

Theme Sentence

It is God's plan - and Jesus' priority - to find the lost.

Launching Question

Share any stories of people you know (- yourself?!) who 'rebelled' as teenagers. How is that familiar story of teenage rebellion a good metaphor of the gospel?

READ Luke 15:1-24

What are the three parables in 3-24 a picture of?

Lost

In what ways are non-Christians/we (?) like the lost sheep/coin/son?

(We're going to be looking at the story of the older son next week ... but) How is the older son just as 'lost' too?

Sunday's sermon included the line: 'until you are found, you are lost'. What do you think that means for our contented, got-life-sorted friends?

The Pharisees and scribes (in 2) divided the world into 'saints' and 'sinners': how do these stories of lost things challenge their worldview?

How are we like the Pharisees and scribes?

So how do the stories of lost things challenge our worldview?

Looking

How is God described in these three stories?

Why is that humbling? And how does that expand the idea of 14:11?

Why is God so reckless about the 99 sheep or the nine not-lost coins?

Why do the angels rejoice (7, 10)?

What does that tell us about heaven's priorities?

How should we respond when someone turns to God?

The Punch-line

Why do the first two parables refer to the sinner who repents (in 7, 10) when neither the sheep nor coin repent?!

What is equally odd about the punch-line in 32 and the story that precedes it?

Is Jesus giving the wrong punch-line to his three stories?(!)

And if not, can you explain why he concludes each story as he does?

What is the connection between repentance ... and being lost-and-found?

What part does God play and what part do we play in our salvation?

Thinking it through

Why is Jesus saying this to the Pharisees and scribes (in 2)?

How does this explain who is included in, and who is excluded from, the banquets of 13:22-30 and 14:16-24?

Luke 15:1-32



Where are we in *Luke*?



At 9:51, Jesus began his final journey to Jerusalem, and therefore to his death. He is still travelling there now.

Before this journey began, he concentrated on teaching about **who he is**, but ever since 9:51, he switched to teaching about **eternal life**. So far he has taught:

- **eternal life comes through Jesus alone** (10:16-24). For this to make sense, he could only begin to teach it after revealing who he is, and after his disciples became clearer about who he is. We need to ask God for eternal life (11:9-13) and listen to him/fear him (11:28; 12:4-10).
- **eternal life cannot be obtained any other way**, and certainly not by good works (10:25-37) or religion (11:37-12:3).
- **eternal life is about life in the next world, not this one**. This has been the big theme. Our natural tendency is to focus on life in this world, but it is transient (12:16-20) and a place of conflict rather than peace (12:51-53). Instead, we should set our hearts on heaven (12:33-34), striving to enter there (13:22f), always ready for Jesus' return (12:35-40). Repentance (13:1-9) ... and not religion (13:10-17) ... is how to be ready.

In the section that began at 13:22, Jesus has considered two big questions:

- who will enter God's kingdom?
- how does someone enter God's kingdom?

'Some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last' (13:30): there are some invited who will find themselves 'shut outside', whilst 'the poor and crippled and blind and lame' are compelled to come in to replace them at the banquet. 15:1-32 will end up with one person (who thinks he doesn't deserve to be there) inside the house for a banquet, and his brother (who thinks he should be inside) shut outside.

[NS]

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Application

- we are all lost ... but there's more than one way to be lost.
- those who know they are lost will enjoy the banquet; those who think they are not lost remain outside the banquet complaining about who is inside.
- older brothers disapprove of Jesus' priority/ministry.

Commentary

The OT uses the idea of a great feast/banquet as a picture of the blessings of God's kingdom when it is finally consummated at the end of time (eg Isa 25:6-8). God invites *many* (14:16) to come. As does Jesus, in 14:25, pointedly addressing *great crowds*: 'come in, one and all ... for *still there is room*' (22-23).

At the same time, Jesus has been explaining why *many ... will seek to enter and will not be able to* (13:24), referring to those who assume that they would get into God's kingdom/have eternal life but discover, to their horror, that they cannot. Prominent in this group will be many Jews who think too highly of themselves, who have the attitude of the Pharisees and the Scribes in 15:2, and so do not *strive to enter through the narrow gate*. Therefore, God will fill his kingdom with other people who, in this world, are of little account (14:21-23).

- *we are all lost*

All three stories feature something lost, as a picture of our condition: if God didn't come looking for us, we would stay forever lost.

