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## Luke Chapter 15

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**Abstract:** A commentary on the events of Luke 15, accompanied by parallel columns of the King James translation of the chapter alongside a new rendition.



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# Luke Chapter 15

## INTRODUCTION

A provisional title for this chapter—“Lost and Found”—emerges from the Savior’s stories about loss and recovery, hope and rescue. But adorning it with the title “Discipleship Continued” also presents a brightly textured tapestry that draws its rich colors from chapter 14. For, in a very graphic sense, the stories about the lost sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal son concern the cost that a person pays to hold onto what he or she has either received from the Master or otherwise acquired. Jesus’ stories in the prior chapter knit together a fabric picture about counting the cost before taking action (see 14:28–32). His stories in chapter 15 point not to becoming a disciple, but to retaining the blessings of discipleship. In each of the three stories in chapter 15, it is worth all of the effort to find what is lost, for it brings joy and rejoicing to those who recover it.

On the negative side, it is important to observe that, in the case of the prodigal son, he does not reacquire his legal place in his father’s household as a land owner.<sup>1</sup> Rather, he effectively returns as a servant in his brother’s household (though he will certainly not remain as such) where he earlier stood as a co-inheritor of the estate. Notably, the place—his home—of his earlier life is so attractive and comfortable that he is willing to reattach himself to it under any circumstance. Such a story carries meaning for our ultimate eternal homes wherein a “fallen” person will eventually do anything to be rejoined to a celestial home.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus weaves this theme of home into the fabric of two of the three stories in this chapter. The woman who loses her valued coin searches and cleans her home to recover it, drawing attention on a figurative level to the

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1. Jeremias, *Parables*, 128–29; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1087.

2. Robert L. Millet, *When a Child Wanders* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1996), 109–35.

home as a place where we look for and find what has ultimate value. Such efforts require that we “sweep the house” (15:8), that we make our homes places of spiritual and physical cleanliness, places where joyous celebrations can occur with family and friends (see 15:9). Further, the parable of the Prodigal Son exhibits the bright threads of home and family in almost every verse, beginning with the opening statement, “A certain man had two sons,” and continuing to the last words of the loving, forgiving father, “this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found” (15:11, 32). Jesus’ illumination of light and dark threads that, when woven together, portray home and family life matches what we find elsewhere in Luke’s report—home and family stand at the top of Jesus’ concerns (see the Notes on 3:8–9; 6:48–49; the Analysis on 11:14–28; and the introduction to chapter 14).

In this connection, one of the significant questions concerns the ultimate fate of a lost child, a lost soul. Jesus poignantly sews together this topic in the story of the prodigal son. Concerning this issue, Brigham Young once said, “I learned a long while ago not to die because my children go wrong. It has been revealed to me that every child and descendant will come to me some time, somewhere. What causes me great sorrow, however, is to know what some of them will have to go through before they get back.”<sup>3</sup>

In a related sense, Jesus subtly joins both men and women within the enclosure of his kingdom, changing the contemporary social and legal landscape. For his first two illustrations concern a man and a woman, both of whom behave as he wishes all of us to behave. This pairing of the man who looks for his sheep and the woman who seeks her lost coin continues a pattern found elsewhere in Luke’s Gospel where a man and woman stand together in significant contexts. On the basis of what we read in 13:18–21 especially, we see that Jesus welcomes women on the same level as men. Virtually all legal and social norms in ancient Near Eastern societies are and have been for millennia weighted in favor of men. Jesus changes that (see the Notes on 13:19 and 13:21; the Analysis on 13:18–21).

A further matter of how Jesus interprets the stories arises. To be sure, he places his emphasis on the one who is found, that is, the one who repents, rather than the one who finds (see 15:7, 10, 32). And this forms the primary meaning. Even so, the concept that blessings come to the one who

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3. Susa Young Gates, *The Life Story of Brigham Young* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), 370.

rediscovers, and thereby holds onto, a treasured possession is also woven into the fabric of these stories.

Another important coloration concerns the juxtaposition of property and personal relationships. Jesus’ sensitive portrayal of these dimensions of life, particularly in the parable of the prodigal son, underlines the frequent and pesky difficulty of separating the one from the other (see 12:13–15). Our property and tightly formed human relationships are often the most highly prized possessions in this life, as the prior chapter also underlines, and, without a refining, orienting, celestial perspective, they can distort our view of eternity (see 14:15–24).

Finally, there is the matter of property itself.<sup>4</sup> In my view, Luke happily preserves such stories as an illustration of his own new view of the correct ordering of life’s values. By accepting Christ, Luke has gone through a change of heart that leads him to a proper sense of where property fits within worldly and eternal schemes. By retelling these stories Luke effectively bears his testimony about both his change of heart and his reordering of priorities.

## TABLE FELLOWSHIP WITH SINNERS (15:1–2)

### King James Translation

1 Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. 2 And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.

### New Rendition

1 And all the publicans and sinners were drawing near to him to listen to him. 2 And the scribes and Pharisees began to murmur, saying that, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

### Notes

**15:1 *all the publicans and sinners*:** On prior occasions, Jesus receives such persons into his company (see 5:29–30; 7:29), as does the Baptist (see 3:12; 7:29, 34), even sharing meals with them (see 5:27–30). He will tell the following stories in part to justify his reception of the outcasts and

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4. I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, 3d ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 142–43, 206.

the lost.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, his willingness to receive such people—those who hold despised and dishonorable employment and therefore are stripped of certain civil rights, and those who have led immoral lives—form a living parable wherein his actions toward them match his words.<sup>6</sup>

**to hear:** The intensity of the verb here (Greek *akouō*) arises because such people—“publicans and sinners”—do not enjoy access to the word of God that is heard in synagogue services where scripture is read aloud (see Acts 15:21).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in its sense of hearing and obeying, the verb stands opposite to that of murmuring (see 15:2).<sup>8</sup>

**15:2 the Pharisees and scribes:** Such people will constitute Jesus’ primary audience for the following three stories. We ask, Why does Jesus choose this audience for these stories? Further, what is the point of preserving the following complaint by Pharisees about Jesus? In answer, their adherence to strict food laws makes Jesus’ eating customs reprehensible.<sup>9</sup> Beyond this, their complaint frames the point of the next three stories, recovery of the lost (see 15:7, 10, 32). Incidentally, Luke is consistent in portraying food concerns from one group of Pharisees to the next, one in Galilee (see 5:30) and this one nearer Judea.

