

## CHAPTER 15

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### Overview of Luke 15

In chapter 15, Jesus presents three parables on love. The lesson will be this: those who are loved the least should be loved the most. The trigger for these parables is grumbling by the Pharisees that Jesus “receives sinners and eats with them.” The Pharisees are referring to tax collectors and to “sinners,” the latter being a general term used by them to describe anyone who did not live up to their standards, both legitimate descriptions of sin from the law of Moses, and illegitimate standards based on the thousands of manmade laws called “the traditions of the elders.” Jesus starts with two rhetorical questions, hoping that the logic may help the Pharisees see the obvious. He will follow up with a parable known as the parable of the prodigal son. All of these parables are lessons on caring and compassion for those who, in the eyes of the Pharisees, do not deserve it.

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**1** Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him.

**2** Both the Pharisees and the scribes *began* to grumble, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

### What to look for in Luke 15

1. As you read each paragraph ask, “How is God speaking to me personally through His word?”
2. You will quickly notice the types of people who are attracted to Jesus and His teachings, and those who criticize and reject Him.
3. Look for the relationship between those who come to hear Jesus and the theme of “lost.”
4. Look for four examples Jesus gives concerning things (or people) who are lost.
5. In the parable of the prodigal son, look for the differences between the younger son and the older son.
6. In the same parable, look for the reactions of the father, especially upon the return of the son who was lost.
7. See if you can figure out what was lost by the prodigal son.

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**15:1-2** “Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him” indicates a fundamental challenge to the religious elite of the day. “Sinners” could be anybody who was declared a sinner, not just by Mosaic law, but by the Pharisees based on their manmade interpretations of the law. Sinners could include those who didn’t keep Sabbath law, those who failed to attend synagogue on a regular basis, those who were deemed a sinner by virtue of their illness or physical disability, those who were unclean, those who were convicted of civil or religious crimes, and of course, prostitutes and pimps. Tax collectors, however, fell into a particularly contemptuous category. These were Jews who had “sold out” to and colluded with the Roman authorities and were paid a percentage of the taxes they collected from the Jews. Some tax collectors were fair, but most became greedy and took advantage of their position, collecting more money than was owed (e.g., Zaccheus in 19:2-8). If anyone complained, the tax collectors had the Roman soldiers to back them up. The complainer then ran the risk of being thrown in jail. In order to have that kind of clout, the tax collectors had to be “friends” with

the Gentile Romans and they often socialized together. Tax collectors were essentially Jewish in name only and often behaved like Gentiles. (There is no record in the New Testament that a tax collector, other than Matthew in company with Jesus, ever went near a synagogue.)

Jesus and His disciples, the tax collector Levi (Matthew) being one of them, spent many hours in the company of sinners and tax collectors. The reason these “sinners and tax collectors” are often cited together is because the tax collectors, despicable in the eyes of most Jews, kept company with those who were also rejected by the religious leaders, namely, prostitutes. Bad people gravitate to other bad people. So the tax collectors and sinners were essentially outcasts who formed a close-knit family, often partying nightly in what may have been drunken orgy-like affairs. The disdain the general population had for them cannot be overestimated. It was with these social outcasts and pariahs that Jesus and His disciples often mingled. They had meals together, something strictly forbidden by the Pharisees if they were to remain “clean.” Touching, dining with, entering the house of, or even coming in contact with a possession of a sinner or tax collector would cause that individual to become “unclean.”

Notice that the tax collectors and sinners “were coming near....” The verb tense here indicates that they were continually coming to hear Jesus, and approaching Him in such a way that Luke describes them as coming “near.” In other words, instead of being judged and rejected as would have been the manner of the Pharisees, Jesus welcomed them, accepted them and, in effect, loved them. This means that, from the point of view of the Pharisees, Jesus was constantly coming in contact with those who were outcasts and unclean, thus Himself being defiled by them according to law. Why did Jesus therefore allow the tax collectors and sinners to continually come near to Him as the risk of ridicule from the religious elite? Because He loved them. Before, all that the sinners and tax collectors had received from the religious leaders was scorn, rejection, judgment and condemnation. But not so when they came to Jesus. He welcomed them, accepted them, and taught them the true meaning of what it meant to be in a right relationship with God. He gave them hope, He gave them a reason to make life changes, and most of all, He gave them love.

The three parables in this chapter, however, are not directed toward the sinners and tax collectors. They are directed to the very ones who, instead of judging and condemning sinners and tax collectors, and in effect withholding from them God’s love, should have been winning them back to a better way of life through the message of God’s love.

Finally, let it be clear that Jesus never accepted nor condoned the lifestyle of the sinners and tax collectors. But rather than taking a position of judgment for their sins, He took the position of loving them *away* from their sins, sending the clear message that God loved them and had a better plan for their lives. Jesus taught them that if they would appreciate how much God loved them and wanted a better way of life for them, they would gladly turn away from the sins and seek to live a life pleasing to Him. It's therefore God's love that would win the day, not God's judgment, and the apostle Levi (Matthew) would be the living proof of that.

