

**The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
New Canaan, Connecticut
Fall, 2008**

The Gospel of Luke

**VI: Luke 15:1-19:27
Lost and Found**

Lost Three Times Over

The first thing to notice about everybody's favorite parable, the Prodigal Son, is that it is the third of three parables that Jesus presents on the same occasion. Whatever we think Jesus may have "originally" meant by telling this story, Luke shows us quite clearly what he thinks is essential to the tale: the rejoicing in what has been lost and now is found.

In Luke the reason that Jesus tells this parable—and the parable of the sheep and of the coin—is that the Pharisees and scribes have seen Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners, and they are grumbling: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." (We remember the sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet at the home of Simon in 7:36-50.) We know from our own lives that there is a big difference between having a nodding acquaintance with someone and actually inviting that person over for a meal.

Each of these parables is told to exhort the Pharisees and scribes to stop grumbling and start rejoicing. In each case something very precious is lost and then found again. In each case the listener is invited to identify with the one who does the finding—the shepherd, the woman sweeping her house, the father...or is it the father?

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is not just brief metaphorical illustration of lostness and foundness—like the stories of the sheep and coin. It is a short, short story. With real characters; real conflict; and three people we could identify with.

We suspect that Luke wants the Pharisees and scribes to identify with the older brother, but most of us who read the story can find ourselves in each of the characters.

Remember that this is a parable and not an allegory. The Father is in some ways like God, but is not identified with God. The elder son reminds of the Pharisees, but he is not one. And the younger son is certainly not a tax collector and maybe not as big a sinner as his older brother thinks.

Notice these features of the story.

Everybody gets his turn.

The Father goes out twice, once to the younger brother and once to the older. But notice, too, that the father does go out. Gives up all his fatherly right to wait for the boys to come find him.

At the end of the story—to all eternity—we do not know whether the older brother went in to join the party or stayed outside, grumpily. Again the parable does not end with a rule but with the opportunity for choice.

This sense of parable as presenting possibilities rather than requirements is evident when Luke presents yet another parable. Remember that just after Jesus praises the Samaritan for doing good, he praises Mary, Martha's sister, for (apparently) doing nothing.

Luke 16:1-13. Now after implicitly criticizing the younger son for “wasting his belongings” Jesus tells a story that praises a steward for doing the same thing—the Greek phrase for squandering in Luke 15: 13 and Luke 16:2 is exactly the same.

Luke does not seem quite to know how to interpret the story Jesus tells. Unlike most parables, which end with one application, the story of the unjust steward ends with four. “The children of darkness are shrewder than the children of light.” “Make friends for yourselves by use of unrighteous mammon.” “Whoever is faithful in little is faithful in much,” and “you cannot serve God and mammon.”

Some commentators have argued that Jesus told this parable as a protest against unjust economic practices in his time. If so, Luke has “spiritualized” the story to say something about the faithful use of riches.

This is not the only passage in these chapters where Luke has Jesus address issues of poverty and wealth. In Luke 16:19-31 a rich man is concerned first for himself, second for his biological family, and not at all for Lazarus, the poor man at his gates. This parable does not seem counter-intuitive for Christian practice, as the story of the Unjust Steward does. At the end of that earlier parable Luke has Jesus tell us that we cannot serve both God and mammon. Now he suggests that one good way to serve God is to serve the person in distress. This is one of those passages that reinforces the suggestion that the Gospel of Luke is especially concerned with issues of wealth and poverty. Some have thought that it is written largely to encourage the poor; others that it is written largely to exhort those who are more wealthy. How we read it may depend in part on who we are.

Other significant themes in this section include instructions and encouragement related to prayer. Jesus prays consistently in Luke's Gospel and believers are instructed to do the same. In different ways we are reminded that if human beings can be nagged into hearing the pleas of the needy, surely the good God will hear the pleas of those who pray. (See Luke 11:1-13, 18:1-8)

In the story of the ten lepers, only one of whom returns to give thanks to Jesus, we are reminded of the two sided nature of redemption in Luke's Gospel. From God, forgiveness. From those who are forgiven, thanks. And having read Luke 10 we are quick to notice that the only thankful person is a Samaritan. (Luke 17:11-19)

Questions for discussion:

1. How do you understand the story of the Prodigal Son from the perspective of the younger brother, the older brother, the father?
2. What do we learn about Christians and wealth from the passages about the unjust steward and the rich man and Lazarus?

3. Jesus continually asserts that prayer affects the way the world goes—affects what God does. How do we understand this in our time and situation?

For Further Study:

John Nolland, “The Role of Money and Possessions in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 18:11-32),” in Craig G. Bartholomew, Joel B. Green, Anthony C. Thiselton, *Reading Luke: Interpretation, Reflection, Formation* (Scripture and Hermeneutics 7; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 178-209.

David Landry, “Honor Restored: New Light on the Parable of the Prudent Steward (Luke 16:1-8a),” *JBL* 119 (2000) 287-309

Timothy A. Friedrichsen, “The Temple, a Pharisee, a Tax Collector, and the Kingdom of God: Reading a Jesus Parable (Luke 18:10-14a),” *JBL* 124 (2005) 89-119

William Herzog, “A Weapon of the Weak: The Parable of the Dishonest Steward (Luke 16:1-9),” in idem, *Parables as Subversive Speech* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 233-58.

