

Excursus - The Good Good Father (Luke 15:1-32)

Introduction

The book you are reading is a study of *Acts*. This chapter is an excursus; it is a flashback to the work that Jesus began to do during his ministry on earth. In it we look back to a time from before Jesus ascended, before he was crucified, and before he was tried. We look in particular at a teaching moment in *The Gospel of Luke*. You could consider this chapter a study break with benefits. While the material is not based on *Acts* it does consider prior work by the same author that speaks volumes on what it means to think and feel missionally.

¹ Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. ² And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, “This Man receives sinners and eats with them.” ³ So He spoke this parable to them, saying:

It is roughly two thousand years ago and in the region of Palestine tension is building between a Galilean Rabbi and the Jewish leadership based in Jerusalem. The former is growing in popularity, gaining favor with the people as He provides teaching and relevant help for the various troubles of the people, and going against the status quo with outlandish antics. What antics?

It is outlandish that Jesus treats sinners with kindness and welcomes them into His company (Luke 15:1-2). The teacher from Nazareth, instead of focusing on the plight of the nation of Israel and praising the religious leaders for their prominently displayed piety, spends his time regularly eating and drinking with sellouts, harlots, and all manner of people commonly regarded as lost causes. What gives?

His frequent fraternizing with the dregs of society is irksome to Pharisees and scribes. Although Jesus should have been lauding the leadership for their set-apart-from-common-folk-living, He was wasting time on people guilty of great wickedness. And the priests and their writing cohort did not keep quiet about how they felt:

¹ Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. ² And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, “This Man receives sinners and eats with them.” (Luke 15:1-2, NKJV)

It would have been an odd enough for Jesus to tolerate the tax collectors and sinners. But, according to Luke, the itinerant Rabbi went beyond passively permitting them to be around His ministry: *This Man receives sinners and eats with them* (Luke 15:2). I am not a Greek scholar but when I study a passage I like to read it in English and Greek.⁹ When I saw the word **receives** (προσδέχεται) and I did not immediately recognize it. I thought to myself, "Self, you need to look this word up." It occurs three times in the New Testament; it is used once by Luke and twice by Paul the apostle (Luke 15:2; Romans 16:2; Philippians 2:29). Each occurrence outside of Luke has the connotation of welcoming with gladness, with respect, and even honor.

Wait? So is Luke saying that Jesus welcomed the sinners that came to Him gladly and that He showed them respect and even honor? Scandalous, man! If this notion is true then Jesus is not avoiding people whose lives

⁹ What about the Old Testament? Honestly, I am working on that. The truth is, based on feedback from people who can read Hebrew as part of their studies, I am about nine months away. It is 20 June 2020 as I write this footnote. If you are reading this you can pray that the day comes (20 March 2021) when I can serve the people of God more capably in the explanation of Old Testament material through time with God and a working knowledge of Hebrew. Your prayers are appreciated.

are all jacked up. Indeed, He is glad to have them come to Him. The dissonance between His attitude toward sinners and that of the religious leaders could not be greater.

He is here to save what the sanctimonious are ready to sacrifice. (Matthew 18:11; Luke 9:56; Luke 19:10; John 3:16-17; 5:34; John 12:47). He is here to consecrate the same people that the Pharisees and scribes condemn.

In the three parables that follow Luke 15:2 Jesus graphically depicts the glaring difference between God's attitude toward sinners and that of the religious leaders.

Parable Name	Passage	Point
The Lost Sheep	Luke 15:4-7	The Sheep Need Saving
The Lost Coin	Luke 15:8-10	The Lost Coin is a Source of Sorrow
The Lost Son	Luke 15:11-32	The Father's Heart is for Restoration and Rejoicing Together

Does this matter? For us, fellow Jesus followers, it has profound implications. There cannot be good work without a glad willingness to do God's will. There cannot be valuable action when the attitude is wrong. Even the value of our giving is a function how we feel about doing it (2 Corinthians 9:7). It says that we should eschew the ugliness of avoiding fellow human beings that are not living as they should. It says that we should go beyond merely allowing them around us. We who are following Jesus should be like Him not just in going to get those who are needing help (Luke 15:4-7) but with gladness about their willingness to be with us until a decision is made to trust Jesus. To what end should we go to them? In order that, at last, they might know Him! We are called to more than the scandal of permitting their presence. We are commanded to the outrageous endeavor of gladly receiving them (Matthew 28:18-20) and teaching them all that He commanded. To this end He is with us continuing to do what He began doing in His days on earth.

