

Every person we encounter is important to God

Luke 15:1-32

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In Luke 15:1-32 we find three parables. Parables were often fictitious stories that were used to reveal a point or a lesson in response to a given situation or dilemma.

In Jesus' day, amongst the Jews, if you wanted to teach an idea or a truth to your listeners, you didn't use technical statistics or formal definitions as our culture might. Instead, it was best done with word pictures.

Word pictures do not focus on the details and the legalistic minutiae. Instead, they bring out overarching truths, values and lessons. Parables are more likely to connect with one's emotions, and when used by Jesus they often touch one's spiritual imagination and how it could be applied in the listener's life.

There was also a sense of mystery to the parables. Those whose hearts were teachable and sensitive to the Spirit often would discover and be impacted by the underlying truth in the story. They could "see" themselves in the story and humbly apply it to their lives. Those whose hearts were hardened often missed the whole point of the parable, because they did not have "ears to hear, eyes to see, and a heart to obey".

Jesus' use of parables have allowed His teachings to continue to minister to people throughout the ages. Their general truths can be applied regardless of time and culture.¹

Let us now turn to Luke 15:

¹ 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."

William Barclay tells of how the Pharisees gave a title to those who did not keep their strict religious law. They referred to these "sinners" as the "People of the Land". There was a complete barrier between the Pharisees and the "People of the Land". It was said:

"To marry a daughter to one of them was like exposing her bound and helpless to a lion. The Pharisaic regulations laid it down, 'When a man is one of the People of the Land, entrust no

¹ Much of this information was learned from <https://www.gotquestions.org/what-is-a-parable.html>, read January 6, 2022.

*money to him, take no testimony from him. Trust him with no secret, do not appoint him guardian of an orphan, do not make him the custodian of charitable funds, do not accompany him on a journey."*²

A Pharisee was forbidden to have any dealings with this type of sinner.

Now tax collectors were considered the worst of the sinners. At this time in history the Romans lorded over the Jews. If a Jew wanted and had enough money, they could buy a tax collecting "franchise" from the Roman government which would allow them to collect money from their fellow Jews on behalf of the Roman government. The tax collectors were then allowed to collect as much as they wanted as long as Rome received their part. In reality the tax collectors were almost like a Jewish Mafia who stole from their own people. Because of this, tax collectors were often put out of their families, ostracized from their community, and hated by everyone. But they were rich.

These were some of the people that Jesus was spending time with, and the religious leaders could not understand how a supposed "man of God" would ever spend time with sinners like this.

In the Middle Eastern culture to eat with someone was seen by others as supporting their lifestyle or the type of people that they were, but Jesus did not worry about what people thought. We know from Luke 5:30-32 that Jesus believed that *"It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."* Because of this, Jesus often spent time among the sinful people who were ready and willing to receive his teaching.

So here we have Jesus Christ, the Son of God, sitting with and teaching people who were considered the worst of sinners, and standing not far away were the arrogant "super spiritual" religious leaders listening and judging every word that Jesus said.

It is interesting how Jesus Christ, the holy Son of God, lived and loved in such a way that even those farthest from God were drawn to Him. Not just to hear His sermons, but actually to pull up a chair and eat and talk with Him, one-on-one.

Whether they be tax collectors, prostitutes, simple townspeople, or religious leaders such as Nicodemus, Jesus treated them with love and valued them.

We know that He did not condone sin, but there was a winsomeness about the grace of God that was on display in His life. In His presence some were convicted of their sin, others were encouraged in their faith, but all who wanted to know Jesus more would be welcomed at the table.

In these verses in Luke 15 the tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to Jesus to hear more of what He was saying. The Pharisees and scribes saw this and grumbled about how Jesus could "receive sinners and eat with them". Jesus, wanting to help the Pharisees and scribes see people as God sees people, then told these three parables: **The Parable of the Lost Sheep, The Parable of the Lost Coin, and The Parable of the Prodigal Son.**

³So 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

² <https://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/eng/dsb/luke-15.html>, read January 6, 2022

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 main part of Judea was a plateau, stretching for about 56 kilometers and averaging about 24 kilometers wide. The ground of this plateau was mainly rocky and not good for farming. It was much better suited for flocks of sheep. Because of this, the shepherd would have been a very common figure in every community.

