

## *Luke 15 Bible Study*

A sainted churchman and theologian called Luke 15 the Golden Nugget of the Gospels. This is a chapter of unparalleled illustrations of God's love expressed to the people of His creation through parable form.

Luke 15 is a high point in the travel narrative and in the entire gospel. Called "The Gospel of the Outcast" and the "The Gospel for the Outcast," Luke 15 "is so distinctive of the Lucan portrait of Jesus" as to be called "The Heart of the Third Gospel." It is closely connected to the table talk and discourse on discipleship in Luke 14; Jesus is looking for those who have ears to hear his catechesis (14:35). The entirety of chapter 15 both is directed at the Pharisees and is also a fundamental part of the catechesis for the disciples and the crowds (and the tax collectors and sinners). (CC p. 586)

It is important that these parables be heard as spoken by Jesus as he journeys swiftly to his destination in Jerusalem and his exodus (9:31) at Calvary. (CC p. 586)

### *The introduction to Luke 15*

**Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."**

*15:1 Tax collectors.* Taxes were collected for the Roman government by Jewish agents, who were especially detested for helping the pagan conqueror and for frequently defrauding their own people.

*15:1 sinners.* Sinners were notoriously evil people as well as those who either refused or lacked the time to follow the Mosaic Law as interpreted by the teachers of the law. The term was commonly used to tax collectors, adulterers, robbers and the like.

Both of these were despised and cast out of the synagogues by the church leaders of their time. They were also not permitted to associate on a plane of equality with the Jews in good standing. (Kretzmann)

*15:1 gathering around.* They kept coming. It was as though there was a sucking power that Jesus had.

*15:1 to hear him.* These tax collectors/sinners want to become Jesus' catechumens—his disciples, or learners of the Word. This certainly is a sign of their repentance, a major theme of the next three parables. (CC p. 587)

Perhaps the greatest reason the tax collectors and sinners kept flocking to Jesus was that they heard nothing but law after law from the religious leaders of the day. The religious leaders of Jesus' day worked on the philosophy that if one rule was good 4 would be even better. This resulted in laws numbering in the thousands which totally overwhelmed the common man and often led him to despair. Jesus preached the good news of salvation which was sweet news to their ears and brought them great joy and peace.

What are some lessons for you in these introductory verses?

### *The Parable of the Lost Sheep*

**3 So he told them this parable: 4 “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? 5 And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ 7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.**

The shepherds were referred to in this verse were those people the Pharisees would hire but they would not consider being a shepherd. They were above that. (Stuenkel)

In their office as religious leaders, “shepherds” of the people, the Pharisees and scribes might indeed hear Jesus calling them to imitate him, that is, to be shepherds who journey to seek the lost one. That is what Jesus is doing and that is what they grumble at; it is the nub of the conflict. And so the shepherd’s work to journey, seek, rescue, and restore the lost sheep is given careful description and a central position. (CC pp. 588-589)

*in open country* – Their normal pasture. The emphasis is not on neglecting the flock, but on seeking the lost. (A shepherd typically watched 3-40 sheep, so Jesus’ account likely implies the presence of one or two helpers. (TLSB)

*go after the one* – This meant going into ravines in stormy weather and taking risks. (Stuenkel)

*on his shoulders* – At that time the sheep’s feet were tied together in front of the shepherd’s neck. The bottom of the sheep was against the back of the shepherd’s neck. This was done because it was presumed that the sheep was exhausted and so the only way the sheep could get lost was if the shepherd got lost. (Stuenkel)

Restoration brings joy to the shepherd in finding the sheep, and joy to the village when the shepherd returns with the sheep. This is why joy is repeated twice around the center of restoration to the house where the community lives. Joy is generally shared by a community in first-century Palestine. And in that culture joy would be shared at a meal in fellowship around a table. The table fellowship context of this entire section strongly suggests that the hearers would envision the shepherd/woman inviting friends and neighbors into his/her home to rejoice *over a meal*. (CC pp. 589-590)

The self-righteous imagine that they need no repentance. Before we are found by the Gospel, the Law must show we are hopelessly lost. (TLSB)

List all of the love images displayed in this section.

