

Recovering the Lost **Luke 15:1-32**

Most weeks the devotional focuses on the same theme as the sermon. This week is different. The parable of ‘the prodigal son’ – or, more properly, ‘the diligently seeking father’ – actually has two primary characters, apart from the father: the younger, prodigal son, and the elder, responsible son. The younger, prodigal son is actually the minor character, and the setting of the story, not its focus. The actual focus of the story is the elder son. It is legitimate for a sermon to focus on the younger, prodigal son: he is, after all, still a main character. But Luke’s focus, and the focus of this devotional, is on the elder son.

Day 1: Luke 15:1-2 ‘Bad company corrupts good morals’

A key pointer to the focus of the chapter, and its third parable, comes in the opening verses. As we have often seen in this Gospel, the first couple of verses helpfully set the theme and tone for the account that follows. Thematically, the Pharisees take issue with Jesus’ popularity among those who are spiritual, political, social, and moral outcasts. In particular, they offer two complaints: (a) Jesus welcomes sinners, and (b) Jesus eats with sinners. (In theory, these could actually be one complaint, but Luke develops them as two, and address each in the parables that follow.)

To socialize with such people communicates an acceptance that undermines the moral fabric of society. Before we dismiss the Pharisees out of hand, we do well to note that modern sociology confirms the legitimacy of their concern: social disapproval is a major factor in constraining misconduct; social mingling implies acceptance. Even the Bible itself warns that “bad company corrupts good character” (1 Cor 15:33). So for Jesus to welcome tax collectors and sinners does actually run the risk of lowering social disapprobation, and thus, increasing sin. At the same time, other values factor into his decision beyond support of a moral social order. One of those values is redemption, helping people find their way back to God. That is possible only for those who restrain the knee-jerk tendency to be judgmental, and instead keep company with those far from God, in order to gain trust and extend the offer of restoration.

Likely for us, the primary point of this text is not directly applicable, since it rebukes those who look down on others who do not adhere to strict moral standards. But at a secondary level, it may be relevant. While we may not

avoid people for theological or spiritual reasons – i.e., because their beliefs or behavior oppose or ignore Scripture and God – once we have been Christians for a few years, often our friendship networks are reduced to those with whom we have most in common, i.e., other Christians. So while we do not intentionally avoid or ostracize those whose convictions or practices differ from ours, we may absent-mindedly neglect building or maintaining relationships with them.

Day 2: Luke 15:3-7 Don't people matter as much as property?

Jesus' first rebuttal of the Pharisees is based on an argument by analogy. The story of the lost sheep makes one point, in two parts. The one point: the shepherd prioritizes the one that is lost over the ninety-nine that are not. The two parts: (a) the shepherd leaves behind the ninety-nine in order to track down the one; and, (b) he then holds a party to celebrate the one recovered. Jesus responds to sinners in the same way: (a) he pursues the lost, and (b) he celebrates their return. So why does anyone criticize him? Don't people matter more than property?

We should live like Jesus: Do you spend all your free time with Christian friends, or are you also cultivating friendships with those who have fallen away from – or have never acknowledged – Christ?

Day 3: Luke 15:8-10 Don't people matter as much as money?

Jesus' second rebuttal of the Pharisees is based on another argument by analogy. The story of the lost coin makes one point, in two parts. The one point: the woman prioritizes the one that is lost over the nine that are not. The two parts: (a) the woman expends all her effort to find the missing coin; and, (b) she then calls her friends together to celebrate the one recovered. Jesus responds to sinners in the same way: (a) he pursues the lost, and (b) he celebrates their return. So why does anyone criticize him? Don't people matter more than money?

With a minor variation in detail for emotional effect, this parable makes the same point as its predecessor. This woman has lost 10% of her net worth, and searches desperately and determinedly for it. And when she finds it, she is justifiably ecstatic and celebrates with a party. So does God, when a lost sinner returns. So, therefore, does Jesus. So, therefore, should the religious leaders. And so, therefore, should we: Do you spend all your free time with Christian friends, or are you also cultivating friendships with those who have fallen away from – or have never acknowledged – Christ?