3 So He told them this parable, saying,

**15:3-32** What follows in the rest of the chapter are three parables Jesus uses to refute the accusations of the Pharisees that tax collectors and sinners aren't worth associating with (15:3-10). The saddest thing about these first two parables is that Jesus has to use love for animals and money in order to prepare the Pharisees for hearing a parable about love for others, and these "others" are not sinners and tax collectors, but family.

Here we see how Jesus uses parables to teach spiritual truths. A parable is a story that isn't necessarily true, but could be true. It is based on what could happen in real-life situations so that the hearers may identify with the story. A parable is also an everyday occurrence designed to teach a spiritual truth. Lastly, a parable is designed to teach spiritual truth to those who believe, and hide spiritual truth from those who do not believe, or who reject the speaker of the parable. The apostle Matthew explains this clearly in his gospel, 13:10-17. However, as Matthew informs us, even Jesus' disciples did not understand the meaning of the parables until Jesus explained it to them. In summary, those who believe will seek to understand the meaning of the parable, and those who do not believe will scoff at the parable, scratching their heads in frustration.

The first two parables are rhetorical in nature, each beginning with a question along the line of, "Who wouldn't..." followed by "the answer should be obvious."

4 "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?"

5 "When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.

6 "And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors,

**15:4-7** In the economy of Jesus' day, a single sheep was a valuable commodity. If the shepherd worked for a master, the loss of one sheep could cost him his job. If the shepherd himself owned the sheep, he had worked long and hard with careful breeding over the years to ensure his sheep were of the finest quality; their wool was thick, their meat was tender, and their health was good. However, as every shepherd knows, sheep are, quite frankly, stupid. They are not the most intelligent of livestock. They stray easily from the flock looking for the next better blade of grass. They

saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!'

7 "I tell you that in the same way, there will be *more* joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

can "tune out" to their surroundings while grazing. They can wander into dangerous situations, being totally oblivious to danger. They can put themselves in harm's way without even knowing it. Thus, they are subject to predators and, in this case, getting separated from the flock and ending up lost. Even worse, once they are separated from the flock, they have an amazing capacity to remain lost! They cannot remember from where they came or how they got there. There is no homing capability in sheep.

This parable is beautiful. It describes how people can get lost and stay lost spiritually. When it comes to one's spiritual well-being, people can be, quite frankly, stupid. People can wander from one blade of untruth to another, to one clump of pleasure to another, from one pasture of supposed well-being and happiness to another, and have no awareness of the spiritual danger they are in. And there are predators about in the form of spiritual enemies.

But the greater point of this parable is the value of the one. *Every single person on earth*, be they a homosexual dying of AIDS or a Muslim fanatic or a convicted killer on death row, or your kind neighbor down the street, is valuable to God. Why? Because God knows what awaits that person after death if they do not turn to Jesus. Dying without the Savior has eternal consequences, consequences that cannot be reversed after death. As we will read in the next chapter, after death there is "a great chasm fixed." What Jesus is teaching in this parable is that, because the consequences of dying without a right relationship with God are so terrible and permanent, every effort to save *one sheep* is important. While we often see the love and caring in this parable, we often overlook the truth behind it, that being lost from God is a terrible, terrible thing.

This parable is pointed at the Pharisees for a number of reasons. First, instead of condemning the sinners and tax collectors for their behavior, and in effect, elevating themselves in self-righteousness, the spiritual leaders of Israel should have shown more caring and compassion for those who are lost, if not mourning and weeping and tossing ashes over themselves because of the eternal consequences of being lost. Second, instead of focusing on God's judgment of the sinners and tax collectors, they should have been teaching them about how much God loves them and cares for them; that they are worth saving, and they are valuable in God's eyes and only wants the best for them. Third, Jesus is pointing out to the Pharisees their lack of love and caring. If the Pharisees were really messengers of God, they would be demonstrating God's love as well as His justice. Unfortunately, the Pharisees have put all their eggs in the basket of justice and righteousness. Justice and righteousness without love

8 “Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?”

9 “When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!’”

10 “In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

results in condemnation only. Justice and righteousness *with* love results in repentance, conversion and a new life.

In essence, Jesus is condemning the Pharisees for their lack of love for anyone other than themselves and those who measured up to their standards. The perfection of God’s love is that He reaches out to those who need His love the most; in this case, sinners and tax collectors.

**15:8-10** It is unfortunate that Jesus has to use the illustration of money to get His point over to the Pharisees. The coin here is a *drachma*, a Greek silver coin worth about \$75 in today’s currency. It was equal in value to a *denarius*, a Roman silver coin, a day’s wage for a soldier or common laborer. The one who has lost the coin is a woman, and the implication is that she is alone and has no one to support her, similar to a widow. Therefore, *one coin is of great value*.

