What comes to mind when you hear the word "sinner"?[1]
What things of value have you lost or misplaced recently?
What emotions do you feel when you find a valuable item that was lost?

Read: Luke 15:1-10

Is there anything that you find surprising in these parables?

Note to leaders

It is likely that you have heard these parables preached many times, and they may feel boringly familiar. If so, you could just focus on the questions and dip into the notes. Or you could use these two parables as an exercise in how to interpret a parable. See the notes at the end, 'Principles for Interpreting Parables', and then apply these to the parables. You should, hopefully, find most of the answers through the notes.

Where are we in Luke

We are still in Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51-19:27). We have said that the Journey to Jerusalem section is also known as the Gospel for the Outcast, and the whole of chapter 15 picks up on this theme.

Context and Introduction

The previous verse finishes with Jesus saying, 'Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.' (14:35). And in 15:1 we see that tax collectors and sinners 'were all gathering around to hear Jesus.' This leads to some grumbling from the Pharisees and scribes over whom Jesus keeps company with. This is not the first time Jesus has been criticized for this (see Luke 5:30) and the tense used (periphrastic imperfect) suggests that it is Jesus' general behavior that is being criticized, rather than one particular incident.[2]
The parables that follow are a response to those who were grumbling, and also criticism of attitude of the Pharisees and scribes.

Cultural Background

Tax Collectors (15:1)

Tax Collectors were viewed negatively almost across the board. In Hellenistic and Roman literature, they are grouped with beggars, thieves and robbers. In the New Testament they are paired with sinners (Luke 7:34) and likened to Gentiles (see Matt

[1] Some questions in this study taken from *Adult Questions for LESSONmaker* (Lk 15:1–7) & (Lk 15:8–10) (Logos, 2024
[2] John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34,* WBC 35B (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1193), 770.

18:17). In Rabbinic literature, tax collectors appear in lists of 'despised trades' that no observant Jew should follow.[3]

On top of that, they were despised by Jews for (1) collecting money for the occupying foreign power; (2) They were also notoriously unscrupulous, gaining wealth at the expense of their own people; (3) They were in regular contact with Gentiles thus rendering themselves ritually unclean.[4]

Sinners (15:1-2)

In the NT, in addition to its normal meaning (one who sins), the pharisees would also have used the term sinner for those who didn't follow the ceremonial rules
As to how sinners were to be treated, later Rabbinic tradition states: 'Man does not join himself to a wicked man, not even to approach him with the Torah (to study the Torah).'[5]

Meals (15:2)

Table fellowship anywhere in the world is a relatively serious matter. This is especially true in the Middle East. In his most recent statement Jeremias says,

> To understand what Jesus was doing in eating with "sinners," it is important to realize that in the east, even today, to invite a man to a meal was an honour. It was an offer of peace, trust, brotherhood and forgiveness; in short, sharing a table meant sharing life.... Thus Jesus' meals with the publicans and sinners... are an expression of the mission and message of Jesus (Mark 2:17), eschatological meals, anticipatory celebrations of the feast in the end-time (Matt. 8.11 par.), in which the community of the saints is already being represented (Mark 2.19). The inclusion of sinners in the community of salvation, achieved in table-fellowship, is the most meaningful expression of the message of the redeeming love of God.

…it is little wonder that Jesus' table fellowship with sinners offended the cultural and theological sensitivities of the Pharisees. The importance of the issue for both Jesus and his opposition is reflected in the fulness of his defense recorded in Luke 15:4-32.[6]

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[3] J.R. Donahue, "Tax Collector" in D. N. Freedman (Ed.), *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), Vol. 6, 337–338

[4] D.A. Hagner, "Tax Collector" in G. W. Bromiley (Ed.), *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans ,1979–1988), Vol. 4, 742).

[5] Merchilta 57b on Exodus 18:1. H. L., Strack & P. Billerbeck, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud & Midrash* (2022). J. N. Cerone, Ed.; A. Bowden & J. Longarino, Trans. (Lexham Press, 2022), Vol. 2, 244.

