

The Lost Son

Derek Wilkerson, 2015-16 NBA XPLOR Resident in Dallas, TX

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Do you ever get a feeling of being lost? I know I do. When I do it is very visible...I get a confused look on my face, and I start to look around, and people ask: Derek, are you lost? But, of course I am too stubborn to admit it. It reminds me of a comic I saw. A couple is in a car and there are penguins around the car and even one on the hood. There is an igloo in the background. A speech bubble out of the wife says, "Henry! You're lost! Admit it!" That is how I feel when I read the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Parables are very important to Jesus' earthly ministry. There are 27 in the Gospel of Luke alone. Jesus uses parables as a way to show us what we are not capable of understanding. Matthew 13:10-11 demonstrates this:

The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables: Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand."

Parables are simple stories with deep theological meaning. Let's take a deeper look at this parable. There was a man who had two sons. The younger son asked his father for his share of the estate. From Deuteronomy 21:17 we understand this to be one-third of the father's possessions. In order to split his property equally, in Jewish law, the older son would receive an extra share. Now, I would like to be optimistic and think that the father is older and may be closer to death; it would make this question less abrasive. But I choose to interpret this son as being on the brink of adulthood and wanting to show his father he doesn't need him anymore. But in any accord, this is an absurd question. If I asked my father for one-third of everything he has, he would think he was crazy. I know that if many of you asked your father this question, he would think you were crazy. And even if your sons or daughters asked you this question, you would think they were crazy. But, unbelievable, the father does it!

The younger son takes all his new-found wealth and runs away from his father to a foreign country. There he ends up squandering his wealth in wild living. He is living in sin. Once he has spent everything he has, there is a famine in the land he moved to, and now he is in need. This is where the humiliation begins. He hires himself out to work for a citizen of the country. This is bad enough to be embarrassing, but he's sent out to feed the pigs! Now, Jewish law is very clear on its opinion of pigs. You cannot eat them; you cannot touch them; you probably cannot even think about them!

And yet, this man is cleaning up after them. It gets so bad, he realizes the pigs eat better than he does because no one will give him anything to eat.



So when he finally comes to his senses, he thinks that even his father's servants have food left over, but I am here starving. He decides to go back to his father and say: 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. Because they have it better than I do now.

He sets off to go back to his father and 'while he was still a long way off,' his father had compassion for him gave him a hug and kiss. The son, probably been rehearsing his statement the whole way home, starts off: I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. And then he is interrupted. His father says Quick! Grab him a robe, put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet, so they will know he is my son. We must celebrate his return. They kill the fattened calf, which would have been the best quality of meat available, and would have been reserved for only the most honored guests. The father is happy that his son has come home. He was presumed dead but is alive. He was lost but was found.

Now we see the other side of this story. The older brother has been out in the field working, doing what he is supposed to do. He comes up to the house and he hears a party going on, which triggers an emotion we all feel when we are not invited to a party. He inquires what is going on, and he is told that his little brother has come back. He gets very angry and he refuses to go to the party. His father hears of this and comes out to plead with him. The son, still in a fit of rage, lashes back. Look! I have done everything you have ever asked me to do, and I have not even gotten a small meal with my friends. But this son of yours that has squandered away your property comes back, and you give him a huge party. The father responds in this way: My son, 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; he was lost and is found.

The background to this story gives us insight to why Jesus tells this particular parable. The 15th chapter of Luke starts off this way: 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." The Pharisees cannot understand why Jesus is eating with people who are not worthy of their presence. This starts a trio of parables about being lost. The first is the lost sheep or the good shepherd. A shepherd has 100 sheep; he loses one and leaves the 99 alone while he searches for the one that is lost. I can imagine that the Pharisees would not understand this. Economically, it would not make sense for a shepherd to leave 99 sheep vulnerable to find one. So Jesus tries a different parable; this time, the Lost Coin. A woman has 10 coins and loses one and searches all over the house until she finds it and rejoices. Again it appears that the Pharisees are clueless, so Jesus continues with this the Parable of the Prodigal, or Lost, Son.

The message, then, is this: Jesus is trying to show us that God loves each one of us. That whether we identify as the loyal older son or the prodigal son, God has compassion for us and loves us unconditionally. The sinners that Jesus is eating with were represented by the sheep, the coin, and the son. Society had turned their backs on them, but not Jesus, and not God. Jesus broke bread with them because he loved them. Amen.

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