

“The Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Two Lost Sons.” (Luke 15:1-32)

I realise that this title is a bit of a mouthful, but it probably more accurately describes the **single** parable Jesus told in this passage from Luke’s gospel. Any other title (or pictorial representation) is likely to be a distortion which could lead to a misunderstanding of what Jesus is saying here. Unfortunately, most of our Bibles chop this parable up into three parables! First of all, however, here are a few introductory comments about Jesus’ parables in general.

1. They all hang like beautifully crafted mobiles. They have a symmetry which balances them, and if we snip off a piece of the parable/mobile it distorts the whole thing. Therefore, each parable has to be viewed as a whole. The symmetry also makes them easier to remember.
2. Although they are memorable, they are not always easy to understand. In fact, the parables are graded according to the difficulty of understanding them – a bit like dives in an Olympic pool which have different degrees of complexity; some have more twists and turns in them than others!

One of the easiest parables to understand is the so-called “Parable of the Sower” (another inadequate title – “The Four Soils” would be better). Maybe it is reassuring to know that the disciples even struggled to grasp the meaning of this one! Hence Jesus’ comment to them, “Well, if you don’t understand this one, how will you understand any of the others I am going to tell you?” (Mk. 4:13)

Jesus explained the meaning of some of his parables to his disciples whilst others he leaves for them, and us, to ponder further. Tom Wright says, “Jesus wanted them to struggle with what he was saying, to talk about it themselves, to think it through.” (1)

3. The parables are essentially stories from everyday life. Most of them do not explicitly mention God or refer to the Bible. They are simply about ‘A farmer who went out to sow’; ‘A woman who took yeast and mixed it with flour’; ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho’.

I agree with Kenneth Bailey who wrote that, “Jesus was a **metaphorical** theologian. That is, his primary method of creating meaning was through metaphor, simile, parable and dramatic action rather than through logic and reasoning. He created meaning like a dramatist and a poet rather than like a philosopher.” (2)

Telling parables, stories based on everyday life, seems to have been Jesus' main mode of theological discourse; Jesus "did not say anything to the crowds without using a parable." (Mt. 13:34)

4. Understanding, or not understanding, the parables, is a key test as to whether a person is a Christian or not and whether they are growing as a Christian or not.

In understanding the parables, there is either progressive revelation of the things of God or there is progressive loss and confusion. To those who have, more is given; to those who have not, even what they have is taken away (Mk. 4:25). The secret of the kingdom of God has been revealed/given to us disciples; to everyone outside, they can only see but not perceive, hear but never understand (Mk. 4:11&12). Such is the dynamic impact of the Word of God and especially the parables.

Kenneth Bailey says that a parable is "a house in which the reader/listener is invited to take up residence and examine the human predicament through the worldview created by the parable." (2)

I would suggest you not only read a parable, but that you live in it for a while; taking up residence will transform your thinking and behaviour!