Day 4: Luke 15:11-32 Two gospels for two sorts of people

The third parable presents the same two sorts of people as the chapter introduction: (1) the upright, and (2) the profligate. While we tend to focus on the latter, the elder son also needs to hear the gospel, though in a different way. The contrast between them is fundamental to understanding the original function of this parable, and its application today, because the parable applies the gospel differently to the two sons. What is the gospel to the tax collectors and ‘sinners’ of 15:1-2? The younger, prodigal son represents them. Whatever their transgressions, if they come to their senses and renounce their sin (15:17-19,21), they are welcomed back with open arms and hearts (15:20). This is their gospel, and ours, if we are like them: God is longing for you to return to him; even before you can reach home, he runs out to meet you; when you return, he he calls his entire community together for a big celebration (15:22-24).

What is the gospel message to the morally and religiously upright of 15:1-2? The elder brother represents them. Human nature is to celebrate the recovery of lost property, whether lost sheep or lost coins. Not to celebrate the recovery of a lost brother is an especially dark manifestation of sibling rivalry. So the elder brother’s behavior is unthinkable, even unimaginably, selfish in the context of a nuclear family. He is no less a sinner – and no less in need of repentance – than his profligate brother. This is their gospel, and ours, if we are like them: God passionately embraces repentant sinners; who are we to do otherwise?

Day 5: Luke 15:11-32 A third gospel, for a third sort of brother

Many of us tend to be neither like the older son, nor like the younger. Instead, we somehow manage to combine the actual virtues of each into a third form of malaise. Like the elder brother, we live scrupulously (though, in our case, without condemning those who do not). Like the younger, we fault ourselves (though, in our case, we may have done nothing particularly blameworthy). We combine both their strengths in such a way as to fault ourselves for being sinners without actually being notably sinful. More importantly, if this is our bias, we may tend to project it onto God, feeling ourselves to be under his condemnation, even if we actually are not.

For those who suffer from this predilection, the gospel to us is the obverse of Jesus’ original point: God never criticized the elder brother’s virtue, so if we live for God, he is not quick to find fault with us. Moreover, God did delight in the repentant younger brother, so if we avoid comparable sins,

he obviously delights in us. We need not beat ourselves up, if God is not intending to beat us up. Instead, let us lighten up on the guilt, and celebrate the kindness and generosity of God.

Day 6: Ezekiel 34:1-16 The good shepherd

Jesus' teaching in this chapter entails implicit claim to divine authority. "I tell you that ... in heaven" (15:7); how can he speak authoritatively of heaven's response to repentant sinners? "I tell you ... in the presence of angels" (15:10); how can he claim knowledge of angels? In the parable of the prodigal son, if the profligate represents the sinners, and the critical older son represents the scrupulous religious leaders, the father obviously represents God; what gives Jesus the authority to speak on behalf of God?

The first parable – the lost sheep – provides the answer. The story of a shepherd seeking out lost sheep refers back to Ezekiel 34. Speaking through the prophet Ezekiel, God condemns the purported shepherds – the religious leaders – of that day. Instead of caring for the sheep, they have fleeced the flock. "You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost... They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them" (34:4,6). God threatens punishment against the shepherds because they "did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock" (34:8).

Not only will God punish those failed shepherds, he will take up their task himself: "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them ... I will pasture them ... I will tend them ... I will search for the lost and bring back the strays ... I will bind up ... I will shepherd..." As shepherd, God is assisted by another, a descendant of David: "I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them" (34:23).

So we end this week reflecting on this truth. That Jesus comes to look after us, as a shepherd after his sheep. Not to condemn, but to rescue. Not to drive away, but to nurture. Not to punish sin, but to die for sinners. "'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11).