



The Gospel of Luke - Chapter Fifteen

- V. [Luke 9:51-19:27 - The Journey to Jerusalem \(continues\)](#)
- V.b [Luke 13:22-17:10 - The second mention of the journey to Jerusalem \(continues\)](#)
- V.b.iv [Luke 14:7-17:10 - Various Teachings and Parables \(continues\)](#)

Summary of Chapter Fifteen

As the Pharisees saw Jesus eating and talking with tax collectors and other sinners, they began questioning his motives. Jesus stated that he was the good shepherd and always in search for the one sheep that is not in the fold at night. Jesus will rejoice over one sinner that turns back to God and the angels will rejoice too.

Jesus then tells the story of the Prodigal Son, who took his inheritance early and squandered it on loose living, hence prodigal. When all was gone, he realised his error and returned to his father expecting to become like one of the workers but the father welcomed him back as if greeting royalty. His brother was less than magnanimous and complained bitterly to his father about the other son's treatment, as he thought it was unfair but the father said 'He was dead and now is alive again, what could be greater?' The Kingdom of God is for those who come back from their dead lives to live with and for God, which is always something worth celebrating.

Chapter 15 confirms what God has consistently shown Israel throughout the OT, which is that grace and mercy abound and that he will rejoice for each and every individual who returns to him. But once again the religious leaders object to and reject Jesus' teaching.

¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear him.

Luke 15:1

Tax collectors collected tolls, tariffs and customs, and were notoriously dishonest. They were universally disliked and considered to be sinners by the religious parties.

In Palestine, tax collectors were representatives of the Roman governing authorities. Their tendency to resort to extortion made them despised and hated by their own people as seen in Luke 19:8, which is the story of Zacchæus.

And sinners are frequently associated with the tax collectors, as in Luke 5:30 <<But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners?'>>, in Luke 7:34 <<The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners'>>, and in Luke 19:7, where Jesus stays with Zacchaeus the chief tax collector: <<All the people saw this and began to mutter, He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner'>>.

Pharisees would have regarded as sinners anyone who failed to keep God's law as they interpreted it and the term here seems to reflect a commonly understood meaning by which it included both people guilty of publicly known sin and others who did not keep the strict purity requirements of the Pharisees.

Were all gathering round to hear him reveals Jesus' popularity with the outcasts of society, who had 'ears to hear' as in Luke 14:35 <<It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure heap; it is thrown out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear>>.

² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.

Luke 15:2

Pharisees and teachers of the law or scribes. The Pharisees were the most influential of the three major Jewish sects and the teachers of the law is a synonym for scribes. They are often paired together in the Gospels.

The religious leaders muttered, while the crowds are amazed and in awe of Jesus. Their problem is their position and authority in the community is under threat. These Jewish leaders are offended that Jesus should mix with wicked sinners, social outcasts and even Gentiles. It was their belief that only pious Jews could repent unto eternal life and they failed to hear and see what Jesus was saying and doing; that by bringing such people into the kingdom, Jesus was glorifying God all the more.

Welcomes or receives sinners, and eats with them again reflects Jesus' concern for the outsider. We have encountered similar criticisms against Jesus' attitude to those that the elite in society continue to shun in Luke 5:27-32, 7:39 and 19:7. One reason perhaps is that Jesus does not judge them for who they are but for what they do. They are not told to quit their professions but to be honest in carrying out their duties.

Such table fellowship implies welcoming these people into extended interpersonal association, which the Pharisees thought would make a person unclean. But just as Jesus would cleanse the leper from his disease and not be made unclean by contact with him, so he will bring sinners to repentance and forgiveness rather than being defiled by association with them.

V.b.iv.4 Luke 15:3-7 - The parable of the lost sheep

This parable teaches the reality of just how passionate God is about human beings. He had created them in his own image quite specifically so that they could understand his magnificence and therefore offer the true worship that he deserves. When any individual finally comes to that understanding and turns to God, there is a great heavenly celebration.

³ Then Jesus told them this parable:

Luke 15:3

Then Jesus told them. The following parables are directed to the Pharisees and scribes. The lost sheep (vv.4-7), lost coin (vv.8-10), and Prodigal Son (vv.11-32), all correspond to lost sinners being found by Jesus, i.e. entering the Kingdom of God.

⁴ Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?

Luke 15:4

This parable can also be found in Matthew 18:12. The man leaves the ninety-nine in the open country to go after the one lost. We see this confirmed in Luke 19:10 <<For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost>>, and John 10:11-14 <<I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me>>.