5. Beware allegorical interpretations of the parables.

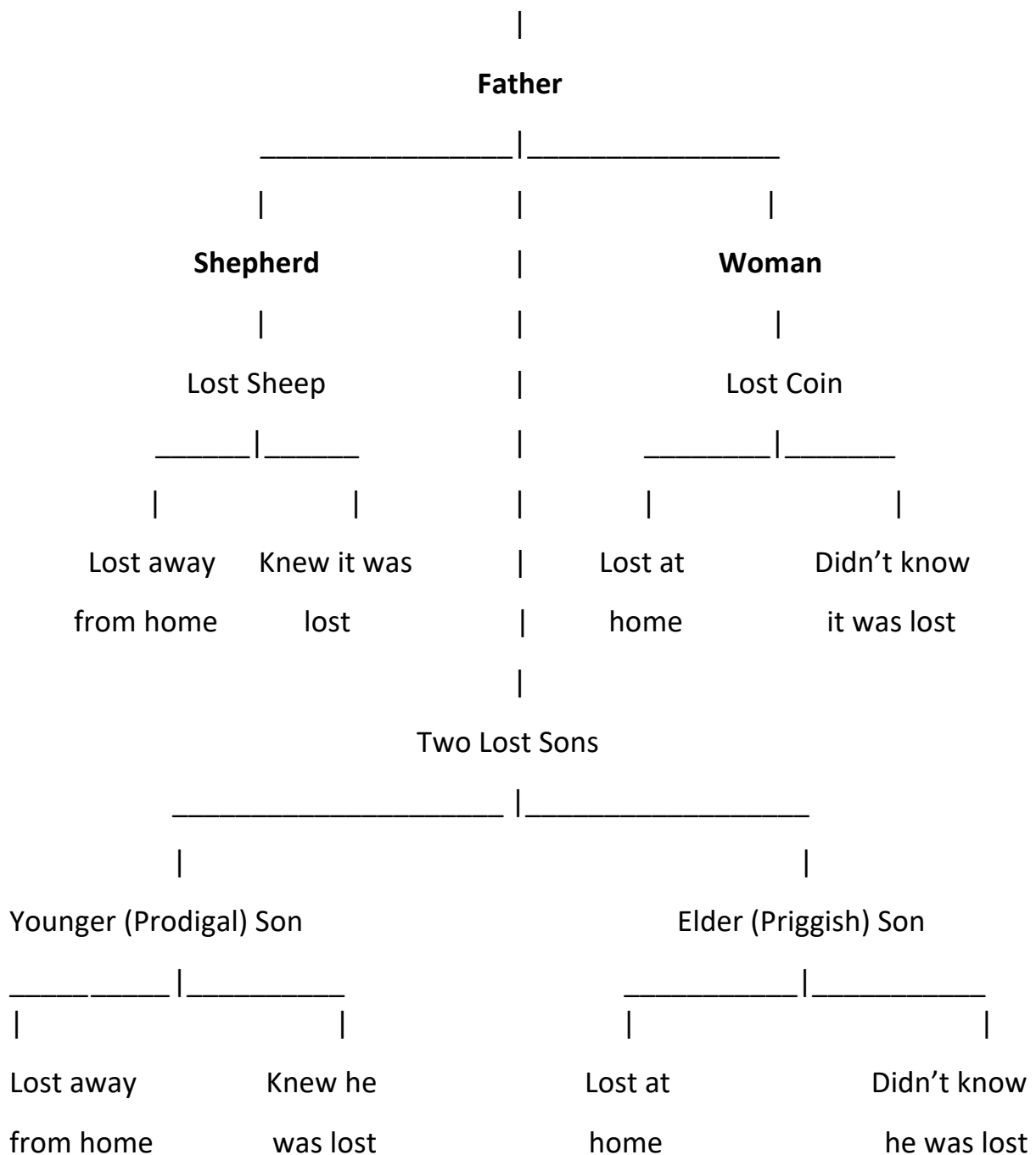
Allegorical interpretations see every detail of the parable as having symbolic meaning. So in the parable of the good Samaritan, for example, "the man who was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves", is identified as Adam, who left the heavenly city (Jerusalem) and was attacked by Satan and his angels (the Thieves). Every detail is given symbolic meaning including the oil, the wine, the donkey, the inn (Church), the two silver coins (Sacraments) etc. Unfortunately, these allegorical interpretations of the parables, and other parts of Scripture, often give rise to farcical and nonsensical speculative understandings!

Although the Song of Solomon is a poem, not a parable, I am reminded of an allegorical interpretation of the woman's breasts (1:13; 4:5; 7:3) where the interpretation given was that the left breast represented the Old Testament and the right breast the New Testament!! On this showing, the phrase 'between my breasts' must represent the Apocrypha?!!

Parables are not allegories and should not be interpreted as such.

And so to the parable of the Lost sheep, the Lost coin and the two Lost sons.

The first two shorter stories prepare the way for the longer story. The sheep was lost away from home in the far country (like the prodigal son); the coin was lost at home (like the priggish son). The sheep knew it was lost (sheep that get separated from the flock make a particular bleating sound), the coin didn't know it was lost. The prodigal (spendthrift/wastefully extravagant) son knew he was lost, the priggish (legalistic/moralistic/ 'stuck up') son didn't. Parables teach by comparing and contrasting.



