

Parable of the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, and Lost Son

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 October 2023

Preacher: Andrew Bartlett

- [0 : 0 0] Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.
- Then Jesus told them this parable. Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Then doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?
- And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, Rejoice with me, I've found my lost sheep.
- I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent.
- Silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, Rejoice with me, I have found my lost coin.
- [1 : 2 6] In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.
- Jesus continued, There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, Father, give me my share of the estate.
- So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country, and there squandered his wealth in wild living.
- After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.
- He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death.
- [2 : 4 6] I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.
- Make me like one of your hired servants. So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.
- He ran to his son, threw his arms around him, and kissed him. The son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.
- I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him.
- Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again.
- [3 : 5 1] He was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate. Meanwhile, the elder son was in the field.

When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. Your brother has come, he replied, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.

The elder brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, Look, all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.

Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours, who has squandered your property with prostitutes, come home, you kill the fattened calf for him.

My son, the father said, you are always with me and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again.

[5 : 17] He was lost and is found. Let's ask the Lord to speak to us as we look at his word.

Father, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. There's nothing in the world so wonderful as the love of God brought to us in Jesus.

And alongside Jesus' love, I must say I never stop marveling at the depth of his wisdom. This set of three stories is just so clever.

It shows what he's doing. It draws in the needy. And it challenges his critics. There's something here for everyone, wherever they are in their spiritual journey.

Because what Jesus is doing is implementing God's forgiving love for sinners, for people who need to be found. And that's something for us all to experience.

[6 : 42] And God can lead us into a deeper appreciation of his astonishing love. It starts, now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus.

But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them. Then Jesus told them this parable.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law are religious people and religious leaders. They are shocked by Jesus' behavior.

Tax collectors were seen as despicable collaborators. Sinners means people who were not respectable and visibly didn't keep God's law.

They were the undesirables. Do you remember Hillary Clinton's phrase, the deplorables? The people who were looked down on. They didn't keep the rules about tithing or about purity.

[7 : 45] They included people who lived immoral lives. They were unclean. Sinners should be condemned, not associated with. Jesus made himself unclean by eating with them.

To get close to bad people was bad behavior. That's how the religious people saw it. Jesus answers them by telling a set of three stories to explain what he's doing.

In fact, to explain what God is doing through him. He's putting God's forgiving love into action.

The stories are all about what's lost being found. And there's an interesting progression, a raising of the stakes. In the first story, it's one sheep out of a hundred that's lost and then found again.

In the second story, it's one coin out of ten that's lost and found again. In the third story, it's one son out of two that is lost and then found again.

[8 : 53] Or, reading more closely, is it both sons that are lost? First, we'll look at this by thinking about three questions. First of all, what's the message for the tax collectors and sinners?

What do they hear? Second, what's the message for the Pharisees and the teachers of the law? What do they hear? And third, what's the message for us?

For me, or for you? What might we hear? So we start with what the rejected people, the undesirables, what they heard. In the first story, a shepherd goes searching because he cares about even one lost sheep.

This tells the sinners that God cares very much for them. Like the shepherd values even just one sheep to go enough, loved enough to go searching for it.

And the shepherd rejoices when he finds the sheep and takes it home. So God rejoices when one sinner responds to Jesus, even one, and repents and comes home.

[10 : 04] Then the second story says the same sort of thing in a different way. A woman loses a coin, a silver coin in the house. To look for it, she has to light a lamp.

That tells us she's poor, very poor, so poor her house doesn't even have a proper window. So she really cares about this coin.

It's important to her. God cares a lot for a lost person. And rejoices when the lost person is found. Then in the third story, the analysis goes even deeper.

The inheritance would come to the sons on the death of the father. So in verse 12, the younger son wants his share now.

That's like saying to his father, I wish you were dead. That's dishonoring to the father. He's thinking only of himself, of what he wants.

[11 : 08] He wants what his father can give, but isn't interested in the father himself. Instead of rebuking his son, the father allows him the freedom that he wants.

To meet his demand, the father accepts the dishonor and divides the property. The older son would get two-thirds, the younger son would get one-third.

We should imagine a Middle Eastern village, the setting of this story. Everyone will know what has happened.

And there are few things held more important than the honor of the family. The father is dishonored in front of the whole community.

And then the younger son promptly sells off his portion and turns it into money. Verse 13. That brings even more disgrace on the family, especially on the father. To lose one's land was to lose one's standing in the community.

[12 : 16] So the father is dishonored. His love is rejected. The relationship with his younger son is ended. His son leaves home and goes to a distant country.

That's what sinners have done to God. Turning their backs on him, thinking only of themselves, of what they want, not honoring God as God, as first in their lives.