### *The Parable of the Lost Coin*

**8 “Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? 9 And when she has found it, she calls together her**

**friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ 10 Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”**

In the second parable, the repentant sinner is like a coin. Unlike the wandering sheep, the coin is inanimate, emphasizing its complete helplessness. (TLSB)

*ten silver coins.* A *drachma* was a Greek coin approximately equivalent to the Roman denarius, worth about an average day’s wages (Mt 20:2). (CSB)

Perhaps a collection of coins or bits of silver, worn as a headdress, brought into the marriage as the woman’s dowry and meant to sustain the family in times of want. (TLSB)

This was usually her only financial security. If divorced, it was all she had. Women often carried their coins in a tightly knotted rag. (Stuenkel)

*seek diligently.* Losing something in the house was not as simple as it sounds. House of that time had mud floor, some had grass or reeds on the floor. They had high and small windows for security’s sake. Frequently animals of some sort were also kept in the house. (Stuenkel)

The unrepentant sinner is like a coin lost in the darkness. Once lost, we have no more ability to find the Lord than the coin has to find its owner. Yet, the good news of Christ gives “light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death” (1:79). (TLSB)

List the comforting images expressed in these verses.

### *The Parable of the Lost Sons*

**11 And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. 12 And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. 13 Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. 14 And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. 16 And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. 17 “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’” 20 And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him 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 servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. 23 And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. 24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate. 25 “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 27 And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ 28 But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, 29 but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with**

**my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ 31 And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”**

*give me* – This request is an expression of man’s desire to be independent of God, to become a god himself (Gen3:5) and lay out his life at his own will and for his own pleasure. (Trench)

*share of property.* The father might divide the inheritance (double to the older son; see Dt 21:17) but retain the income from it until his death. But to give a younger son his portion of the inheritance upon request was highly unusual. (CSB)

*estate* – What the prodigal does in asking for the father to give him his share of the inheritance is to ask for the father’s death. This would be a most outrageous request in first-century Israel, and for that matter, in any culture, even our own. Inheritance was only handed over at the father’s death or in some other extraordinary circumstance, but never at the request of the younger son. Since the division of property occurred at death, this request amounts to asking the father to “die” so that the younger son might freely take what would be bequeathed to him. (CC p. 597)

*gathered all he had.* The son’s motive becomes apparent when he departs, taking with him all his possessions and leaving nothing behind to come back to. He wants to be free of parental restraint and to spend his share of the family wealth as he pleases. (CSB)

The process of disposing of the estate would have been difficult in a community that was completely opposed to the prodigal’s request and shocked at the father’s consent. The prodigal would have to cut a quick deal with someone unscrupulous enough to help this young man turn his property into cash. The prodigal needed his inheritance to be in liquid assets that he could take to a “distant country” (15:13) where no one would know him. The community would watch him try to dispose of his inheritance, and “as he goes from one prospective buyer to another, the intensity of the community hatred and disgust mounts. At every turn he is greeted with amazement, horror, and rejection.” (CC p. 598)

*far country* – Actually means overseas. Wherever the father wasn’t. (Stuenkel)

*reckless living.* The idea combines carelessness with moral laxity (cf v 30). (TLSB)

*famine* – When people were killed and eaten raw. Shoe leather, rotten flesh and garbage were all devoured. They even ate the bark of palm trees. (Stuenkel)

*hired himself out* – ekollatha - Glued himself to, foisted himself upon, begging to be a slave. (QV)

*fed...pigs.* The ultimate indignity for a Jew; not only was the work distasteful but pigs were “unclean” animals (Lev 11:7). (CSB)

He not only renders himself unclean and an outcast, but it also shows how far he has sunk in his own personal demise. (CC p. 598)

*pods.* Carob pods were regarded as animal fodder and were eaten only by the desperately poor. (TLSB)

*came to himself* – Knew that his father would not taunt him or say, “I told you so.” He had a pleasant memory of home and his father.

