

*The Transformed Life
requires us to
love the lost as
God does.*

GOD'S LOST AND FOUND DEPARTMENT (LUKE 15)

by Coy Roper

In newspapers, department stores, schools, shopping malls, and government buildings there may be a lost and found department. God has a lost and found department too. We find it in Luke 15, where we read of three or four things that are lost, and three things that are found. There we find the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, the prodigal son, and the elder son. In these parables are represented, I believe, three groups of people. *Every one of us is in one of those three groups.* Let us consider each in turn.

REPRESENTED IN THESE PARABLES ARE THOSE WHO ARE LOST

It is obvious that each of the parables represents lost people, who are later found. We can learn something about being lost.

What Does It Mean To Be Lost?

We can learn how people are lost. Some are lost like the sheep—through their own carelessness and indifference. Some are lost like the coin—perhaps through another's carelessness. Some are lost like the lost son—of their own free will they stubbornly and rebelliously determine to lose themselves.

We can learn what it is like to be lost. In the case of the sheep, being lost means being separated from the group where there is fellowship and shelter and from the one who cares and keeps, and being exposed to all the dangers of the enemies of the sheep. In the case of the coin, it means being useless and worthless. In the case of the son, it means being penniless, being friendless, being jobless (Luke 15 does not say that the citizen hired the prodigal; it says the prodigal

"joined himself" to the citizen), being in a disgusting, degrading situation—living in a pigpen, living in rags, without shoes, being hungry, being without family or father and without home or house, and being without status or standing.

Let us pause to drive home the point that if you are not saved, that is *exactly* where *you* are!

Are you lost? All are lost and deserve to die because of their sin (Romans 3:23; 6:23). If then you are accountable, you are lost until you accept God's offer of salvation by faith and obedience. If you have not done so, you are lost!

If you are lost, what does it mean? It means that you are in the position of the lost sheep—alone in the wilderness, desolate, separated from fellowship and care, exposed to danger, and like the lost coin—worthless and useless as far as the purpose for which God created you is concerned, and in the position of the lost son—penniless, friendless, hungry, without a family or a father, without status or standing, living in a pigpen!

How do you feel about that? I asked a man that question once, and he replied, "It doesn't feel very good living in a pigpen." How do you feel about it? Do you like living in that pigpen?

How Are the Lost Saved?

First, to be saved, you have to see your "lostness." You have to realize your pitiful condition. Jesus said that when the young man "came to his senses. . . ." Notice that when he came back into his right mind, he saw himself; he saw his true condition. It was ridiculous for him to perish with hunger when even his father's servants had plenty to eat. It was only reasonable—it was the logical thing to do—for him to leave sin and

return to his father. And so today, the reasonable, logical course of action is to leave your sin and to return to God. Those who continue to sin, who are knowingly away from the Father and stay there, are “out of their minds”! They are not thinking straight! In a sense, they are crazy.

Second, you must resolve to do something about your lost condition. The lost son said, “I will get up and go. . . .” We say, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” But so is the road to heaven! Resolutions by themselves will not get the job done. However, few good things are ever accomplished without someone having earlier resolved to do them.

Third, you must be willing to admit your sinfulness. The prodigal said he would say: “I have sinned. . . .” Implied in this confession is the idea that the prodigal was sorry, sorry that he had brought shame upon his father and sorry that he had disobeyed God. You must feel a similar sorrow and be willing to make the same admission—to say, “I have sinned,” without offering excuses.

Fourth, you must come to God seeking mercy. The son was going to say, “I am no longer worthy. . . .” No one is worthy of the salvation provided by God! If we are saved at all, it must be by grace, by favor extended to us which we do not deserve. When you come to God, you must not come as a bargain hunter or as a treaty maker. You must cast yourself down before God, seeking grace, admitting your unworthiness, unconditionally surrendering yourself to God.

Fifth, you must come to God where He is, doing what He wants you to do. The prodigal son said, “I will go to my father. . . .” You do not have the right to dictate to God the road you are to travel to get to Him. You must travel the road He has given you through His Word. That road takes you through Jesus, who said, “No one comes to the Father, but through me” (John 14:6). To be saved by Jesus, you must believe in Christ, repent of your sins, be willing to confess your faith, and be baptized into Christ for the remission of sins. Or, if you are a Christian who has turned away from God, return to Him by repenting of your sins and praying for forgiveness (Acts 8:22) while you confess your sins (1 John 1:9).

