



## Finishing in Luke 15

This year we have spent time studying Luke 15. In this chapter Jesus tells three stories that have an amazing impact on our lives. The first story Jesus tells is about a lost sheep and the good shepherd who goes searching. In the first Liu, we saw how this story relates to our lives, and how God is always ready and willing to go searching for people who are lost in the wilderness of life.

The second story Jesus tells in Luke 15 is about a lost coin and the good woman who goes searching. In the second Liu, we reflected on the good news of this story, that even people who are lost “inside the house” of God are not left on their own. The good news is that God, much like the good woman, searches in the house and out in the wilderness, always willing to search until he finds the lost people.

In this third Liu, we are going to talk about the third story Jesus tells in Luke 15. This third story is very familiar to most of us. It is the story of the lost sons, and the good father who goes searching for both of them. This is one of Jesus’ most famous stories, and it has a lot of good news to tell us, so we will be taking extra space to think about the words of Jesus. This third story is like the ending of one teaching.

While it is an incredible story, the first two stories about lost sheep and coins have helped prepare us for this great teaching. It is not by accident that Jesus tells the first two stories before this last big story. The story of the lost sheep and lost coin have given us the clues that we need to best understand what Jesus is trying to say in the third great story. As you read the rest of this Liu, I would encourage you to remember the first two stories and see how they connect to this big third story.

As always, you are encouraged to read the story of the lost sons and to try to find your place in the story. Which person in the story do you relate to? And how does the good news affect that person? After we spend good time with Jesus’ third story we will reflect on all three of the stories together, noting how they all connect. We here at Namikango love Luke 15 and feel that it shares really good news for everyone. We pray that you to fall in love with this chapter and can accept the truly great news that Jesus gives here.

By: Eric Gephart

## The Parable of the Lost Sons

The word prodigal means “spending recklessly.” We often title this parable the prodigal son, but the word prodigal describes the father as much as it does the son. The father is the central figure in the story, whom Jesus uses to describe himself. We remember that there are two groups with Jesus when he tells this parable.

As we read, we can compare the feast in the story to the kingdom of God, the younger son to the tax collectors and sinners, and the older son to the Pharisees. The story has a missing ending as the older brother is left outside the feast, with the audience left unsure as to what he will do next. Jesus is asking the Pharisees, “Will you join the feast?” It is to them that this story is primarily written. Let’s go through the story.

The story begins by telling us of a father and his two sons. The younger comes to his father, and, incredibly, asks his father for his share of the property. Jesus has only said a few words, and already those listening would have been shocked. “The father is still alive,” someone might say! “The son can’t ask for his share now!” In Jesus’ time (as often happens in Malawi), property is not passed to the next generation until the parent dies. Land was not just something someone possessed.

It was often something that was in the family for years, and thus a part of their very life. We can understand the fullness of what the son has just asked something like this: “Father, I wish you were dead. I want to receive what I deserve right now.” The son has not just broken the cultural rules of the village, he has broken his father’s heart and asked his father to tear his life apart.

But even more incredible than the son’s request is the father’s response... “so he divided his inheritance between them”. The father, who would have been expected to become enraged and throw the boy out of the home with nothing, humbly gives the boy what he wants and quietly suffers the loss of his son, and the pain in his own heart. Both sons thus receive what would have

### Luke 15:11-24

Then Jesus said, ‘There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

been due them at the father’s death. The younger son receives 1/3 and quickly sells his share of this ancient family property to the first buyer, takes the cash, and sets off to find happiness and freedom from the father’s rule. The older son receives the other 2/3rds and stays with his father. Here though, it’s important for us to note something.

In this situation, the older brother would have been expected to be the mediator between his father and his brother. He refuses to do this. Thus, from the beginning, we are made aware that the older brother too, is not in right relationship with his father. This will become important later in the story.

The younger son travels to a far country, settles there, and we are told that he wastes his inheritance in reckless living. After some time, there is a famine and the son has nothing left, so he “glues” himself to local citizen. He becomes so desperate that he is ready to eat with the pigs. Jews despise pigs. It would make a Jewish person unclean to eat pork, much less to eat what the pigs were eating. The choices of the son have now led him to a desperate place. At this point, he considers returning to the father, but not as we might have thought. There is no sign of remorse or repentance from the son.

