

The Lost are Found

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[0 : 0 0] Let me begin just with this question. Just a fun fact. Do you know what's the number one rated film on IMDb, which is the largest online database of information related to films, television series, podcasts, home videos, video games, and streaming content online?

What is the number one rated film on IMDb? Is it The Lord of the Rings? Is it Forrest Gump?

Or maybe The Godfather? Now the movie many consider to be the best or in their personal top ten among the millions ever made in history is actually called The Shawshank Redemption.

Now the film follows Andy Dufresne, a banker wrongly convicted of murdering his wife and her lover and spends years in prison, suffering under an unjust system.

Yet despite the odds, he never loses hope. And through a combination of patience, befriending people in the prison, resilience and the right opportunity, Andy escapes.

[1 : 1 8] He's finding his freedom and restoring justice to his life. And it's a powerful story that resonates with many people because all of us love to see wrongs made right.

All of us love to see the lost found, love to see order reinstalled, and we love a good ending. All of us enjoy a sweet ending to a good story.

Now in Luke chapter 15, if you could turn with me now and keep your Bibles there, keep your Bibles open to Luke 15 as we will be repeatedly referring to this passage. In Luke chapter 15, Jesus actually tells not just one but three parables, three stories about the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son.

All three of them contain three stories, three things that were lost, but it's eventually restored.

And so today we'll look at each of these stories and then their similarities, but also the differences and how they uniquely reveal God's heart for the lost.

[2 : 3 3] Let's pray. Father, as we come to you, I pray that you will open our hearts, that we will not only see this familiar passage as outdated, as something we've already known, as something that's relevant for others but not ourselves.

I pray that you will open our eyes to gain new spiritual insights from this passage, that you will reveal our hearts, reveal what is broken, twisted in it, and you will form it, build it up in your image.

Pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Let's start with number one, the audience of the parables. The audience of the parables. Now the chapter begins with the introduction of two distinct group of people who had come to listen to Jesus.

The first group consisted of the tax collectors and sinners. Now these were men and women who did not follow religious rules. They did not follow the moral laws of the Bible or the rules for ceremonial purity.

Don't touch this. Don't handle that. These were tax collectors and sinners were people who live outside the boundaries of traditional morality.

[3 : 55] They were considered the outcasts of society. And these sinners were all drawing near to him. They continually flocked to Jesus.

And we are then introduced to the second group, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Now in deep contrast, these individuals were students of the scriptures.

They studied them. They obeyed the Bible. They were your PhDs in Bible and theology. They worshipped faithfully. They prayed constantly.

And as expected, the religious leaders were puzzled. They were in fact angry that Jesus, a famous rabbi, was extending his invitation to sinners.

That's why we read In verse 2, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them. Now surely, in their minds, Jesus was not preaching the truth to these sinners as the Jewish leaders are.

[4 : 56] Surely, Jesus has distorted the gospel, watered down into some kind of acceptable form that we commonly even see today in 60 seconds, TikTok shorts. That surely, Jesus must be telling these people what they wanted to hear.

or they wouldn't be coming back. And we do the same thing today, don't we? When we see other churches or religions, religious movements capturing the attention of marginalized people, our default is to think, surely, there's something wrong in their theology.

Surely, their preaching isn't as good as BMKC. Surely, they've added something to attract these lost people. surely, they must be compromising the gospel and not teaching it as faithfully as we do.

But why is it that outcasts are drawn to Jesus and not to churches today? Why is it that our pew often seems full of pretentious people who think they have their lives together, yes, you and me, while the broken and hopeless avoid the church?

If our preaching and our practice are not attracting the same kind of people that Jesus did, are we truly sharing the same message that he did?

[6 : 25] If the lost are avoiding us, perhaps our churches are more filled with rule keepers, Pharisees, religious students than we would like to admit.

And we Asians love rule keepers, don't we? We admire the student who never steps out of line. We admire the employee who works late without complaint, not even taking OT pay.

