

TCC Sunday 24th November 2013 – Luke 15 – The Lost Sons

Title: “The Lost Sons”

Purpose:

To be clear about our standing with God and to make sure we are those that have repented and are truly home with our heavenly Father.

Introduction

Shrek

- Now, for the highly literary folks amongst us, Q. “**Shrek**” is what? Very good – an ugly **OGRE**.
- And for the very shrewd, the other main character, **LITTLE DONKEY**, is what?

Now at one point **Shrek** and the **Donkey** are walking through a field of sunflowers and **Shrek** is trying to help the **Donkey** to understand him better and he says:

SHREK: “For your information there’s a lot more to Ogres than people think.”

DONKEY: “Example?”

SHREK: (and seeing he happens to have an onion in his hand, he replies:) “Ogres are like onions.”

And then he goes on:

SHREK: “Onions have layers. Ogres have layers. Onions have layers, you get it? We both have layers!”

Now his point is simply that you can’t always judge or understand a person by what you see just on the surface – you have to go a bit deeper and peel back the layers one by one – and only then you will start to understand them **more fully AND more properly**.

Today

And I think, if there’s ever a passage of Scripture that is a lot like an onion, with its multiple layers, then our passage this morning - Luke 15 , is one such.
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As with many parables, the key to unlocking them lies right at the start or perhaps just prior to the start and that, very naturally, involves us paying attention to the context.

So, for this particular chapter that we are coming to this morning, we need to pay careful attention to the opening 3 verses:

Luke 15v1-3 (where we read) “Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Then Jesus told them this parable:”

So here in **Verses 1&2** we have what is THE TRIGGER for Jesus to go on and tell 3 integrally related parables.

Q. So what is THIS TRIGGER? Well, it is that Jesus is entertaining and even receiving people who the Pharisees and teachers of the Law consider to be completely unsuitable and inappropriate for him to be fraternizing with.

The religious leaders are **not merely confused** by Jesus’ behaviour – they are **positively stumbling** over it, they are **scandalized** by it.

Surely, they reason, any good and godly man will keep his distance from any person who is a traitor to Israel, who has sold himself out to the Roman to collect taxes and to extort money from their fellow-countrymen. Surely a godly man will not keep company with those who are “sinners” – people such as prostitutes and the generally morally bankrupt of society – the riff-raff, the low-lights, the dregs.

Who the chapter is aimed at

The very fact that the Pharisees and the teachers of the law are muttering and complaining about Jesus behaviour, we are pretty sure that they are the chief group of people that Jesus has in his sights through this whole section.

And obviously one side effect is that subtly we feel a bit let off the hook, we feel that we are much more in the category of spectators, we are, if you like, a SECONDARY AUDIENCE.

ELF – A forum of evangelical leaders

I was at a forum of evangelical leaders down in Reading on Tuesday and we were going through the findings of a Research report – produced by the Evangelical Alliance – which examined the beliefs and habits of 1,800 evangelicals representing a reasonably broad cross-section of evangelical churches in the UK.

And one particular statistic that I noticed – where people were describing the churches that they were in – stated that **59% of the churches were PREDOMINANTLY MIDDLE CLASS.**

We know, from what we read in the gospels, that:

- The Pharisees REPELLED sinners & that
- Jesus ATTRACTED sinners

At a minimum it should give us pause to consider whether we have:

- more in common with Jesus OR
- more in common with the Pharisees

And if, we have more in common with self-righteous Pharisees, then just perhaps this section, through Luke 15, is one we need to pay particular attention to.

Our approach - first QUICKLY, then we'll SLOW DOWN

By way of how we are going to come at these parables – let me just say that we will **start quite quickly**, with the lost sheep and the lost coin and then **we'll slow up somewhat** as we head into what your bible either calls:

- The prodigal son
- The lost son
- The prodigal son and his brother

1] The Lost Sheep and The Lost Coin

Now we had the passage read to us earlier on – let me read Verses 4-10 just to refresh our minds of the first 2 parables:

*** READ Luke 15v4-10 ***

Nice and simple

Now, I think you'll agree, they do both read very easily:

- **The LOST SHEEP** – a man's got a nice round number of sheep (100) and guess what he loses just 1 (again nice and simple – he doesn't lose 13 of them) and then he leaves his flock where they are and goes off to find the missing sheep.

