a separation from the ground on which he had walked home. This reception is much like Pharaoh showed Joseph:

Gen 41:41-42 *Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt."*

(42) Then Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put the gold necklace around his neck.

The fattened calf would have been one prepared for a special feast and probably belongs to the older brother after the division of the inheritance. The bringing in of such a special animal implies that the father is preparing to give a huge party to celebrate the return of his son. The aorist tense translated "come to life" stresses the beginning of his entrance into the state of life so the translation above is correct. This image of death and life is seen throughout the NT such as:

- Rom 8:13 *for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.*
- Eph 2:4-5 *But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, (5) even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),*

All Christians were dead as evidenced by their sinful life and then were made alive with Christ so the image of the prodigal son being dead and then come to life again is repeated throughout history. What a ceremony much as the joy in heaven over the repentant sinner!

Luke 15:25-29

"Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. (26) "And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. (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 became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. (29) "But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends;

Now Jesus comes to the second phase of His parable that involves the older son. The older son had been dutifully working in the field and was coming home after a hard day's work when he heard music and dancing. He summoned one of the servants and asked what was going on at his home. The servant told him that his brother had come home and the father had killed the fattened calf because of the return of the younger son. But the older son would not join in the rejoicing over the return of a repentant sinner. Perhaps he thought that his brother was just pretending to be repentant since he had lost everything and had to return home. He may have thought that the wayward son should maybe have just been offered a job but not returned to familial status. His reaction was like the Pharisees and Scribes as he grumbles loudly. Certainly he thinks that he has alone upheld the family honor and should be the one the father is celebrating.

The father could have commanded him to come in to join in the celebration but he goes out to the older son in a similar way that he ran out to greet the younger son. As the father was pleading with his older son, the son revealed the true nature of his heart. He had been faithfully serving his

father and the family while the younger son left but he was doing so only for the rewards that he would receive. He is only upset because he was never treated with a celebration because he stayed with his father. Note that the father killed a seasoned calf but the son referred to the serving of a young goat. The first was for a very large congregation whereas the second would be for a very small party involving just the older son's friends that would even exclude his family. This type of contrast reminds us of the Pharisees who celebrated in their small cliques and eat in purity. However the celebration of the father involves the entire village including the outcasts.

Luke 15:30-32

but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' (31) "And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. (32) 'But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"

Now the older son begins to more fully reveal his heart as he refers to the younger son as “this son of yours” and cannot bring himself to say “this my brother”. He is comparing himself as he worked as a dutiful son to the younger son's wayward ways in the far country. We do not know how the older son knew of the exploits of the younger son but he is throwing those events in the face of his father and asking why he would kill the fattened calf for such a person. The father does not respond to defend the younger son but calls the older son “Son” and reminds him that he knows he has always been with him. Also the inheritance has already been split so the older son has his family rewards.

Jesus then wraps up the parable with the last verse recorded by Luke. Whenever someone who was dead starts life we must celebrate and rejoice. It is also important to remember that repentance is also God's gift:

- Acts 5:31 *"He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.*
- Acts 11:18 *When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life."*

Note that the father calls the younger son “this brother of yours” when he talks to the older son. Perhaps this would cause the older son to soften in his attitude toward his brother and father but Jesus does not reveal this result. Certainly the older son needs to be given the ability to repent of his sin toward his father and toward God.