We admire the child who respects their parents without question. We are a society that loves rule keepers. And we love people who prioritize the family's well-being.

We tell stories of people who sacrifice their own good for the good of the greater good, greater world. And we regard this as a true path to honor and respect.

But, if we extend this to our relationship with the Lord, we are treading in dangerous waters. So, who then is Jesus addressing in these parables?

[7 : 34] Is he really talking to the lost? It is actually primarily the religious leaders. Jesus is primarily talking to Pharisees and scribes, rule keepers, you and me, whose attitude towards the outsiders prompted Jesus' response.

And these parables don't just tell the story of how God freely receives those who repent. Instead, Jesus is here to challenge deeply ingrained beliefs about God, about sin, and about salvation.

And he calls our spiritual pride as a particularly dangerous condition blind to its victim that is especially pervasive among those of us familiar with Christianity.

So, we must set aside this understanding, this assumption that these parables are only for the lost, that we only preach them at evangelistic meetings, and they have nothing for us.

We must begin with the assumption and the recognition that they hold an important message for regular churchgoers as well. And only then can we tap into the heart of Jesus' message and his ministry.

[8 : 50] So, let's begin with the first two parables, the lost sheep and the lost coin. Now, anyone who has ever looked for something lost understands the frustration that comes with it.

There was a time when I was very into puzzles. Now, I managed to finish two 1,000-piece puzzles, but kid you not, neither was truly complete.

The first time, I lost a piece while moving it. The second puzzle ended up with a piece bitten by my dog who thought it was food. So, I ended up making replacement pieces, but that's all I could do.

And despite all the effort that went into the puzzle, I'll always have to live with the fact that they'll never truly be complete. Because, no, and this same feeling actually lies at the heart of this first story.

Set in a rural pastoral world of Palestine, a shepherd realizes that he's missing one sheep out of his flock of a hundred.

[9 : 55] This flock likely belongs to a pretty rich person as flocks in that time range from 20 to 100 sheep, to 200 sheep even. And a shepherd therefore leaves to find the lost sheep.

And although the text doesn't specify if the remaining flock is left with the neighbors, we can probably assume that as a shepherd wouldn't typically risk the 99 to search for just one.

But it could also be that parable's surprise is that finding the lost sheep is so important that the shepherd takes the risk. When he successfully recovers the sheep, alive and unharmed, the shepherd rejoices.

And the joy is of course understandable for one. The sheep held commercial value. But Jesus' point of course is not about recovering lost property. Instead, lost sheep actually alludes to the image of Isaiah chapter 40 verse 11 where God is depicted as caring tenderly for his people.

It says in Isaiah chapter 40 verse 11, He will tend his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms. He will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are young.

[11 : 14] And likewise, the shepherd's joy in celebrating the sheep's return actually illustrates God's delight when a sinner turns back to him. And Jesus explains that there is greater rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 who don't need repentance.

And so Jesus came to search for sinners because their restoration brings heavenly joy. The second parable mirrors the first.

This time it's focusing on a woman who loses a coin. Likely a denarius which is equivalent to a day's wage for an average worker. Now, I don't know about you, losing a day's wage, it hurts but it probably is not enough for the kind of thorough searching that the woman does here.

she leads the lamb, she lights the lamb, sweeps the house and persistently searches until the coin is found. And just like the shepherd, she rejoices and calls her neighbors to celebrate, symbolizing again the joy in heaven over a sinner's repentance.

So although these parables are very straightforward, very simple, they are rich in truth. It is that God desires his followers to share his heart in restoring the lost.

[12 : 40] Both searches demand effort and while the lost items may appear minor at first glance, be it one sheep or one lost coin, the search becomes a priority.

And in each case, the joy of recovery is celebrated with others. And of course, by starting in verse 4 when Jesus says, suppose one of you, or verse 8, suppose a woman, he's drawing his listeners into the role of the shepherd and the woman.