Now his search is a success and so he returns:

with his sheep
with much relief and more importantly
with much joy

The parable is rounded off with a spiritual lesson statement: ***READ Verse 7 ***

- **Similarly – The LOST COIN** – a woman has got a nice round number of silver coins and she also loses just 1 – and just like the man, she also does the obvious thing, she instigates a comprehensive search until she too – finds her lost item. And the similarities don't stop there – she, likewise, goes and gets her friends together and rejoices with them that what was formerly lost has now been recovered.

This parable too, even though it is a bit briefer, still has a spiritual lesson statement attached:

*** READ Verse 10 ***

MONK – Detective with OCD

Q. I don't know if you ever saw that detective series called MONK? He was a detective who had OCD Obsessive/Compulsive Disorder – and although his condition made him very strange in the way he

behaved, he had remarkable powers of observation.

Whenever he would first get to a crime scene he would move around the room in strange ways just trying to absorb all that the room and the furniture and the various loose ends had to tell him.

So let's try and "DO A MONK" on these 2 pretty identical looking parables.

1. **FIRST LET'S PLAY THE LETTERS GAME (INVERSION)** – The themes of the 2 parables pop out very easily. As we have said this is partly because the stories are kept simple and uncluttered.

However it is worth pointing out that part of the reason the themes stand out so clearly is that they are **deliberately reinforced**.

Q. How is that done? Well technically they call this structure an **INVERSION**.

Let me just explain that – it sounds more complicated than it is – in the parable of the lost sheep there are 4 simple THEMES or KEYWORDS:

LOST – FOUND – REJOICING – HOME (i.e. the thing lost has been recovered and restored to being back at home)

And so in our parable here we see that the opening sequence goes:

Sheep Lost – Sheep Found – Man Rejoicing – Man (+ Sheep) back at Home

Then there is a closing sequence which reverses back the sequence:

Being at home – Man rejoices with his neighbours because – Sheep is Found though previously – Sheep was Lost

So if you put the letters ABCD to the 4 keywords – the story goes ABCDCBA.

In KEYWORD form that is: **LOST > FOUND>JOY>HOME>JOY>FOUND>LOST**

I suppose it is a bit like the difference you get when you hear a piece of music in **STEREO** rather than in **MONO** – there is a much better appreciation and clarity to the music that you then hear.

Now that you know that – just try it out on **the LOST COIN parable** – and you'll notice it does the same sort of thing.

2. **OK – LET'S PLAY THE NUMBERS GAME (PROGRESSION)** - Another thing that we probably ought to notice is **the progression – see how the numbers change –**

first it is 100

then it is a whole order down – just 10

and when we get to the last parable it is down yet another whole order

Have you ever put a penny in one of those clever collecting boxes that is shaped like a funnel, the coin goes through the slot and then it spirals around and around only eventually dropping

out of sight into the box at the bottom.

The coin gets faster and faster as it gets toward its final destination.

And that suggests a couple of things:

- 1) that Jesus is leading us inexorably to a particular destination
- 2) that the stakes are being slowly raised

After all the sheep was represented only a 1/100 share

The coin was worth more it was 1/10 of everything

And the odds are going to get much more acute when it comes to lost sons, to people rather than things that are lost.

3. **OK FINALLY – LET’S PLAY THE SPOT THE DIFFERENCE GAME** – Now you might say – with some justification – that really the parables are essentially the same and Jesus is giving us two versions so as to MERELY EMPHASIZE things.

And I am sure that we do get extra emphasis by having two stories along the same lines.

But it is worth checking what has been chopped out of the first one in the second, trimmed-down version.

One thing that is cut in half is the PUNCHLINE: Verse 7 reads ***READ*** Verse 10 ***READ***

In the first we have the clear idea that we have a SINNER who is away from home and RIGHTEOUS that have remained at home.

In the second we have a different situation where the SINNER is one who is located already at home.

Q. Let me ask you – how many parables do you think we really have here? (And I don’t really want to be too pedantic or dogmatic about this) I’ll make it a multiple choice – 1, 2, 3 or 4.

