

Luke 15

Cosmic Lost & Found Bucket

Study Summary and Learning Objectives

This chapter contains three linked parables about things that are lost and then found. All three give us a glimpse into Jesus' heart for sinners. These stories are intended to offer comfort to those who respond to Jesus' teaching and act as a warning against those who fail to acknowledge they are in need of God's grace. They also give us a better glimpse into God's character and His mission for humanity.

Objectives

- Praise God that we have been "found" and then explore how we should interact with the world in light of this knowledge. Reflect on how God's grace should impact our daily behavior.

Steps to Prepare (For Leaders)

- Read the entirety of Luke 15 in one sitting.
- Spend some time thinking about how all three parables relate to each other.
- Come up with one example from your life where you felt like God was seeking you out.

? Have you ever found something that you thought you had lost a long time ago?

Leader's Note: This a long passage but it is helpful to read it entirely in one sitting; consider having multiple members read different sections.

Read Out Loud: Luke 15

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

⁸ "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' ¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

¹¹ Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

¹³ “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

³¹ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

Read Out Loud: This passage is often cited as proof that God accepts those who are lost and return to Him, but if we look at all three passages as one theme we see that Jesus spends as nearly as much time trying to contrast those who are found with those who are lost. In this study, we will examine how this is consistent with God’s character and how we as those who have been found should live out that blessing.

? Consider the Old Testament. How is Jesus' message through these parables consistent with God's ongoing story?

Possible Answers: The Israelites being sought and freed from Egypt, God sending prophet after prophet to get his people's attention, God taking all the responsibilities of the Abrahamic covenant on himself, etc.

Parables are not Analogies

Analogies are short phrases that relate two concepts together. For example, the heart is a pump for blood. Similarly, parables are stories that use images, scenarios, and characters taken from everyday life to illustrate specific truths or teach a moral lesson. Parables often cast familiar ideas beside harder to grasp concepts much like an analogy. However, we should be careful never to stretch a parable farther than it was intended and assume that each component of the story is an analogy. For example, the story of the prodigal son is a great example of God's powerful love for us and the grace He exhibits in welcoming sinners back into a relationship with Him. This is the lens through which we should examine this parable, but we should be careful not to find other analogies in the story that Jesus may never have intended, such as the father's house representing heaven or his wealth as a symbol for our eternal reward.

? The third parable's popular title is "the prodigal son," but the parable gives just as much emphasis on the father and the other brother. How might you retitle this parable?

- This story features three main characters. Who do you think all three are meant to represent?

Possible Answers: God the father, "those who do not need to repent," and "sinners."

? Who are the "righteous persons who do not need to repent" in verse seven?

Possible Answer: Jesus launches into this trilogy of parables after being criticized by the Pharisees and the teachers of the law (see v. 2), so it's likely that Jesus is referring to them here. If so, Jesus' point is that heaven rejoices more over one repentant sinner than it does over 99 people who think they are righteous. In other words, the "one" is worth celebrating while the 99 are not.

? How do people act like they "do not need" to repent in this day and age?

Possible answer: Legalism, when you feel like you haven't sinned in a while you begin to feel like you are the one responsible for your righteousness and you grow distant from God. Those who act like the older brother in the third parable -- basically those who believe they are deserving of God's love or grace or gifts based on their perceived righteousness and good deeds.

What a Pig!

The story about the younger son living with pigs loses some of its depravity in a modern context. Jesus describes how the younger son started from wealth and became a swine-herding slave to a Gentile – a threefold dishonor. The boy even remarks how unclean animals are better off than he is. The scribes and Pharisees near Jesus would have equated this existence to a cursed life.

? The son was merely hoping to be welcomed back as a slave, but his father accepts the younger son back wholeheartedly – adorning him with a new robe and preparing a lavish feast. The ring he puts on his son’s finger is even indicative of sonship and represents the son’s ability to transact on behalf of the father. Have you ever experienced the wealth of God’s love in a similar way?

? Now that we’ve explored all the parables, let’s look back at verse 2 where the Pharisees and scribes said, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them!” How might Jesus’ three parables be linked back to this statement?

Possible Answers: Jesus is commenting on the Pharisees and scribes’ hardheartedness. They don’t understand that God has a heart for the lost, and the Pharisees’ self-righteousness makes it hard to have a relationship with God because they aren’t willing to acknowledge their sin or admit their need for a savior -- therefore how can they be found.

Leader’s note: Read 1 John 1: 8-9 out loud as a prayer to your group as you close.

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

Questions for Discussion and Accountability

? In what areas of my life have I hidden from God? How is He seeking me?

? How should the wealth of grace God has blessed me with change the way I relate to others and how I spend my time?