This, too, is a beautiful parable. Note how the woman finds the coin. She first lights a lamp. Light, in the New Testament, represents salvational truth; that is, truth that delivers one from spiritual darkness (cf. John 1:9). As Jesus will pray in the Gospel of John, “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth” (17:17). After bringing light into the room (the implication is that the room is full of darkness), the woman sweeps the house. Why sweep? Because the house has dirt and dust in it, and the coin may be hidden by dirt. In other words, she goes and cleans every nook and cranny in the house, every corner, under every bed and table and chair, moving furniture, looking through cabinets and behind decorations, going to great lengths and effort to find that one missing coin. Here again, it is the value of one.

And notice what she does when she locates it: “...She calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!’” This was exactly the same words the shepherd used when he found his lost sheep. And, Jesus summarizes each parable the same way: “...There is joy...over one sinner who repents.”

The use of the word “repents” each time in this parable emphasizes that Jesus is not out just to make friends with sinners and tax collectors. He’s on a mission. His mission is to get them to repent; that is, turn their lives around and begin living a life that is acceptable to God. And how does Jesus do that? Not by trying to bully them into the kingdom by holding some artificial authoritarian hammer over their heads, but by demonstrating through His love that the Father in heaven loves them and has a wonderful plan for their lives.

This is a stinging rebuke of the methods employed by the Pharisees, just as it is a stinging rebuke of the Evangelical community who attempts to win people to Christ by judging rather than by loving. The problem with attempting to win people to Christ by judging them is that it inevitably places the messenger in a position of self-righteousness and self-importance. The benefit of winning a person to Christ by loving them is that it enables the person to see their personal value, and especially, their personal value to God Himself. It is the value of one.

But the rebuke of the Pharisees goes even deeper than methodology. It is the concept of law over love. To hold law over someone is infinitely easier than to reach out in love for them. To employ the law is to employ words only; to employ love is to give of yourself sacrificially. Law is easy—love is hard. Law is black and white—love is grey. Law is authoritarian—love is relational. But the saddest thing of all is that love is found *everywhere* throughout the Old Testament, and it begins with the Father’s love for His children, the Israelites. If the Pharisees had really known and understood the Law and the Prophets, they would have seen and grasped the great love God has for His people, and therefore they would have expressed that love to others. Somewhere in their great learning, they had emphasized the statement, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart...” and completely ignored the statement, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Unfortunately, they took God’s words and not only ignored them, but twisted them, emphasizing the law and missing the love behind the law.

Unfortunately, it is a problem we still have in the church today.

**11** And He said, “A man had two sons.

12 “The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.’ So he divided his wealth between them.

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.

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

15 “So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

**15:11-32** This beautiful parable is known as the parable of the prodigal son. In keeping with the theme of the two previous parables, it could just as well be called the parable of the lost son. Whereas the emphasis of the two previous parables was on that which was lost, in this parable the main subject is the father and his response to the return of the lost son—one of great joy. Jesus is emphasizing how “...there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

The best way to comment on this parable is verse by verse.

**Verse 11:** “A man had two sons.” There is an older son and a younger son. The older son will represent the Pharisees and the younger son those who have strayed from God and become lost in the world, embedded in a sinful lifestyle, and hopelessly at the mercy of those who do not love him.

16 “And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving *anything* to him.

17 “But when he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger!

18 ‘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.” ’

20 “So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion *for him*, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

21 “And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

22 “But 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;

23 and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;

24 for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’ And they began to celebrate.

**Verse 12:** The younger son, for reasons not stated, decides to take his inheritance in cash. Though the father says nothing, the younger son is wanting to be out from under the authority of his father. He no longer wants to work the estate or have his life directed by anyone other than himself. He no longer wants familial responsibilities and wants the freedom to live his life on his own. In saying goodbye to his father, he is saying essentially, “I don’t need you anymore.” This is exactly what happens when a person chooses to sin or embark on a lifestyle that is against the wishes of the Father. All sin is self-willed, and all self-will is a desire to be out from under God’s authority. The greatest problem with the desire to be out from under God’s authority is that the person is also choosing to be out from under God’s provision and protection. This desire to be out from under God’s authority was first seen in the garden of Eden, and is characteristic of all those who wander from God’s plan today.

Note that the father does not refuse the son’s request. The father gives him what he asks for, which amounts to one-third of the estate. The other son, being the first born, receives a double portion; that is, two-thirds.

**Verse 13:** The rise and fall of the wayward son is summarized in one phrase: “...there he squandered his estate with loose living.” “Loose living” is a euphemism for a raunchy lifestyle of debauchery, drunkenness and prostitution. He has spent his entire inheritance in hedonistic pleasures. Unfortunately, he is not able to phone home for more money...he is in a “distant country,” implying foreign soil. Fortunately for him at the time of his fall, the land is plenteous and he is able to live off the abundance of the land and the handouts of others. But things are quickly about to take a turn for the worse.