He's training his disciples to continue his work that no soul is too insignificant for God's love, no sinner is too far for his grace.

No soul is too insignificant for God's love, no sinner is too far for his grace. And so that is the backdrop that we are setting up before we jump into the third parable.

That we have this wonderful picture of God's mercy, that at his cost, you know, that the shepherd or the woman will go to the extent that they did to look for the lost item.

[13 : 51] And then we come to the parable of the prodigal son. Number three, the lost son. How is it similar to the last two parables?

And how is it different? Now let's look at Luke 15 verse 11. 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. Now make no mistake, this was an absurd request.

You see, first asking for an earthly inheritance would involve a very complicated process, just to calculate the amount of how much everything is worth. Even today, you would have to get bankers, evaluators, all to assess your assets.

But in traditional societies, it was more than just about the money. Land was synonymous with status. And so to ask for an inheritance early is to not only ask for the father to lose money, but lose his status in society.

[15 : 04] By granting the son's request, the father would lose a portion of his social standing. But perhaps the worst of all is that asking for the inheritance while the father was alive, imagine if your children came to you right now and said, show me the will and I want to get my portion now.

It was akin to wishing him dead. Essentially, the younger son was saying, I want you for your gifts, for all the good stuff you have, but I don't want you.

I want your gifts, your wealth, the future that I could see with what you have that you're giving me, but I don't want you. But surprisingly, the father agrees.

We read in verse 13, 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.

And the son's recklessness leads him to destitution. When a severe famine hits, he finds himself in verse 15. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.

[16 : 27] And the situation later becomes so dire that he longs to eat the pigs' food. But then it hit him. Verse 17 to 18. When it came to his census, he said, how many of my father's hired servants have food to spare?

And here I am starving to death. I will set out and go back to my father. And say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

So the lost son decides to return home. And he requests to be treated as a hired servant. Let me work my way back. But the father's reaction is strikingly unconventional.

Not only does he run, which is a very rare thing for men in that culture to do, but in verse 20, his father saw him and felt compassion.

And he embraced him and kissed him. And he told his servants, bring quickly the best rope and put it on him.

[17 : 37] 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.

Now, Jesus could have ended the story here. And we would all be moved by the father's great love. And traditionally, that's how this parable is often presented, isn't it?

Preachers use this text during Christmas, Easter, to share the gospel. Preachers use this text to emphasize to non-Christians, you know what?

You're messed up, but that's okay. Jesus loves you. No matter your past, how terrible you feel about yourself, Jesus is here. He welcomes you into his kingdom with love.

And that makes for a great Hollywood plot. But if we focus only on this aspect, we miss a crucial part of the picture.

[18 : 50] Why doesn't Jesus end the parable here? What else is he trying to say? And so we look at verse 25, where the focus shifts to the older son.

Meanwhile, the older son was in a 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 older 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 comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him. And so finally, we reach the true climax of the story.

how will the father respond to his older son's blatant defiance? What will he do?

[20 : 15] Now, a man of his own era, a man of that era, could have disowned his son immediately. But instead, the father shows incredible tenderness.

He says, my son, you are always with me. 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. He says, my son, despite the public insult you've given me, I still want you at the feast. You still have a seat at the table.

I won't disown your brother, but I don't want to disown you either. And I challenge you to set aside your pride and join the celebration.

The decision is yours. Will you come in or not? Will the family finally reunite in love?

[21 : 27] Will the brothers reconcile? the older brother be moved and come back to the father? To our surprise, the story ends here.

Why doesn't Jesus tell us what happens next? And the reason is that the real audience for this story is not the tax collectors and sinners.

It is the religious elites, the elder brothers, you and me. Jesus is challenging our understanding of connecting with God.

He is redefining sin, what true lostness is, and how true belonging can be found. so we go to the final section number four, true lostness and true belonging.