*I have sinned* – Heaven means against God, no excuses. (Buls)

*treat me like one of your servants* – The son’s repentance is similar to what many in Jesus’ day considered repentance, that is, repentance as a human work, with an offer, from the person’s side, of conditions, terms, reparations. Repentance was something that humans could initiate outside of God’s initiative.

*father saw him* – Father is watching and waiting. (Stuenkel)

*felt compassion* – To have bowels yearning. Also used in Good Samaritan story.

The father’s compassion precedes any confession of repentance by the son and corresponds to the seeking and searching in the two preceding parables.” (CC pp. 600-601)

*ran* – Shows acceptance of the wayward son before any question is asked. Remarkably, the father ran to his son, which was below the dignity of the older man. (TLSB)

*embraced him and kissed him* – Falling on the neck and kissing are gestures that acknowledge *family relationship*. (CC)

The father expresses his complete reconciliation and acceptance of his son publicly—*and he does this before the prodigal has uttered a word of confession*. (CC p. 601)

*I have sinned* – He expresses the speech he had rehearsed.

The son begins his speech but is cut off before he can offer his bargain (v 19). (TLSB)

*best robe ... ring ... shoes... celebrate*. Each was a sign of position and acceptance (cf. Ge 41:42; Zec 3:4): a long robe of distinction, a signet ring of authority, sandals like a son (slaves went barefoot), and the fattened calf for a special occasion.

*fattened calf* – Literally “the grain-fed.” “In contrast to the cattle left to graze on grass, the beast destined for special feasts is stuffed with grain to put on extra weight and tenderness.” (CC)

Reserved for if the king of the land should come. (Stuenkel)

*dead and is alive* – From the father’s perspective, his son’s plight was worse than imagined. (TLSB)

*older brother was in the field* – Doing his work. (Stuenkel)

*music and dancing* – Unmistakable sounds of celebration. (TLSB)

Hired professional musicians. This was a choral dance with gestures, clapping of hands, perhaps also steps, and was a grand spectacle for the audience. (CC)

*asked* – The imperfect, “he kept asking,” suggests that the elder brother asked a number of questions of the young boy. (CC p. 594)

*was angry* – Into his elder son’s fury the father enters with a third expression of unbelievable love and grace. The father comes to the elder son and pleads with him to *enter the feast*, and the son turns him down by arguing with him in public *at the feast*. This is a great insult to the father, which shows that “there is now a break in relationship between the older son and his father that is nearly as radical as the break between the father and the younger son at the beginning of the parable.” The elder son insults his father by not addressing him with a title.

*refused to go in* – The sound of the music should have caused him to run in and join the festivities; as the older brother, he would be required by custom to serve as the host-steward of the meal. The older son was responsible for arrangements so that the father could serve as the gracious host. But the older son does not join the festivities, let alone take charge of them. (LL)

*entreated him* – παρεκάλει—The imperfect suggests that the father was continually pleading with him. L.T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 238, suggests the translation “was comforting” to show that this was a continuation of the father’s compassion (15:20). (CC p. 594)

But the father is not deterred. Even in the face of these mounting insults, he addresses his elder son affectionately as “child” (τέκνον; 15:31) and assures him that his place in the house as well as his inheritance are secure. This is another example of the outrageous love of the father in which there is “no judgment, no criticism, no rejection, but only an outpouring of love.” (CC p. 606)

*I served you* – Elder son had become a slave at his own desire.

This present tense with a dative of advantage, “I am a slave for you,” captures the elder son’s feeling that he has been bound in slavery to the father. (CC p. 594)

*this son of yours*. The older brother would not even recognize him as his brother, so bitter was his hatred. (CSB)

When are we like the youngest son?

When are we like the elder son?

Ponder the incredible love that the father shows to both sons and us and write a bring summary of what this means to you.