Sixth, you have to follow through with your intentions. Intentions are not bad—but failing to

carry through with your good intentions is bad! The great thing about the prodigal son is not just that he intended or resolved, or planned, but that he did what he resolved to do. “He got up and came to his father.” Have you been intending to be saved? To obey the Lord? To be baptized? To be restored? Great! Now do what you have been intending to do!

How Will the Lost Be Welcomed by God?

The most amazing thing about the parable of the prodigal son is the father’s reception of his returned son. The boy is finally coming home. The father sees him while he is “still a long way off.” Why? Because, it seems, he was looking for him, and probably he had been looking for a long time. Each day, he must have stared down that long road, looking, longing, hoping: “Maybe he will come home today. . . .” Finally, when his son does return, the father *runs* to meet him. That is impressive, is it not? Old men usually do not run. I expect that old men in that part of the world never ran. But this old man ran to welcome back his boy—that is how glad he was to see him. And the father embraced his son and kissed him—even before the son had begun his statement of repentance! Then the son said, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son. . . .” But before he could finish, the father interrupted, to call for the robe and the ring and the shoes and the killing of the fatted calf, and the welcoming party: “For this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.”

What love—what amazing grace—is exhibited in this story! But it is the kind of love and grace that God has for sinners today . . . for you and me . . . and you can expect that kind of reception when you return to God! Claudine Miley wrote a poem called “Will God Run?”¹

When our lives are filled with sin
And we give no thought to God at all,
Will God still own us as His own?
Does He love us when we fall?

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No matter how far we choose to go,
He looks and waits for our return.
He patiently waits with outstretched arm,
For our wellbeing is His great concern.

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Amazing grace! How wonderful it is

To have a Father who loves us so.
He'll claim us as His very own,
If only back to Him we'll go!

He loves us more than we can ever know,
And once that trip back home's begun,
He'll rush to greet us on our way.
He will even run. Yes, God will even run!

REPRESENTED IN THESE PARABLES ARE THOSE WHO ARE CONCERNED ABOUT AND WHO SEEK THE LOST

Of course, the seeking shepherd, the searching woman, the father, all represent God's interest in and concern for the lost. God's love is like the shepherd's seeking the lost sheep and like the woman's searching her house diligently to find her lost coin. In the case of the lost son, the father does not go looking for the son—after all, when a sinner goes into a far country, God does not go with him. A sinner who rebels of his own free will must return of his own free will. But when that rebellious child makes his way back, God is waiting to greet him and welcome him.

In every case, there is rejoicing when the lost is found. In the case of the sheep that is found, the shepherd says, "Rejoice with me" (Luke 15:6), and then we read, "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7). In the case of the coin that is found, the woman says, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost" (Luke 15:9). And then Jesus adds, "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10). In the case of the lost son who is found, the father says, "Let us eat and be merry," and then Jesus said, "and they began to be merry" (Luke 15:24). There may be a progression here: first, there is joy in heaven; second, there is joy before the angels of God; third, the Father Himself rejoices. So the point is: God loves the lost; God wants the lost to be sought; God wants the lost to be found; and God and the angels rejoice when the lost are found!

But why was it necessary for Jesus to make the point that God loves the lost? Notice the setting for the parables: Luke 15:1–3.

Jesus had been accused of associating with sinners. He does not reply by saying, "You mis-

understand the situation—these people are not really sinners!" Nor does He say, "Oh, I'm sorry, I never realized they were sinners; I won't do it again." Rather, He says: "Guilty as charged!" Then He explains why He associated with sinners: "Because God is concerned about sinners." Jesus simply reflects God's concern. This is the primary message of the chapter.

But the implication is that God's love for the lost, as exemplified by Jesus, ought to be shared by God's people. The way God feels and thinks about the lost—that is the way we ought to feel and think! What God did to bring the lost to salvation—that is the kind of thing we ought to be willing to do to bring others to Christ! Think of it: How much does God love the lost? That is how much we ought to love the lost! How much did God do to save the lost? How much did He trouble Himself—what kind of trouble did He go to—to save the lost? That is how much we ought to be willing to inconvenience ourselves, if necessary, to save the lost!

If we have love for the lost as Christ did, what will we do?