The life of the shepherd was a hard life. Working outside in the heat or in the cold. In the sun or in the rain. For hours or even days on end. With the limited food that he had in his satchel and the limited weapons that he had in his hand, every flock had to have a shepherd, and the shepherd could never take a break. Because of limited grass, the sheep would often wander away looking for food. In the plateaus there were usually no fences, so it was the shepherd's responsibility to constantly be looking out for the whereabouts and the safety of the sheep.

The sheep had no way to defend themselves, so it was all up to the shepherd. Whether it be protecting them from falling off a cliff at the edge of the plateau, or fighting off wolves or thieves, the shepherd's job was never done.

The shepherd was supposed to meet every need of the sheep. You see it in the 23rd Psalm. Green pastures, still waters, clear paths, and even protection when death threatened. This was the job of the shepherd every minute of every day.

Now there were different kinds of shepherds. Some were "hired hands", who were merely people employed to watch the sheep. It was a job. Their main motivation was money, with no binding interest in the sheep. When there was danger, they ran. The other type of shepherd were those who actually owned the sheep. In Judea it was different than in other places. They did not raise the sheep so they could kill them and eat them, they raised the sheep mainly for their wool. Because of this, many shepherds had been shepherding their same sheep for many years. Some had grown up with their sheep and had grown very familiar with them, even to the point of naming them and thinking of them as companions and even friends. When danger came against this type of shepherd and his sheep, he would be willing to stand and fight, even to the point of laying down his life.

George Adam Smith wrote of the shepherd:

"On some high moor across which at night the hyaenas howl, when you meet him, sleepless, far-sighted, weather-beaten, armed, leaning on his staff and looking out over his scattered sheep, everyone of them on his heart, you understand why the shepherd of Judaea sprang to the front in his people's history; why they gave his name to the king and made him the symbol of providence; why Christ took him as the type of self-sacrifice."³

This was the cultural situation with which Jesus' listeners would have been familiar.

³ <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/dsb/luke-15.html>, read January 6, 2022

Starting in verse three, Jesus asked how many of his listeners, if they had a hundred sheep and were missing one, would not go look for the one. Jesus is not saying that the ninety-nine in the open country are not important. In a case like this, they likely would be cared for by other shepherds, as the one shepherd left to search for the lamb that was lost. In many ways open country was safer because one could see danger coming from afar.

The danger would lie in the shepherd seeking out the lost sheep. Most of the shepherds had grown to be experts at tracking the trail of the sheep. Whether it be in cracks or crevice or in places where wolves might dwell, the shepherd would set out, willing to risk his life for the one sheep that had wandered away.

Some would still question why one lost sheep would be worth the trouble. Those of you who have pets, who are a beloved member of your family, understand the idea.

Jesus ended this short parable by then describing the rejoicing that would occur as the shepherd returned home with the lost sheep. We turn to William Barclay once again, to give us a clearer picture of how this might have looked in Jesus' day:

“Many of the flocks were communal flocks, belonging, not to individuals, but to villages. There would be two or three shepherds in charge. Those whose flocks were safe would arrive home on time and bring news that one shepherd was still out on the mountain side searching for a sheep which was lost. The whole village would be upon the watch, and when, in the distance, they saw the shepherd striding home with the lost sheep across his shoulders, there would rise from the whole community a shout of joy and of thanksgiving.”⁴

Then Jesus ends the parable with these words, **“There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”**

The Pharisees saw them as nothing but offensive, hopeless sinners, but Jesus, the Good Shepherd (John 10; Matthew 9:36), sought and celebrated when the lost were found.