Be careful to note that there is not a hint that Satan was involved in the son’s choices. His decisions are made of his own free will. Theologically, what is involved here is the flesh, not the influence of outside spiritual forces.

**Verse 14:** Whereas once his life was under his control, now his life has gotten completely out of his control. Famines are usually caused by severe drought, and in those days, because most food was perishable, it didn’t take long for the food chain to whittle down to nothing. As in all instances of poverty caused by environmental catastrophe, people begin to look out only for themselves. Sharing is not an option, and the previous good will of his acquaintances dries up quickly. This would be particularly true of someone who isn’t a member of a family and has no one to turn to for help; the risk of living in a foreign land (“that country”). Thus, the wayward son not only has nothing, he has become

“impoverished,” which is somewhat of an understatement. This is a kind way of saying destitute and indigent. He is literally begging for every morsel of food and water he can get.

**Verse 15:** Fortunately for him, he is able to get a low-paying job. Unfortunately for him, he is feeding swine. Pigs are particularly disgusting to Jews, and even contact with them makes oneself unclean. So now, not only is the son dependent on someone who could care less about him, and not only has he sunk to his lowest level, but he has become unclean. The fact that the son has become unclean applies directly to the Pharisees who considered the tax collectors and sinners as unclean. Please note, though, that the Pharisees are *not wrong* about the way they have characterized the sinners and tax collectors: because of sin, they are indeed unclean. Where the Pharisees have gone wrong is in assuming that they themselves *are* clean and need no repentance. They are also wrong in the way that treat sinners: instead of loving them as Jesus loves them, they have shunned them and judged them.

**Verse 16:** Only pigs can eat pods. For a human, pods are of no nutritional value. The point of the willingness to eat pods is that the son is so starved, he is willing to eat anything just to fill his stomach and have that full sensation, whether it’s digestible or not. And, as stated above, no one is giving him anything to eat.

**Verse 17:** It is not uncommon that, in order for a person to realize how low they have sunk, they must first reach rock bottom. Testimonies to this experience abound. The low point for the son is that he is literally wallowing with the pigs; he has become one of them...unclean. Fortunately for him, “...he came to his senses.” Most often, people come to their senses when they realize they can no longer help themselves. In order for that to happen, they must come to the point that their lives are out of their control. They are helpless. They can no longer depend on others, and they can no longer depend upon themselves. All the son’s enablers are gone; they will enable him no more simply because they have nothing to give and nothing to enable him with. From a spiritual perspective, only those who realize they cannot help themselves come to a point of repentance. The problem with the Pharisees was that they believed they *could* help themselves. They could just tithe a little more, say an extra prayer, enact another Sabbath law, or judge another sinner.

By coming to his senses, the son is able to reflect back on that which was lost. He was once full; now he is starving. He was once esteemed; now he is unclean. He was once in control; now he is out of control. In seeking to be out from under his father’s authority, he has placed himself under the authority

of people who do not love him, and elements and circumstances that control him. In seeking to live life entirely on his own, he has found himself alone and friendless. In his quest to gain that which was legitimately his, he has, of his own doing, lost everything. He is at the point of death physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Such are those who realize they are lost spiritually. They realize they cannot live without the knowledge that someone loves them. They realize they cannot find meaning in life on their own; that they need someone greater than themselves to direct them. They realize that their own choices have taken them far from where they really want to be. And most of all, they realize they need help, and that they cannot, in spite of what they formerly believed, help themselves. It's at this point that a person finds comfort in repentance, and it is only at this point that repentance becomes the last escape, the last way out. Because the Pharisees believed themselves beyond needing repentance, they are forever stuck in a situation worse than wallowing with swine; they *are* the swine and pitifully ignorant of their own uncleanness because their standards are based on law, not on love.

**Verse 18:** It is at this low point that the son begins to formulate a plan. He realizes he needs to return home and return to the loving care of his father. In his coming to his senses, he has faced a hard fact...he has sinned. Not only has he sinned against God ("heaven"), but he has sinned against his father.

It is a terrible point to get to when you realize how much you have strayed from that which you know is right. It's an even more terrible thing to realize how much you have hurt others by your sin, especially someone who loves you very much. You realize how much lust has overruled love in your life, and led you down a path that you knew was wrong, but couldn't seem to resist. You took your freedoms and turned them into license. You took your heritage and made a mockery of it. You assumed the pleasures you sought were innocent and justified, just a part of experiencing the world. You said goodbye to those who held you accountable and, as a result, shook hands with those who led you down an ever-descending path of spiritual corruption. You end up doing things you wish you'd never done, and can never fully erase from your memory. You find yourself selfishly taking advantage of those who come under your narcissistic spell, and you squander without regard whatever healthy relationships you encounter. It is one thing to realize you are in need of help and that you cannot help yourself. It is quite another thing to realize you have sinned against God, the Father in heaven who has loved you all along. It is a devastating, breaking, dark moment to come face

to face with your sin. And yet, through the mercy and compassion of the Father, it is the most liberating and hopeful moment you can ever have. Coming to your spiritual senses, repentance, is the most freeing act in the world. The wayward son has come to that moment, and he has decided to return to his father. Unfortunately, it is a moment the Pharisees will never know nor understand, for in their eyes, they need no repentance.