**murmured:** The verb (Greek *diagonguzō*) stands in the imperfect tense and may therefore feature a steady, persistent grumbling, “kept murmuring,” or if we read the imperfect as inchoative, “began to murmur” (see 5:30; 19:7).<sup>10</sup> More than this, the verb ties back to the Exodus and the constant murmuring of the Israelites against Moses and the Lord, effectively painting the Pharisees and scribes with the same brush (see LXX Ex. 15:24; 16:2, 7–8; 17:3; Num. 14:2, 36; 16:11; Deut. 1:27).<sup>11</sup> Their murmuring contrasts sharply with the willingness of the publicans and sinners “to hear” Jesus (see the Note on 15:1). Notably, all the passages from the book of Exodus have to do with drinking and eating, activities that invite ritual cleanness concerns among Pharisees and scribes.

**This man:** The term is emphatic and expresses a hissing derision against Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

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5. Jeremias, *Parables*, 128, 132.

6. Jeremias, *Parables*, 132, 227.

7. Levine, *Ancient Synagogue*, 343–47.

8. *TDNT*, 1:217–20, 729.

9. Neusner, *Glory of God Is Intelligence*, 20–28.

10. Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, §§1790, 1890–94, 1900, 2341; BAGD, 181; Blass and Debrunner, *Greek Grammar*, §§327, 325.

11. *TDNT*, 1:730; Green, *Luke*, 571.

12. Morris, *Luke*, 260.

***receiveth sinners, and eateth with them:*** The protestations of the Pharisees and scribes unwittingly bear witness that Jesus’ actions mirror his teachings. The fact that he shares his table with outcasts means that he fully embraces them—his actions mean much more than kind words and respectful greetings, no matter the setting.

***eateth with them:*** The complaint about eating ties back to the prior chapter, wherein Jesus not only joins a group for a meal but also talks a good deal about meals, making the point that one shares one’s table with all (see 14:12–14, 21–23). As a connector, of course, this concept of sharing links not only to the implicit allusions in the stories to eating as a celebrating act in this chapter (see 15:6, 9, 29 [“make merry”], 32) but also to the explicit references to foods and eating (see 15:14–17, 23–24, 27, 29–30, 32). As noted above, Jesus strings together this series of stories as a broad response of sorts to the Pharisees’ restrictive concern about foods. The eating situations that Jesus describes, particularly in celebrations, arise rather spontaneously and thus are open to defilement, especially from guests, as the Pharisees define that idea (see the Note on 11:38). Another link lies in Jesus as host both in the prior chapter and here. These stories that talk about food and eating at celebratory meals allow Jesus to show that he is the divine host who by right sets out proper and improper action.

## Analysis

In a brief two verses, Luke leads readers inside a world that jangles and jostles over food matters. For the Pharisees and their scribes, eating customs are paramount for conferring an aura of holiness on their homes and creating a temple-like atmosphere therein. Such practices extend from the dutiful tithing of each sprig of parsley (see 11:42; 18:12) to the proper preparation of foods and their containers (see 11:39; Mark 7:4), to a ritual washing before meals (see the Note on 11:38; Mark 7:2–7), and to an avoidance of sharing one’s table with unsuitable guests who, because of uncleanness, would render the table unclean and its foods inedible (see the Notes on 8:43, 47; the Analysis on 8:43–48).<sup>13</sup> In this light, home stands at center stage. The main issues of conflict, of course, pivot on who the guest is and the guest’s state of ritual cleanness. For the Savior, every person is welcome no matter the circumstance.

As proof that Jesus’ welcoming embrace literally reaches all, in his prior teaching he wraps his merciful clasp around “the poor, the maimed, the

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13. Schürer, *History*, 2:400; Neusner, *Glory of God Is Intelligence*, 20–28.

lame, the blind” as well as those from “the streets and lanes of the city” and “the highways” outside the town, potentially sweeping Gentiles into his inviting grasp (14:13, 21, 23). Now he stretches himself toward “the publicans and sinners” (15:1). The first group, “the publicans,” of course, consists of tax collectors. But it also represents all who find themselves in despised occupations, including “shepherds, donkey-drivers, pedlars, and tanners.”<sup>14</sup> The second group, “sinners,” holds up those who lead immoral lives such as harlots, adulterers and swindlers, people who stand condemned and ostracized from their societies (see 18:11).<sup>15</sup> Such people Jesus not only allows to share his table but warmly invites them to join. In this remarkable sense, his actions become the vivid, concrete demonstration of his teachings, as they have from the beginning of his ministry (see 5:29–31). In a word, he teaches by his elevated and elevating examples.

## PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP (15:3–7) (Compare Matt. 18:12–14)

### King James Translation

3 And he spake this parable unto them, saying, 4 What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? 5 And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 6 And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. 7 I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.

### New Rendition

3 And he told them this parable, saying, 4 “What man among you who has one hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety and nine behind in the wilderness and set out after the lost one until he finds it? 5 And when he finds it, he places it upon his shoulders with joy. 6 And when he comes back to his house, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’ 7 I say to you that there will be this kind of joy in heaven over one sinner repenting more than over ninety-nine righteous who need no repentance.”

14. Jeremias, *Parables*, 132–33; also Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 303–13.

15. Jeremias, *Parables*, 132.

## Notes

**15:3 *this parable*:** For the observation that a parable is a story that “presents one single point of comparison,”<sup>16</sup> see the Notes on 4:23, 5:36 and 8:4.

***unto them*:** Jesus directs the following parable, and the other two in this chapter, to the murmuring Pharisees and scribes. To be sure, others are in his audience, but he aims his words mainly at them.

**15:4 *having an hundred sheep*:** Though this number may represent “a medium-sized flock,”<sup>17</sup> Jesus’ language points to the owner, not to a hired shepherd whom people typically reckon as holding a despised job (see the Notes on 15:1, 6; and the Analysis on 15:1–2).