[6] Kenneth E. Bailey *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (United Kingdom: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983) Poet & Peasant 142-143. Quoting Joachim Jeremias Theology of the New Testament (New York: Scribner, 1971), 115.

Questions

What might Christians do today that would make non-Christians ask in surprise, "Why in the world are you doing that?" just as the Pharisees asked about Jesus' parties?[7]

What might Christians do today that would make other Christians ask in surprise, "Why in the world are you doing that?" just as the Pharisees asked about Jesus' parties?

The Parables

There are three parables with similar themes here, the lost sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal son, bookended by an *inclusio* of sorts, with the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes in verses 1-2 and with the grumbling of the elder brother in verse 29-30.[8]

The first two parables are a male and female pairing (the male shepherd and the woman with the lost coin), one of Luke's tendencies. Luke frequently pairs accounts dealing with both men and women. This is part of a Lukan strategy to underscore the role of women and Jesus' relation to them.[9]
As the first two parables are so similar, we will treat them together in the notes.

Note also the progression through the three parables, from 100 sheep to 10 coins to 2 sons.

The twin pillars of the first two parables are seeking and joy, with the emphasis on the joy at finding the lost sheep/coin.

The two parables here, the lost sheep and the lost coin, are both interrogative parables. They are phrased as a question and expect an answer.

They are both *a fortiori* arguments, with the logic from the lesser to the greater. If such and such is true with human beings, how much more so would it be with God.

Jesus starts both parables with a question: 'Which one of you…' and 'Or what woman having ten silver coins' (NRSV). Where questions like this are asked elsewhere in the Gospels the expected answer is always 'No'. Since the first question is asked as a negative, the expected answer would be something like 'No one – any shepherd would leave the ninety-nine to find the one'.

[7] Some questions in this study taken from T. Wright, & P. Pell, *Luke: 26 Studies for Individuals or Groups* (London: SPCK, 2011), 94).
[8] K. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Eerdmans, 2008), 95.
[9] Snodgrass, 112.

> The force of the parable comes from the challenge to each to recognize that were the loss one's own, one's behavior would be quite the same as that described in the parable. Though the man pictured has ninety-nine other sheep, it is quite natural that he should give a disproportionate share of his attention and concern to the one that is lost.[10]
>
> The logic of the parable is this: If, as surely you would agree, a shepherd will go after a lost sheep and rejoice when he finds it, how much more will God search for a lost/strayed person and rejoice when he recovers that person?[11]

Likewise with the parable of the lost coin the expected answer is, 'any woman would search for the lost coin'.

Cultural Background

Shepherds (15:3-6)

One hundred sheep would mean the shepherd or owner was of modest means. A flock of three hundred sheep was considered a large flock.[12]

Shepherding was a despised profession. Later Rabbinic tradition states:

> *Midr. Ps.* 23.2: "R. Jose bar Ḥanina taught: In the whole world you find no occupation more despised than that of the shepherd, who all his days walks about with his staff and his pouch. Yet David presumed to call the Holy One, blessed be He, a shepherd!" (which is explained from Gen 48:15). *m. Qiddušin* 4.14 assumes that shepherds are robbers because they lead sheep onto other people's lands, *b. Sanhedrin* 25b lists herdsmen among those ineligible to be witnesses and associates them with tax collectors, and *b. Baba Qamma* 94b says that it is difficult for shepherds to repent and make resitution.[13]

Yet throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the image of the shepherd is used for God's care for his people. In particular, read: Ezekiel 34:1-31

> Ezekiel 34 mentions sheep wandering on the mountains and hills (v. 6) and says that God himself will search for his sheep (v. 11), care for them (v. 16), judge their oppressors (vv. 17, 20, and 22), and set a Davidic shepherd over them to care for them (vv. 23–24). In addition, God will judge the shepherds who have failed to care for the sheep. Other texts have the same thoughts and hopes that God will shepherd his people and/or appoint a Davidic deliverer to shepherd them. Ezekiel 34 is only one of several texts carrying this shepherd theology. Whether the connection is to Ezekiel 34 or to the larger shepherd tradition cannot be determined with certainty, but at the very least the parable

