

The Second Lost Son  
Luke 15

Turn to Luke 15. We're reading Luke 15 because I have a particular scene in mind. Some day, perhaps quite soon, someone will begin attending this church that we don't think belongs here. This person will not be like us, they will have a different kind of story, and they will not fit in very well.

They'll be here because they want God, they want Jesus, and they can tell that we want God and Jesus too. We want to love God and trust him, we want to follow and obey Jesus. They like that, so they join us. But we grumble and mutter. There's too much wrong with this person. Why are they like that? We've sort of figured out how to get along with each other, at least we're used to each other, and then someone comes in that's hard to welcome.

Jesus has always attracted people like that, and such people have always been a problem to the righteous, to people like us.

Jesus Welcomes the Bad and the Righteous Grumble - Luke 15:1-2; 5:27-32; 13:24-27; 19:5-10

Here's how our text begins: *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

Let's talk about this muttering. Jesus regularly ate with people who did not seem to show any interest in God, and this offended the righteous. Sinners liked to eat with Jesus, because he welcomed them and they were not used to be welcomed by those who taught about God. In the experience of the sinners, God-teachers would have nothing to do with them. So they liked Jesus.

Jesus ate with them as one way to call them to repent. For Jesus, the kingdom of God was like a banquet. He ate and drank with them to give them a taste of the kingdom. He ate and drank with them to give them the flavour of being a child of God. It was one of the ways that he invited them to the eternal banquet. Not everyone Jesus welcomed came to God, but some did.

We'll look at three other places in Luke that tell us about Jesus eating and drinking with sinners, Luke 5, 13, and 19.

Luke 5:27-32: *After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him. Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."*

Jesus was pretty good to the Pharisees and law teachers, wasn't he? They were the healthy ones, the righteous ones. Jesus came for the sick, the sinners. Jesus came to call sinners to repentance. He called them to repentance by eating with them. Eating with Jesus did not mean they had repented, but it did mean he was calling them, and some of these did repent, as Levi did.

Luke 13:24–27 – Not every one Jesus ate with repented. Not every one Jesus ate with entered into life. *“Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, ‘Sir, open the door for us.’ ‘But he will answer, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from.’ ‘Then you will say, ‘We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.’ ‘But he will reply, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!’”*

They will say, “but we ate and drank with you, you taught in our streets,” but the owner will say, “I don’t know you or where you are from.” I’m bringing in this paragraph because I’ve heard people use Luke to teach that Jesus accepted everybody. Jesus did not accept everybody. He called everybody, and he called them by eating and drinking with them and enjoying them. The kingdom is like a banquet. But that does not mean they followed him.

Jesus said this will happen to many. “Many, I say, won’t be able to enter. They’ll answer, ‘we ate and drank with you,’ but that won’t be enough.

One more grumbling story. This is the Zacchaeus story, in Luke 19:5–10.

*When Jesus reached the spot (where short Zacchaeus was in the tree), he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”*

All the people began to mutter. Then Zacchaeus got up and openly announced his repentance. This is the kind of person that entered the narrow gate. For Jesus, that was successful eating and drinking. There was no one Jesus would not sit down beside and invite into the kingdom of God.

Now let’s read again the opening of Luke 15: *The tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”*

One reason I have filled out the setting is that if we're not careful we can take the parables of Jesus on their own, without making sure we know who Jesus was talking to, and why he was talking to them. Every parable of Jesus comes to us as a piece of the larger story of that Gospel. A parable is always part of a larger Gospel story, and it belongs right where we find it.

If we take them out of their setting, we take them off their foundation, and then they can mean all kinds of things, whatever strikes our fancy. That has been done to the stories in Luke 15. Let's not do that.

Now we'll read the first two stories in Luke 15. Put yourself in the place of the Pharisees and law teachers. Pretend you're one of them. You're offended that Jesus, who clearly claims to be a teacher of God's ways, feels so free to welcome and eat with bad people, and enjoy them. Pretend we're all Pharisees and law teachers, and now Jesus speaks to us.