The easy and obvious answer I guess is 3 – and that is how all our bibles put it – and I don’t particularly want to argue with that answer.

But let me suggest that we could look at it as 2 parables – 2 twin-parables:

because the prodigal son parable is very clearly like a play that has **two ACTS** in it – **Act 1** – we have a lost son who is very much (like the sheep) AWAY FROM HOME and for whom we look for a RETURN/a RESTORATION TO THE HOME. In **Act 2** – we have another lost son who is very much (like the coin) ALREADY AT HOME but still needs to be brought into the JOY of being truly home.

So what we have in the first 2 parables is really like a warm up act preparing the way for what is coming – it is as though Jesus is showing us the scenery and the main props for the play that is about to hit the stage.

2] The Prodigal Son and His Brother

Ok let's take a moment and read the verses that form **ACT 1** of this more extensive of the parables – so I'm going to read:

*** READ Verse 11-24 ***

Put yourself in the story

Now as I always say with stories (and a parable is essentially a story) – try and enter the story yourself – in your minds imagine the setting, try and absorb the likely emotions that would have been floating around – if something is shocking – try and sense something of the outrage.

As an approach we'll look at the three scenes in this play:

- ACT 1 SCENE 1 – The **trials** and **tribulations** of the Younger Son
- ACT 1 SCENE 2 – The **joys** and **jubilations** of the Father
- ACT 2 SCENE 1 – The **anger** and **attitude** of the Older Son

ACT 1 – SCENE 1

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

Sound very neat and simple

It sounds deceptively simple – rather like that old comedian Tommy Cooper who used to say "Just like that! Just like that!"

The way that inheritance worked was that the oldest got a double share and then the other siblings had a single share. So it wasn't that nothing was going to be coming to the younger son – it is just that the dad had to die first – and so we come to realise that the son has a problem with the father, he has a broken relationship with his father and he is saying in effect:

- "Dad – I wish that you were dead!!" or, rather similarly
- "Dad – I want your things – I don't want you!!"

Bear in mind that the estate was mostly comprised of land and property – the dad did not have a large safe and a big stash of gold that could be quickly exchanged via eBay!!

Of course, this would have taken some time and would have exposed the dad to endless questioning from family members and from the community, it would have probably meant that he would have had to lay off some workers who would no longer be needed once his estate had been downsized by a third.

Bear in mind also that the father was sharing out his whole estate (verse 12 'he divided his property between them') – so now he is making himself dependent on the remaining son, who has all the

remaining title deeds.

Pretty painful all told – and pretty utterly shaming for him – he would have not come off unscathed – he would have no longer enjoyed the rest and the respect that he had formerly enjoyed.

The far country

The son hits the road and is soon in the far country and he engages in what:

- the **NIV** calls ‘**wild living**’
- the **ESV** calls ‘**reckless living**’ and what
- the **NKJV** calls ‘**prodigal living**’

Hence the familiar title **the Prodigal Son** – and if you’re not quite sure what the word **prodigal** means – it simply means being *extremely lavish and wasteful*.

Sin is fun for a season

Well as the story goes on we see that sin has its season – the son has his fling, but as we all know the fruit of sin is always bitter in the end and just as he has brought his father’s life to the edge of ruin now he too begins to be in need.

The son has been granted what he wanted – to be the master of his own destiny and it has led him to the pigsty.

Lowest of the low

Just try and enter into that detail a moment – here we have a Jew and firstly he is made to go begging to a Gentile and secondly he now has to go and feed pigs. This is the lowest of the low – in fact he even gets to the point of wishing that he were a pig and could fill his stomach with the pods they were downing!!

There are a couple of things worth noting at this point:

- **FIRST** – we learn something about **SIN** - as Richard Trench (the Archbishop of Dublin there in the late 19C) coined it when he spoke of **“the centrifugal tendency of sin”** – the force of sin tends to take us further and further away from the Father. The longer we stray, the deeper down we go.
- **SECOND** – it shows us something important about **SALVATION** – and that is that until we have recognised in ourselves:

-> the **LOSTNESS OF THE SHEEP** – we will not discover

-> the **LOVE OF THE SHEPHERD**

Put another way – we cannot know **RECOVERY** until we know that we are truly **BROKEN DOWN!!**

ACT 1 – SCENE 2

Let’s head on from **ACT 1 – SCENE 1** to **ACT 1 – SCENE 2**.