If we are really following Jesus then we too are happily hanging with the people responding to Jesus' calling to life and life abundantly (John 10:10). The Pharisees saw the fallenness of the tax collectors and sinners... and could not get passed their history of failures and present day problems. They missed, as many of us do, the beginnings of faithfulness. In the prior chapter Jesus had issued a confrontational assessment and a call to hear His words:

³⁴ "Salt *is* good; but if the salt has lost its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? ³⁵ It is neither fit for the land nor for the dunghill, *but* men throw it out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (Luke 14:34-35, NKJV)

In the sermon on the mount Jesus said to the small portion of the nation that could hear him that they are the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13). It was God's intent to use Israel to prevent decay, preserve life, and even add pleasing flavor to the world. But if the nation would not be salt then the nation "is neither fit for the land nor for the dunghill." That is graphic! He is clearly indicating that the nation's value for the purposes of God was in

question. It was a confrontational assessment. But He goes on to offer His help. Jesus says, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” These are the words of a prophet offering terms of peace and restoration to those who will hear. The key word from the prior chapter is **hear**. It connects what has been said to the opening of chapter 15. Do not miss this!

Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to **hear** Him. (Luke 15:1, NKJV)

The people gathered around Jesus have a right response to a clear call. He had just said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” It says in the opening of chapter fifteen that they drew near to Him **TO HEAR HIM**. Their gathering is the fruit of underlying faith, the beginning of obedience, and the result of recognizing their own need for repentance; by gathering to Him they evidenced an awareness that they were not salty and that God would be just in throwing them out. By gathering to Jesus they showed a willingness to consider walking right.

The Pharisees and scribes did not see the good in all of this. They saw the bad – a would-be rabbi is reclining over food with reprobate people (Luke 15:2). Jesus knows how these Pharisees and scribes feel about this moment in His ministry. He is going to confront their awful attitude in terms everyone can understand.

So He spoke this parable to them, saying: (Luke 15:3)

Jesus shares the parables that we are about to consider with the aim of helping detractors and disciples of that day and this day to understand the missional heart and mindset.

The Lost Sheep (Luke 15:4-7)

⁴ “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!’ ⁷ I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.

Each parable is an explanation of something that we otherwise could not know presented in terms that we readily understand. The Son of God, capable of peering into both the spiritual and material world, is uniquely qualified to explain spiritual truths in concepts and concrete ideas we can handle. Things that we are fundamentally incapable of understanding with out His help He makes known to us in terms that we can understand (Luke 24:45; Acts 16:14); grace and truth comes through Jesus Christ (John 1:17).

It is interesting that the first parable involves shepherding; that particular vocation was detested by religious leadership. Regardless of how his listeners felt about shepherding, in the view of Jesus, it was a valuable model when making his point. He starts with a question:

What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?

The **man** mentioned in this verse, for Jesus' Jewish listeners, would be a reminder of shepherds mentioned from their prophecies, heroes, and history (Genesis 49:24; Number 14:33, 27:17; 1 Samuel 17:40; 2 Samuel 5:2, 7:7; 1 Kings 22:17; Psalm 23:1, 28:9, 78:71-72; Psalm 80:1; Ecclesiastes 12:11; Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 3:15, 23:4; Ezekiel 34:12, 23; 37:24; Zechariah 13:7). The **man among you** in this case is a good shepherd and one that owns the sheep. For this reason he has not employed the help of a hireling (John 10:12-13). Those familiar with shepherding would have readily received the missional point of the story:

Jesus is the Shepherd going after the ones that are lost. His joy is not merely in the righteous but mostly in the repentance-restoration of His sheep.