Who are the younger brothers in our culture today? They're people who don't follow rules or tradition. We all have friends like that, who reject social norms, who are emphasizing pursuing personal goals and self-worth on their own terms.

[22 : 50] these are people, even children of our own, or children of our siblings, who believe no one has the right to dictate how others should live.

And if life leads you to start your own coffee shop, so be it. If life brings you to work on a cruise ship, go ahead. And in many Asian families, this is typically the youngest child, who gets more freedom to act on whims, the eldest might have to wait until they are 15 to get their first phone, while the youngest gets one at 12.

The oldest child has to clean up their sibling's mess, while the youngest can throw a tantrum in the store and get a new toy. Now, perhaps you identify with the younger son.

Maybe you've always been the student that teachers couldn't correct. The child that your parents struggled to communicate with. The younger generation that the eldest couldn't reach.

The one who says, I'm just going to do what I think is right. I don't care what my siblings did. I get to choose my own path. And it's not that you intentionally defy authority.

[24 : 08] It's just that you just never felt that anyone truly understood you. And so for you, the most important thing in life is to enjoy yourself while pursuing your dreams.

But maybe your lifestyle is more like that of the elder brother, of the Pharisees and scribes. These individuals were students of the law.

They were authorities responsible for maintaining the order of Jewish religious and social life. They're the pengawas, the guru discipline.

And although they were God's chosen people, the Pharisees believed that they still had to strictly follow the scriptures to maintain God's blessings. For them, a morally upright life that sacrifices one's personal satisfaction to uphold God's will and societal standards is the key towards a happy world.

And maybe that's you. You've always been the ones striving to meet the expectations of your parents, your teachers, your employers, maybe even your pastors.

[25 : 23] You work hard to get the best grades, chose a career that many respected, denied yourself pleasures to provide for your family. At home, you remind your children of the sacrifices you made.

At work, you take pride in your work ethic, discipline, your public image. You've dedicated your life to bring honor to yourself and your family.

Now, does everyone fall into one of these two categories? Yes and no. In fact, you and I might have experienced both lifestyles at different stages of our life.

Some people begin with a very carefree lives in their youths. They spend money, enjoy women, but later, they turn to a disciplined moral path in middle age.

They found religion. They found a guru, a philosopher, a method that they really like and they practice it and they swear by it. But there are others who grew up in strict environments, stereotypically the pastor's child, who may find such a rigid lifestyle burdensome and so in their 20s turn dramatically to a more indulgent way of living.

[26 : 47] And some people blend both approaches outwardly like an older brother who conforms to society's standard but will inwardly, secretly a younger brother.

brother. We think of the recent, not so recent, but years of controversy with the Catholic Church, where priests have been caught in scandals despite their outward appearances of piety.

But it also works the other way. Many people who are outwardly a younger brother actually have the elder brother pride. They dismiss people who believe in God with a self-centered attitude.

atheists who arrogantly insist that religious people are wrong. And so Jesus wants us to understand that no matter where you are on the spectrum, whether you are younger or older, you are both, you are sometimes this, sometimes that, both of these approaches are fundamentally flawed and they are lost.

You see, in the first act, Jesus shows us through the younger son what sin is. This young man shamed his family, led a life of indulgence and was completely unrestrained.

[28 : 06] And as Asians, we would be among the first to crucify his sins. We might even think, ah, such a person needs Jesus. Only God can awaken him.

And this is a popular version of the gospel that we hear in our churches today. There are many versions of the gospel that only preaches God's love, God's forgiveness, God's patience, God's grace.

But I believe Jesus' intention is not just to illustrate the younger son's lost state. Jesus calls out Asian culture by showing us that the model child, the rule keepers, the conformers are lost too.

How dare he? See, both the elder and younger child want control. The younger son wants to make his own decisions without restrictions and so he does this by declaring his complete independence.

But the older son, although outwardly compliant, harbors resentment towards his father. And he also wants his father's wealth rather than the father himself.