We will seek the lost. When we have an evangelistic campaign, we will be involved. Maybe we will hand out tracts. Perhaps we will make a point of speaking to others about our Lord. Certainly we will invite others to attend services with us. We will seek opportunities to teach others personally. Furthermore, sharing the concern of Christ for the lost will cause men—and women—to leave their home and go to faraway countries to serve as missionaries.

We will seek diligently, as did the woman who swept the house looking for the coin. We will not be satisfied with a token effort, but will search until the lost are found! We will persist in seeking until we find those who are receptive to the gospel. As a church, we will do more than just allot a modest sum to evangelism and missions. Just as Jesus gave priority to seeking and saving the lost, so will we.

We will rejoice when the lost are found! When the sinner turns, or the apostate returns, to Christ, we will not treat them as if they are on probation for a period of time. Nor will we treat their "welcoming home" party as if it were a perfunctory activity we wish we did not have to take the time for. Rather, there will be the kind of rejoicing pictured in these parables!

WE FIND REPRESENTED IN THE CHAPTER THOSE WHO COULD NOT CARE LESS ABOUT THE LOST!

I said at the beginning of the lesson that there were three or four lost things in these parables. The fourth is the elder brother (Luke 15:25–32).

It is obvious the younger brother was lost and not so obvious that the elder brother was lost. The younger was lost away from home; the older, at home. The younger's "lostness" was a matter of distance; the older's, a matter of attitude. The younger was probably guilty of sins of the flesh; the older, of sins of the spirit; the younger, of sins of commission; the older, of sins of omission.

Think about the sins the older brother was guilty of: (1) He was angry and refused to go in. He was thus guilty of sinful anger or wrath, and of spite. (2) He was self-righteous. He said, "I never did anything wrong. I never neglected a command of yours." That is hard to believe. (3) He was selfish: "I have been serving you . . . I have never neglected. . . . You have never given *me* a kid . . . that *I* might be merry with *my* friends." This was no time for him to be thinking about himself. It was a time for him to be thinking about others. (4) He was jealous and envious. (5) He was probably ungrateful and forgetful of what his father had done for him. "You have never given me a kid that I might be merry with my friends" (Luke 15:29). That sounds extreme. (6) He was judgmental. He said the prodigal son had "devoured your wealth with harlots" (Luke 15:30). The elder brother could not know that. (7) He lacked a spirit of brotherliness, of brotherly affection. Notice the exchange: The elder brother says, "This son of yours . . ." The father says, "Your brother . . ." The elder brother was not even willing to claim the returned son as his brother.

His greatest sin was that he did not share his father's attitude toward the lost! He would neither seek the lost nor rejoice when the lost was found. This is the climax of the chapter. Jesus was trying to get his critics to see themselves in this elder brother, to contrast their attitude toward the lost with His attitude, and to understand that His attitude was God's attitude. The sins of the elder son were also the sins of the Pharisees.

Some today sin in the same way; they neither seek the lost nor rejoice when the lost are found: If a gospel meeting is held, they will neither invite others nor attend themselves. They will not talk with their friends about the gospel. They can talk about football or television programs, but not about their Lord. Will they use their home to teach the Bible? No. If the lost are found, they may not even rejoice. When someone comes on Sunday morning to be baptized, some Christians may actually be impatient because it means that they will be late to the restaurant for Sunday dinner.

What Jesus is asking us in this chapter is this: "Do you care about sinners the way I do? Or are you like the elder brother? Are you like the Pharisees, who couldn't care less about the lost?"

The saddest part of the story is that there were four things lost and only three found. In spite of the father's kind entreaties and loving approach, the elder son stayed outside and stayed lost. At the end of the story he is on the outside looking in! What about you? If you have shown by the way you have acted that you could not care less about the lost, begin today to demonstrate in your own life Christ's concern for the lost.

CONCLUSION

Finally, we ask: In which of these three categories do you find yourself? Are you saved? If you are, are you concerned about the lost? Or are you one who could not care less about the lost?

If, on the other hand, you are yourself one of the lost, let me ask: Why will you continue to be lost? Come back to God! Why? As long as you are lost, you are away from God, poverty-stricken, and living in a pigpen. Why would you live in a pigpen one week longer . . . one day longer . . . one minute longer than you have to?

But there is another reason why you should return to God: It is because of God's love for you. God loves you and wants you to be saved; He is waiting, hoping, expecting, wanting to welcome you! He will run to meet you if you will come to Him.

Endnote

¹Charles B. Hodge Jr., *Will God Run?* (Dallas: Christian Publishing Co., 1965), 7.