Jesus was saying that the one **sheep** not in the fold corresponded with the sinners with whom He is eating. Heaven (the Father) regarded them as lost sheep and longed to see them restored to fellowship. Each time one of the lost sheep was returned to a right relationship with God there was great celebration in the heavenlies.

To be of the same mind as Christ and His Father is to (1) work with Him in finding and bringing back the lost sheep and (2) rejoice with Him in each and every return. Did you notice how the sheep got back to the fold? In the parable he was carried on the shoulders of the rejoicing shepherd (Luke 15:5). To be missional in our hearts and minds is to see the weight of wayward brethren as not worth mentioning compared to the blessing of bringing them home. Love bears all things!

The Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10)

⁸ “Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she has found it, she calls *her* friends and neighbors together, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I lost!’ ¹⁰ Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

In the second parable Jesus, lest he be found only teaching men and using only masculine ideas, draws upon an example familiar to women and their friends.¹⁰ The parables are similar. We might gloss over this one as being merely repetition. That would be a mistake. In this parable a spiritual truth and subtle but significant nuance is revealed in the choice of the storyteller about what is lost.

¹⁰ That is not to say that the parable is only to women. The phrase **her friends** of Luke 15:9 is feminine; the woman called her girlfriends to tell them about her joy. Those familiar with the personality traits common in their wives, sisters, mothers, and female friends will have life experiences that correspond to what is seen in this parable. While Jesus could have used another parable involving men, He provides another example from life that would be familiar to his listeners. Jesus is not asserting that all women are invariably this way but that women in their culture are recognized as not letting certain things rest. I have seen the behavior described here by the Rabbi both in my grandmother and my wife. What no one else could find they, because it meant something to them, succeeded in finding. In this way, and many others, they bear God's image in a way that can be used to help illustrate missional thinking and feeling.

Seeing the Other Side of the Coin

In the first parable the condition of what is lost is the focus; sheep without a shepherd are in a poor state of affairs (Numbers 27:17; 1 Kings 22:17; Zechariah 10:2; Mark 6:34). Such sheep are easy prey. In the second parable the focus changes. It is no longer on the thing lost but on the one who has lost. Specifically it is on the heart of the one that has lost. Why do I say this? Think about it. The coin itself is not living and is unaffected by whether it is lost or found. The coin is not better or worse for based on whether it is lost or found. The woman who has lost the coin is affected. By changing the thing lost Jesus has made us see something about God's heart in all of this:

The effect of being lost is not merely in the sorry state of affairs for the lost. It is also in the sorrow of the one who has lost. Jesus reveals that there is sorrow with God over being separated from those that are His.

To be missional in my thinking and feeling is to be concerned about those that are lost. It is also to care deeply about what matters to God. It is to live so as to promote start of things that cause Him joy and to promote then end of things that grieve His heart (Mark 3:5; Ephesians 4:30). If the Father is pleased with the repentance of sinners then, out of my desire to please Him and, I should promote that. It is His love language to lead people back to Him.

The Lost Son (Luke 15:11-32)

Having explained the heart and mind of missional living with two examples that could be readily understood by anyone, Jesus goes on to now drive the point home. In the third parable, saving the best for last, Jesus reveals the mind and heart of Messiah and the Father that sent Him. The best way of looking at this thing, says the Teacher to those willing to listen (Luke 14:35), is in the brokenness and restoration of relationship between a good, good father and a prodigal son.

The Dark Disposition toward Dad (Luke 15:11-13)

¹¹ Then He said: "A certain man had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.' So he divided to them his livelihood. ¹³ And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living.

The last parable will be focused on three people: **a certain man** and **his two sons**. Truths otherwise unknowable to Jesus' critics and committed followers will be unveiled, decloaked, and revealed in a fictional story about relationships between a (1) good father and a prodigal son, (2) a good father and an outwardly pious son, and (3) between brothers.