And then we all know in the story, in the distant country, things don't go well. Determined to do what he wants, the son squanders all the money on wild living.

From a Jewish point of view, in those days, everything about the way this is described is bad. Not just the wild living, not just all the money being wasted, but also the fact it's in a distant country.

So that means he's living among Gentiles who were regarded as unclean. He's working for a pig farmer. Pigs for Jews are unclean. He's hungry, so hungry he'd like to eat the pig's food.

[13 : 23] And he's socially rejected and helpless. It says no one gave him anything. So that's a picture of the sinner's lives.

Some have wasted their resources and fallen on hard times. Some have hired themselves out as tax collectors for the Romans. They've experienced social rejection.

Then, in verses 17 to 20, Jesus starts to paint a picture. This is what the beginnings of repentance look like.

The son changes his mind about his behavior. He realizes he's been both foolish and wrong. He experiences guilt and remorse.

He now wants to act correctly towards his father and serve him. He goes back. Well, that's what's happening. When people listen to Jesus, they change their minds about their behavior.

[14 : 25] They realize they've been both foolish and wrong. They want to act correctly towards their heavenly father and serve him. They go back. But this younger son hasn't yet fully grasped his true situation.

He thinks he can work as a hired servant perhaps begin to rebuild his finances. He hasn't seen clearly yet that the fundamental issue is not the wasted money, but the broken relationship with his father.

And then the behavior of the father in the story gives assurance of the wonderful depth and extent of God's love and forgiveness. To understand that, let's again remember, this is set in the ancient Middle East.

What would the community in the village think of the younger son? What would the servants think? What would the rest of the family think? He brought disgrace on his father and on his family.

What reaction should the younger son expect when he returns? People will show their disapproval. As he comes up the street, they'll turn their backs to shun him.

[15 : 49] Or else, they'll face him and shout abuse at him. They'll reject him and tell him to go away. Get out! You dishonorable son!

But what happens? The father has been watching and waiting for his son whom he loves to come home. The father runs to meet him a long way off outside the village.

Such a father, head of a property-owning family, would never run? That's much too undignified. But this son, this father, loves his son so much that he accepts more dishonor, the indignity of running and the dishonor of accepting back his wicked and wayward son and bringing him back to his house in the sight of everyone.

He's filled with compassion. He throws his arms around his son. He kisses him. He brings him through the village, into the house, honoring him in the sight of everyone.

And then, verse 21, the son doesn't make the speech that he'd planned. He abandons that idea of working as a hired servant.

[17 : 16] His eyes are opened by the father's love. The central issue is he broke his relationship with his father, but his father is receiving him as a son again.

The father responds with forgiveness and delight, with gifts of honor, the best robe, a ring, new sandals.

And the father doesn't stop there. He organizes a celebration. The fattened calf will feed a lot of people. The family and the village will celebrate together. Jesus is painting a vivid picture of God rejoicing over sinners who return home to him and bringing them out of dishonor into a place of honor.

That's a wonderful message for all these people who are thought of as sinners. But what do the religious people hear when Jesus tells these three stories?

Let's go back to the first one about the lost sheep. We can be sure that the story catches their attention like a hook catches a fish.

[18 : 29] Where are they in the story? They don't see themselves as sinners. sinners. They aren't the lost sheep. So, they must be the 99 righteous people who do not need to repent.

But on the other hand, that idea of looking for lost sheep isn't exactly new to them. They're religious people. They know their Bible. Ezekiel 34, Son of Man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel.

say to them, this is what the sovereign Lord says, woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves. Shouldn't shepherds take care of the flock?

You've not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. So, Jesus' story seems to imply that in his care for sinners, he's doing what they, as leaders of Israel, have failed to do.

What about the second story? The second story, they can't see themselves anywhere. The woman's friends and neighbors rejoice with her, which is obviously the right thing to do, but that can't refer to the religious leaders.

[19 : 54] The religious people haven't been rejoicing over tax collectors and sinners gathering around to hear Jesus. Quite the contrary, they've been complaining about it. And then in the third story, are they going to see themselves somewhere?

Well, at first, it seems they're not there, but then Jesus gets to the older son, verse 25. Meanwhile, the elder son was in the field.

When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing, so he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. Your brother has come, he replied, and your father has killed the fattened calf because his back is safe and sound.

The elder brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.

The older son is angry. By refusing to go in and join the celebration, he's dishonoring his father, he's rejecting the whole celebrating family.

[21 : 03] The father goes out and pleads because he loves and values both of his sons. But the older son gives an answer that reeks of self-righteousness.

