

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.