Let us now turn our attention to **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.”

Most homes in Jesus' day had very few windows and thus very little light. The floors were usually hardened dirt covered with dried grasses and reeds. To look for a coin in that kind of setting would have been very difficult and required a lot of time and energy.

The coin mentioned in this parable was worth more than one day's salary. Most Jews lived day-to-day, so every coin was important. The woman might have searched so diligently because it was supposed to pay for the family's food that day.

⁴ <https://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/eng/dsb/luke-15.html>, read January 6, 2022.

There was one other reason that the woman might have looked so diligently. In the parable Jesus talks of 10 coins. This was likely a description of the head dress that Jewish married women often wore. It was costly and the equivalent to today's wedding ring. It would have been one of her most precious and treasured possessions.

In the parable, the woman is so overjoyed when she finds the lost coin that she gathers her friends and neighbors to celebrate. Jesus then declares that this type of joy is expressed by the angels of God when a lost sinner repents and turns back to God.

This was such a foreign idea for the Pharisees and scribes: that a holy God could revel in a sinner's repentance; that God would even want them in His presence. But Jesus was their living example, the exact representation of the Father, sitting with, talking with, and enjoying the presence of those sinners who were drawing near.

Let us now consider **The Parable of the Prodigal Son:**

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.”

Jesus told of a man with two sons. The younger son came to his father and asked for his part of the inheritance. Now the inheritance was never given to the sons until the father died. So in the culture of that day it was the same as telling your father, “I wish you were dead.” But instead of slapping the son or having him publicly whipped to save the father and the family’s honor, which would have been the normal response, the father grants the son’s request.

Jesus was telling a story that was an exaggerated example. In the Middle East culture, shame and honor are key. One avoids shame at all costs. This story was so extreme that the listeners were probably thinking that this story would never happen in real life. Jesus was describing unthinkable shameful actions so that the people would begin to grasp the unimaginable love of the Heavenly Father.

The son then took the money and went to a distant country where he wasted all the money on wild living. Eventually the money ran out and the son was left with nothing. A famine came to that foreign land and the son was desperate to find food. He hired himself out to a citizen of that country and was sent out to the field to feed pigs, but no one gave him anything to eat.

The son, in a matter of months, had spent money that had taken generations for his family to accumulate. How foolish this young man was. Such a disgrace, and it only got worse. For a Jewish person, pigs were considered unclean animals. This would have been horrifying for the listeners that the son would have fallen to this point of desperation that he would even consider this type of work of feeding pigs.

Finally the son “came to his senses” and made a plan. He would return to his father and beg to be made a servant, not a son. But even with this plan he was not being realistic. He had already taken and wasted more money than a servant could ever repay.

Dr. Kenneth Bailey, an Arabic and New Testament scholar who taught at seminaries in Egypt, Lebanon, Jerusalem and Cyprus for 40 years, gives this interesting perspective:

“Jesus’ original audience would not have seen this as the turning point. For the first thousand years, the universal Arabic translation was not that “he had come to his senses” but rather that the prodigal “returned to himself (nepash)” or more specifically “he would depend on himself”. Had the son been repentant, Jesus would have used Shub, a Hebrew word meaning “return to God”. The son is going to try to pay-it-back himself. He will not become a slave but rather a skilled craftsman so that he can restore himself. It is with this mindset that he returns to his village.”

Thinking he could go back as a servant and make things right would be the same as thinking you could pay back a billion euro debt with a minimum wage job. That kind of thinking doesn’t even make sense. A hired worker was the poorest of the poor. They were the ones who would gather in the city square each morning, hoping that someone would come buy and hire them for the day to do some odd job. Scripture even commands that hired workers be paid at the end of a day’s work, because that is the only way they would have money to buy food for their family. At least a slave would have been a “part of the family” because of their ongoing service, but a day worker had no promise of tomorrow.