What we must notice about the **younger of them** is the disrespectful disposition toward his father, the self-absorbed determination to get away, and the complete disregard for God. The younger son's request is unusual because **the portion of goods that falls to** him would normally not be granted to him unless the father were

unable to manage his own affairs or had died. The younger son's request implies that he can manage affairs better than his father. The decision to leave with his stuff puts on display his dark disposition toward his Dad; he is done being in relationship with his father. The **younger son** treats his father as if he has died when he **gathered all together and journeyed to a far country** (Luke 15:13). And why did he leave? So that he could waste **his possessions with prodigal living**. Prodigal living? What is *prodigal living*? The older son tells us: the inheritance was blown in relationships with prostitutes (Luke 15:30).

The younger son represents all who have taken the gracious gifts of God, distanced themselves, and then wasted their gifts (time, talent, treasure). The gifts are squandered in prodigal living. What is prodigal living? Self-centered attempts to be happy even when it amounts to outright rebellion against the rightful reign of God in my life (Luke 15:18, 21).

The conduct of the young son was not just amazingly disrespectful to the father it was also and foremost against God; the things given to the son by the father were really from the Father. Be careful! If we do not ask how we are like the younger son we fail to see ourselves rightly and become the people to whom Jesus is preaching. If we accept that all of us like sheep have gone astray we will get more from the passage.

The Dawn of Brokenness (Luke 15:14-19)

¹⁴ But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. ¹⁵ Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. ¹⁶ And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, ¹⁹ and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.” ’

The wealth is wasted in wickedness. And then **there arose a severe famine in that land**. What might have been invested or used sparingly is gone. The younger son, bereft of his inheritance, **began to be in want**. It was so bad that he forced himself (έκολλήθη) upon someone in order to make a living.

joined himself (έκολλήθη). The verb means to *glue* or *cement*. Very expressive here, implying that he *forced himself* upon the citizen, who was unwilling to engage him, and who took him into service only upon persistent entreaty. “The unhappy wretch is a sort of appendage to a strange personality” (Godet). Compare Acts 9:26. Wyc., *cleaved*. See, also, on Acts 5:13.

Vincent, M. R. (1887). *Word studies in the New Testament* (Vol. 1, p. 386). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Wyc. Wycliffe's Version of the New Testament.

The word translated **joined himself** is also used in Acts 5:13 and 9:26. In these other cases Luke, the same person who penned the gospel that contains this parable, uses the word to indicate an attempt to join company. Wealth that formerly provided a layer of insulation around the younger son is now gone; without it he is forced to seek company and care from people that do not seek his highest good. The **citizen of that country... sent him into his fields to feed swine** (Luke 15:16). For Jesus' listeners the story has taken a very dark turn. The son is now servant to someone who obviously is not a Jew; the assets and agenda of the citizen reflects the fact that he is a Gentile – he sends the younger brother into his fields to feed swine. Jews, based on the laws given to them by Moses, will have nothing to do with swine. But this son is so desperate he goes into the field to feed the swine. And his dire straits were so extreme that he would have eaten the food being given to the pigs. In fact, he asked for carob pods being used to feed the swine but no one would give them to him. That is when it happened – **he came to himself** (Luke 15:17).

The decision to take his inheritance, to depart to a far country, to squander his possessions with prostitutes, and even the willingness to take work feeding animals that are forbidden among the Jews are now all seen as a type of insanity.

Came to himself. A striking expression, putting the state of rebellion against God as a kind of *madness*. It is a wonderful stroke of art, to represent the beginning of repentance as the return of a sound consciousness.¹¹

What is Jesus saying? This really matters:

The lost son represents all who have given themselves to the nonsense of finding a better life apart from God. They are most aptly seen as souls suffering with a type of insanity. The outworking of their madness is the folly of intentional sin against a good God.

The son's fever broke; the illness that darkened his heart toward God, his father, and himself finally gives way to reason. Hired servants in his home are faring better than the sorry state he was in. With his mind in the right place he determines what he will do: (1) return home, (2) confess his sin, and (3) request the place of a slave.