[10] Nolland, 773.
[11] Snodgrass, 107.
[12] Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53* BECNT (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1996), 1300.
[13] Snodgrass, 102.

has been framed on the OT shepherd tradition which Ezekiel 34 expresses so forcefully.[14]

Coins (15:8-9)

A drachma is a Greek silver coin, roughly equivalent to a Roman denarius – about a laborer's daily wage.

Question

What would you do? Would you act like the shepherd or the woman in the parables?

A cautionary note

It is tempting with parables to try and identify what each item/person represents. In particular, we need to avoid allegorizing in our interpretation. See 'Principles for Interpreting Parables' at the end of the notes.[15] But not everything in the parable is a symbol for something or stands for something – sometimes they are just a part of the story. For example, the parable of the lost sheep is not saying that the 99 were left alone. With 100 sheep it is possible that there was another shepherd. But even so, that is not the point of the parable[16] and to focus on that would be trying to make the parable say something the parable isn't saying.

> This parable is not saying that God is a shepherd, nor do the following parables make God a woman or a father. These parables are implied *analogies.* The actions and attitudes portrayed—not the people themselves—mirror the actions and attitude of God. The parable of the Lost Sheep is an analogical "how much more argument." The shepherd is not God, Jesus, or anyone else, and the sheep is not a person or group. These figures reside in and stay in the story. Certainly the mountains/wilderness and the friends do not "stand for something." At the same time, images selected for stories are not chosen at random; they are specifically chosen to set off resonances, and reference to a shepherd and sheep would bring to mind the OT use of these images for God, leaders, and hope for God's people. [17]

What is revealed about the character of God is the value he places on even the least deserving and the care he extends to such people. God is not passive, waiting for people to approach him after they get their lives in order. He is the seeking God who takes the initiative to bring people back, regardless of how "lost" they are[18]

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[14] Snodgrass, 105-106.

[15] A bad example of allegory would be Augustine on the parable of the Good Samaritan, where, the man going down to Jericho is Adam, the robbers are the devil and his angels, stripping him is robbing him of his immortality, and beating him is convincing him to sin etc. Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules,* 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2011), 160-161.

[16] besides, there is no mention of abandonment in the other two parables.

[17] Snodgrass, 107.

[18] Snodgrass, 109.

Verses 7 and 10 give the application of the parable – God, like the shepherd and like the woman, takes special delight in the restoration of a sinner who has been lost from his people.

> Joy deserves focus as the true mark of Christianity, for it is directly connected with the theological awareness of the character and attitude of God as one who seeks and celebrates recovery.[19]

The parables also act as a defense of Jesus' behavior, and by extension, a criticism of the grumblers. Jesus is doing the work of God, or the messianic figure of Ezekiel 34. Where the religious authorities have failed to do so, Jesus is taking the role of a shepherd of Israel.[20]

Questions

Do you relate to anyone in today's reading? Have you lost something? Or have been lost and found? Do you relate to the Pharisees and scribes?
How do the themes of sorrowful losing and joyful discovering play out in each parable?[21]
How do the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin (vv. 3–10) illustrate the differences in what "repentance" meant to Jesus and to the Pharisees?
What role does "grumbling" play in both the story and story's audience?
What effect would these stories have had on the repentant sinners who heard them?

Summary

Implicitly, these are both kingdom parables:

> Both parables function the same way. Both assume the presence of the kingdom and that in Jesus' ministry God is at work to redeem his people and to fulfill his promises to restore Israel. Both present a defense of Jesus' association with tax collectors and sinners and show that those complaining about his actions reveal their lack of understanding of God's attitude and actions. God is the diligent searcher, the one who takes the initiative to recover what is his. He gives no grudging or hesitant acceptance of sinners but eagerly seeks them and finds cause to celebrate at their recovery. The kingdom comes with limitless grace, even for those that others denigrate.[22]

Questions

How does the picture of "rejoicing in heaven" over repentance make you feel?
How can these stories help you cultivate your own Christlike response to the "tax collectors and sinners" you know?

