

Home Church Study Guide—May 16, 2010
Lost and Found (Luke 15)

This chapter begins by telling how the tax collectors and sinners were flocking to Jesus. The Pharisees and scribes were outraged! Their reaction to Jesus' association with these social outcasts shows how far their hearts and minds were separated from God's. Their religion was about their status and their own self-focused desires. Eating with sinners was more than they could bear. The irony here is thick—the table from which they wanted to exclude the sinners was the very table from which they barred themselves, because of their attitudes towards those they deemed unworthy. We must be careful to not repeat their offense. When we use the table of God to exclude the world from God's presence instead of inviting them to His feast, we, like the Pharisees, must repent! When the table is a sign of our righteousness instead of it being a celebration of God's gracious provision for all, we must repent! When we gather at God's table to celebrate His wondrous love and forgiveness, surely we see that not nearly enough are gathered with us! We are compelled to go out to the highways and byways and invite the poor, suffering, and neglected to the table of plenty! By refusing to understand God's concern for the lost and sinners, we exclude ourselves from the feast of rejoicing!

You recognize the numbers—1 of 100, then 1 of 10, then 1 of 2. The sheep is lost through wandering, the coin has no fault, it is inanimate; the son intentionally strays from the father, but the response is the same in every case. Upon finding the lost, there is unbridled celebration! Any other response would be unthinkable! So why were the Pharisees so hardened, that they could not rejoice at the lost coming to Jesus? They, like the older brother, had missed the joy of relationship with God. Some have suggested the third parable is misnamed as that of the prodigal son. They suggest it should be the parable of the elder brother. Perhaps they are right—for Jesus was directing his comments toward the self-righteous Pharisee, not the straying sinner. Jesus' comments in v. 7 and 17 do not mean there are those living without need of repentance. Clearly, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Jesus is pointing out what should be the natural response of the child of God toward those who repent—rejoicing! God is not “more pleased” with the repentant sinner than with the faithful son, but He does rejoice greatly when the straying come home! If we properly understood our standing with God—surviving only by His gracious love and forgiveness—surely, we too, without hesitation, would greatly rejoice at the salvation of others! We get into trouble when we think our standing before God has something to do with our own righteousness. Such thinking causes us to jealously guard the borders of the kingdom, letting in only those of whom we fully approve. Woe to us when we become border guards to keep the lost out instead of ambassadors welcoming repentant sinners in!

The first two parables speak of the rejoicing surrounding the wandering lost sheep and the lifeless but valuable coin. The third tells of an intentional life of blatant disobedience. It speaks of a son who wishes his father dead (“give me my inheritance now”). The prodigal son cuts deeply into the heart of the father, and throws away his inheritance in sinful living. Clearly this case calls for some strong discipline and severe punishment! Even the straying son understood this. In the depths of his squalor, he realized something his older brother never saw—being anywhere near the father was more than anyone needed! For even the lowest of the servants in the presence of his father had more than enough to eat! Yes, he would settle for that! He knew he didn't deserve even that, but he somehow believed his father would allow him to at least live the life of a lowly field hand. So over and over he practiced his speech of repentance. There is no way to capture the emotion of the moment of the son coming home. His father was looking for him! After all the pain he caused him, his father was looking for him, longing and waiting for him. This is the heart of our heavenly Father. Do our hearts reflect the kind of extravagant love for those who have intentionally harmed us? Do we long for the reconciliation with us and God with those who have abused us, stolen from us, ruined our good reputations—do we pray for them to come home? Oh, that we could embrace and then emulate the compassionate love of God! Too often, though, we manifest the behavior of the older brother. The father has no care for the loss of dignity he has suffered because of his disobedient son. He doesn't even need a confession or repentance. Both were obvious by the repentant son's behavior. The father lovingly re-clothes the son, replacing his rags with a fine robe. He meets his son's hunger with the promise of a fine feast! But the unbelievable action of the father is the ring! Though he has wasted half the estate, he is given the right to full sonship! This reminds us of the parable in Matthew 20 when

the laborers are paid equally though some have labored much longer than others. It doesn't seem fair, but when you are the creator God, and all the wealth of the universe is yours, you can give as you will. The lost are fully restored. No period of half-sonship. No punishment. Accounts can now be sealed and the full wealth of the estate is once again his. Oh, to understand the depth of the gracious love of God!

So, do we enable sinners to continue in their sin in the name of love? No, that would not be love. But when the sinner comes home, God calls us to embrace and forgive, as He has embraced and forgiven each of us. I pray that we not repeat the anger of the older brother who had missed out on the richness of relationship with the father out of his own sense of self-righteousness. God's riches, love, forgiveness, and longing for the lost are inexhaustible. Do we want to make heaven itself rejoice? We must embody the love of the Father, making the wandering sinner long for the feast that even the lowliest of the servants enjoy in God's kingdom.

“So What” for Home Church discussion:

1. Have you ever lost something of great value and found it? What was your reaction?
2. Who do you know who is lost and needs to come home? Spend time in prayer over those individuals.
3. Look for specific ways to show the gracious forgiveness of God to those around you.