**Verse 19:** Part of repentance is a sense of extreme unworthiness. It is not just a part, but it is a *necessary* part. You have lost all sense of self-importance. You have lost all pride, and you have lost all self-esteem. Although the son is still, in fact, a son, he does not consider himself worthy of being a son. Why? Because he has not lived up to his sonness. He has not lived up to what his father designed him to be and what his father hoped that he would be. He has not only disappointed his father, he has pained him deeply. The son has removed himself so far from his father's presence that he is incapable of conceiving that his father still loves him and longs for his presence. And this is one of the problems with sin: we lose sight of how much we bring pain to the Father, and we begin to believe that He has stopped loving us. After all, how could God continue to love someone who has sinned so badly? We begin to believe that our sins are beyond forgiving, and that we indeed deserve to be judged and rejected by the Father. But this is the very thing Jesus came to refute: no one is beyond the Father's love...*no one*, no matter how badly or terribly or despicably we have sinned, no matter how selfishly we have lived, no matter how cruelly we have betrayed the love of others, no matter how badly we have hurt the very ones we love. All it takes is to come to our spiritual senses and turn our intentions back to the Father who has never stopped loving us.

**Verse 20:** The attention is now turned to the father. Note that "...while he was still a long way off, his father saw him..." The father had been looking and hoping for his son's return. This is a perfect picture of the Father who never stops looking for return of the lost son. But note also that the father never went looking for his son. The shepherd who searched for the lost sheep needed to because sheep are, quite frankly, stupid. But not so in this case. The son isn't stupid. He, being raised as he was, was quite capable of coming to his senses and finding his way home all on his own. And when the father saw him, he ran out and "embraced him and kissed him." The father never once scolded the son. The father never once said, "I told you so." The father never counted him as unclean or incapable of forgiveness or a second-class citizen, a "hired hand." The love that the father has for the son is unconditional and never-

ending. That is exactly how God the Father looks toward those who are lost: His love is unconditional and never-ending, and that is the very message that Jesus the Son is trying to communicate to His audience. The love of the Pharisees is conditional and can be withheld at the blink of an eye. But the love of the Father is eternal and immutable.

The father of the wayward son knew what the son needed most: not a scolding nor a lecture nor a punishment such as being sent out to the field with the hired hands. What the son needed most was the love of the father. What the son needed was to know that, in spite of his poor judgment, in spite of his selfishness, and in spite of his sins, his father still loved him and accepted him and welcomed him back. Why? Because the son “came to his senses,” repented, faced his sins, and willingly returned to his father. This is a lesson on the never-ending love of God for His children.

**Verse 21:** The son never gets to finish the speech he had so carefully practiced all the way home. The father’s love was too overwhelming.

**Verse 22:** The father’s response is one of quickly restoring the son to his previous status. He is one of the family, and he will remain one of the family. Even though he is certainly worthy of being treated like just another hired hand, he is restored. He comes home with no robe; he is given a robe of position and prominence. He returns to his father without credibility; he is given a ring of the family seal, the sign of authority. He limps to his father barefooted like a field hand; he is given sandals to protect his feet from the thorns. His father has not only welcomed him back, he has restored him to his previous status as one of his sons. In short, the father has fully forgiven the son, and all is forgotten. The father holds nothing back from the son who repented; all he wanted him to do was to come home.

So it is with our Father in heaven: all He wants is for His children to repent and return home. Only then can we be restored, and only then can we enjoy the full blessings He has for us.

**Verse 23:** The enthusiasm and excitement of the father over the return of the son which was lost is manifested in his instructions for a celebration. A full banquet is ordered. And so it is in heaven when a sinner repents and seeks to return to the Father. Joy is the key emotion in all of the three parables.

That the father wants to celebrate the son’s return rather than judge him for his sins, is a perfect emphasis on the nature of God. God’s first and foremost expression is love. Even though God is also a God of justice, justice and judgment come only after His eternal, persistent and persevering offer of love has not only been rejected, but mocked and scorned. But the Father’s first action is to love, to

forgive, to welcome, to receive with joy, and to celebrate the return of those who were lost. God is love, and it is His nature to express love first. In the parable, the father's desire to celebrate the return of his son is something that should never be overlooked in sharing Jesus Christ with others.