The lost sheep is a sinner who is not in communion with God, separated from the support and safety of the flock, and therefore subject to danger from predators. This analogy can be applied to individuals or groups of non-believers or backsliders: <<We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all>> (Isaiah 53:6).

God has a world full of angels and many true believers, i.e. the 99 sheep, yet he spends time, energy and resources on seeking and retrieving the one lost sheep, i.e. he sends his Son.

⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders

Luke 15:5

Puts it on his shoulders is considered by some to show that the sheep is too weak to return on its own, which is a better analogy for us rather than it is simply quicker to carry it than walk alongside it.

⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep'.

Luke 15:6

Calls his friends and his neighbours is again seen in v.9. The Pharisees and scribes are encouraged to rejoice with Jesus that the lost sheep of Israel are entering the kingdom.

⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

Luke 15:7

Rejoicing in heaven contrasts with the grumbling of Jesus' opponents. It apparently means that both God and all the heavenly beings including the angels rejoice greatly (see v.10).

Righteous persons who do not need to repent for as we read in Luke 5:31-32 <<Jesus answered them, It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance>>.

In light of the emphasis in Luke-Acts on the universal need of repentance, as proclaimed by John the Baptist: <<He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins>> (Luke 3:3), and the evil of humanity, unlike that in the kingdom: <<If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!>> (Luke 11:13). In Romans 3:10-18, Paul writes: <<As it is written: There is no-one righteous, not even one; there is no-one who understands, no-one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no-one who does good, not even one. Their throats are open graves; their tongues practise deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes>>. This is best understood as ironic for those who think they are righteous and have no need to repent.

We have a great account of what happens in heaven when one lost sheep returns home, but the unanswered question is: 'Did the sheep end up on the BBQ as part of the celebration?'

V.b.iv.5 Luke 15:8-10 - The parable of the lost coin

This parable reinforces the message Jesus gave in the previous one and follows the same line of reasoning.

⁸ Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?

Luke 15:8

Ten silver coins are literally ten drachma or about 10 denarii, which was 10 days' wages for a labourer.

⁹ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin'.

¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

The lost coin, although one of only ten, is actually of little value in real terms. But seeking and retrieving it is again worth a lot of effort. Finding it is a cause for celebration and more will be spent on hosting the party than was the intrinsic value of the lost coin. Such is the value God places on each and every repentant sinner!

Although Pharisees and scribes were, or at least believed they were, righteous and God fearing, and tried to live their lives according to their interpretation of the Law, God would have rejoiced equally as much over their acknowledgement of error, rather than their self-

righteous and lengthy prayers. We see a good example of the Pharisaic attitude in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18:9-14.

Paul was a converted Pharisee and says that: <<they praised God because of me>> (Galatians 1:24). In our modern world there are many who have now been caught up in the trap of religion rather than faith. They are today's Pharisees and the same applies to them now as it did to their Jewish counterparts two thousand years ago.

V.b.iv.6 Luke 15:11-32 - The parable of the lost son

This parable is also called the Prodigal Son. It tells the amazing story of God's grace to those who are sinful and set themselves apart from him. In this story, the father is God, the elder brother represents the Pharisaic tradition that includes some religious Christians today, and the younger brother represents both unsaved sinners and backsliders. The younger son demands from the father what would be freely given by grace, if he would only be patient and live by the Father's will. He takes what he is given and squanders it in a far land, i.e. the world. When all the money is gone, he finds himself living a miserable existence. In his desperation, and for many it has to come to that before they are prepared to even consider turning to Christ, he realises the error of his ways and his heart is in a condition to surrender to God: <<Because he considers all the offences he has committed and turns away from them, he will surely live; he will not die>> (Ezekiel 18:28). He returns to the father expecting to be accepted as a servant, but finds he is welcomed in love as a son of true worth. The elder brother takes exception to this, as he feels that he deserves more, as he has remained faithful, failing to realise that what he has, has been given to him through the same free grace. Although this story has a happy ending, there are many that find their way in the world and don't see the need to return to the Father. Or there are those who are facing hard lives, but just don't realise that God is there for them. Either way they will face eternal separation unless they seek him and repent. This can be very difficult for some of us: <<Jesus replied, I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin>> (John 8:34).

In this parable we see, once again, that our Father's house is well stocked and has provision for everyone: the Father, the Son, the heirs and the hired hands all have plenty, with plenty to spare.

We should learn and tell others that you do not just come to the Father when things are bad in your life. Nor should you expect everything to go well when you do come to him. Our joy in Christ is that we receive back what we have lost, e.g. health out of sickness rather than having health without sickness.