***if he lose one of them*:** The verb (Greek *apollumi*) regularly describes loss (see 5:37; 9:24; 15:8, 24, 32; 17:33; 19:10).<sup>18</sup> Jesus’ words here paint the scene wherein a shepherd or owner counts the sheep when leading them to the sheepcote for the night.<sup>19</sup> Hence, the search for the lost sheep occurs very late in the day, even into the night, indicating the owner’s unshaken determination to recover the lost one.

***in the wilderness*:** Jesus’ hearers know that the owner does not abandon the ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness, or even in the sheepcote, while hunting for the missing sheep. Rather, he will leave them in the care of another owner or shepherd whose flock shares the sheepcote (see 2:8; John 10:4–5). The term *wilderness* here simply refers to the hill country where sheep typically graze.<sup>20</sup> In an interesting twist, the Joseph Smith Translation reads, “leave the ninety and nine, and go into the wilderness after that which is lost,” indicating that the owner safely secures the flock before looking for the lost sheep (JST 15:4).

***until he find it*:** The principle is that the owner or master never gives up (see 15:8; 3 Ne. 18:32; the Note on 15:24). Luke alone preserves this clause; Matthew 18:12 does not repeat it, raising questions about how much the two versions of the parable share.

**15:5 *he layeth it on his shoulders*:** The image is one of the owner carrying a tired sheep that is unable to follow its master back to the sheepcote. Hence, the owner is rescuing one of the weaker sheep of the flock and

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16. Dodd, *Parables*, 18; also Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 295–99; Plummer, *Luke*, 125–26; *TDOT*, 9:64–67; *TDNT*, 5:744–61.

17. Jeremias, *Parables*, 133–34.

18. BAGD, 94–95.

19. Jeremias, *Parables*, 133.

20. Jeremias, *Parables*, 133; Marshall, *Luke*, 601.



thereby exhibits his genuine concern for the safety and well-being of the feeble and weak.<sup>21</sup>

**15:6 *he calleth together his friends and neighbors*:** Although not explicit, Jesus' words assume a celebratory meal, over which the owner is the host, thus picking up the references to such meals in the larger context (see 14:1, 8, 12–13, 16–24; 15:2, 9, 23, 27, 32).

***my sheep*:** The possessive adjective demonstrates that the seeker is the owner, the master, not a hired shepherd. This fact points to the account in Ezekiel 34, and more distantly to Jeremiah 31:10–21, wherein the Lord himself goes looking for his own sheep and rescues them.

**15:7 *joy . . . over one sinner*:** Jesus repeats these same words in 15:10. He draws his lesson from a very modest pair of individuals, a common sheep owner and an ordinary woman for whom each possession is precious. One lesson, of course, is that God is a one-by-one caretaker, as are these two persons.

***joy shall be . . . more*:** Does heaven really rejoice more over sinners who repent than over those who remain true and faithful (see also 15:10)? Possibly. This notion lies at the base of the father's rejoicing for his prodigal son who returns (see 15:20, 22–24, 32). On the other hand, what is in it for the one who remains true and faithful? In response, first, the "joy . . . in heaven" does not seem to spell out a real reward. Second, the answer arises from the response of the father to his faithful son, "all that I have is thine" (15:31), words that he does not speak to his wayward son. Even so, heaven rejoices over the repentant soul (see D&C 62:3). A reader also observes that Jesus may have spoken in irony the words about the "ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance." For all need repentance. Those who "need no repentance" are those who, only in their own minds, do not.

## Analysis

The Savior draws on a common occurrence—loss of a sheep from a flock—to make an uncommon point: recovering the lost draws the happy attention of heaven. In stark contrast comes a saying from the Rabbis, the spiritual descendants of the Pharisees and scribes, that characterizes sinners as nettlesome, loathsome creatures: "There is joy before God when those who provoke Him perish from the world."<sup>22</sup> For his part, Jesus' concern for lost souls breathes the same air that wafts through Ezekiel's prophecy

21. Jeremias, *Parables*, 134; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1077.

22. Edersheim, *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 2:256.

about the Lord's future attempts to recover his wandering people. Ezekiel's words paint a picture of leaders who, rather than taking care of the Lord's flock, "feed themselves" and "with force and with cruelty have [they] ruled them" (Ezek. 34:2, 4). Because the "shepherds" shirk their responsibility for the sheep, the Lord's "flock was scattered upon all the face of the earth, and none did search or seek after them." As a result, and in a passage that is saturated with first-person pronouns—I, my, mine—the Lord declares that "I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out" and "I will feed my flock . . . [and] I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away" (Ezek. 34:6, 11, 15–16). The compassion and love of the Lord for his sheep are mirrored plainly in Jesus' actions toward and stories about the lost.

Because Matthew repeats a similar story about a sheep lost from a flock of one hundred, a question arises about the relationship of the two accounts (see Matt. 18:12–14). For some scholars, the two stories arise from a common stock that the respective Gospel authors have reshaped extensively.<sup>23</sup> For others, the parables are similar, but not similar enough to posit a common source.<sup>24</sup> Instead, a person is justified in seeing Jesus telling similar stories on different occasions to make a fresh point. Besides, from the beginning of chapter 13 through the midpoint of chapter 18, a full five and one-half chapters, only small portions from Luke's report are paralleled in those of Matthew and Mark.<sup>25</sup> Plainly, Luke has tapped into sources, whether written or oral, that enrich his account in memorable ways.

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23. Bultmann, *History*, 171; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1073–74.

24. Beare, *Earliest Records of Jesus*, 178; Marshall, *Luke*, 600; McConkie, *DNTC*, 1:508.

25. Parable of the mustard seed (Matt. 13:31–32; Mark 4:30–32; Luke 13:18–19); exclusion from the kingdom (Matt. 7:13–14, 22–23; 8:11–12; Luke 13:22–30); lament over Jerusalem (Matt. 23:37–39; Luke 13:34–35); parable of the great supper (Matt. 22:1–14; Luke 14:15–24); conditions of discipleship (Matt. 10:37–38; Luke 14:25–33); parable on salt (Matt. 5:13; Mark 9:49–50; Luke 14:34–35); parable of the lost sheep (Matt. 18:12–14; Luke 15:3–7); two masters (Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13); law of Moses (Matt. 5:18; 11:12–13; Luke 16:16–17); statement on divorce (Matt. 19:9; Mark 10:11–12; Luke 16:18); offenses and repentance (Matt. 18:6–7; 18:15, 21–22; Luke 17:1–4); increasing disciples' faith (Matt. 17:19–21; Mark 9:28–29; Luke 17:5–6); the day of the Son of Man (Matt. 24:17–18, 23, 26–27, 28, 37–39, 40–41; Mark 13:19–23, 14–16; Luke 17:22–37).