**Verse 24:** The reason for celebration is now made clear by the father: "...this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found." The son was physically alive but spiritually dead; he could be physically found, but he was spiritually lost. There is no doubt that the son realized this about himself, and that is what caused him to repent.

The problem with those who are lost is that most do not realize they are lost. They believe that because they are physically alive, they are also spiritually alive. And because they can be physically found, they are spiritual "found." Nothing could be further from the truth. The Pharisees had this problem, as do all those who do not feel they need God. They believe they can help themselves, and that God will automatically count them worthy of their self-sufficiency. Just as it was difficult to convince the Pharisees of their need to repent, so, too, is it difficult to convince self-sufficient people of their need for God. Throw into the mix their personal sins, those behaviors they know are wrong but tend to justify, and the chance of their repentance is slim. What they need in their lives is "a severe famine."

Finally, note the phrase "...this son of mine..." The son has never lost his identity as a son of the father. So, too, we as children of God, never lose our identity as a child of God, no matter how badly we may have gone astray. Once a child of God, always a child of God.

**25** "Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.

**26** "And he summoned one of the servants and *began* inquiring what these things could be.

**27** "And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.'

**28** "But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and *began* pleading with him.

**29** "But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a

**Verses 25-28a:** Now we come to the appearance of the older son. As stated earlier, the older son is a type of Pharisee. He does not rejoice in his brother's return. In fact, he becomes jealous of the attention he is getting. The older son believes that the father was wrong to restore him into a right relationship; that the wayward son should be punished for leaving him with all the work and bringing grief to his father. The last thing on earth the younger son deserves is a celebration. Yet the father has done the very opposite of what the older son believes should be done; the father is celebrating and throwing the lost son a party. His response? He becomes angry and is not willing to go in and join the party.

There are a number of issues here that directly condemn the Pharisees. First, the Pharisees believe that sinners don't deserve God's blessings, especially after the lifestyle they have lived, the people they have hurt, the shame they have brought to Judaism,

command of yours; and *yet* you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends;

30 but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.’

31 “And he said to him, ‘Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours.

32 ‘But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and *has begun* to live, and *was* lost and has been found.’ ”

and the embarrassment they have brought to the religious leaders. Second, to see Jesus ministering to sinners and tax collectors just makes them angry. Why should “that kind” be ministered to? Their response? They will boycott the party. Third, it is obvious that the older son does not love the younger son. And herein lies the problem with the Pharisees: they do not love the tax collectors and the sinners. They are incapable of seeing beyond the sin to the sinner. They do not value them as worthy of God’s love. They cannot fathom that God would hate the sin but love the sinner. They cannot distinguish between the person and the person’s behaviors. They are unable to see the sinner as God sees the sinner: a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost soul. Even worse, they cannot accept the fact that God loves the sinner and watches for his return. Those who turn away from God do not merit His love, but only His punishment. They want no rewards to go to the sinner: no robe, no ring, no sandal. They only want justice, and the justice they want cannot tolerate love. Love must be overruled by justice, and love must not be part of the equation. Restoration means little, and repentance is meaningless. For the Pharisee, once a sinner, always a sinner. Once unclean, always unclean. There is no such thing as a celebration for someone who begs for forgiveness. Once lost, always lost.

**Verse 28b:** The amazing thing is this short end to the verse is that, believe it or not, God still loves the Pharisee. As the father is pleading with the older son to not only welcome his brother home, but to experience the joy of celebrating his return, so, too, does God desire for the Pharisee to join in on the celebration of those who are repenting of sins and returning to God. If Pharisees were motivated by love rather than law and legalism, they would have joined Jesus in fellowshiping with the tax collectors and sinners. Through love, they would have seen the new life that Jesus was bringing to those who were previously alienated from God. Love would have overruled law, and love would have ruled their responses. But such was not the case. Like the older son, they made excuses why they should boycott the celebration.

**Verses 29-30:** The older son is not happy for his brother. The older son believes that, not only does his brother not deserve the celebration, but that he himself deserves more. After all, he has “...never neglected a command...” Well, here we see the hypocrisy and self-deception of the Pharisees. They believe they have never neglected a command when, in fact, while they are saying this to themselves, they are neglecting the command to “love your neighbor as yourself.” The Pharisees have successfully eliminated the need to show love out of all the commands they have enacted. It’s a case of law at the

expense of love. And having propped themselves up so successfully with law, they have legislated out of their spiritual lives the need to love. The law has blinded them to the ability to experience and express God's love. Not only has the law become the keystone of their identity, it has become the wall behind which they shut out the need for love. Love is like an enemy; the law has become a weapon. And like the older son, the Pharisees have found two thousand excuses not to love.

