

Coming to Yourself and Coming to The Father

Luke 15:11-24

Introduction: Eagerly Awaiting

All of Luke 15 is spoken as an answer to the accusation of the Pharisees and the scribes in verse 2 that Jesus "receives sinners and eats with them." Verse 1 says that "all the tax-gatherers and sinners were coming near to him to listen to him." And Jesus was making a place for them at his table and encouraging them to stay and eat with him.

Luke uses this word "receive" six other times in his writings and every time it means "eagerly await or expect and look for." **Luke 15:2** says that Jesus is not just receiving sinners; he is looking for them and eagerly awaiting their coming. He has his eye out for them. The word "receive" sounds passive. But Jesus is not passive. He is seeking sinners and tax-gatherers to come to him and eat with him.

So the Pharisees and scribes accuse him. And all the rest of the chapter is Jesus' explanation to them of what is really happening when he welcomes sinners and eats with them.

1. The first answer in **verses 3–7** is that his receiving sinners is like a shepherd who finds a lost sheep and celebrates with all his friends.
2. The second answer in **verses 8–10** is that his receiving sinners is like a woman who finds a lost coin and celebrates with all her friends.

And in both answers Jesus leaves no doubt about what he means, because in **verses 7 and 10** he tells the Pharisees that the lost sheep and the lost coin represent lost sinners, and the being found represents repentance, and the celebration is what God and all the angels are doing in heaven.

And at that moment some get it and some don't. He is saying: "*I welcome sinners because I am the incarnation of God's love pursuing the lost. I am the shepherd seeking the sheep. I am the woman seeking her coin. And this meal that we are eating together is a little bit of what is happening in heaven right now, and a foretaste of the joy that is coming. When sinners turn from their sin and accept my fellowship as the joy of their lives, they have come home to God. And God is glad*"

Luke 15: Lost and Found

Now in verses **11–24** Jesus gives a third answer to the Pharisees' accusation. When he receives sinners and eats with them, it is like a father who finds a lost son and celebrates with all his house. All three parables have this in common: being lost and being found followed by great joy in heaven.

1. **Verse 6: "Rejoice with me for I have found my sheep which was lost!"**
2. **Verse 9: "Rejoice with me for I have found the coin which I had lost!"**
3. **Verse 24: "'This son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' And they began to be merry."**

A lost and found sheep—and a party. A lost and found coin—and a party. A lost and found son—and a party.

Every month, Cook County officials buried numerous bodies in Homewood Memorial Gardens just outside Chicago. Who were they? People who have nobody that knows or cares. They just die. Someone finds them on the street or in a park or in an alley or in a lonely tenement. The officials search for relatives. The Medical Examiner's Office waits and holds the bodies. No one comes forward to claim the body. A hundred-eighty-foot long trench is dug at the cemetery

and the wooden boxes are lined up next to each other and buried. No stone. And no marker. This happens every month with 20 to 30 unclaimed people in Chicago.

Surrounded by millions in Chicago and not a single person seems to know or care when they die. This feels like absolute lostness.

But it's not. Absolute lostness is when you are cut off from God. It is better to die unknown by every human in Chicago than to die unknown by God. If we feel a fearful sense of alienation because of 68 forgotten people buried in a mass grave in Homewood, Illinois, how much more should we feel the fearful prospect of dying without God?

Luke 15 is about the love of God coming into the cities and suburbs of our world to find lost sons and daughters. It's about the identity of Jesus Christ and the meaning of his mission in the world—then and now – *to seek and to save that which was lost*

[Before we consider the Lost Son, let's go to God in prayer...]

The Lost Son

What's different about the parable of the lost son is that the misery of his lostness is spelled out, the nature of his repentance is spelled out, and the lavish enthusiasm of the father is spelled out more fully than in the other two parables. Let's look briefly at each of these.

I. The Misery of the Son's Lostness

Running away from God starts by feeling free and ends in utter misery—either in this life or the one to come, or both. Look at this in **verse 13**:

“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.”

The word "loose" (*asus*) means a "wild, abandoned, reckless" manner. This always feels free for a season—like sky-jumping feels free—until you realize you don't have a parachute. So running from God at first feels free.

But then verse 14:

“Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be in need.”

Easy come easy go. And then reality. A famine. Where do you think that came from? What might be the design in that?

Verse 15:

“And he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.”

When we break our attachment with God, we will end up attached to another, and that attachment will be slavery not sonship. It may be drugs or alcohol or illicit sex or an employer or a spouse or a sport or a hobby or a television or a lake cabin or a computer or books. The attachment may be crude or it may be refined. If we break loose from God, we will be attached to another. And in the end (whether crude or refined) this alien attachment will send us to the swine troughs—either in this life or the one to come.