It was good that the son had realized that he had sinned against God and his father, but the belief that he could somehow make it right by his own efforts showed that he did not understand the gravity of his wrongdoing and the hopelessness of his efforts to make things right.

Nonetheless the son started his journey home. Because of the shame that he had brought on his family and the failure that he experienced financially, it was expected that he would be ridiculed and ostracized by his community once he returned. That was part of the cultural punishment that was often received by people with grave misbehavior, but the father had other plans. Jesus described it with these words:

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”

If anyone should have been running, it should have been the boy. He should have been the one begging for the mercy of the father, but instead the father ran. In Middle Eastern culture that was shameful. Middle-aged men were never to be seen running and showing their legs. But in this instance we see the father gladly taking shame upon himself so that his son will be shielded from it. Because of the father’s actions, the boy never experienced the punishment from the community. Instead:

“The father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So, they began to celebrate.”

The son never even got a chance to present his idea of becoming a servant. The father immediately restated his son’s status by giving him the best robe, shoes, sandals, and the family ring that gave him full authority as a son. The father even prepared a huge celebration, with the fatted calf, for his son who had returned. That is how God feels about the sinful person who comes home to the heavenly Father.

The first part of the story was primarily given for the sinful people that Jesus was sitting with and teaching. It was a huge offer of mercy and grace and love to each one of them. But Jesus wasn’t finished. This story was also being overheard by arrogant religious leaders who were standing at a distance. For them he continued the story.

Jesus told of the older brother who had never left home. He told how the older brother heard the celebration as he came home from working in the fields. He asked the reason for the celebration. When he found out it was for his rebellious brother who had now returned home, he was furious.

The older brother refused to join the celebration. His father came out to talk with him, but the older son just yelled at his father reminding him about how good a son he was and how he had never received a party. There was no love in his heart for his brother or his father, only for himself.

This was Jesus’ message for the religious leaders. Although the older son stayed nearer to the father geographically, his heart was farther from the father than the son who had left and now returned. This was true for Jesus’ listeners that day. Jesus was surrounded by sinful people who were now coming close to God, and God was celebrating. But the religious leaders who appeared to be near

God were really the ones who were farthest from Him and were the ones most displeasing to God. Their lack of love for others exposed their selfishness and godlessness.

This story applies to us all. All of us have at one point in our lives been distant from God. Some have publicly turned their back on God, while others have privately turned their back on God while still claiming to be near Him. Either way, God, like the father in the story, waits for us with open arms if only we will return to Him.

In these three parables we see God's passion for those who are lost. We see His love for the unlovable. We see His desire to bring near those who are far from Him. We see how He waits with expectancy for the Prodigal to come home. We then see the celebration that follows. This was Jesus' point. He had not come for the well, but for the sick. He had come to find the lost, that they would be reconciled to God.

- ***“God . . . desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”*** (1 Timothy 2:3b-4)
- ***“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”*** (2 Peter 3:9)

Every person we encounter is important to God, and because of this, they should be important to us. Our family member. Our neighbor. Our classmate. Our coworker. The bus driver. The person sitting by us on the metro. The telemarketer. The waiter. The Amazon delivery man. Even the passing stranger. No one is insignificant.

All have been created in the image of God, yet in their sin are separated from Him. We, too, were far from God, but God treated us with grace and love. Should we not also do the same?

If we forget the value that God finds in each person, we will begin to treat people as if they do not matter. We will miss opportunities to point people to Christ, or at least to give them a taste of what God thinks about them. We never know the part that our loving response may play in their spiritual journey towards Christ.

Every person we encounter is important to God. With this in mind we must pray that God will give us eyes to see the people around us and the heart to care for them as He does. We then continue to pray so that He will begin to move their hearts towards faith and grant us opportunities to display the love of Christ to them. We pray so that our simple gestures of love will catch their attention and stir in them a desire to know more about our Savior. If we are to usher people to Jesus, it will always start with prayer.

May we value every person as God does and may our prayers and actions move us towards them so that they may move towards Christ.