Note that the older son makes a ridiculous, irrational statement: "...but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth..." First of all, the older son does not refer to the younger son as his brother, when in fact, he is to be his brother's keeper. Second, it is absolutely untrue that the younger son "devoured" the father's wealth. Not only has the father lost nothing, but the older son still has everything coming to him. So what's his problem? Third, he makes sure that the father knows *how* the younger son squandered his inheritance: with "prostitutes." This is a subtle way of demeaning the brother. Fourth, he is accusing the father of poor judgment. That the father showed love and compassion to the son that returned is abhorrent to the older son. In other words, the older son believes he is smarter than the father. This was exactly the situation with the Pharisees: they believed they were smarter than Jesus; that Jesus, if He were the Messiah, should never be associating with sinners. God is too holy and just for that. So, behind the great wall of law, the Pharisees are unable to see over to the other side, the side of love.

**Verses 31-32:** Note that the father still refers to the older son as "son." The father doesn't deny that the older son has indeed been a good son, and that he will indeed receive his inheritance when the time comes. Yet the father is pleading with the older son to accept the younger son as a "brother of yours," and to see what a wonderful thing has happened to his brother. The father's plea to the older son is to open his eyes and see the good thing and not the bad, to rejoice in the present and forget the past, to experience the joy of the father and put aside his jealous anger. If anyone should be angry, it would have been the father. But he is not, and therefore, the older son should not be angry. The older son should join the party.

Finally, it should not be overlooked that, even though the lost son came to his senses and was welcomed back by his father, there was a price to pay. The price was that his inheritance was gone. All that was left of the father's estate belonged to the older son, the one who did not squander his inheritance. The younger son is now at the mercy of his older brother. The younger son must live under

the reality that there are earthly consequences to indulgence in sin. This is true for whether a person is a Christian or not. If a Christian and a non-Christian jump out of plane without parachutes, *both* will hit the ground at terminal velocity. Being a Christian does not automatically protect one from the earthly consequences of choosing a life of sin. The caveat to this is that the Christian can find forgiveness and discover the grace of God in spite of his sin, thus lead a life of ongoing redemption. Nevertheless, the lesson is clear: there is an earthly price to pay for sin. Innocence lost can never be regained.

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## Questions for Your Personal or Group Reflection

1. In this chapter, how has God spoken to you through His word? Of the many principles presented in chapter 15, what principle stands out most to you? Once you identify the principle, what do you intend to do about it in the form of action?
2. How does the concern of the Pharisees over who Jesus spends time with reflect their attitude toward others? What did they use to “separate” themselves from those they considered unworthy of God’s concern? How does the issue of love play a role here?
3. Identify the three parables Jesus tells His audience and find two common themes that connect all three parables together.
4. In the parable of the lost son, which character do you identify with the most? Is it possible that in one way or another you can identify with two, or even all of the characters? Are you willing to share that discovery about yourself with others?
5. How does the theme of “joy” permeate the three parables? Who is doing the rejoicing? What should have been the reaction to the Pharisees to the parables about that which was lost being found?
6. Why do you think Jesus made the statement, “...there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance”? Is Jesus saying that righteous people (or those who think they are righteous) are not as valuable to God as someone who is lost? What is the point Jesus is making here?
7. In the parable of the lost son, what factors do you believe made the lost son come to “his senses”?

### The Discippler's Commentary

Fill-in Outline for the Disciple

Luke 15

15:1-2 – Jesus is spending time with and ministering to tax collectors and sinners. This causes the Pharisees and scribes to \_\_\_\_\_. Why?

15:3-32 – Because the religious leaders obviously do not see any benefit in Jesus spending time with the sinners, Jesus begins teaching a series of \_\_\_\_\_.

The purpose of parables:

1. A parable is designed to teach a \_\_\_\_\_;
2. A parable is a story that could be true but is not necessarily \_\_\_\_\_;
3. A parable is designed to reveal truth to believers and hide truth from \_\_\_\_\_.

15:4-7 – The parable of the \_\_\_\_\_

Major themes:

1. The value of the \_\_\_\_\_
2. The joy in heaven over recovering one who is \_\_\_\_\_
3. The joy for the one who \_\_\_\_\_

15:8-10 – The parable of the \_\_\_\_\_

Major themes:

1. The value of the \_\_\_\_\_
2. The joy among angels over recovering one who is \_\_\_\_\_
3. The joy for the one who \_\_\_\_\_

15:11-32 – The parable of the \_\_\_\_\_

Major themes:

1. The son chose of his own accord to \_\_\_\_\_
2. A person may not realize they are spiritually lost until they hit \_\_\_\_\_
3. The father was always looking for \_\_\_\_\_
4. There was great celebration when \_\_\_\_\_
5. The fact is that the lost son squandered his inheritance; \_\_\_\_\_

Question: How is God speaking to *you* through His word today?

**The Discipler's Commentary**  
Answer Outline for the Discipler  
Luke 15

15:1-2 – Jesus is spending time with and ministering to tax collectors and sinners. This causes the Pharisees and scribes to grumble. Why?