## PARABLE OF THE LOST COIN (15:8–10)

### King James Translation

8 Either what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it? 9 And when she hath found it, she calleth her friends and her neighbours together, saying, Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece which I had lost. 10 Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.

### New Rendition

8 “Or what woman having ten drachmas, if she should lose one drachma, does not kindle a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 And upon finding it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found the drachma which I lost.’ 10 So, I say to you, there will be joy among the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

### Notes

**15:8 *ten pieces of silver*:** This coin is the Greek *drachma*, the rough equivalent of the Roman *denarius*, and represents the pay for a full day’s work in most parts of the Roman Empire.<sup>26</sup> But there may be more than meets the eye in this story. One dimension that makes sense is the woman receives this coin from her husband at the time of their wedding. Women are known to have worn such coins in their scarves as an indicator of their marriage.<sup>27</sup> Hence, the coin may be tied to her own self-identity as a married woman and, perhaps, as a mother, illustrating its high personal value (see Isa. 49:18; 61:10; Jer. 2:32). Presumably, the value of the coin is less than the cost of hosting her gathered friends.

***light a candle*:** She is lighting a wick that sticks out of a clay lamp (see the Notes on 8:16 and 11:33). Even though the amount of light is little, it will help her examine the corners of her dark home which may not have any windows, especially if it is built along the outside, defensive wall of her town and then shares sidewalls with other homes.<sup>28</sup>

***sweep the house, and seek diligently*:** Jesus portrays a poor woman who, living in a home with a dirt floor, examines every surface for her valued coin.

26. Marshall, *Luke*, 603; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1081; Schürer, *History*, 2:64–65.

27. Jeremias, *Parables*, 134–35.

28. John S. Holladay Jr., “House, Israelite,” in *ABD*, 3:309–10.

**15:9 *she calleth*:** The verb (Greek *sun kaleō*), the same as in 15:6, though not common, carries the meaning of inviting guests to a meal, besides that of summoning people to a council, which cannot be the meaning here.<sup>29</sup>

***friends and . . . neighbors*:** The friends and neighbors are women, as the Greek feminine definite article before “friends” illustrates.

## Analysis

Continuing a pattern since chapter 13, Luke offers another teaching of the Savior that no other writer preserves, enhancing his record all the more. Moreover, Jesus’ story about the lost coin fits within a now-established pattern of emphasizing the rescue, mainly his mission to rescue. He has not come on his journey chiefly to make people feel good, or to bring them to reconsider their political and social environment, though his words occasionally carry this latter point (see the Analysis on 14:12–14 and the Note on 20:25). He has come primarily to offer deliverance, to proffer redemption. And he brings us inside a woman’s home to make his point, emphasizing the home as a place of discovery and recovery. For it is here that family members find what matters most in their lives. What is more, and different, as the stories of the lost sheep and lost coin demonstrate, the individual weighs much on an eternal scale—“there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one” (15:10; see also 3 Ne. 11:15; 17:21; 18:36; 28:12).

Commentators are correct in drawing attention to the woman’s poor condition in contrast to the moderately well-off owner of the sheep, who possesses a flock of one hundred. But the fact that Luke pairs the two stories, a feature likely from his source, continues a visible, singular pattern of pushing women forward in companion stories throughout his Gospel, beginning with Zacharias and Mary and continuing with Simeon and Anna (see 1:5–38; 2:25–38; 4:25–27, 33–39; 7:1–15; 8:1–3, 26–56; the Notes on 13:19 and 13:21; the Analysis on 13:18–21).<sup>30</sup> Just as impressive are Jesus’ linkages to celestial realities—“joy shall be in heaven” and “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God” (15:7, 10). For in this context we learn that God, represented in the owner and the woman, is one who seeks, who looks for the individual: the owner leaves “the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and [goes] after that which is lost” and the woman seeks the coin “diligently till she [finds it]” (15:4, 8).

29. Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon*, 1662; BAGD, 780; TDNT, 3:496.

30. Johnson, *Luke*, 236; Stein, *Luke*, 376.

## PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON (15:11–32)

### King James Translation

11 And he said, A certain man had two sons: 12 And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. 13 And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. 14 And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. 15 And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

17 And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, 19 And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. 20 And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. 21 And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. 22 But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his

### New Rendition

11 And he said, "A certain man had two sons. 12 And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give to me that portion of the estate which falls to me.' And he divided his property between them. 13 And after a few days, when the young man had gathered everything, he went abroad into a far land, and there he squandered his goods by living dissolutely. 14 When he had exhausted everything, a serious famine arose across that land, and he began to be in short supply. 15 And he went and joined with one of the citizens in that land, and he sent him into his fields to tend swine. 16 And he desired to eat his fill from the carob pods which the pigs were eating. And no one gave him anything.

17 "But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am perishing here from hunger. 18 I will rise up and go to my father and say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.' 20 And he rose up and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and felt compassion and, running, fell upon his neck and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out the best robe and clothe him, and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet. 23 And bring

feet: 23 And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: 24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

25 Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. 26 And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. 27 And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. 28 And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and entreated him. 29 And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: 30 But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. 31 And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. 32 It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.

the fattened calf, slaughter it, and we will rejoice while eating it, 24 because this, my son, was dead and has come alive again, he was lost and was found.' And they began to celebrate.

25 "But his older son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 And calling one of the servants to him, he inquired what was going on. 27 And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf, because he received him in good health.' 28 Then he became angry and did not want to go inside. And coming outside, his father called to him. 29 Then answering, he said to his father, 'Look, for so many years I have worked like a slave for you and have never neglected one of your commandments. And you have never given me a kid so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came who has devoured your property with harlots, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.' 31 And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. 32 But it was necessary to celebrate and rejoice because this brother of yours was dead, and has come alive; and he was lost and was found.'"

