

Lost and Found (Part 2)

Jesus came to seek and to save the lost (Matt. 18:11, Luke 19:10). The traditional understanding of this purpose statement is that Christ came to give eternal life to those who stand eternally condemned. While Jesus came to do that too, that is not what this statement is saying. The context of these passages is not referring to those who are lost in the sense of eternally condemned but rather to those Israelites who are lost in the sense of wandering out of fellowship with God. In other words, Jesus is addressing saved Jews who are backslidden. That was demonstrated in [Part 1](#), where we studied the parables of the two sons (Matt. 21:28-32), the lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7), and the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10). In this article we will examine the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32).

Parable of the Prodigal Son

*And he said, A certain man had two sons: And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.
Luke 15:11-16*

The prodigal is obviously a son from the start of the parable. The Scriptures are very clear on that point. Nothing can change his position as a son, not even his lifestyle.

All born-again believers are sons of God. Nothing can take away that unconditional inheritance. Regardless of lifestyle, sons are always sons. Behavior does not determine eternal standing with God. However, behavior does determine whether one receives the *conditional* inheritance, the status of firstborn son, which is not guaranteed.

The prodigal is a saved, but backslidden, Israelite – the kind Jesus came to seek and to save. This young man is lost, not eternally, but in the sense that he has destroyed his fellowship with the Father. He is miserable, wallowing in sin. The prodigal represents the publicans and harlots in Israel, the “vice” sinners whose deplorable spiritual condition was obvious to everyone. Nevertheless, the prodigal repents!

And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I

have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. Luke 15:17-19

True repentance is always preceded by coming to oneself. Before a child of God can get right with God, he must see the awfulness of his way. There is a sense of guilt, of remorse; a change of mind that prompts a turning from sin, a behavioral change. For the prodigal it is the realization that he has been wasting his life in riotous living. Yet there is no need to perish with hunger. He awakens to his need to get right with the Father by admitting his failure and asking for deliverance from his condition. He realizes he is not *worthy* to be the father's son, though he never questions his actual standing as a son. With contrite heart, he will ask to be reinstated as a hired servant, a mere employee.

And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry. Luke 15:20-24

Of course, the focus of the prodigal son parable is not the son; it is the Father. Thankfully, God always has open arms to receive back wayward saints, and all heaven rejoices over their return. Of course, the Father is not eager to receive back to fellowship an unrepentant saint. His reception is based on repentance.

Notice the terminology used by the Father in v.24, *My son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found*. It is important to remember the prodigal is a son – a saved sinner – restoring fellowship with his father. The fact that he is “lost” cannot mean he is unsaved. In context, it must mean he is wandering away from the father but later returns. This young man is revived. What a gracious, loving heavenly Father, who is always ready and willing to receive back home a repentant child. He is eager to kill the fatted calf and celebrate!

The Legalist Son

There is one other aspect to the parable that is often forgotten: the other son. He stays home and does not waste his life in riotous living. However, he has a self-righteous attitude, as seen in his response to the father.

Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. And he called one of the

servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found. Luke 15:25-32

The stay-at-home son is angry and envious that the father will go to such great lengths to receive home the scoundrel, whereas the father sees it quite differently. The prodigal is no longer “dead,” in the sense of being separated from the father, and no longer lost. He is alive and found! The father graciously receives him back home.

Why would Jesus tell a story of this nature? It seems He is identifying the two groups of sinners in His day that He sought to restore to fellowship with God. The prodigal son apparently represents the licentious publicans and harlots who get right with God. But the stay-at-home son seems to represent the legalistic scribes and Pharisees whose outward life was conforming, but inwardly, they were spiritually corrupted. Most of them never repented.

Does this latter group represent the attitude of some fundamentalists, who view themselves as righteous for holding true to biblical doctrine, avoiding licentious living, serving in their local church, reading their Bible regularly, and doing other things to make them spiritual? Because they have not wandered off into left field, they think their life is acceptable and well-pleasing to the Lord. But they are relying on a “to-do list” of sorts to make them spiritual. But isn’t it possible to wander off into right field, thinking that conservatism is next to godliness? This is nothing less than legalistic sanctification, which Paul condemned in the book of Galatians.

Meanwhile, their heart is not in true fellowship with the Lord, for the dependence is on self rather than the Lord. This kind of person often resorts to hoity-toity, condescending comparisons with prodigals to make themselves feel good. No one would admit to this condition, of course, and that is part of the problem. What is needed is a long look in the mirror of God’s Word!

Two Different Ends

The legalistic son bemoans the fact that the father has never thrown a party for him. He feels gyped, reminding the father he has remained at home all through the years and has never disobeyed his father’s commandments. Really? What son *never* disobeys? Self-righteousness oozes from this man’s pores in contrast to the returned prodigal who views himself as unworthy of being the father’s son.