¹¹ Jesus continued: There was a man who had two sons.

¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate'. So he divided his property between them.

Luke 15:12

Give me my share of the estate. Some commentators see this as the younger son not wanting to wait for his father's death to receive his inheritance. However, it was not unusual for a father to share his estate with his sons prior to his death. The eldest son would then care for his needs in old age.

Here, the younger one was probably a teenager since he was unmarried. His share would have been half of what the older brother would receive or one-third of the estate's total value.

Under Jewish law, the eldest son received a double portion as his inheritance of the family estate in comparison to his brothers. So with two brothers the elder gets two thirds and the younger one third; with three brothers the elder gets half and the other two a quarter each, etc. The eldest son also becomes head of the family with its associated privileges and responsibilities.

Although Reuben was Jacob's first born by his wife Leah (Genesis 29:32), and should have had the double portion, he lost his birthright when he slept with Jacob's concubine Bilhah (Genesis 35:22). Simeon and Levi were the next two sons by Leah but they brought shame on the family by slaughtering the Shechemites because the Shechemite's heir to the throne had raped their sister Dinah, as recorded in Genesis Chapter 34. Although Leah bore Jacob three other sons: Judah, Issachar and Zebulun, each of whom could have become the heir especially Judah, through whom the seed of promise would come; and had four sons by the two concubines Bilhah and Zilpah, it was the elder son of his beloved Rachel, i.e. Joseph, who would bear the honour of inheritance, or at least his two sons would. Shortly before his death Jacob blessed the two sons of Joseph, Manasseh and Ephraim (Genesis Chapter 48), with the descendants of each son receiving their share of the inheritance in Canaan.

Although Deuteronomy 21:17 states: <<He must acknowledge the son of his unloved wife as the firstborn by giving him a double share of all he has. That son is the first sign of his father's strength. The right of the firstborn belongs to him>>, Jacob was not in breach as the law was not yet in place when he gave his oath to his grandsons. His word was his bond and this was honoured when the land was divided after the law was given.

He divided indicates that the father responded to his younger son's request and allowed him to make his own choice to go his own way.

¹³ Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth on wild living.

Luke 15:13

Got together all he had indicates that the son converted all of his inheritance into cash, which may have included land or cattle and which he then foolishly squandered his wealth in wild living.

¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.

Luke 15:15

In desperation, the son hired himself out to a Gentile to feed pigs, which were unclean animals that would, or at least should, have been repugnant to him: <<And the pig, though it has a split hoof completely divided, does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you>> (Leviticus 11:7), and confirmed in Deuteronomy 14:8 <<The pig is also unclean; although it has a split hoof, it does not chew the cud. You are not to eat their meat or touch their carcasses>>.

¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no-one gave him anything.

Luke 15:16

No-one gave him anything. His worldly friends all deserted him, which is often the case when we indulge in this type of life style.

¹⁷ When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

Luke 15:17-18

When the son came to his senses, he realised that his sin was not only against his earthly father but in the deepest sense against heaven. That is against God himself.

¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men'.

²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. 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.

Luke 15:20

He got up and went shows that we should act immediately when we know we have to.

A long way off emphasises the father's great love as he must have been watching for the son in the way God is always looking out for his children who are ready to come home.

The father ran casts aside all behavioural conventions of the time, as running was considered to be undignified for an older person, especially a wealthy landowner such as this man. In essence, we have the feet of mercy on display here and those feet are quick: he ran. This denotes how swift God is to show mercy. The prodigal son came slowly, under the burden of guilt, shame and fear; but the tender father ran to meet him with his encouragements.

The father kissed him or literally 'fell on his neck'. This is confirmed in Genesis 33:4 (ESV) <<But Esau ran to meet him (Jacob) and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept>>, in Genesis 45:14 (ESV) <<Then he (Joseph) fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept upon his neck>>, and: <<Then Joseph prepared his chariot and went up to meet Israel his father in Goshen. He presented himself to him and fell on his neck and wept on his neck a good while>> (Genesis 46:29 - ESV).

²¹ The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son'.

Luke 15:21

The prodigal repeats his prepared speech (vv.18-19), but the father cuts him short before he finishes showing that he has forgiven him, as scripture tells us: <<None of the offences he has committed will be remembered against him. Because of the righteous things he has done, he will live>> (Ezekiel 18:22). The righteous things here are admitting his own guilt and repenting, then returning immediately to the Father.

²² But 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.