## Notes

**15:11 *two sons*:** The numerical ratio becomes greater, two to one, that is, two sons and one who becomes lost. In the earlier stories, the ratios are one hundred to one and ten to one (see 15:4, 8). The loss in this story, both because of the ratio and because it involves a family member, becomes harder to accept.

**15:12 *the younger*:** The age of the young man remains unknown. Evidently, he is unmarried, a clue to his age. One later view holds that a man

“at eighteen [is ready] for the bride-chamber.”<sup>31</sup> This son may be slightly younger than eighteen or a bit older. A young man is actually eligible to marry as early as age thirteen.<sup>32</sup>

***the portion of goods:*** The Greek term *ousia*, “goods,” properly has to do with property.<sup>33</sup> In whatever form it comes to the younger son, he is able to sell it, or it is in a form that he can spend, so that he can live abroad as he chooses (see 15:13).

***he divided unto them his living:*** In the division of the inheritance, the older or firstborn son receives a double portion, the younger son a single portion, leaving him with one-third of the estate (see Deut. 21:17; the Note on 20:29). But the father seems not to transfer the double portion yet to the older son because he remains in control of the farm (see 15:22–23) and speaks of “all that I [still] have” (15:31).<sup>34</sup> In transferring the inheritance to his children, a father can create a will that becomes effective upon his death, or he can make a gift of property to his children during his lifetime. In the latter instance, he retains the interest or *usufruct* that may come from the property until his death. If a child sells the property, as seems to be the case in this story (see the Note on 15:13), the new owner does not take full possession until the death of the father.<sup>35</sup>

**15:13 *gathered all together:*** The meaning of the verb (Greek *synagō*) has to do with the younger son liquidating his part of the estate so that he can depart.<sup>36</sup>

***took his journey:*** By this action, the younger son severs himself from the duty to honor and care for his parents in their older years (see the Notes on 4:38; 18:20). His older brother, on the other hand, will do just that (see the Note on 15:29).<sup>37</sup>

***wasted his substance:*** The noun for property is the same as in 15:12 (Greek *ousia*), even though the younger son has effectively turned his part of the estate into cash. The repetition of the noun carries the dual senses that the property still somehow links back to the father and that this son is

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31. *Mishnah Pirke Aboth* 5:21, cited by William Rosenau, *Jewish Ceremonial Institutions and Customs*, 3d ed. (rpt., Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1925), 151.

32. Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 2 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book, 1961), 1:29.

33. Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon*, 1274; BAGD, 600.

34. Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1087; “The father has precedence over all his offspring” in matters of inheritance (*Mishnah Baba Bathra* 8:2).

35. Jeremias, *Parables*, 128–29; Marshall, *Luke*, 607; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1087.

36. BAGD, 789–90; Marshall, *Luke*, 607; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1087.

37. Balla, *Child-Parent Relationship*, 128–29.

shamelessly squandering his father’s money, not just his own—“devoured [the father’s] living” (15:30).

**with riotous living:** The expression does not specify whether the son is disorderly and wild, or wastefully squandering his inheritance on luxuries—either meaning fits.<sup>38</sup> But news eventually trickles back home that he has “devoured [his father’s] living with harlots” (15:30).

**15:14 when he had spent all:** The term for “all” (Greek *panta*) repeats the same term in the prior verse—“gathered all”—and underscores that, by spending his inheritance to the last coin, he has become totally penniless with nothing to show for it. The verb translated “to spend” appears elsewhere in the New Testament (see Mark 5:26; Acts 21:24; 2 Cor. 12:15; James 4:3).

**15:15 joined himself to a citizen:** The younger son no longer controls his destiny, but submits to his need to survive by working for a Gentile who owns pigs, illustrating vividly how far he has fallen. Pigs, of course, are unclean for Jews (see Lev. 11:7; Deut. 14:8).

**15:16 with the husks:** The noun (Greek *keration*) literally means “little horn” and refers to carob pods that are a food staple for animals in the Mediterranean region, and even for poor people.<sup>39</sup>

**no man gave unto him:** Two meanings attach to Jesus’ statement. First, the “mighty famine” (15:14) affects everyone in the society to such a pitch that no one is able to render even a little help.<sup>40</sup> Second, whatever friendships the young man forms in his new setting do not persist. No former associates come forward to assist him. Clearly, his recent and current relationships are not built on enduring grounds.

**15:17 when he came to himself:** This is the literal meaning of the Greek expression and points to the young man’s dawning realization of how he dishonors his father and the gnawing regret for his actions. In a word, though the humbling process is imposed by external factors (see Alma 32:12–16), his repentance begins in earnest with his newly stirred consciousness of his irresponsible actions.<sup>41</sup>

**hired servants:** The word (Greek *misthios*) refers to a day laborer who receives a daily wage from the master (see 15:19) and is to be distinguished

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38. TDNT, 1:506–7.

39. BAGD, 430; Marshall, *Luke*, 609; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1088.

40. Green, *Luke*, 581.

41. Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1088.



from the servants of 15:22 (Greek *doulos*) and 15:26 (Greek *pais*) who are a part of the household (see the Notes on 15:22 and 15:26).<sup>42</sup>

***servants of my father's have bread:*** This innocent-looking note indicates that poverty is widespread in Jesus' world.

**15:18 *I will arise:*** Although the participle is in the aorist tense, and thus indicates a one-time action, illustrating the young man's fresh determination, and although the verb (Greek *anistēmi*) frequently means "to arise" (see 1:39; 4:16, 38, 39; 6:8; etc.), in this passage the word carries a strong hint of rising from the dead, both physical and spiritual, as does the same verb in 15:20 (see also 8:55; 9:8, 19; 16:31; 18:33; 24:7, 46).<sup>43</sup> This theme carries into the father's words in 15:24—"my son was dead, and is alive again" (see 15:32).

***I have sinned:*** Framing the life that the fellow is living (see 15:21), the verb fills out the meaning of the noun "sinner" that appears earlier (see 15:1–2), thus rolling out Jesus' views on what it means to sin—willfully turning against one's family, selfishly spending one's resources on oneself, impudently engaging in immoral behavior, and knowingly pursuing shallow friendships that evaporate at the onset of troubles.

***against heaven, and before thee:*** These prepositional phrases set out Jesus' viewpoint on those affected by a person's sinful behavior and therefore those from whom that person must seek forgiveness (see 15:21; 1 Ne. 7:20–21).