The Grace Greater (Luke 15:20-24)

²⁰ “And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring out the best robe and put *it* on him, and put a ring on his hand and

¹¹ Vincent, M. R. (1887). *Word studies in the New Testament* (Vol. 1, p. 387). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

sandals on *his* feet. ²³ **And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; ²⁴ for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ And they began to be merry.**

His mind was made up and his speech was ready. But things would not go as planned. First, his coming to the father would be interrupted by the father’s attention (**his father saw him**), the father’s compassion, and superior desire for reconciliation (**ran and fell on his neck and kissed him**). The son tries to go through his rehearsed speech. But he never makes it to the part where he offers himself essentially as a slave. He is interrupted by grace greater than his sin.

He gave the son a new position with a **robe ... a ring ... and sandals**. Jesus intentionally used the banquet motif again. He had previously spoken of a banquet to symbolize the coming kingdom (13:29; cf. 14:15–24). Jesus’ hearers would have easily realized the significance of this feast. Sinners (whom the young son symbolized) were entering into the kingdom because they were coming to God. They believed they needed to return to Him and be forgiven by Him.¹²

The moral significance of the son’s return has not escaped the notice of the father in the parable:

The father’s insight is also superior. He has known the truth about his son and the reason for the earlier disrespect all along; he realized that his son was dead and lost before he left. And he now sees the new truth concerning the youngest son – he was lost and is found. It was this truth about the sinners in his company that had been missed by the Pharisees and scribes.

The Unveiling of Bitterness and a Bad Basis for Obedience (Luke 15:25-32)

²⁵ **“Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.’ ²⁸ “But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ So he answered and said to *his* father, ‘Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. ³⁰ But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.’ ³¹ “And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. ³² It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.’ ”**

¹² Martin, J. A. (1985). Luke. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 245). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

At last the parable comes to the older son. It was in this part of the parable that Jesus would introduce material not seen in the other parables. Here he would deal with the bitterness that makes one brother unfit for fellowship.

The **older son was in the field** (Luke 15:25). He was working while the younger brother was wasting. Upon approaching **the house he heard music and dancing**. He heard the rejoicing that has been featured in the previous parables (Luke 15:6, 9). It is the rejoicing **in heaven** and **in the presence of the angels of God** over the repentance of one sinner. Notice that it is described here as a party; there is food, music, and dancing of the sort that is quite noisy.

The older brother, a symbol of the Pharisees and scribes, does not immediately see the return of the other son, does not see the significance of the return, and is late to realize that there is genuine rejoicing taking place. It has to be explained to him. This is not the issue. The problem is in his perspective. The older son, a symbol of the established religious leadership, **refused to go** to the feast. At issue is not that he is dull but that his disposition of condemnation and disdain toward the formerly disobedient. Just as the older son will not enter the feast the Pharisees refused to enter the kingdom Jesus offered to the nation (Romans 14:7).

The Pharisees could not accept the acceptance of sinners, could not accept the King who accepted sinners, and therefore could not accept the kingdom He offered.

Do we see the significance of the father’s pleading with the older brother? Jesus also ate with Pharisees as well as sinners. He did not desire to exclude the Pharisees and teachers of the Law from the kingdom even though they held a grudge against their brethren. Jesus is the good, good father of the parable (Isaiah 9:6). His invitation was to everyone. In the table below are some of my observations about the older brother.

Older Brother Observations	
Better Behavior	When we meet him in the story he is in the field (Luke 15:25). His account of his own living is not contradicted by the father (Luke 15:29). We are to see him as outwardly conforming.
Bad Beliefs	The word translated servicing is based on the same word that is also translated slave. His words reveal that older brother thought he had a relationship with his father based on his work. Moreover, He served his father not out of love but out of a desire for reward. He even thought of himself as being in bondage to his father. He does not get grace.
Bitterness Toward Brother	Notice that the older brother does not refer to the younger brother as his brother; he is described in language full of disdain an intentionally distant: that son of yours . Finally, it must be seen that he cannot bring himself to be in fellowship or rejoicing over a son that has benefited from his father’s great grace; he resents him. A root of bitterness defiles a person and makes them unfit for worship.