29 and 30. Look, all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders, yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.

But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you killed a fattened calf for him. He's not only self-righteous, he's rejecting his younger brother.

He doesn't call him his brother. He's associating his father with the sins of his brother. He's critical of his father for receiving him back. Exactly as the religious leaders are critical of Jesus for welcoming sinners.

There's no doubt at all where the religious leaders are in the story. They're the older brother. The father responds, my son, the father said, you're always with me and everything I have is yours.

[22 : 19] But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He's lost and is found. The father explains why it's right to celebrate.

True repentance is like a dead person coming alive. For the religious leaders who know their Bible, Jesus has moved on from Ezekiel 34 to Ezekiel 37, the valley of dry bones.

He asked me, son of man, can these bones live? Prophecy and say to them, this is what the sovereign Lord says, my people, I'm going to open your graves and bring you back to the land of Israel.

I'll put my spirit in you and you will live. That's what Jesus is doing. He's starting to fulfill God's ancient promise to restore his people, to bring them back from their exile in a deeper way, to find the lost, to give life to the dead.

He's inviting the religious people to look at a tax collector, a sinner, who has come to Jesus and to say, this brother of mine was dead and is alive again.

[23 : 49] So what's going to happen next? How will the elder brother react to the father's explanation of why it's right to celebrate? Will he continue to dishonor his father and disobey him?

Or will he repent and join the celebration? Jesus doesn't say. It's a cliffhanger. In the same way, the religious leaders will have to decide.

Will they acknowledge what Jesus is doing, bringing sinners into life? Will they repent, join the celebration? Or will they continue to dishonor God by their complaints about Jesus and their lack of compassion for the tax collectors and sinners?

What about us? What should we hear? That may depend on where we are just now in our own spiritual journey and how we think of God.

We're in an incredibly different context, aren't we, from this story, from Jesus, from the religious people, from the sinners. They all had approximately the same idea about the nature of God.

[25 : 06] They're all first century Jews, 21st century London, more diverse. Some people think of God as a sort of impersonal force everywhere in the world.

To them, Jesus' story says no. Although God is everywhere, he's like a person, a father. Some think of God as distant, not really interested in people.

To them, Jesus says no. Although God is separate from us, he's very close to us and very interested in people. Some people think of God as stern and unforgiving.

To them, Jesus says no. Although God is stern against sin and strongly against everything that's wrong, he's also like a father who loves his children.

When people turn to him, he's delighted to forgive them. Perhaps it can help us if we think about alternative titles for that third story.

[26 : 11] In the New International Version, it says at the heading, The Parable of the Lost Son. That's a good title. If someone sees themselves as on the same journey as the lost son, a journey of rebellion, then of heartache, then of repentance, then of coming home, then of being received in the father's love.

One of the lessons is we can't earn our way back. The younger son had to give up his idea of being a hired servant and accept he'd been found and accepted by his father's great love.

That's grace. Another good title for the third story would be The Two Lost Sons. The older son was also lost.

He was judgmental, unloving, self-righteous. He ruptured his relationship with his father. Like the younger son, he needed to repent. If that rings a bell, the lesson is plain.

Then perhaps there's an even better title we could give to the third story. The Dishonored Father Who Keeps On Loving. He's rejected and dishonored by his younger son, but when he sees him in the distance, he willingly incurs more dishonor, running to meet him, so he can bring him back into an honored place of full reconciliation.

[27 : 46] He takes dishonor upon himself to take away his son's shame in the sight of everyone. Can we hear there the echoes of the incarnation?

Jesus, he takes the lowly place and goes to his estranged son, just as Jesus becomes man and goes among the needy. And can we hear echoes of the cross, where God in Christ takes shame upon himself in order to reconcile the world to himself, not counting people's sins against them.

Then the father does the same again with his elder son. The elder son refuses to go in. by refusing he rejects and dishonors his father. That's shameful behavior.

What would people expect in that situation? The father should send the servants out in force and have his older son dragged in and made to submit.

But no, again, for love of his son, the father voluntarily incurs more dishonor by humbling himself and going outside to him to make a personal appeal, to bring back the lost.

[29 : 11] That's the way of the incarnation, the way of the cross. That's the way that Jesus is walking. Jesus has accepted the dishonor of associating with the tax collectors and sinners in order to bring back the strays.

And in a little while after this encounter, he's going to accept the dishonor of death on the cross, to bring back the lost, to reconcile people to God.

So Jesus puts into action the forgiving love of God. Can we see afresh the depth of God's astonishing love?

We are stirred to worship him. Amen. educations for acc Lamb to af help to climb this thought of aRAY man