**15:19 *no more worthy to be called thy son:*** This line hints that the younger son has not yet stepped completely beyond his past because it breathes the air of manipulation, for he knows that his father will not accept such a statement (see 15:21). He will need time to step away from his devious thinking as well as his actions.

***make me as one of thy hired servants:*** This line also carries a manipulative dimension. We wonder whether this tendency is a part of this son's character. If so, this trait may underlie the older son's pique (see 15:28). On the other hand, it also breathes the air of contrition. The younger son knows that, eventually, he will be working for his older brother. Given the unhappiness that evidently characterizes their relationship, this prospect points to the genuineness of the younger son's repentance.

**15:20 *he arose:*** To his credit, the younger son follows through on his resolution, taking action instead of postponing or changing his mind. On this verb, see the Note on 15:18.

42. BAGD, 204–5, 525, 609; Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 111.

43. BAGD, 69.

**a great way off:** The adverb that stands in this expression (Greek *makran*) also appears in 15:13, where it has to do with the substantial distance that the fellow travels to escape his father—“a far country.”<sup>44</sup> The repetition of the term here indicates that the young man’s return is complete—he is shortening the distance—and that he is reversing the path of his life.

**had compassion:** The father’s compassion plays out in the vivid action verbs that follow: “ran, and fell on . . . and kissed.” Jesus’ more-than-subtle point, made through the father, is that true compassion involves acting, not mere thinking or feeling or talking.

**fell on his neck:** This act conjures up images of Joseph’s warm greeting for his younger brother Benjamin (see Gen. 45:14) and, even more vividly for Jesus’ audience, the greeting between Joseph and his father Jacob (see Gen. 46:29; also Acts 20:37).

**kissed him:** The King James translators, working in a world wherein the scripture text is read aloud, bring the reader’s lips together in the position of a kiss when repeating the pronoun “him.”

**15:22 the father said to his servants:** It is more than curious that the father does not address his son directly, but lets his words to the servants tell the son about his joy and his forgiveness. Evidently, the father is not yet ready to speak to his son. Too much hurt lies between them because of the son’s actions. The father seems to be thinking of a period of probation before the son regains his full place in the family circle. Incidentally, these servants (Greek *doulos*) belong to the father—“his servants”<sup>45</sup>—and are not among the “hired servants” who receive wages (see the Note on 15:17).

**Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him:** Thus begins the clothing of the now repentant son, recalling the robing of priests at the sanctuary and the donning of clothing for other special occasions (see Ex. 29:5–6, 29; 40:13–14; Lev. 16:23–24, 32).<sup>46</sup> Pointedly, the young man does not clothe himself. The scene that Jesus describes for the younger son also echoes the loss of sin during the Day of Atonement (see Lev. 16:2–34).

**15:23 the fattened calf:** Drawing out a young animal from the herd for slaughter points to an owner of considerable means, for the loss of a young animal means a loss of future productive power that sustains the herd (see 15:27).

**let us eat, and be merry:** In an obvious reference to a celebratory meal one finds a hint about the banquet that the Messiah will host in the future

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44. BAGD, 488–89.

45. BAGD, 204–5.

46. Jeremias, *Parables*, 130; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 1016–17.

(see the Notes on 13:28; 22:16–18, 30; the Analysis on 4:1–13 and 9:10–17).<sup>47</sup> Importantly, as in so many other eating scenes, this one takes place inside a home, an important theme in this story. And it seems evident that the robing of the son is a step in preparing him for the special meal (see 15:22; Matt. 22:11–12).

**15:24 *my son was dead*:** The father’s language is metaphorical, of course, because the son is not really dead (see 15:32). But the father’s words still carry the sense that he has thought of his son as utterly gone from the family and that only a miraculous resuscitation will restore him.

***is alive again*:** The verb (Greek *anazaō*) forms an obvious reference to the resurrection, a theme in this parable (see 15:32; Rom. 14:9; Rev. 20:5; the Note on 15:18).<sup>48</sup> It contrasts to the reference to the son’s death in this verse and to the death of “the fatted calf” (15:23).

***was lost*:** The verb ties to forms of the same verb in 15:4, 6, 8–9 and 32 (Greek *apollumi*),<sup>49</sup> brightening one of the threaded connections among the three parables of this chapter.

***is found*:** The other luminous connection lies in this verb (Greek *heuriskō*) which denotes here not a chance discovery, which is one of its meanings, but a recovery following a diligent search.<sup>50</sup>

**15:25 *his elder son*:** On one level, this son represents those in Jesus’ society who are diligent about their responsibilities, for he is taking care of tasks “in the field.” But it is an unreasonable stretch to see him as somehow representing “the Pharisees and people like them.”<sup>51</sup>

***musick and dancing*:** This line offers a glimpse into scenes of family celebrations in Jesus’ world—festive occasions do not always consist simply of a good meal and warm, renewed associations, as at the Last Supper (see 22:14–38). In this case, the term translated “musick,” in this context, likely means orchestra or band (Greek *symphōnia*).<sup>52</sup>

**15:26 *one of the servants*:** This person is one of the servant boys, not an adult, as the Greek term indicates (*pais*).<sup>53</sup> The same term appears in 7:7 with the same meaning. Although Jesus elsewhere indicates his compassion

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47. Smith, “Table Fellowship as a Literary Motif,” 613–38; Madsen, “Marriage Supper of the Lamb,” 2:860; Smith, “Messianic Banquet,” 4:788–91.

48. BAGD, 53; *TDNT*, 2:872–73; Jeremias, *Parables*, 130.

49. BAGD, 94–95; *TDNT*, 1:394–95.

50. BAGD, 325–26; *TDNT*, 2:769.

51. Morris, *Luke*, 266; also Marshall, *Luke*, 612.

52. Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon*, 1689; BAGD, 788.