And here we realise that this parable does not all revolve around the young prodigal.

The truth is that this parable is:

- as much about the **father** as it is about the **younger son** & it is
- as much about the **oldest** as it is about the **youngest**

So let's now see the Father.

And remember - for the younger son to be able to "make his own life" – the Father has had to "tear up his"!

When we last left the Father:

- we were thinking - "**What Rejection!**" and now as the son comes home
- we are now discovering – "**What sustained affection!**"

It is worth noting that the father did not go after the Son and drag him back (the focus here is mostly on the receiving) – however, we do see that all the while, the Father is looking out – Verse 20 "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him..."

The father acts in a remarkable way – he is a man of standing, one who had an estate that could be divided up and in this culture you would never expect one so senior to run, he would have made a spectacle out of himself for a second time, hitching up his long flowing robe to be able to run out of town to be the first to reach his son.

Imagine maybe, a little of the necessity of this – the townsfolk are not likely to be ready to receive one that has wished his own father – a pillar of their community – dead. So he paves the way for his return and not only this we start to wonder whether right here we have another onion layer to peel off.

This is the story of the prodigal son

OR Q. Is it the story of the prodigal father?

See how lavish and seemingly reckless he is in pouring out his Compassion and Mercy:

Verse 22-24 "... 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."

Perhaps the father is being IMPULSIVE, a bit on the RASH side? No – it can't be that because the father sees him a long way off, he is moved with compassion. There is no hint of out of sight and out of mind.

Robe, ring & sandals

Dwell on the gifts for a moment – because they speak of the ongoing cost of the son being recovered and returned home.

- **The best robe** – Q. Who do you think that belonged to? Well the father of course – it was no doubt his robe of office – that robe that spoke of his seniority and of his standing in the

community – now it is placed on the returning son.

- **The ring** – This was the father’s too – and maybe his own signet ring which carried his own authority, it carried his own seal of approval.
- **The sandals** – The fact that only family members wore sandals and not servants, tells us clearly the terms on which he is entering or re-entering the family.
- **The fattened calf** – In those days eating meat was not something done every day – it was more of a thing for special occasions. To kill the fattened calf (given that there were no refrigerators available) indicates that this was a community affair.

The forgiveness and restoration was not merely with the father but with the gathered community as well.

So I think we can see that this is very much a story of a prodigal son and an even more prodigal father.

Which brings us finally to the last part, which is simply:

ACT 2

Let me read the final couple of verses:

*** READ Luke 15v25-32 ***

So here we meet the senior son. He is the squeaky clean son who hates the way his younger brother is.

When he learns that the community celebration is all because his younger sibling is back in the house – he is filled with, what we might call a, “**righteous rage**”.

He is the one who has always been at the father’s side, he’s never left home to go and see the world. And he has certainly never gone off to invest all his father’s wealth on filthy scum prostitutes.

His speech

You have to say his speech in Verse 29&30 is quite compelling:

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

But wait a moment

But maybe we should consider whether this parable is all about the younger son or even mainly about the younger son – given that we recognised that the prodigal label may well be better applied to the father than to the son.

Recall the fact that at the start, the TRIGGER for these parables was the fact that the Pharisees and teachers of the law are muttering and complaining about Jesus receiving and welcoming “sinners”.

And so these parables are told with them in view.

Remember too – that the parable of the lost coin was all about something lost that was still at home.

Looking deeper

Let's look just a bit more underneath the surface here.

Q. Why might the younger son have turned out the way he was?

Q. Was the younger brother primarily running away from the father or from the elder brother?
How many times have you heard people express their interest in Jesus and their total rejection of The Church – Q. And why? Well often because of the presence of so many “**elder brother types**” in the church.

Perhaps, if we talk about which of the brother's had the most issues, we should look to the older brother. Maybe it was his insecurity that led him to try and bolster his own ego at the expense of his younger brother's.