In these days of gender equality, notice too how Jesus balances the **male** shepherd ('anthropos') who lost one of his sheep in the first story, with the **female** householder who lost one of her silver coins in the second story. Jesus' illustrations often had gender-balance and gender-specific appeal!

Another example: Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which **a man** took and planted in his field. And, "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that **a woman** took and mixed into a large amount of flour." (Mt. 13:31-33)

Even chocolate bars today are crafted and created to appeal to either men or women. 'Yorkie' is designed for men (chunky) and 'Galaxy' and 'Cadbury's Dairy Milk' are designed for women (silky & smooth)! In the world of advertising, we are talking here about 'gender-targeting'!

When 'Yorkie' chocolate bars first came out in 2002, it said on the wrapper, 'It's Not For Girls'. People complained to the Advertising Standards Authority that it was sexist, but the complaints, at that time, weren't upheld, and the advertising campaign, initially by Rowntree's and then Nestle, continued.

In fact, when you arrived at the railway station in York in those days, there was a huge advertising billboard with a picture of a 'Yorkie' bar on it and underneath were the words, "Welcome to Yorkie, where the men are hunky and the chocolate chunky!"

Even the colours of the wrappers are carefully chosen to attract men or women (or children). In 2006 they brought out a special edition of a 'Yorkie' bar which they said "Is for Girls", and what colour did they choose for the wrapper? ~ pink!

But the point is this: In our daily walk and witness as Christians, and especially if we are preachers or teachers of God's word, then we are going to have to think through whether the words we use, the illustrations we give, the Christ we proclaim, appeals to both men and women.

Is there equal gender balance and appeal? Are we communicating with both men and women? Or has our gospel become too masculinised on the one hand, or too feminised on the other?

Jesus was very careful to get the gender balance right. And of course, the gospel of Luke especially mentions the place and role of women among Jesus' disciples.

Back to the parable. It is easy to focus in this parable on the prodigal son (hence the name it is commonly known by) but he is not the main character, though most sermons have been preached with him at the centre, including this one with its 3- point rhythmical outline: -

1. The Son's Madness ~ He cavilled, he travelled, he revelled.
2. The Son's Sadness ~ He went to the dogs, he lost his togs, he fed the hogs.
3. The Son's Gladness ~ He received the seal, he ate the veal, he danced the reel!

Or, if you want another prodigal-son-centred sermon outline, you could say he went through 3 stages: - * Sick of Home * Homesick * Home

But no, the prodigal son is not the centre of this parable; the shepherd is, the woman householder is, and the Father is. They are the ones who reveal what God is like and they are the ones we are to emulate. The emphasis of this parable is that we must become more like them; reaching out and finding those who are lost and then rejoicing at their homecoming.

Who is in the audience?

Another key to understanding this parable (and all the others) is to ask, 'Who is in the audience?', 'Who is listening to the parable Jesus is telling?'. Here it was a mixture of 'tax collectors and sinners' on the one hand, and 'Pharisees and teachers of the law' on the other (Lk. 15:1&2). What would they make of it?

The Pharisees and teachers of the law. The Pharisees were essentially 'separatists' who kept themselves to themselves and didn't much care for those they regarded as the riff-raff of society, although some did have a missionary zeal. Similarly, the teachers of the law were moralistic and legalistic.

They would have been absolutely shocked by the younger son's request to have his inheritance whilst his father was still alive. This was perhaps the equivalent of the son saying, "Dad, why don't you drop down dead."

They would have been even more surprised that the father acquiesced and gave the son what he wanted. And yet more surprised at the way in which the father eventually welcomed the prodigal son home again!

The 'Sinners.' They must have thought that the way the father reacted when the prodigal came home was too good to be true. Certainly the son himself was surprised; he couldn't have imagined the reception he was given or, amazingly, that his status as a son still seemed to be intact.

Let's focus more now on some of the characters in the story.

The Elder Son. He has a number of issues: -

- Rather than seeing himself as a son, he seems to have had a slavish relationship with his father, "All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders." (Lk. 15:29)
- He appears to regard his father as being niggardly, "You never even gave me a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends."