53. BAGD, 609–10; *TDNT*, 5:637–38; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1090.

for children by healing them and by speaking of his high regard for the family (see 7:7; 8:54; 9:42; 3 Ne. 17:11–25; 26:14, 16; introduction to chapter 14),<sup>54</sup> for the sake of telling the story he repeats this common term for a youthful servant without comment.<sup>55</sup>

**15:27 *safe and sound*:** The verb that underlies this expression (Greek *hygiainō*) points first of all to the good health of the younger son—he has returned with his health intact.<sup>56</sup>

**15:28 *he was angry, and would not go in*:** The petulance or peevishness of the older son ranks as a very minor transgression.<sup>57</sup> However, if the older son does not repent, his pique will extend the separation from his younger brother, which will perpetuate itself at least into the next generation. The father plainly senses this risk (see 15:32). From the way Jesus tells the story, it seems apparent that he is stressing the role of the father as peacemaker within the family.

***intreated him*:** The tense of the verb—imperfect—points to the father’s repeated, persistent action.<sup>58</sup> Jesus thus indicates the quality of the father’s effort: even though time and persuasion are required, he does not give up and speaks kindly to him throughout their conversation.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, obvious to Jesus’ hearers is the fact that the father will succeed in coaxing him inside their home to join the guests because the older son owes him complete obedience. The challenge will be for the father to help the older son to heal his jangled heart.

**15:29 *do I serve*:** The verb carries the sense of working as a servant or slave, thus highlighting this son’s loyal and uncomplaining service to his father (Greek *douleuō*).<sup>60</sup> This circumstance now changes as he complains and, in his fit of anger, dares to criticize his father. Nevertheless, his faithful actions speak louder than his words, showing his commitment to obey and honor his father (see the Notes on 4:38; 15:13; 18:20; 20:13).<sup>61</sup>

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54. M. Gawain Wells, “The Savior and the Children in 3 Nephi,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 62–73.

55. *TDNT*, 5:648–50.

56. BAGD, 839–40.

57. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 309; Edward L. Kimball, comp., *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 109.

58. Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, §§ 1790, 1890–94, 2341; Blass and Debrunner, *Greek Grammar*, §§327, 325.

59. Jeremias, *Parables*, 130.

60. BAGD, 204.

61. Balla, *Child-Parent Relationship*, 128–29.

**a kid:** This reference likely points to a young goat, though it can mean an adult (Greek *eriphos*),<sup>62</sup> clearly inferior to a calf (see Matt. 25:32–33). In effect, the older son says that his father has not given him even a kid for celebrating, let alone a calf.

**15:30 this thy son:** The expression is emphatic both in English and in Greek, and bears a sense of contempt (see 18:11).<sup>63</sup> By repeating these words, the older son distances himself from his younger brother by omitting any acknowledgment of their sibling relationship.

**devoured thy living:** The son's choice of the verb is striking (Greek *kataphagō*), for it means “to consume” completely and, in a metaphorical sense, “to destroy” (see 8:5; John 2:17; Rev. 10:9–10; 12:4; 20:9).<sup>64</sup> Because the younger son took a portion of the estate that might grow and make the family holdings even stronger, the older son shows his anger at its utter loss.<sup>65</sup>

**with harlots:** The winds of news and rumor carry this disturbing part of the younger son's wasteful life back to the family. The older son has taken offence and adds this to his smoldering resentment at the younger son's earlier manipulative acts (see the Note on 15:19).

**15:31 Son:** The word (Greek *teknon*) commonly conveys “an affectionate address to a son” (see 2:48; 16:25; Matt. 21:28).<sup>66</sup>

**thou art ever with me:** The son's initial protest to his father that he works hard and faithfully must be addressed (see 15:29). And here the father reassures him of his status, perhaps reminding him that he does not fully appreciate his place in the home.<sup>67</sup> We sense the hint of an apology from the father for not offering his thanks more frequently to his older son.

**all that I have is thine:** This statement answers the second of the older son's complaints that he has never received even a young goat for a party with friends (see 15:29). Clearly, the father is taking time and effort to answer his son's complaints.<sup>68</sup> Beyond this, the principle is true that, to the faithful, “all that [the Savior's] Father hath shall be given unto [them]” (D&C 84:38).

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62. BAGD, 309.

63. Plummer, *Luke*, 378; Jeremias, *Parables*, 131.

64. Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon*, 918; BAGD, 423.

65. Marshall, *Luke*, 612.

66. BAGD, 816.

67. Plummer, *Luke*, 379.

68. Plummer, *Luke*, 379.

**15:32 *it was meet*:** This impersonal verb is strong, denoting necessity: “it was necessary” (Greek *dei*).<sup>69</sup> Hence, the father sets out the proper—and needed—response to the return of a wandering soul.

***this thy brother*:** The father’s words balance those of the older son, “this thy son” (15:30), thus reestablishing the sibling connection. Though the younger son returns as “one of [the] hired servants” (15:19), he will not remain so. Here the father exalts him to his former rank, although not to his position as an heir, so that the older son does not lose his perspective about his brother.

## Analysis

In a most beloved parable, the Savior paints a portrait of a family. The painting captures a broad swath of time, portraying tones and textures of family interaction whose first hues are splashed on the canvas by a younger son who not only seeks his fortune but goes off to spend it frivolously. It is as if to show his father and brother that he has grown up and will make his decisions independent of them, thereby splitting himself from hearth and home. Jesus’ words both picture the willful behavior of this son and also draw onto the canvas the thin, dark lines of his older brother’s slow-burning resentment for his youthful manipulations of their father. Jesus’ parable thus captures in vivid colors a sibling rivalry that almost defies a father’s best mediating efforts, much as those between Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, and Laman and Nephi. Of the three, only Esau and Jacob reconcile, and that occurs only in their later years, not promising odds.

Some commentators read this parable substantially, and the prior two in this chapter, as Jesus’ defense against his critics of his table fellowship with publicans and sinners.<sup>70</sup> But this reading seems too flat, too insipid. Others see this parable, in large measure, as a portrait of the Pharisees and their allies in the person of the older son, a portrait that takes them down to size.<sup>71</sup> To be sure, the Pharisees and scribes stand front and center when the chapter opens (see 15:2). But this view seems to diminish the energizing sweep of the story and its timeless lessons for all who hear. For it is just as possible that Jesus genuinely intends his words for his followers, who will soon take their places in his nascent church and will face questions that

69. Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, §§933a, 1985; BAGD, 171.

70. Jeremias, *Parables*, 128, 132; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1085–86, holds more softly to this view.

71. Plummer, *Luke*, 378–79; Marshall, *Luke*, 611–12; Johnson, *Luke*, 242.

have to do with worthiness and wickedness and, beyond those questions, forgiveness and acceptability.