[29 : 24] And while the younger brother goes away as a means of control, the older brother gains control by staying at home.

He's essentially saying, I have never disobeyed you. Now, you must do things my way. Friends, do you see that the heart of these two sons are the same?

both resent their father's authority. Both try to escape it. Both are in rebellion.

One through very bad means, the other through very good means. One through means that we as a culture shame, the other through means that we as a culture honor.

And so here's the warning, that to be an elder brother is actually a spiritually more critical situation. Because younger brothers at least know that they're sinful.

[30 : 41] Elder brothers don't. Do you understand what Jesus is teaching? teaching? You can rebel against God. Or you can follow all rules and you can still be hostile to God.

It is not about what you do on the outside. For a society like ours, that values order and regulations, Jesus' message is incredibly shocking.

you can be distant from God by disregarding His authority, going away from church, living life the way you want.

But you can also be distant from God by trying to control your life through religious piety. Christianity. You might be a good Christian.

You attend church. You tie. You serve in a worship team. You have a good social standing. But deep down, you're using your obedience to control God.

[31 : 56] You're saying, just as the older brother, Lord, look at how much I've done for you. Why are things still not the way they are? Look at how much I've done for you.

You deserve to pay me back. And so you too want the Father's gift, not the Father himself. And I think one of the ways is to tell if you have an older brother spirit, is to see how you react when things don't go your way.

Do you think God should bless and help you because you perform your duties diligently and generously help others? If so, Jesus might be a model for you.

His teachings might be great encouragements, rules that help you strive harder. But Jesus is not your savior.

You are your own savior. savior. Do you use your obedience to control God? To get things your way?

[33 : 13] Or do you obey God because you want to resemble him? To become more like him? To love him, know him, and delight in him? If you're the former, you are like those who reject Jesus as savior and define right and wrong for themselves because you have not fully allowed Jesus to be the lord of your life.

Sin is not just breaking the rules. Sin is putting oneself in God's place, becoming one's own savior, God, and judge, just as the two sons try to replace their father's authority in their lives.

And so what then is the solution? How can we address our tendency to indulge in sins like the younger sons and our desire to control God like the older son?

What is the cure towards both our sinfulness and our self-righteousness? It seems that we are stuck in between. And the answer is again found in the text.

If we look at these three parables, the first one, something was lost and someone went and found it. The second one, the coin was lost, the woman went and found it.

[34 : 47] But it's only in this final parable that no one goes out to find the younger brother. The older brother does not search for the younger brother.

Why? Because he knows it would come at a cost and it's not worth it for him. You see, in every case, forgiveness forgiveness is free and unconditional for the offender, but costly for the one who forgives.

Let me say that again. Forgiveness is free and unconditional for the offender, but costly for the one who forgives.

Let me just give you an illustration. The other day, actually just this week, I was backing out of my parents' garage, and I accidentally bumped into a car.

And I freaked out. And so, you know, I did what you usually do, you get out of the car, you look, you hope that it's not too bad. And so the owner came out and he just struck me by surprise.

[35 : 57] I expected rage, I expected a series of emotions, but he just said, ah, a bit only, no problem. no problem. And he just said, and he just pushed the bumper back in, and he said, you can go.

Now, while this was super generous of him, if he decides to repair the car, guess who pays? Not me, because he had just told me I don't need to pay.

He still has to pay the cost himself. See, either I pay or he pays. Someone has to pay in forgiveness in order for redemption to happen, it always involves the cost.

Someone has to pay. And unless the younger son bears the cost himself, he cannot return to the family. And so, if we are to return to the father's house, who will bear the cost?

Tim Keller writes, our true elder brother took and paid our debt on the cross in our place. There, Jesus was stripped naked of his robe and dignity so that we could be clothed with a dignity and standing we don't deserve.