The son rehearses the speech he will tell his father: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you...”. These words sound good, but these words are a direct quote of the very words that Pharaoh speaks to Moses (Ex. 10:16) when he un-truthfully agrees to let the Israelites leave Egypt if Moses will ask God to remove the plague. These are not genuine words or repentance. Furthermore, the son seeks to work as a “servant” in his father’s house.

Servants are paid. Slaves are not. He does not entertain returning as a slave. He needs money so he can pay his father back, and regain respect in the community. He commits to his plan and sets off to try to convince his father to let him earn his way back into the family and community. Thus, when he reaches the edge of his village, he is still very lost.

In the culture of Jesus’s day, when someone in the community does what the son has done (shames the family and wastes their wealth in a Gentile land) and seeks to come back into their community again, they must go through what is called the Kezazah ceremony. As they enter the community the villagers will line the road through town and throw insults (and vegetables) at the one returning. It is incredibly shameful, and only after the person has paid

## Luke 15:25-32

Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.” Then he became angry and refused to go in.

His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!”

Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

back all he lost will the community accept him. The son is no doubt thinking of this on his long journey back, as this at least lies between him and the point at which he can make his speech to his father.

Meanwhile though, the father has been standing at his front door each day waiting, watching for any sign of his son. Finally, he spies him when he is still far off, and once again, the father does the unthinkable; he *runs* to meet him. In Malawi, do old, dignified men expose their legs and run anywhere? In Jesus’s day, men *never* ran! It was shameful to do so. But why does *this* father run? Of course we know he is excited to see his son. But there is more.

The father also knows what awaits the son as he enters the village; the suffering and shame he will face as the people enact the ceremony. So this *father runs through the village; shames himself, so the son won’t have to*. He meets him at the edge of the village. It is here that the son *truly* repents. After seeing the display of costly love for him by his father,

before he has spoken a word, his speech changes; “Father, I have sinned...I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” He does not continue to ask if he can be a servant as he now sees that the father will not allow it. He is loved too much. He cannot earn anything; the father has demonstrated that any attempt for the son to earn anything will be pointless. The father already loves and accepts him. He receives his father’s ring, robe and sandals; all symbols that say, “This is an honored son of my family, not a servant.” The son will now be treated in the community as the father is.

So in one amazing picture, Jesus has shown his hearers how God receives these tax collectors and sinners; consistent with the lost sheep and lost coin where someone must go out to restore the lost, here we have a father who leaves his home and goes out to suffer and restore his lost child. Is this not the very thing Jesus has done in leaving his heavenly home to come seek and save you and me, and to suffer for our sakes? The good news, we see, is that before any of us deserved it or worked for it, or even repented, God has loved us and come to save us. What a powerful picture Jesus has given us, and what a wonderful father we have. This truly is good news!

Here, many times we end the story, dwelling on this great lesson from the parable, as if this were the primary lesson Jesus is trying to teach. It is indeed great, but if this were the primary lesson, the story should not have continued. It could end there. But the story does not end there. Let us then continue reading...

The father now holds a celebration at his house where he calls his friends to celebrate the father’s success at restoring his lost son. Meanwhile, the older son (the word used here is “elder,” a word used to describe the Pharisees; there is no question who this son represents) is out in the field, and as he draws near the house he learns from a young boy nearby that his lost brother has arrived, and the father has reconciled with him. In other situations, there may have been a meeting after the son returned to discuss how the return should be handled. The son

knows from these few words that there will be no discussion. The son has been “received.”

The older son is furious, and refuses now to join the feast and celebration. Here again, we must understand that this refusal to enter is as great an insult to the father as what the younger son had done. The older son would be expected to wait on the guests at the party. Instead he disgraces his father, and everyone at the feast knows it. Any normal father is expected to disown his son. But this is not a normal father. He once again, for the third time does the unthinkable. He goes out again (the word in the text is “to reconcile”) in search of another son, disgracing himself out of love for his boy. Both sons are equally loved by the father. He is willing to suffer for both.

When he reaches the son, he is insulted further as the son in effect says, “Look you! I have slaved and received nothing.” Such a thing cannot be said to your elder, much less your father. The son’s heart is now revealed. He believes himself to be a slave, and he was only seeking things from his father. He goes further to speak of “this son of yours;” he can’t even call him a brother. The son is indeed lost, far from the father, and the family. He too has not just broken the customs, but his father’s heart. But the father *one more time answers in incredible love and patience*, with these amazing words: “My son, you are always with me, and all I have is yours...”. The word used for “son” here is not an ordinary word for son; it means “my dear son.” The father tells the son that he has been a son the whole time though he didn’t realize it. He didn’t need to slave for anything; all the wealth, and joy and peace of the father was all already his.