- *The discipler may need to review why tax collectors and sinners were so abhorrent to Pharisees.*
- *Ask the disciple what kind of reaction the Pharisees, experts in the Old Testament, should have had toward those who were lost because of sin. (Law vs. love)*

15:3-32 – Because the religious leaders obviously do not see any benefit in Jesus spending time with the sinners, Jesus begins teaching a series of parables.

- *The discipler is equipped here to explain the purpose of parables; see below*

The purpose of parables:

- *The discipler may need to elaborate each of these points.*
  1. A parable is designed to teach a spiritual truth
    - *Parables are not just cute stories such as Aesop's Fables, or proverbs which teach lessons about life. They are specifically intended to teach a spiritual truth that helps the listener see how God sees things.*
    - *Parables are often taught to help the listener understand what the kingdom of God looks like.*
    - *Parables are also taught to help a believer understand how to live a godly life, or how to be a true follower of Jesus.*
    - *Parables do not predict the future, but equip the believer how to cope with whatever the future holds.*
  2. A parable is a story that could be true but is not necessarily true;
    - *Parables are therefore taken from everyday settings and events that the listener can relate to.*
    - *Parables are uniquely designed for the given audience.*
  3. A parable is designed to reveal truth to believers and hide truth from doubters and skeptics.
    - *A believer will attempt to understand the meaning of the parable; he or she will seek out the spiritual truth which should result in changed behavior or changed relationships.*
    - *An unbeliever will not want to waste time trying to understand a parable, and in fact may be so blinded by disbelief that he is completely unable to grasp the spiritual truth.*

15:4-7 – The parable of the lost sheep

- *All of Jesus' audience would be familiar with sheep. The disciple may not be.*
- *The discipler may need to explain to the disciple the characteristics of sheep and how they can become lost.*

Major themes:

1. The value of the lost individual (the "one")
  - *The key word here is "value." Every individual is valuable to God. Can the disciple name some kind of individuals that the world—or even the church—might find NOT valuable to God?*
  - *Ensure that the disciple understands why it is so important to God that a lost individual is found. Ensure that the disciple knows what are the consequences for dying as someone who is spiritually lost.*
  - *Ask the disciple what the reaction of the Pharisees should have been toward the lost being found. Can the disciple describe why the Pharisees would not see finding the lost "sinner" a cause for rejoicing?*
2. The joy in heaven over recovering one who is lost & unaware he is lost
  - *Ask the disciple why there is so much rejoicing over a spiritually lost person being found.*

3. The joy for the one who finds (recovers) the lost

- Ask the disciple if he or she can determine why the Pharisees were not rejoicing over lost sinners being found.
- Make sure the disciple clearly understands the fact that the Pharisees viewed sinners only through the eyes of the law, whereas God sees sinners through the eyes of love.

15:8-10 – The parable of the lost coin

- The themes are the same as the previous parable. One exception is that the main character in the parable of the lost sheep is a man; the main character in this parable is a woman.

Major themes:

1. The value of the lost individual (the “one”)
2. The joy among angels over recovering one who is lost
3. The joy for the one who finds

15:11-32 – The parable of the lost son (prodigal son)

- Quite likely, the disciple has heard of this parable. Ask him to retell the parable in his own words.
- The disciple may not know the meaning of the term “prodigal.” It means one who spends money or resources in a reckless, self-serving way.

Major themes:

1. The son chose of his own accord to leave the presence of his father
  - Ask the disciple if he or she has ever acted like a prodigal, or known someone who has. (The answer to the latter usually involves a family member.)
  - Ask the disciple if he or she can identify with the lost son.
2. A person may not realize they are spiritually lost until they hit rock bottom
  - If the disciple is able to identify with the prodigal son, ask what happened to turn him around and make him come to “his senses.” (This can be a very personal and intimate time, and the discipler should allow the disciple to speak freely and, if necessary, acknowledge repentance.)
3. The father was always looking for the return of the lost son
  - A great discussion can be elicited here. The disciple may be the lost son, or the disciple could actually represent the father who was looking for the lost son. If the latter is the case, ask if he or she ever wanted to “give up” on the one who was lost.
4. There was great celebration when the lost son returned
  - Ask the disciple if he or she has ever felt like the son who was NOT lost.
  - Ask the disciple if the church he or she attends celebrates the recovery of a spiritually lost person.
5. The fact is that the lost son squandered his inheritance; there are earthly consequences for sin.
  - This is a very important point to stress to the disciple. Ask the disciple what can be lost by becoming a prodigal son. For example, innocence, finances, and relationships may be lost. Other consequences can be bad memories, a loss of physical or emotional health, guilt, regret, and loss of self-esteem.
  - Ensure that the disciple does not leave the session on a negative note. What should be emphasized is the never-ending love of our Father in heaven who not only forgives completely, but throws banquets for a returning lost son.

Question: How is God speaking to you through His word today?

- This is a great place to ask the disciple, “How has God spoken to you through His word today?”