Incidentally, if we have this view of God, it will seriously impact our prayer life i.e. what we ask for and what we expect from God.

- After all his loyalty and hard graft, it seems that he felt unappreciated and unloved.
- He was consumed with his anger, complaints, jealousies and resentments.

Of course, all of the angst that the elder brother was thinking and feeling only came out on the return of his younger brother; until then it appears to have been hidden. It was this shift in family dynamics which precipitated the out-pouring of the lava from the volcano!

Sometimes God will allow situations to develop in our lives (especially in our relationships, and even more especially in our family relationships) which bring to the surface hidden tensions and resentments. The key to resolving these issues is forgiveness.

The Younger Son.

He was in a hurry. He couldn't wait for his father to die. His request, "Let me have (now) the share of the estate that will come to me", is both hurtful and offensive to the father and betrayed the values of his family and community.

Although I didn't ask my father for a handout when I left home, I can see aspects of the younger son in myself. I am the younger of two sons and left home when I was 17 years old. Part of what drove me, was the desire to go out into the world and prove that I could be successful, popular and powerful.

From a worldly point of view I achieved some of this, but it took another 5 years for me to realise that the things I was chasing after weren't satisfying deep down, so I reached out to the Father and, more importantly, he came out to meet and greet me!

Now, as a Christian, every time I am attracted to and seduced by the world, it is as though I am leaving home again like the younger son, and am starting to look for things 'in the far country' which only the love of the Father can provide at home. We 'leave home' whenever we squander and misappropriate the resources God has given us e.g. time, money, gifts, the environment etc.

The Father

The Father is equally sensitive to the needs of both sons. He left the house to welcome his younger son back and he left the house to plead with his elder son to join them. The father has no favourites.

However, we live in a world that constantly compares people. A world that ranks them as more or less intelligent, more or less attractive, more or less successful. But the father's love does not operate like this, and James reminds us that to have favourites is to sin, "If you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as law-breakers." (James 2:9)

Of course, on a human level, we find it easier to get along with some folks than we do with others. Jesus was probably closer to Peter, James and John than the other 9 disciples, and closer to John than to Peter and James. But God doesn't have any favourite children; in this parable the Father finds it deep within his own heart to love each of his sons equally, despite the condition of their hearts.

Sometimes we can find it difficult to receive the Father's embrace, to accept his love, forgiveness and healing. Are we that loveable? Sometimes, even as Christians, we may want to prove that we are loveable by being successful, popular or powerful. But, like the prodigal, it is necessary to 'come to our senses', to give up wanting to be in control of everything, wanting to know where we may be led, pursuing false gods etc., and instead, to surrender to the Father's boundless love that knows no limits.

"You are my son/daughter, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (Lk. 3:22)

The Father tries to reassure his elder son that "you are always with me, and everything I have is yours." It is worth remembering that as the elder of two sons he would inherit two thirds of his Father's estate and the younger son one third. This was the law (Deut. 21:17).

The Nature of the Father's Love.

It is important to understand that the Father's love does not force, push, pull, constrain or coerce. He couldn't compel his youngest son to stay at home. He couldn't force his love on him. He had to let him go in freedom, even though he knew the pain it would cause both him and his son.

God's love allows us to leave home and live away from him and independently of him. But to do so is to be spiritually dead and lost. God, in his love, laid down his power to insist that the younger son stay at home or to compel the elder son to come into the house and celebrate.

God's freely offered love has to be freely received.

The Bible actually describes God's love as being 'steadfast', 'endless', 'unfailing' and 'undeserved'. However, we can never say that God's love, from our human perspective, is 'unconditional'; the condition is that we repent and return to the Father in order to know, experience and fully benefit from his steadfast, endless, unfailing and undeserved love.

Although Paul reminds us that no-one or nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ (Rms. 8:35-39), sadly, it remains true that we can separate ourselves from that love. Alas, many have done so, and are now 'lovers of themselves', 'lovers of money', 'lovers of pleasure', but not 'lovers of God.' (2 Tim. 3:1-5)

God, though, wants us to know that the love we often search for in distorted ways, is supremely available 'at home', in and with him. Despite our waywardness, the Father is filled with compassion for us and moved with pity. His heart goes out to us, and he also feels the pain when we do not 'come home'.