The story ends here. These incredible last words are what the Pharisees hear from Jesus. They, who believed themselves to be so righteous, are being told that they are lost. They are outside the feast. And these “younger brothers” are in. How can this be possible? Like the father though, Jesus is pleading with them as his dearly loved children, to leave their self-righteousness and join the celebration of what God is doing.

When a story is left unfinished, or ends with a question in the Bible, it means the story is being directed towards us. “How will you respond?” We see that the point of Jesus story is not primarily to those of us “sinners” who have done everything wrong, but to those of us self-righteous Christians who have always done everything the Bible says.

The main concern of the story is not about breaking or keeping laws, but about breaking relationship with the father. It is possible to keep all the laws, Jesus says, and be very far from the heart of the father. It is also possible to break the laws and be far from the father. But Jesus invites both to see their lostness, know that they are loved, and to change.

By: Ben Hayes

## Further Reading

We have now discussed all three stories that Jesus tells in Luke 15. What we have discovered is that all three stories are trying to say the same thing. Let’s look at how each story compliments the others.

We saw that in the story of the lost sheep, the sheep leaves the shepherd and gets lost out in the wilderness. The sheep is so lost that it cannot find its way home and must rely on the good shepherd to come and find it. The same thing happens in the story of the lost sons. The younger brother leaves the father’s house and gets lost out in the wilderness, in the far away Gentile towns. He becomes so lost that he cannot hope to be found until the good father runs down the road to rescue him.

As we said earlier, both the lost sheep and the lost younger brother represent the sinners and tax collectors that were in the crowds listening to these stories in Luke 15:1. These people are so lost that they must rely on a good shepherd, a good father, to come out into their wilderness to find them!

Reflect on the story of the lost sheep and the lost younger son. Have you ever felt like the lost sheep? Have you ever felt like you were lost in a wilderness?

What do you hear Jesus saying to you in these stories?

Likewise, we saw in the story of the lost coin that the coin is dropped and lost inside the woman’s house. The coin is not lost out in the wilderness like the sheep, instead it is lost right under the feet of the woman. Even still, the coin is helpless to become found and must rely on the good woman to search her house until the coin is found. The lost coin is a lot like the lost older brother. He is lost inside his father’s house, not out in the wilderness like his younger brother.

The lost older brother is physically close to his father, but he is just as lost. Like the lost coin, the lost older brother must wait for the good woman, the good father, to search the house to find him. As we said earlier, both the lost coin and the lost older brother represent the Pharisees and teachers of the law in the crowds listening to these stories in Luke 15:1. These people think they are very religious because they obey the law of God, but they are just as lost as the sinners and tax collectors. They need the good father to come and rescue them!

Reflect on the story of the lost coin and the lost older son. Have you ever felt like the lost coin? Have you ever felt like you were lost even though you were close to God?

What do you hear Jesus saying to you in these stories?

What is the good news in these three stories Jesus tells?

We see another similarity in these three stories. When the good shepherd finds his lost sheep, he goes home, calls his friends together, and throws a feast. The good shepherd is so happy to have found his sheep that he celebrates with his friends. Likewise, when the good woman finds her coin, she calls her friends to her house and throws a feast. The good woman is so happy to have found her coin that she celebrates with her friends.

What do we learn about people in these three stories?

And what does the good father do when his lost younger son is found and returned to his house? He calls his friends together and throws a feast! The good father is so happy to have found his son that he must celebrate with his friends. In the same way, Jesus tells us that God is so happy when he finds a lost person that he throws a feast for them. God is not angry or upset when he finds us, he is so overjoyed that he has to throw a party to celebrate!

What do we learn about God in these three stories?

Even though Jesus ends his third story before we find out what happens to the lost older brother, we can guess at several things. The first thing we can guess, is that if the older brother decides to return to his father's house, the father will be so overjoyed that he will continue the celebration, perhaps even preparing more food for the party guests.

How can you apply these three stories to your own life?

However, if the older son decides to stay lost outside his father's house, we can also guess that the father will never give up on him but will continue to pursue his lost son and bring him back to the father's house. God is a God of pursuit. He loves to go out to find lost people, whether they are lost in the wilderness, or whether they are lost in the house.

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