

Three Parables

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who eats with sinners like me and you, Jesus Christ our savior and our Lord, amen.

Sometimes a story is so familiar we all think we know what it means, and we stop looking for new interpretations and meanings. God's Word never stands still or stays static. (SLIDE) This week as I studied these three parables Jesus told, a new meaning, new at least to me, came out. I always thought Jesus was teaching about repentance in these parables, but they were so awkward and you had to make some pretty weird theological gymnastics in order to try to make them fit into a coherent and consistent theology of repentance.

Here's what I mean... Let's start at the beginning... All the tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus to hear his teachings. (SLIDE) Jesus was allowing them into his inner circle and even, scandal of all scandals, eating with them. The religious leaders, pharisees and scribes, were grumbling. They didn't appreciate Jesus relationship with these sinners. After all, they were sinful and unclean. This is the stage Luke has set for us and the context into which Jesus gives his three Lost and Found parables. I usually grumble quietly to PJ when I don't like something that's happening. I try to do it quietly so no one else can hear, but in this case, Jesus does hear what the scribes and Pharisees are grumbling about. They say, "This guy", even though they know perfectly well his name is Jesus, but they say, "This guy welcomes sinners and eats with them." So, the issue

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on the table, according to Luke, is Jesus' behavior toward people who are known to do bad, unrighteous, unholy things. Then Jesus turns to "them" and tells three parables. It's unclear if the "them" to whom Jesus turns is the religious leaders, the sinners and tax collectors, or both groups.

(SLIDE) All three parables involve the vocabulary of lost and found. All three involve throwing a party. The first two parables about the sheep and coin use the language of "repentance." I noticed the third parable of the prodigal family never mentions the word repentance. Reading these parables in the context of Luke's frame or context, which is as a response to the criticism that Jesus fraternizes with tax collectors and sinners, has many benefits. A close reading of the stories in this light also reveals a good deal of awkwardness, I and many commentators have noticed.

Where, for example, does the issue of "repentance" come from? Is there an assumption that the tax collectors and sinners are spending time with Jesus, listening and eating and drinking and also, in some obvious way, repenting?

(SLIDE) The text doesn't say that. I have long been aware that sheep and coins can't "repent" of anything. So, rather than Jesus telling this story to make the religious leaders aware that all those sinners and tax collectors were the ones in need of repenting and that's why He came to earth from Heaven, perhaps Jesus was looking more at the Shepherd and the Woman who both carelessly lost something.

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Maybe, just maybe, Jesus is asking us to consider the need for the inattentive shepherd or the careless woman who lost her coin to repent. I mean, if a sheep starts to wander off, a good shepherd will stop them. Likewise, if you want to keep your coins safe, put them somewhere safe. Similarly, are we sure the father in the third parable isn't in a similar category? He lost two sons, and that didn't happen overnight. I mean, the father didn't challenge the younger son's impractical plans, and he was slow to notice the older son was missing from the festivities after the younger son returned. There are lots of reasons for family dysfunction, of course, but many times parents have something to do with it. Before you get angry with me for saying that, there's no judgment here... Parenting is hard. All I'm asking you to consider is if you are certain this is a model father? The younger son was "found," yes, but I wonder what this family will be like a few months from now, a few years from now, with a depleted nest egg and deep-rooted resentments still festering.

All this is to say: many traditional interpretations assume these stories are allegories, with God as a key player. God is usually identified with the shepherd and the woman. Think about all those pictures and statues created with Jesus carrying that newly found lost sheep on his shoulders... (SLIDE) Almost always God is identified with that father, full of grace, running down the road to greet his retuning son who was dead and is now alive. It's a powerful interpretation, and has

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been a fruitful one, but the story Luke tells never makes those connections.

Interesting things can happen when we don't either. The central characters in these stories lost things. (SLIDE) In each case they caused or contributed to the absence of the thing that was lost. Perhaps the focus of these parables is not on the person/things that got lost and were eventually found, but on the person who did the losing. It's that person who turns around and scours the hillsides and pries up the floorboards and runs down the road. It's that person who repents, repairs, and then throws a party. When you solve a separation problem, you should celebrate. Read in this light, the message to the group of Pharisees and scribes listening in might be: (SLIDE) You have lost relationships to tend to. You have work to do to rebuild or forge connections with the tax collectors and sinners. After all, they are sheep of your own flock, treasures from your own storehouse, members of your own family. And when those relationships are rekindled, these stories suggest, you should have a big party.

I'm actually surprised it took me this long to understand these parables in this way. When I was about 10 or 11 years old, my oldest sister, Alice, left home in a similar manner to the younger son. She took probably more than her fair share of the inheritance and took off for parts unknown. She would call once in a while, usually late at night to talk to our mother, but never to my dad or to me. She never came home, not even to our father's funeral. My mother cast partial blame for my

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father's early passing at the age of 60 years old, on Alice for breaking his heart. Many years later, Alice decided it was time to come home to her family. My mom and other sisters seemed to be so joyous over her return, but I was not convinced. It took me a long time to repent and forgive. I'm certainly glad I did! Alice became a beloved member of our family. She and her husband Woody were RVers and would come to spend the winters with us in San Antonio and the summers with my mom and other sisters in Wisconsin. She really tried to make up for all those years of being absent from our lives. In our family, I was the Pharisee who asked why we should allow this person who had sinned so egregiously against our family to be allowed back into the fold. Why would anyone who remembered what she did, want her to be around and to share our meals with her... I was the one doing the grumbling...

Sometimes we're the Pharisees and the scribes who grumble over the lost who Jesus calls us to accept and to welcome. Sometimes we are the sheep and the coin or the younger son who runs off and squanders the family fortune. That's the beauty of the living Word of God. Every time we read these stories, they convey a meaning to us that God needs us to hear. My guess is the religious leaders got the point of the parables Jesus told that day. I'll go out on a limb here and add that I'll bet they were none too happy. Jesus was calling them to repentance. Jesus was letting them know they were the ones entrusted with the ten coins and the 100

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sheep. They were the ones who had allowed that one sheep to wander off and become lost. They were the ones who failed to secure the money needed to purchase food for the family, but instead, had lost one of the treasured coins. They were the father who had given up on his younger son without so much as a fatherly objection. It took God himself to come down from heaven to show them, er, us the error of their and our ways. From their point of view, they were only following the Laws of God, but Jesus came to tell them they had missed the whole point of the laws of God. They used the Law like a Billy Club to beat up those who they considered sinners. They turned the Law, which was meant as a gift, into a fence to keep “those people” out. God help us from becoming those religious leaders!

(SLIDE) May the love of God penetrate our broken hearts and give us a heart full of love for God and for our neighbor. May we experience a profound sense of gratitude for the blessings of forgiveness we have all received. May our gratitude overflow from our individual lives and from this community of faith so that all people will know that same love we have received. May our lives be lived in constant repentance for our failings so that we can offer that same forgiveness to those who we consider sinners and tax collectors today. Amen.