Verse 16:

“And he was longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.”

You and I were made to be filled with God. And if we run from him, if we take our little earthly inheritance of time and money and energy and use it to attach ourselves to other things than God, it won't matter whether we are worth nine billion dollars or buried in Homewood, Illinois—our future will be swine food for all eternity.

That's the misery Jesus describes when we run from the Father's house.

II. The Nature of the Son's Repentance

Then he describes the nature of the son's repentance. **Verse 17:**

“But when he came to his senses [literally: came to himself], he said, “How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! 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.’”

Notice three elements in this repentance.

1. First, he comes *to himself* (v. 17).
 - i. When you are alienated from God, you are always alienated from yourself. You can't know yourself or relate properly to yourself if you are running from the one who made your self for himself.
 - ii. You were made by God in the image of God for God. These are the three main things about your identity as a human being; you are made by God, like God, for God. Therefore conversion is "coming to yourself" as well as coming to God. It is discovering where you came from and who you are and why you exist. Running from God is always a running from ourselves. Repentance is waking up to this truth.
2. The second part of repentance is humble brokenness and a deep sense of unworthiness before God. Verse 18: *“I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”*
 - i. Lostness is not something we can make excuses for. We are guilty. We are rebels (**Isaiah 53:6**). We have known our Father's will, and have rejected it. So repentance is a deep sense of how horribly offensive this is to God, and that we have no rights before him at all.
3. The third part of repentance is that we cast ourselves on God's free, merciful, bountiful provision of grace. **Verse 17:** *“How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father.”*

Now notice something very carefully here. At this point many people make a terrible mistake in the way they try to come home to God. The lost son is willing to come home as a servant rather than a son. Does that mean he wants to relate to God as a hired hand who earns things from God and thus turns a generous father into a wage-paying employer? I don't think so. Is that what God wants? What the son is saying is: look at how rich and generous my father is. Even the servants eat well. You might say: even the crumbs that fall from the father's table would satisfy me more than what the world has to offer. The focus here is not on the service that he can supply to the father, which the father then would be obliged to compensate. The focus is on the incredible bounty and generosity that he has so foolishly traded for the fleeting pleasures of sin. Repentance is believing that God is so great and so good that the smallest enjoyments of his house are better than ten thousand worlds without him.

With that changed heart, the boy heads home.

III. The Lavish Enthusiasm of the Father

This brings us to the third focus of this parable.

- o First, there was the misery of lostness;

- Second, there was the nature of repentance;
- Now third, there is the lavish enthusiasm of the father when the boy comes home.

What will you find when you turn home to God through Jesus Christ? Here's what you will find. See it in six photographs of God's welcoming his son.

1. **Verse 20:** The son "*got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him.*"
 - a. God is not so busy with other things that he is not concerned about his alienated children. All his affairs are in order, and well taken care of. He is free to be concerned about his children. Before anyone else sees, God sees. He sees every twitch of your soul.
2. **Verse 20:** When he saw him far off, "*he felt compassion for him.*"
 - a. There is something in Almighty God like this. Some of you fathers know what it is like to have a child run away from home. Then there's the phone call, and a rendezvous, and the flood of emotion and longing and love when you see him walking toward you. That's the way it is with God when you head home.
3. **Verse 20:** "*And he ran.*"
 - a. Now here is a middle-aged man, the owner of a significant estate, with servants at his beck and call. There is a certain decorum to maintain. There is a dignity. Such people do not run. Unless they have thrown all middle-aged decorum to the wind and given themselves over to the utter joy of their hearts. That's the way God is about your coming home.
4. **Verse 20:** "*And he embraced him and kissed him.*"
 - a. I could probably bring tears to hundreds of eyes in this room if I lingered over this and encouraged you imagine that one person in your life that you want to come home—home from sin, home from alienation, home from unbelief, home from hard-heartedness—and what it would be like to see brokenness in their face and to reach out and embrace them and kiss them. You need to know that God is this way. God is pure and God is physical. He does not hold you at arms length. Jesus did not have to include these vivid, emotion-laden details. He wants you to feel something here about the way God welcomes you home.
5. The son makes his confession. Then in **verse 22**, "*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.'*"
 - a. Here is the lavish welcome of the father. The *best* robe. The robe of sonship, not slavery. The robe of full, lavish, enthusiastic, unrestrained restoration to the family. That is the way the Father is when you come home.
6. Finally, the celebration. **Verse 23:** "*Bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry.*"
 - a. God is very glad when you come home. When Jesus receives tax-gatherers and sinners and eats with them, it is the gladness of the Father gathering in his lost children.

The gospel is almost too good to be true. But what do you hear when the Father says (v.24), "*This son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found*"?