Why is this son so angry? I believe it is because the returned prodigal is given the best robe and a ring. The robe is reminiscent of Joseph's coat of many colors that had infuriated his brothers, not merely because Jacob seemed to favor Joseph, but because it denoted his status as firstborn son. Along with that status came privileges, such as receiving a double inheritance – later evidenced by Jacob blessing Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh – and leadership responsibilities, but also the right of succession. Furthermore, the firstborn son was recognized as the spiritual leader of the family in the father's absence.

A father would often identify the firstborn with the gift of a royal robe and a signet ring, symbolizing the father's authority being bestowed upon the special son. That appears to be what is happening in this text. But why does this make the self-righteous son so angry? Because *he* is the eldest son, not the returned prodigal. Luke 15:12 clearly identifies the prodigal as the younger son, so the father is choosing to break with tradition and bestow the firstborn status on the younger son rather than the elder.

Why would the father do this? Because the younger son is clearly the more spiritual of the two. Though he has wandered, he has fully repented in great humility and is now in full obedience and submission to the father. The older son, on the other hand, is outwardly conforming, but inwardly angry and self-righteous. His heart has not changed. Consequently, the father views him as less spiritual, but reminds him that he is also a son and, therefore, entitled to the father's riches as well.

We would be remiss to ignore the spiritual lesson Jesus is sharing in this parable. Previously, Jesus had told the scribes and Pharisees, *the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you (Matt. 21:31)*. Although this infuriated the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus explained why they would receive the lesser status in the kingdom. *For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him (Matt. 21:32)*. The publicans and harlots, because they had repented of their backsliding when John preached, would be given greater status in the Messianic kingdom, the honor of ruling and reigning with Jesus. The scribes and Pharisees, because of their continued corrupt heart, would be of lesser status in the kingdom.

The application to twenty-first century Christianity should be clear. Beware of self-righteous, legalistic sanctification! Don't rob yourself of the status of firstborn son, or you will be lesser in the coming kingdom.

[Lost and Found \(Part 1\)](#)

It is terrible to be lost, but wonderful to be found.

*For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.
Luke 19:10*

Many commentators interpret this verse as meaning Jesus came to give eternal life to those who are eternally condemned. The New Testament sometimes speaks of unsaved persons as being lost. *2 Cor. 4:3, If our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost.*

However, the word *lost* is not predominantly used in the Scriptures of those who are unsaved, and the first century Jews would not have understood it as referring to those who are eternally lost. The preponderance of times the word *lost* is used in the New Testament, it is used of saved people who are floundering in sin. They have wandered away from the Lord, and in that sense, they are lost. How then can they be saved? By being delivered from their sinful self-destruction.

A saved person who is living in carnality is temporally lost to some degree and needs to be found. Incidentally, in those instances where the word *lost* is used to refer to carnal, but saved people, the word *saved* is used in many of those cases to refer to their repentance and return to the Lord. In that sense, they are *found*.

Yes, Jesus also came to earth with a burden to see eternally lost people get saved from sin and receive eternal life. That is the emphasis of John's Gospel. But that is not how Jesus uses the terms *saved*, *lost*, and *found* in the Synoptic Gospels. The first two years of His preaching ministry were mainly focused on convincing the Israelite nation to repent and turn back to the Lord, for they were like lost and wandering sheep, needing to be rescued from national destruction.

Two Types of Sinners

In seeking and saving the lost, Jesus repeatedly encountered two groups of people in Israel that were polar opposites in one respect, but very much alike in another. The first group, comprised of scribes and Pharisees, were the self-righteous fundamentalists of Jesus' day. They were more focused on the letter of the law than the spirit of the law (see Matt. 5:21-6:18), fully expecting their keeping of lists and standards to make them spiritual. Priding themselves in strict observance of the law, they condescended to those who had "lower standards:"

*God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners,
unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican (Matt. 18:11).*

Instead of comparing themselves to God and seeing how far they were from Him in fellowship, they compared themselves to "sinners" and felt good about their spiritual condition. They were self-righteous, yet carnal, nonetheless.

At the other end of the spectrum were the publicans (tax collectors that defrauded citizens) and harlots (promiscuous women). Needless to say, for

every promiscuous woman, there was at least one promiscuous man, so this was not limited to women. The publicans and harlots represented the carnal element of the nation, those who were living licentiously. For those who insist these seedier elements of society had to be eternally lost, consider the present day church of Jesus Christ, which is plagued by many who are saved, yet living in fornication or adultery. Indeed, in 1 Cor. 6 Paul had to warn the Corinthian believers not to use their bodily members – which were now Christ's – as the members of a harlot. He was dealing with the sin of fornication in the church.

Jesus treats both groups – scribes and Pharisees, on the one end, and publicans and harlots, on the other – as “sinners,” but He never calls into question their eternal standing with God. Yet he deems them both lost and in need of repentance.

Doesn't the use of the word *lost* imply they were eternally lost and in need of eternal life? No, that is an assumption that has been made by many, but it is not consistent with the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus refers to both groups as if eternally saved, but in need of restored fellowship with God. That can be clearly demonstrated from several parables.

