



It's fair to say that even though there are three parables in Luke chapter 15, most sermons are on the last parable, often called, "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." Rembrandt, the famous Dutch painter, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, painted this beautiful painting.

I am by no means an expert in Rembrandt's work but I don't believe he painted the two other parables – Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of Lost Coin.

Despite the fact that these parables are often read separately, it is important to recognize that these parables must be read together to get their meaning. Let me show you.

The three parables together, addresses the question the religious leaders had of Jesus ministry. They wondered why Jesus, not only spent so much time with sinners – talking to them, and healing them, but why he would "eat" with them. Eating with someone, in Biblical times and culture, was an ultimate expression of inclusion and acceptance.

It was unusual for religious leaders to practice "inclusion" as Jesus did. There were clear boundaries- moral, purity, and ceremonial laws, which governed how you were to relate to people, and to break those boundaries was to break the code that God had established through the Law.

So, why would Jesus eat with sinners? That was the question to which Jesus gave the three parables as the answer.

The first two parables are important in showing two things:

First, is the idea that God, exemplified in the parables as a shepherd and a woman, pursuing the lost sheep and the coin. Both objects in the story cannot "return" themselves to the owner. Sheep, once lost from the herd, go into a state of shock and cannot move on their own. This is why the shepherd needs to care them on his shoulder. The coin is even more unable to find its owner as it is an inanimate object.

What these two parables are trying to convey is the notion that God is like the shepherd and the woman who are actively pursuing the lost in order to return that which were lost. God is on a mission to find the lost! So was Jesus! He ate with sinners because he was on God's mission to pursue and find the lost! The parables were meant to show that God was actively seeking those who do not know Him and seeking to build relationships with them, in Jesus!

But what's important to note is that these parables are pointing already to what the third parable is going to deal with, and that is, the question of how we will respond to God's mission.

Are we going to rejoice with the shepherd because he has found the lost sheep? Are we going to rejoice with the woman, because she has found her lost coin?

So, now we are in better position to understand the last parable in the set.

The parable of the Prodigal Son is design to reveal our response to God's mission to find the lost. Although this parable often focuses on the returning younger brother, the real point of the story is the elder brother, who broods in the background in resentment to the younger brother who gets to return, but the real resentment is towards the Father for his generosity and forgiveness.

I think the real prodigal son in the parable is the Eldest son, while working and following orders, was "lost" because he never understood the Father's heart.

For the older brother, love was earned through merit – obedience – hard work – these were the conditions of receiving God's love.

But when the younger brother receives "unmerited favor", his world shatters. It shatters because he believed that his acceptance and inclusion in the Father's love was because he earned it. Which means that, his younger brother who shamed the Father and squandered his inheritance must pay back before he can be accepted into his Father's household.

Remember the Pharisees and the religious leaders who were muttering?

What was Jesus telling them through this parable?

I think the parable would have made the Pharisees very uncomfortable, no one like to be revealed! You see, the Pharisees were responding like the older brother – When they saw Jesus finding the lost and restoring them to the Father, they refused to take joy, brother refused to join the celebration.

But the point of the story isn't condemnation of the older brother at all. The point of the parable is that God loves both the "lost" brother – the one who squandered everything and who returns to the Father in desperation, and the older brother who lived all along under the Father's roof and yet was lost because he never understood the generous and loving heart of the Father. Instead he tried through his own hard work to earn it.

God's love is free. You cannot earn it, you don't have to.

God loved the younger brother when he went away, and he loved him when he returned.

God loved the older brother when he was obedient, and He loved him when he wasn't.

God's love is unconditional.

God loves the younger prodigal and the older prodigal – he loves them both!

God is love, thanks be to God.