Luke 15:22

The best robe, ring and sandals give a picture of the finest clothing so that the son is ornately dressed. The ring may have contained a seal indicating that he has been reconciled and welcomed back as a full member of the family. In the original Greek, there is double emphasis for it says 'that robe, that principle robe', a robe of righteousness and salvation as we find in these words: <<I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels>> (Isaiah 61:10), also: <<and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace>> (Ephesians 6:15).

²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.

Luke 15:23

A fattened calf was usually kept for special occasions, such as the time when God or a theophany of Jesus and two angels showed up on their way to Sodom: <<And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man, who prepared it quickly>> (Genesis 18:7), in the account of Saul and the witch of Endor: <<The woman had a fattened calf at the house, which she slaughtered at once. She took some flour, kneaded it and baked bread without yeast>> (1 Samuel 28:24), and Amos, in his condemnation of Israel's complacency: <<You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves>> (Amos 6:4).

They will have a feast and celebrate in thanksgiving to God and not godless self-indulgence as we saw in the Parable of the Rich Fool in Luke 12:19 <<And I'll say to myself, You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry>>.

Jesus clearly states: <<I am the bread of life>> (John 6:48), and proclaims to all that: <<Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day>> (John 6:54). This is a feast indeed for all who will turn to him in true repentance.

²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found'. So they began to celebrate.

Luke 15:24

The son was assumed to be lost but is now found and reunited with the family, which presents us with a picture of membership in God's kingdom. Such is the power of salvation; taking that which was dead and bringing new life; giving purpose to what was useless: <<Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful to both you and to me>> (Philemon 11).

²⁵ Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.

Luke 15:25

While the younger son represents tax collectors and sinners, the older son represents the Pharisees. Both groups were listening to the parables of this chapter (see vv.1-3), but the Pharisees were probably the primary intended audience of this parable.

²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ 'Your brother has come', he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound'.

Luke 15:27

Safe in the protection of the father's household, and sound in terms of both spiritual and physical health.

²⁸ The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.

Luke 15:28

The older brother became angry mirrors the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes in v.2.

And refused to go in indicates how some of us view those that God shows grace to in accepting them into the family of God, yet we are not prepared to share in fellowship with them if we disapprove of what they have done in the past, or perhaps the social class from where they come.

Just as he went out to meet the returning prodigal, so his father went out to meet with the elder brother who would not come in. Again, this demonstrates so clearly the love and grace of the Father that he is willing to go personally to those whom he loves and to guide them into what is right. This is not a sign of weakness but a sign of great strength and true love. It is interesting to note the parallels here to how God spoke to Jonah when he failed to understand God's gracious attitude towards the repentance of Nineveh in Jonah Chapter 4.

²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.

Luke 15:29

But he answered his father. The older brother protests that the welcome extended to the returning younger son is not fair, likening life with his father to years of servitude without celebration. He should note that it is better to eat bread at the Father's table than to feast on a young goat with earthly friends.

I have been slaving for you shows an attitude that is contrary to the reality of grace. We are given far more than we could ever earn yet we often think it is not enough and that we are hard done by.

The picture offers a sharp contrast between on the one hand the mercy and grace extended by the father, representing God the Father, and on the other hand the self-righteous resentment of the never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me of the older brother, which is exemplified by the Pharisees and, in the modern era, by some religious Christians; for there are some in the church today who, through years of faithful service, have come to feel superior and even prideful of 'their' achievements. Such people actually have more to be thankful for and should show even more humility than those who are turning to God from a sinful existence. The parable shows us they are even of the mindset to expect a reward for living under grace!

³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!

[Luke 15:30](#)

[This son of yours](#) indicates the older brother's refusal to acknowledge the prodigal as his brother.

³¹ 'My son', the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.'

[Luke 15:31](#)

[Son](#) is an affectionate appeal by the father showing that he still loved the older son and wanted him to join in the celebration. By implication Jesus is still inviting the Pharisees to repent and accept the Gospel. Similarly, we should not be offended if our church gives more attention to the newcomers and seems to take the stalwarts for granted.

³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found'.

[Celebrate](#). Once again God is ready to 'throw a party' every time someone enters the kingdom for the first time and probably feels the same way when any backsliders get their lives back on track!

Seeing someone come to faith is the most exciting thing we can experience. Seeing someone who was in fellowship, who left God and then returns after realising the error of their ways, has to be almost as good. Both are worthy of equal celebration! We need to remember never to envy others the grace of God for it will still abound to us, as there is sufficient for everyone.