

**DAVID JEWELL** Mon 1 Dec, 07:10 (3 days ago)

to DAVID

## **The lost son**

Probably the greatest and most significant of parables.

Often used in modern parlance in secular society.

In this chapter we have these three parables recorded here by Luke: the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son: why did Jesus repeat His theme three times! Here we have the answer. One sheep lost out of 100-just 'shrinkage' in modern language. We may feel sentimental towards the lost sheep, the Jews of the first century would definitely not have! The lost coin-a significant material loss, but because it was lost in the house, eventually it would be found! However, the parable of the lost son is about human relationships, family, interesting that this is not only an issue for our time! Jesus introduces us to three people-a father and his two sons. Jesus, that master storyteller sketches out beautifully the context of this young man's request. This is stuff of parental nightmare-the renegade, self-destructive son. Obscenity of asking for your part of estate before your father has died. Jewish law stated that older son should get two thirds, younger one third, but it was the father to choose if he wanted to distribute his estate before he died. *Proverbs 20v21: 'An inheritance claimed too soon will not be blessed at the end.'*

However, the younger son acts in a way far more horrendous than perhaps we at first recognise. He is really saying to his father, 'I wish you were dead!' The father would have been within his rights in Jewish Law to have put his son to death. The words the Prodigal uses demonstrate an overwhelming selfishness-imagine as a parent what you would feel about this sense of entitlement; what he was

demanding would have caused major upheaval to his father's farming business.

The father manages to get the money together and the son is off to a far-off country to party, gamble and obey the dictum, *'Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die'* Incredibly the money runs out-who would have thought it!-and all the friends who he had bought drinks for, fade away. This stupid, selfish young man began to recognise that he might need to find some work. Being a farmer's son, you would think that he would have practical skills, but he seems to have learnt nothing on the farm and can only do what no other Jew would do, feeding pigs. So, the lost son is in a bad way-he has seen life, enjoyed the bright lights and now most clearly, he is struggling. This is a very special time for him: now I'm not saying that our goal in life should be to be pig farmers, but this menial job gives him time alone, away from noise and illusory friends, a chance to think and he uses it to look with clarity at his prospects. Remember the pragmatism Jesus encourages in *'The parable of the building project and the King going to war'* which we can read in the previous chapter, Luke 14 v 25-

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I think it's important that we recognise and remind ourselves regularly that God ensures that there is no waste in our lives and those periods when we are sick, jobless, caring for a chronically ill loved one are perhaps the most important, because a gap suddenly opens up in our schedule.

**Talk about my conversion at eleven and behaviour as a child.** The window of the between-schools summer holidays was God's window to speak to me about my choices.

Now we see again the Prodigal's sense of entitlement: why can't I become a servant in my father's house! We might think, 'Surely you have burned your bridges there!!' We view the Prodigal as desperate, but not completely sorted, repentant or no longer over-pleased with himself. Anyway, back he treks for many days. Please note here that the father has not gone searching for him, he allows him to go, he has given him freedom to make good or bad choices, but the bad choices he made has brought him to this

dire situation, inevitably. His father didn't make this happen to punish him or to force him home. He waits for him. Just as the farm is coming into view his breath is taken from him by his father's embrace, who must have spent most of his time viewing the horizon, despairing in his heart that he would ever see him again. He manages to say the first few words of his carefully prepared statement, but his father ignores his words, brings his best robe, shoes and a ring. Now the significance of these is that he has shown that he has fully restored him to his place in the family, not just that he has raised his standing by bringing him shoes-quite a lot about shoes in the Old Testament, they were quite a symbol of respect and even legal transfer of property. Most important of all he gave the younger son his signet ring: in the days when servants would run the business, the guarantee of payment would come from the owner's seal on his signet ring: in other words, he had immediately given his son full access to all the family money! The father then brought out the prize calf to be slaughtered-a bit like the vintage premier champagne which had been sitting there for years for a time of special celebration. This man's son, who he had assumed was lost had been found, was dead and now is alive! That is all that mattered-no talk of time of probation, perhaps couple of years as a servant to see if he could be trusted! No, this was his son! So, the party is started, the neighbours invited and where is the older son-working. The good faithful son, still at home, dealing with a sorrowful father: he hears the news and rushes to his father: look at these words 'This son of yours'-nothing to do with me, and a reminder of the Prodigal's supposed crime. The father is taken aback-this is your brother, why don't you welcome him into the family?

So we are going to briefly look at the context of this amazing parable which continues to blow my mind and to see what it can tell us: there are two sets of listeners to Jesus' parable-the 'tax collectors and sinners' and the Jewish religious leaders and Jesus appeals directly to them through the response of the older son. Many of these people were good, conscientious, they would spend hours each day studying the Torah, and they were genuine in their

search for God. However, when someone with the authority of the Son of God came and spoke of God's gracious embrace being big enough for all then they couldn't cope. They weren't big hearted in their joy at this unexpected turn of events, although it is stamped all over the Old Testament-if you have time read the prophetic writings of Hosea- they became mean-minded and chose to put an end to the bringer of this Good News! They believed that 'there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who is obliterated before God!' Jesus turned that on its head by declaring the opposite. We get this sense of Jesus' challenge, His deep desire that they would embrace His message. Now I am sorry to say that there are church goers who are like this! I don't think that there are any here, but I have met them in other places and it has always amazed me that these apparently really nice people become all narrow-minded and sour when it comes to talk about God: they know what they know and you can't have a discussion about it. Please if you come to church only because you think that this will make you better or get you into Heaven, don't bother!

The overwhelming message here is the **outrageous grace** of God. Jesus tells this parable here and later demonstrates it with what He says on the cross to the repentant murderer: 'Today, you will be WITH ME in Paradise'. God's sense of fairness is very different than our sense of fairness, it is a kind of super-fairness! He reaches out to embrace the vilest of people: the paedophile, the fraudster, even bankers! No one is beyond His grace! Jesus came to bring the message that the door of Heaven is wide-open, there is no qualifying exam, just as this was a revelation for the tax collectors and sinners so it will be for our community, for so many have been put off church and God by those who go there! At the very centre of God is love and this is what motivates Him. He created, He sustains, He blesses out of love for all His creatures. He reaches out to you, calling for you to return. You have been gone too long, He is not condemning you, He doesn't punish you, but call to Him and there will be great joy in Heaven amongst the angels!