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[19] Snodgrass, 110. Snodgrass mentions a quote from Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf which I love: 'The essence of Christianity does not consist in being pious but in being joyous'
[20] Snodgrass, 105-106.
[21] Some questions in this study taken from Scott McKnight, *Luke*, New Testament Everyday Bible Study Series (Grand Rapids, Michigan: HarperChristian Resources, 2023), 246.
[22] Snodgrass, 115-116.

Principles for Interpreting Parables[23]

1. A parable usually only has 1 major point

- sometimes 2 but mainly 1
- Remember that the parables are first and foremost stories and not a collection of doctrinal propositions

2. Identify the type of parable and its main theme

- Form of parable – eg: similitude, metaphor
- Category – eg: growth, conflict, delay

3. Clarify cultural points of reference for the first hearers

- What would the first hearers have understood
- As parables were drawn from everyday life in Palestine, it is important to understand the background
- Any interpretation that does not breathe the air of the first century cannot be correct. That requires listening in a context not our own and presumes some familiarity with that context[24]
- Is there a twist? A surprise?

4. Identify the Original Audience being Addressed

- Three main audiences
  - the crowds
  - the disciples
  - opponents

Parables were told to capture the audience.

> Context is a determiner of meaning—in the end the only determiner of meaning, for words themselves have only possible meanings apart from context. If the goal is to hear the voice of Jesus, some other context cannot work. If we place parables in contexts of our choosing, we change them into something other than Jesus' communicative intent.[25]

5. Guidelines for Arriving at the Parables Main Point

a. Who are the main characters

b. What occurs at the end

[23] Mostly based on NT Introduction Lectures by C.D. Marshall (Bible College of New Zealand, 1992). With some additional material from lectures by Robert Stein, and Lectures by Douglas Stuart. Also, Snodgrass' book on parables is fantastic.
[24] Snodgrass, 25.
[25] Snodgrass, 26.

c. What appears in direct discourse

d. Who gets the most space

6. Interpret the parable in relation to Jesus' broader perspective on KoG

- Inaugurated eschatology
- Jesus' role as Bearer of the Kingdom
- Kingdom Ethics
- Kingdom as both divine and human performance – assertion of what God is doing and call for response

7. Avoid Illegitimate Allegorization

- We should only give allegorical interpretations to the elements in the story that Jesus intended to be understood allegorically
- Not everything in a parable stands for something
- What would the first hearers have understood?
- The concern in parable interpretation is not "What does this element stand for?" or "How many correspondences are there?" even though correspondences may exist and may be identified. … They picture actual realities *partly,* but are intended to make people think and question and often do so through hyperbole, surprise, and *inexactness*. …
  They picture actual realities *partly,* but are intended to make people think and question and often do so through hyperbole, surprise, and *inexactness*. A point in a parable may be intended, *not* to mirror theological realities, but to force reflection and analysis. …
  Analogies have correspondences by necessity, but understanding parables results usually from obvious givens in the analogy or from a flash of insight given in a revealing statement (such as Nathan's "You are the man"), not from deducing correspondences. The more you spend time trying to deduce correspondences the more likely you will miss the force of the parable.[26]

8. Interpret what is given, not what is omitted or not mentioned.

- Any attempt to interpret a parable based on what is not there is almost certainly wrong.[27]

9. Note how each evangelist employs the parable in his narrative

- Eg: Mark likes nature parables in OT style
- Luke has many parables of delay, prayer, money
- Lost sheep in Matthew compared to Luke

  Compare Matthew 18:10-14 to Luke 15:1-7. See how the parables have quite different meanings in the different contexts.

[26] Snodgrass, 27.
[27] Snodgrass, 29.