[37 : 19] On the cross, Jesus was treated as an outcast so that we could be brought into God's family freely by grace. There, Jesus drank the cup of eternal justice so that we might have the cup of father's joy.

There was no other way for the heavenly father to bring us in except at the expense of our true elder brother. So how?

How can we transform our inner fears and anger into love, joy, and gratitude? how can we escape from both the self-indulgence and self-righteousness?

The answer is you need to be moved by what it took to bring you home. You need to be moved by the cost of your redemption.

You must understand that your sin is so profound that it took God's son to be crucified and mocked by the world to save you.

[38 : 30] And you must see this vast chasm between God's holiness and your sinfulness that is only growing day by day. And you will realize that the cross which bridges this chasm is the only way to reconnect you with your creator.

It is not your religious efforts or devotion. It is not how much wealth you accrue by the end of your life. It is not how people think of you. Until we place our faith in our true elder brother, Jesus Christ, we will not find true belonging.

Now some of you might say, look Paul, I have heard this before. Let's move on to something else. Give me the real thing. This gospel stuff is for beginners.

Now if you say that, it shows you haven't truly gotten the gospel yet. Anybody who says, I know this stuff, I need something else, I need five methods to rid me of my anger issues, anybody who says, I need something else, I know this stuff, doesn't really know this stuff.

Friends, you don't need anything else. You need the gospel. And I must clarify, I'm not putting the gospel like a new method, you know, as if this gospel centrality thing is this new movement in this 21st century.

[40 : 04] The gospel is not a method. It's not just news about Jesus. The gospel has always been Jesus himself. Jesus is the gospel.

You see, self-help books says, here's how to get organized. Jesus, here's what you do when you wake up, you look in the mirror, you say these things, when you're in trouble, you do that. Apply it and you will find a way.

Jesus says, no, I'm your way. Religion says, here's a way, follow it, and you'll be a righteous person. Jesus says, no, I'm your righteousness.

Jesus. And to quote John Piper, Christ did not die to forgive sinners who would go on treasuring anything above seeing and savoring God.

And people who would be happy in heaven if Christ were not there, would not be there. The gospel is not a way to get people to heaven, it is a way to get people to God, to Christ himself.

[41 : 06] And if today you say, yes, it's true, I have the gospel, I have Jesus, but I need something else. I have Jesus, but I need this meeting to go well. I have Jesus, but I need this person to like me.

I have Jesus, but I need these things so that I won't be anxious. I have Jesus, but I also need to be serving in a church to prove my wealth.

I need my moral record to know that I will belong, I will go to heaven and you don't get the gospel. If you're constantly anxious, you're saying, I have Jesus, but I also need something else to feel love, to feel worthy, and to feel in control.

If this is you, you're not getting the gospel at all. You're not getting Jesus for him to be your righteousness. Do you see, you've got to see, friends, that Jesus Christ himself, the gospel is the one who brings you ultimate joy and lasting change.

And if you're willing to say, look, God, I've stumbled. I've tried both the younger brother way and the older brother way, and boy, am I lost.

[42 : 26] But now I'm going to say, I don't have my own righteousness. I'm going to turn to you for righteousness, for life.

And if your answer is yes, then my friend, you might have just begun to delight in the joy and life changing power of the gospel.

Let's pray. Lord, we confess of all the twisted ways we make good things to serve our own means.

We confess of our forgetfulness, of the ways we think we've graduated from the gospel, of the ways we default to younger brother styles of living or older brother styles of living, even perhaps mixing them both, faith, of the ways we constantly look to our own moral record as assurance of our righteousness that we will have a final standing before you and it will be good.

And so Lord, remind us today of the I have Jesus but I need something else. Remind us of the something else that we're turning to to give us assurance and peace.

[44 : 00] Remind us that we cannot find true belonging, that we as lost people will not truly be found unless we come before the foot of the cross, naked, vulnerable, empty, confessing of our struggles and our needs for you and looking to you to be made new.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.