

[Luke 15:1-32](#)

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is a wonderful story. Told on its own, it's a heart-warming parable of the Gospel that speaks powerfully about God's love.

Don't worry, I don't propose to question any of that!

But the key words there were, 'Told on its own.' Today, I deliberately put it in its context. When you do that, you see much more the purpose of the parable.

The Lectionary almost got it right. Had we followed that slavishly we would have read the first three verses but not the two shorter parables about the lost sheep and the lost coin. We would have missed the fact that the Parable of the Prodigal Son is the third in a series of parables. It is, as the NIV calls it, the lost son.

What, then, do we learn here about God? And what does that mean for us?

Firstly, *God loves the lost.* Through all three parables here we get a sense of God's love for those who are lost and far from him. When the Pharisees and teachers of the law mutter, 'This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them' (verse 2), Jesus explains exactly why.

For Jesus, the lost are not the collateral damage we put up with so that we can devote our energies to the insiders in the community of God. They are a priority – so much so that he will do crazy things to reach them. What shepherd risks leaving ninety-nine sheep to find one that has gone astray? (Verse 4) The Good Shepherd does.

Could it be that one of our problems in the church is that we spend so much time on the ninety-nine inside the fold that we forget our calling to those lost from us? We agonise about why people don't come to church and we despair at church decline, but which of us will take the radical steps to reorganise our churches along the principles of the shepherd in the Parable of the Lost Sheep?

If you want a sign of the sickness I'm talking about, then look for the reaction whenever somebody suggests a new initiative in the church which does things in new ways and goes beyond the existing members. Someone is sure to complain, 'What about those we already have? Shouldn't we be looking after them?'

It's so infantile and selfish. How come these experienced Christians haven't learned how to feed themselves spiritually?

The giveaway for me was one year when a church member complained to me in a letter about something. It's so long ago I can't remember what she was moaning about, but in the middle of the letter came the words, 'First and foremost you are *our* minister.' In other words, she who pays the piper calls the tune. We put money in the offering, and we therefore expect you to prioritise us. It's a consumer attitude to religion. It isn't a kingdom attitude, where we give for the sake of others.

These parables warn us clearly that if we just want things done for us in the church then we are like the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Their faith had become so corrupted from God's call to Israel to be a light to the nations that everything was centred on defining the in-crowd and concentrating on the in-crowd.

We have too many Pharisees in the church today. Look instead at the passion of the woman seeking her lost coin and the commitment of the shepherd looking for the lost sheep.

Look too at the father of the Prodigal, surveying the horizon for any sign that his errant son is on his way back, a son who by demanding his inheritance early was saying in the culture of his day, 'Father, I want you dead.'

And see as that father does the undignified thing of running to his son, when the culture expected him to stand, face frowned and arms folded, waiting for the son to grovel. None of that. He is passionate for his lost son.

And look as well at the celebrations. The shepherd invites all nearby to celebrate, and Jesus says that's a picture of heaven when a sinner repents (verses 6-7). The woman does similarly when she finds the coin and Jesus says that's like the joy of the angels (verses 9-10). Presumably the party thrown by the father when the lost son returns is a parallel to them (verses 22-24).

Understand that this is how God feels about those far from him. Many of us have prodigals in our families. We have children who have not followed our faith, and it hurts to the core of our being. Some of them have gone off and done things in their lives that make us weep.

You may have had friends in the church who seemed deeply committed, whose faith you admired and whose friendship you valued. But one day they walked away. You didn't have a clue what was going on under the surface. When they left the church you felt confused and bereft.

Know that in these parables Jesus spells out just how full of love and compassion for our friends and our children the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is.

With that knowledge I invite you to pray daily for the prodigals you know, remembering that God loves them so much he will send out his search and rescue mission for them.

And as well as ourselves individually and in families, how do we show this in the life of the church? What would it mean for us to re-order our priorities to reflect God's love for those yet to know him rather than mainly putting on events that benefit us?

Secondly, *God loves the Pharisees.* One reason I wanted you to hear the whole context was so that you knew all these three parables are told in response to the moaning and groaning of the Pharisees and teachers of the law about Jesus hob-nobbing with lowlifes. They just don't get the gospel of grace.

And yet these are people who saw themselves as defending the pure faith. I've probably mentioned before that the Pharisees started out as goodies, even though we see them largely as baddies in the Bible. Their movement began as a way of calling Judaism back to a pure, unsullied faith. It was a renewal movement.

But what happens when a renewal movement doesn't meet its goals? What happens today when people who are passionate to renew the church don't see things going the way they believe they should? Frustration sets in, and if they don't guard their hearts they become embittered. They hold onto truth, but they forget grace, and so the pure well becomes poisoned.

What do people like that do? The sort of things the Pharisees did to Jesus. In their quest for purity and their failure to remember the grace of God, they hunt down Jesus and anyone like him who is a threat to what they see as the pure faith.

They do the same in the church today. Many ministers can tell stories of church members who have hounded them and resorted to underhanded tactics to undermine them or get them moved on. They think they're serving a just cause, but they sink down to an 'end justifies the means' approach.

I know what I want to do when I encounter these people, especially when they threaten my livelihood and with it the home the church provides for us. There is a small number where I would have had the right to take them to court.

But the grace and mercy of God is so outrageous that he loves these people, too. How do I know?

It comes in the ending of the Prodigal Son parable. The elder son is clearly meant to stand for those Pharisees and teachers of the law. They are the ones who have been with the Father and had all his resources. But the celebrations of heaven and the angels just render them all the more angry.

Yet look at the tenderness with which the father in the story speaks to the older son:

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

‘Come and join the party,’ says the father. The invitation into the father’s joy couldn’t be plainer. God longs for those who have contended for the truth to do so in response to his grace. He doesn’t want them to give up a passion for truth, but he knows how distorted and damaging it becomes when it isn’t paired with his grace. It damages those who are attacked with the truth, and it damages the Pharisees, too.

And so today, for all of us who have been elder sons, defending the faith vigorously but somehow losing our first love, the same Father who welcomes home prodigals seeks to melt our hearts too with his love.

How are we going to answer the invitation? You’ll notice that the story of the lost son doesn’t completely end. We don’t get to hear how the older son responds to the invitation of the father.

Except we do know in reality. Since the older son represented the Pharisees, we know what he would have said: ‘I’m going to kill you.’

Each of us must write our own ending to the parable in our own lives. Whether we are a younger son or an older son, a prodigal or a Pharisee, will we say ‘Yes’ to the Father’s extravagant love for us and for all people, or will we throw it back in his face and find that in our defence of truth we have chosen death instead of life?

I pray we write a good ending.