The interesting twist on this is the older son (25-32). Both of the two sons rebelled: one by being bad, and the other by being good. Both sons resented their father's authority. Both sons wanted to get into a position where they could tell the father what to do. Both sons were alienated from the father. Both sons equally wanted to live at a distance from the Father. Both sons were lost. The younger son's rebellion is crashingly obvious. If anything, the older son's is worse because he remained blind to his own condition.

The older son thinks that his obedience means that he deserves the father's favour (29-30): 'surely there must be some *quid quo pro* for my godliness; I deserve a reward'. It is important to feel the force of his complaint ... that immorality seems to hold more merit with the father than faithfulness. Underlying the older son's complaint is the question: 'where is justice?' Grace is unfair! It seems to be sloppy about sin, saying that impurity doesn't matter. It doesn't recognise and reward goodness. It seems completely unjust to favour sinners, and overlook saints.

- *the grace of God*

We tend to shrink 'grace' to mean something like 'God cutting me some slack; God letting me get away with it'. These three stories show that grace is far more than that – it is not just a feeling of benevolence, but something dynamic and active. C S Lewis famously described God as 'the Hound of Heaven' because he sniffed him out, trailed after him, stalked him, chased him, caught and held onto him until he was too exhausted to fight it anymore. Like Jonah, Lewis had tried run and hide. But like the shepherd/woman/father, God took the initiative and came searching for the lost sheep/coin/son.

Why does the shepherd leave the 99? Why doesn't the woman simply think: 'well, at least I've still got nine coins'? Why does the father stand looking down the road towards the city, longing to see a cloud of dust of his son returning? Tim Keller suggests that this is because the Christian God is 'the Prodigal God' (where 'prodigal' means 'recklessly extravagant').

- *lost-and-found and repenting*

Look again at the punch-lines of the three stories. The first two punch-lines (7, 10) emphasise repentance, when neither the sheep nor the coin have shown any attempt to repent (!), they were just lost and then found. The third punch-line (32) stresses being lost-and-found, when the story has been more about the repentance of the son (cf the repetition of his apology speech 18-19, 21) than the father going to the far country to find his wayward son. It almost seems as if each story got the 'wrong' punch-line.

And this draws attention to a central theme of the chapter. There is a direct link between those whom God sovereignly makes the first move to find ... and those who repent. Responding to God in repentance is the mark of those whom God has chosen and searched for and found. I know that God has chosen me if I'm like the prodigal, acknowledging my lostness and turning back to God in repentance and faith. This exposes the older son's problem: he thinks that he deserves to be chosen, without exhibiting any of the humbling himself of 14:11.

- *why this chapter is here*

These three stories are told to the Pharisees and Scribes because of their grumbling in 2: *this man receives sinners and eats with them*. Of course, what they were muttering is exactly what the elder brother was muttering in 29-30. So, the reason for the whole chapter is the sting in the tail/tale (!) in 25-32.

The context in Luke since 13:22 has been the question of who is inside and who is outside. The older brother divided the world into 'us' and 'them': 'we' deserve to be at the banquet; 'they' don't. In fact, what God should do about 'them' is to make sure that they always remain outside. The older son's view of his father (and therefore the Pharisees' and scribes' view of God) is that he is wasteful with his generosity: he wastes it all on a waster. But that is exactly the character of God that the Pharisees and scribes are missing: a gracious God exalts lost wasters to the status of honoured guest. The Jewish leaders were right out of step with the Father and his angels. And if you are out of sympathy with the Father and his angels, then you are in danger of excluding yourself deliberately, and of being shut out from the joy of the heavenly banquet.

And that's why the ending of the story is potentially so devastating. What did the older son do, after the father said 31-32 to him? Did he stay outside, standing on his pride or did he join in with the welcome the father gave to his returned son? Did his attitude change, or did he persist in misunderstanding works and mistrusting grace? We're not told. It leaves the story open, inviting the Pharisees and scribes to write their own ending.

There are hundreds of people like that today: respectable, conventional, good people. They look down their noses at the permissive society. They curl their lip at the decay in moral standards. They think they're good, but they're not; they're simply dull. They think they're being moral, but they're not; they're merely feeling sanctimonious. They think they're Christians, but they're not; they are Pharisees. Jesus would have us know how huge the difference is. Joyless in their hypocrisy, sterile in their respectability: their religion has no more in common with Christianity than a frigid marriage has in common with a real love affair.

Roy Clements: [A Sting in the Tale](#)