Bad theology prevents good relations with God. Those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). The son's bad beliefs (theology) were at the root of an inability to fellowship or worship. How many of us are operating as if we are keeping ourselves, as if our standing with God is based on works, and as if the people who approach him cannot be accepted until they have corrected all of the issues in their life?

Without the assurance of my salvation I am reduced to regarding my relationship with suspicion and prevented from serving with sincere gratitude for what He has done. Without assurance I am working for grace, wondering about where I stand, and unable to experience the fulness of my calling - *worship*.

Regarding the father of the parable I have a few observations. (You probably have more and I would love to hear them.)

Father Observations	
Compassion	His view of the younger son was not condemnation. Jesus said He was moved by compassion to receive him, restore him, and rejoice over his return.
Greater Grace	The grace of the father is greater than the bad behavior of the younger son and the bitterness of the older son. He would receive them both and have them to join him in rejoicing. Both are fallen and both are encouraged to come home.

Are we being too hard on the Pharisees? Maybe the Pharisees are just trying to put down easy believism before it starts. Or maybe they are concerned about the corrupting influence of keeping company with sinners. The former view is an overreach and comes from reading our modern theological issues into the text and culture - *eisegesis*. The latter is an overreaction to the threat of the corrupting influence of sin and a misunderstanding of the mission; the Pharisees would simply cut off the ones who had a history of ungodly conduct without examining what was happening in those same people in the moment. They were ready to sacrifice those who were sick when what was needed was mercy. Jesus will have to deal with this crass and cruel idea multiple times in His ministry.

¹⁰ Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, *that* behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples. ¹¹ And when the Pharisees saw *it*, they said to His disciples, "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹² When Jesus heard *that*, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ But go and learn what *this* means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance." (Matthew 9:10-13, NKJV)

R. H. Stein says it well when he describes how pharisaic works-based theology and bitterness about blessings on others was manifest in a meanness that needed to be addressed.

The full acceptance of repentant publicans and sinners, before they could achieve a holy life-style and track record, contradicted their understanding of piety. They believed in repentance and forgiveness, but the immediate

acceptance of such people as “righteous” was difficult to accept. Perhaps also despite the claim that the law was a delight, many of Jesus’ opponents saw it as a burden that all people should have to bear. To receive forgiveness freely, apart from bearing such a burden, made their own burdensome keeping of the law seem unnecessary and worthless (cf. 15:29; Matt 20:12). Rather than feeling sorry that the outcasts missed the joy of the life of obedient faith, they were angry that they could receive salvation without having to bear the burden of the obedient keeping of the law.¹³

Jesus is the father of the parable. He seeks to save that which is lost. In some cases the lost are those who have been living in rebellion but have finally come to themselves. That awakening was awarded to them by God and is the beginning of His work to change their lives; he rejoices in what seems like only the start of change. Jesus, again, is the father of the parable. He is calling those who have a history of faithfulness to follow Him in welcoming those who have been wayward. Yes, to fellowship with them and receive them with gladness.

In the parable the father seeks the reconciliation of the whole family - even those who are miserably mean. In the same way Jesus, representing the interests of the Father and promoting the program of the Godhead, calls sinners to repentance (Luke 19:1-9) and spends time fellowshiping with those who are well (Luke 7:40-50). Through the many meals, midnight conversations, and weary dialogue by Jacob's well the Savior calls them all.

Questions for Missional Community Discussion

1. Why is the gathering of tax collectors and sinners to Jesus (Luke 15:1) a good thing (Luke 14:34-35)?
2. What is the focus of the parable of The Lost Sheep? (Luke 15:4-7) What is the focus of the parable of The Lost Coin? (Luke 15:8-13)
3. Would anyone watching my life catch me in conversation and meals with people considered sinners (Matthew 9:9-11)? As I honestly consider my attitude toward the return of those who do not know God, am I more like the older brother or father (Luke 15:1-2)?
4. What does it mean to repent and believe the gospel (Mark 1:15; Acts 20:21)? How much repentance is necessary before a person can be saved? Why are these ideas placed together?

¹³ Stein, R. H. (1992). *Luke* (Vol. 24, p. 408). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.