### The Joy of Finding – Luke 15:3–10

*Then Jesus told them, the Pharisees and law teachers, this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' 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 suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

We all know about the joy of finding. We lose something important to us, we look and look and don't know where it is, and then we find it! It's a big relief. The older I get the more often I experience the joy of finding, because I lose things more often. We don't always find what we lose. Sometimes is gone and we never get it back. We carry on. But it sure is nice when we find what we feared was gone for good.

God knows all about the joy of finding. When a sinner repents, decides to follow Jesus and live in his ways, God celebrates, because someone God lost has been found. Not every sinner who ate with Jesus repented, but even if one did, God rejoiced. Jesus was talking to the Pharisees and law teachers, and also to us when God brings us a person too rough and unpleasant to be welcomed.

What the Pharisees and law teachers did not grasp was how happy God was when one sinner repented. Jesus was not condemning them, he was just telling them and us about his Father. He's telling us how pleased the Father when even one of these people wants to honour him and follow Jesus. He's telling us that the Father is cheering. He wants to know how the Father responds.

## The Second Lost Son – Luke 15:11–32

*Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*

*“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father.*

*“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ “But 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.*

*“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘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!’ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 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.’*

The younger son repented. He told his father, *“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”* He came back to his father, and that’s what he said. What he said was true. He had sinned against God and against his father, and in the ancient eastern world, after publicly humiliating his father as he’d done, he was no longer worthy to be called his son. That’s repentance. Jesus told the story to make his repentance clear.

When we grumble about who the Lord brings in, we take ourselves out of God’s celebration. We refuse to attend his banquet. We the righteous are always in danger of being the older brother.

Both brothers broke their father's heart. Both of them turned their backs on their father, both did it publicly, openly humiliating their father.

In Luke 15, the Pharisees and law teachers are the older brother. "You are always with me, and all I have is yours." This is the unexpected kindness of Jesus to these Jewish leaders. The father did not condemn either son, and Jesus did not condemn the Pharisees and scribes. But through this story Jesus was saying to them, "won't you join God's celebration?" God has found what he thought was lost. Won't you join his celebration?

The righteous grumble that the people the Lord brings in are not "right," and heaven cheers that they came in. This story sometimes gets told in a way that centers on the kindness of the father to the younger son, and that's an important part of this. But Jesus told these stories to the Pharisees and law teachers. They were the older brother, and that's why this story ends with the older brother.

The father went out to meet both boys. He ran down the road to meet the younger son, and bring him in. Then he left the happy dinner to talk to the older son, and bring him in, too. Jesus ended the story without telling us whether or not the older brother came to join the celebration. Did the older brother come in? We don't know. The Pharisees and law teachers were the older brother, and Jesus did not know what they would do. The story ends with the father explaining why he was so good to the younger brother.

At the end, the older brother said, "Father, you don't get it. Don't you see how bad he is?" The father said, "No, you don't get it. Don't you see how happy I am that he's back?" Whose view will guide us? We get to answer that for ourselves.

This parable always reminds me of Jonah. The older brother was angry that his father welcomed the younger brother back so kindly, and Jonah was furious that God did not destroy the evil Ninevites. Jonah found God's kindness offensive, and the older brother found his father's kindness offensive. And the Pharisees and law teachers found the Lord's kindness offensive.

Jonah ends with God speaking gently to Jonah, and explaining to Jonah why he was merciful to the Ninevites. The parable ends with the father speaking gently to the older brother, and explaining why he was merciful to the younger brother. Did Jonah change his mind? We don't know. We don't know if the older brother changed his mind.

Both stories are left open on purpose, because God's righteous people always need to decide for ourselves how we will act when God is more merciful than we want him to be. All three parables in Luke 15, and the book of Jonah, mostly tell us what God is like.

This is all just another way of urging us to love one another. In Romans, Paul urges us not to condemn each other or despise each other. "Rather, accept one another, just as Christ accepted you." God has accepted the one we condemn and despise. Just like these stories of Jesus tell us.

The older brother said, “Can’t you see how bad he is?” The father said, “Can’t see how glad I am that he’s here?” Amen.

PRAYER: Father, sooner or later you will bring someone to us that offends us. We’re going to think they shouldn’t be among us. We’ll be wrong, but that is how we’ll respond. So widen our hearts already, God. Make us more like you are. Don’t change them, Lord, change us. Save us from being the older brother. May the God who calls us to this be faithful to do it. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.