Before you write that off as way too fanciful:

- Consider the fact that the older brother is out on a limb with regard to receiving his younger brother back – everyone else is at the party.
- Consider the fact that earlier in the story we learn that the younger brother has been involved in reckless living – it is only the elder brother who puts it in a somewhat worse light by saying that he had been partying with prostitutes. The text doesn't actually state that! And, he wasn't actually there!!

Also – Q. Have you ever thought why we don't have any element of going out seeking the lost here in this parable?

Recall what is God's implied answer to Cain, the elder brother to Abel, when he says “Am I my brother's keeper”?

You see, the more you look at things the more you start to realise that there is more than one way to be thoroughly lost.

2 ways to be lost

It is true that there is just one way to be saved – that is through Christ's sacrifice on the cross of Calvary by way of repentance and faith.

It is ***NOT*** true that there is just one way to be LOST – this story helps to SMASH UP OUR EASY CATEGORIES:

- You can be LOST by running as far away as you can from GOD
- You can be JUST AS THOROUGHLY LOST by sticking as near to GOD as you can

Now you might be thinking – surely not – Q. How on earth does that work?

We'll consider how the "elder brother" talks to his father:

- V29 – the form of address – is very rough – "Look!" he says – *NOT* "Gracious father" or "My Lord" or "Sir"
- He goes on "All these years I've been slaving for you." Doesn't sound like a very good relationship that he has with his father (at least from his side) – evidently his service to the Lord was a drudgery, a duty, and not any delight.
- He points out that he has never "disobeyed your orders" and connected into that statement he goes on that "Yet you never even gave me a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends."

Do you not get the impression that from the "eldest brothers" point of view – he and his father is more of an arrangement than a relationship.

The arrangement, the deal, is I OBEY and YOU BLESS ME.

You could look at it in terms of tax – I faithfully pay my taxes, pay my dues and now you owe me a service. "I have rights".

Q. Which one most reckless?

Q. Have you ever considered which of our characters is the most reckless?

We start off thinking that this is the younger son – go away from home for a spell of reckless living.

We then start to think that the father outdoes the son by his unbelievable reckless loving

Yet perhaps we should give the prize for recklessness to the elder brother because of his uncontrolled rage and disrespect for everyone – the father, the community and his own brother – (Notice: that he could not even bring himself to own him as a brother anymore – he had disowned him the day he walked out – he calls him "this son of yours").

We get really angry

Isn't it the case that when we get inordinately angry – it is frequently because we are not getting our way in something that we particularly want.

If you are just sitting down to watch your favourite TV series and then someone else comes and says – "Do we have to watch that!" – we can get really angry.

Sin – not breaking a list of rules

We tend to think that SIN is breaking rules – God's rules – and when we do this we become alienated from God and from his love.

BUT SIN is really when you maintain your independence from God:

- This is what the younger brother did – give me my share, let me go and live my own life – I wish you were dead, I do not want you in the equation of my life.
- This is what the elder brother did – he had no love of the father, he only obeyed the rules in order to feather the nest of his own life and was outraged when his share of the estate was now being used to fund the return and blessing of the younger brother!

CONCLUSION

Let me come full circle – Shrek, was an OGRE – he looked all ugly on the surface – just like these wretched “tax collectors” and “sinners” - *BUT* to see things truly we need to peel back the layers and look more carefully.

Q. Which one of the brothers was truly home at the feast of the father?

This is another parable that has an open ending – we don’t get told whether this RELIGIOUS elder brother ever repented – whether he ever went to his HEAVENLY FATHER and said, I have disgraced you in public by snubbing you, I have been party to sending my younger brother away, I have not served you with love, I have not reciprocated the wonderful love you have showered on me all my life – I am not worthy to be called your son...

Let us pray this morning that none of us would remain lost.

SIN is a category that is WIDER than we tend to think – we can be ever so close to God, going to church, keeping all the rules – just so that we can get our own way and manipulate God into blessing us and rewarding us with what we want. After all why else would one slave for a God – if there’s no dividend, no return to be hand upon the investment.

I’ll close with the BOTTOM LINE of the opening two twin-parables – which is the very HEARTBEAT OF OUR REDEEMING GOD:

“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.” (or as it most likely means – “over 99 supposedly righteous persons who do not feel they need to repent”).