Jesus, the embodiment of the Father's divine love, illustrates this dilemma with his words concerning Jerusalem: -

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, **but you were not willing.**" (Lk. 13:34)

As with the elder son, The Father will urge us, beseech us, and entreat us to come to him, but the decision to respond or not, is yours and mine.

The Centrality of Joy.

It is so important to enter into the joy of this parable. The shepherd who rejoices over the single lost sheep that is found and celebrates with friends and neighbours alike. The woman who does the same when she finds her lost coin. The Father who is glad and celebrates the return of his son. Let the festivities begin; it's party time!

In this dark world it is easy, I find, to lose this perspective. Henri Nouwen highlights the tension well: -

“When Jesus speaks about the world, he is very realistic. He speaks about wars and revolutions, earthquakes, plagues and famines, persecution and imprisonment, betrayal, hatred and assassinations. There is no suggestion at all that these signs of the world's darkness will ever be absent. But still, God's joy can be ours in the midst of it all. It is a joy of belonging to the household of God whose love is stronger than death and who empowers us to be in the world while already belonging to the kingdom of joy.” (3)

Something else I believe this parable teaches us is that it is so important to be able to rejoice over the seemingly small and insignificant. The shepherd rejoices over the 'one'; the woman rejoices over the 'one'; the father rejoices over the 'one'. The world tends to overlook the 'one' in favour of the 'many'. Even the Church can judge 'success' by numbers. Again, Nouwen has something important to say on this: -

“From God's perspective, one hidden act of repentance, one little gesture of selfless love, one moment of true forgiveness is all that is needed to bring God from his throne and fill the heavens with sounds of divine joy.” (3)

Some Final 'Food For Thought': -

- There are probably aspects of the pharisee, the teacher of the law, the sinner, the shepherd, the woman, the Father, the younger son and the elder brother in us all. We could place ourselves in any of their positions.
- God surely intends that we become more like Him. The younger prodigal son was wastefully lavish whereas God, the prodigal Father, was, and is, extravagantly lavish in grace, love, mercy and forgiveness. We are, therefore, called to mature and be transformed into his likeness; growing up from being sons and daughters to become parents ourselves, able to freely minister love, healing and forgiveness to all who come to us.

- It is important to remember that, as Henri Nouwen writes: “The joy of living the Christian life is its own reward whilst living it.” (3) If this is not true for us, we need to ask why not.
- Displaying self-righteousness and judgmentalism whilst at home in the Father’s house, can keep us away from the Father’s love every bit as much as living a dissolute, immoral life away from home.
- All of us need the embrace of a forgiving Father.
- We do not know how the elder brother responded to his Father’s invitation to join the party and return to the father’s house. The parable is left open-ended.
- Churches should examine themselves to see how much of the elder brother attitude exists among its leadership and membership and may be preventing the ‘prodigals’ from returning home and finding acceptance.

I once visited a cathedral in London for an important service and took a seat near the front. The cathedral was completely full, but suddenly a woman came up to where I was sitting and, jabbing her finger at me, said angrily, “I’ve been sitting in that seat for 40 years”, before storming off! If I had been a prodigal returning home to the Father’s house, that experience might have dissuaded me from ever returning, as may the experience of a visitor to a different church who was told after the service that she could have a cup of tea/ coffee but that the biscuits were only for Church members!

I believe we need to be preparing ourselves for the return of the prodigals. It was when the younger son ‘began to be in want’, ‘began to feel the pinch’, when there was a ‘severe famine in the whole country’, that he ‘came to his senses’ and decided he would be better off at home with his Father. Around the world, many are now feeling that same economic pinch with escalating food prices, gas prices, electricity prices, petrol prices etc.

The door is open for the prodigals to return home. We know what kind of reception the Father will give them. Will the other family members do the same?

George Irving – June 2022

(1) Wright, T., *Matthew for Everyone*, SPCK, 2002.

(2) Bailey, Kenneth E., *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*. SPCK, 2008.

(3) Nouwen, H., *The Return of the Prodigal Son – A Story of Homecoming*. Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 1994.