If, in this light, Jesus seems to be lenient on one who has committed frightful sins and then has staggered back into the arms of his father, his parable simply matches his words both when he asks his disciples to forgive another “seven times in a day” (17:4; also Matt. 18:21–22; D&C 98:40), when he generously forgives the “sinner” woman who washes and anoints his feet (see 7:36–50), when he underscores the generosity of the landowner who hires day laborers (see Matt. 20:1–15), and when he treats the woman taken in adultery with both measured respect and healing stipulations about her future behavior (see John 8:2–11).

Another view holds that the father has failed as a parent by indulging his sons and by refusing to set limits on their behavior as they grow older, instead keeping them dependent on his generosity. On this view, the younger son senses that he can only grow up if he escapes his father’s influence but is ill-equipped to deal with life because his father has not prepared him. Similarly, the older son rests within the comfort of his father’s largesse and toils unappreciated on the estate until he too comes to realize that he possesses no value apart from his father and is left permanently unable to cope.<sup>72</sup> But this approach stands on a soft web of psychological assumptions that makes sense only in the modern world of psychoanalysis rather than in the world of ancient storytelling.

Turning to the refined skill that underlies the cluster of parables in this chapter, we soon leave behind any view that Jesus retells these stories chiefly to defend his behavior or to shine a light on the low actions of his critics. Setting aside questions of how much Luke’s literary skills are at play in these stories, because such queries seem endlessly bogged down in disputes over notable details that Jesus may well introduce rather than Luke, we notice as an example the progressive character of the three parables, building a crescendo of sorts. For Jesus begins with a parable that focuses on one lost from a hundred, then one out of ten, and finally one of two.<sup>73</sup> In effect, the relative value rises the longer Jesus talks. Naturally, the human soul is worth much more than a precious coin, no matter its temporal worth. We are reminded of the market scene that the seer describes in the book of Revelation, which shows a clustering of items of similar types, with the most precious listed at the end (see Rev. 18:12–13; also 1 Ne. 13:7).

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72. Richard Q. Ford, *The Parables of Jesus: Recovering the Art of Listening* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 90–114.

73. Green, *Luke*, 573, 578.

On another literary level, the parable is really two stories, both of which concern a father and a son.<sup>74</sup> In the first, the younger son moves on the stage with his father and without his older brother. The personal flaws emerge into the light of day as he demands his share of the inheritance and then distances himself from any family connections. His part in the story comes to an end when, after coming to himself, he returns home and finds a warm welcome, complete with a dinner party and dancing. In the second, the older son stands at center stage, with the younger son unseen but present in the wings. The older son draws the reader's sympathy because, unlike his brother in the prior scene, he has been true and faithful to his father and to his attendant responsibilities. But, like his younger brother, he also is beset with flaws. Indeed, his flaws are not as debilitating as those that trouble the younger brother. But they are real nonetheless. And his challenge is also to come to himself and to see what lies at his feet both in terms of his inheritance but, more to the point, in terms of his opportunity to graciously welcome his lost and now repentant brother.

In another literary vein that illustrates Jesus' consummate skill in telling this story, the parable does not bring the story to an end. Hence, Jesus allows his hearers to complete the narration in their own minds. Questions abound, and this feature underscores the lofty, accomplished character of the parable.<sup>75</sup> For example, what is the final end of the jangling conversation between the father and older son? Does the older son finally join the party? And if so, does he continue to nurse his spite or does he genuinely embrace his younger brother and begin to enjoy the festivities? Over time, does the gap between the brothers remain, even expanding, or does it shrink, leading to mutual respect? Further, does the younger son really change his behavior and turn his energies to building what he loses when he squanders his inheritance? The parable does not address such questions, adding appeal to the story.

The tight, interwoven character of the parable, complete with its obvious links to the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin, point clearly to a single mind that masters the intricacies of storytelling and presents the three accounts as fresh and compelling declarations about recovering the lost. Moreover, the three narratives fit comfortably within the parameters

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74. The dual stories is the view of Ford, *Parables of Jesus*, 90–114; and Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 25, 140–57; also Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1083–85.

75. Plummer, *Luke*, 379; Young, *Parables*, 154–55.



of discipleship that Jesus sets out in the prior chapter. But rather than raising questions about how to become a disciple, as in chapter 14, these stories approach the topic of discipleship by illustrating how one holds onto what one has received as a trust, how one holds onto the relationship of master and disciple. A disciple grasps and continues to possess such a relationship by effort and by establishing and reestablishing a submissive demeanor and attitude. In all cases, just as the father in the parable, the master welcomes back the wayward disciple with joyous celebration.

In this connection, does not the parable also represent conversion? In important ways, the younger son mirrors those who hold in their hands the precious truths of the gospel and, for some reason, let them drop and walk away, choosing a different path in life. But then, stirred perhaps by influences outside themselves, they return to their former lives, welcomed and embraced by those who love and have stewardship for them. Similarly, the older son represents the faithful who pass through inner trials, in this case asking the question whether it is possible to accept those who are hard to accept because of temperament or past actions. The crucial question for the faithful person is whether truly to forgive as the Lord requires and, thus refreshed, come inside (see the Notes on 17:3–4; Mosiah 26:31; D&C 64:9–10).

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, does the father represent God? The answer is no and yes. No, in the sense that the father is willing to divide his inheritance with the younger son before that son has proven himself as a responsible person worthy of receiving and managing a substantial estate. No, in the sense that the father does not and cannot reconfer a portion of his estate on the younger son, unable to add reward to what he has already given. Of course, opportunity stands in front of this son to rebuild his life, but he is no longer eligible to inherit anything from his father. Yes, in the sense that the father takes the risk that the son, as well as his portion of the estate, will be lost.<sup>76</sup> But he takes the risk anyway. Yes, in the sense that, when the son returns repentant and humble, the father welcomes him back with genuine forgiveness and affection, remembering his transgressions “no more” (D&C 58:42). And yes, in the sense that Jesus speaks the words, conferring on them a timeless and exalted tenor, including the role of the father, even if a piece or two seems out of place.<sup>77</sup> For within Jesus’ words rises the divine will.

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76. Johnson, *Luke*, 241.

77. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 146–47.