Parable of the Two Sons

But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not. Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him. Matthew 21:28-32

Notice the vineyard owner has two sons. Sonship is evidence of an eternally secure relationship with God. Furthermore, both sons are asked to work in the Father's vineyard; again, evidence of right positional standing with God. Unbelievers have no connection with the Father's vineyard.

The first son initially refuses to work in his father's vineyard, but he later repents and goes. According to the interpretation given by Jesus, this son represents the publicans and harlots who are not right with God at first, but later repent at John's preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom and submit to the baptism of repentance. The other son agrees to work for his father, but then never does. This latter son epitomizes the self-righteous religious leaders who claim to be doing the will of God, but whose self-righteous hearts are not right with Him.

Imagine how infuriated the Pharisees become when Jesus tells them the

publican and harlots will go into the kingdom of God before them, the religious leaders! Why will this happen? Because the sinners have believed the message of John and repented of their lifestyle. Of course, the Pharisees are sinners too, but they can't see it and so do not repent.

Some may question how the word *sinners* could be used for saints. But are there not sinning saints? The word *sinners* in this context simply means they are carnal sons of God. It is important to take note that both groups – the scribes/Pharisees and publicans/harlots – are expected to be in the kingdom, but the repentant publicans and harlots will go before (i.e., precede) the unrepentant Pharisees, signifying a greater status for the repentant. As a result of bringing forth the fruits of repentance, the righteousness of the publicans and harlots exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. The publicans and harlots, now revived, will be great in the millennial kingdom, while the scribes and Pharisees will be least (Matt. 5:19-20).

We read of these two groups of sinners in another passage of Scripture.

Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them. Luke 15:1-2

Once again, Jesus encounters the two polar groups of sinners in Israel. Jesus is accused by the self-righteous sinners (scribes and Pharisees) of eating with the vice-sinners (i.e., those guilty of vices, the publicans and sinners). Nevertheless, both are eternally secure believers, as will be clearly demonstrated in the following parables.

Parable of the Lost Sheep

What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance. Luke 15:4-7

In the parable, the shepherd owns all one hundred sheep! This clearly pictures their standing before God as eternally secure. One becomes lost by wandering. That cannot mean unsaved, for salvation cannot be lost. In the metaphor, the sheep (incidentally, it's not a goat) is an Israelite who wanders away from God through sinning. The shepherd, Jesus Christ, goes after the lost sheep, because He came to seek and to save that which was lost. *Lost*, in this context, cannot mean eternally condemned. *Lost* here means eternally saved, but not right with God.

Jesus did not come to call the righteous Israelites to repentance; he came to call sinning Israelites to repentance. Righteous Israelites, in context, are not merely those who are eternally saved, but those who are right with God. In v. 7, they are called *just persons that need no repentance*. Some like to say the word *just* refers to positional righteousness, that is, justification. It does in some other contexts of Scripture, but not here.

The word *just* can also refer to practical righteousness, that is, progressive sanctification. For instance, in Matt. 1:19 Joseph, after learning of Mary's pregnancy, determines to put her away privately (in other words, he will not divorce her publicly), because he is a *just* man. That doesn't mean he is saved, justified. Rather, it means he is a good, righteous man who acts uprightly in his everyday living.

When Pilate washes his hands to demonstrate his innocence in the matter of judging Jesus, he says, "I am innocent of the blood of this just person." Pilate is obviously not saying Jesus is eternally justified in the eyes of God. He is saying Jesus is innocent, upright. Thus, context helps to determine how the word *just* is being used. In the parable, it seems there is joy in heaven whenever Christians get right with God, in this context, Jews repenting and turning back to Jehovah. Indubitably, there is also joy in heaven when eternally lost people become eternally saved, but that's not the point here.

Parable of the Lost Coin

Either what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it? And when she hath found it, she calleth her friends and her neighbours together, saying, Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece which I had lost. Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth. Luke 15:8-10

The woman owns all ten coins, just as the shepherd owns all the sheep. The fact that one sheep or one coin becomes lost, does not mean the owner forfeits ownership. It simply means the thing owned is temporarily lost and needs to be found. In both cases, though, notice the aggressiveness with which the owners go after what belongs to them. Jesus, out of a heart of love, goes after His sheep that are wandering, whether first century Israelites or twenty-first century Christians.

Why are angels joyful about Christians getting right with God? The answer is marvelous. One day Satan and his host of angels will be deposed by Christ, and Jesus will rule in His kingdom, along with those saints who have lived uprightly. The same heavenlies, including earth, that are today ruled by Satan and his minions will one day be ruled by faithful saints, with Christ as the ultimate ruler. God's holy angels are eager to see Satan deposed and righteousness ruling in heaven and earth. Unrepentant saints are counterproductive to that goal, because they are not becoming qualified to

rule and reign the heavens on behalf of Jesus Christ. When saints are not living for God, they are not preparing themselves for their ultimate purpose of glorifying God by ruling over heaven and earth. Angels are, therefore, joyful when saints get right with God and stay right with God.