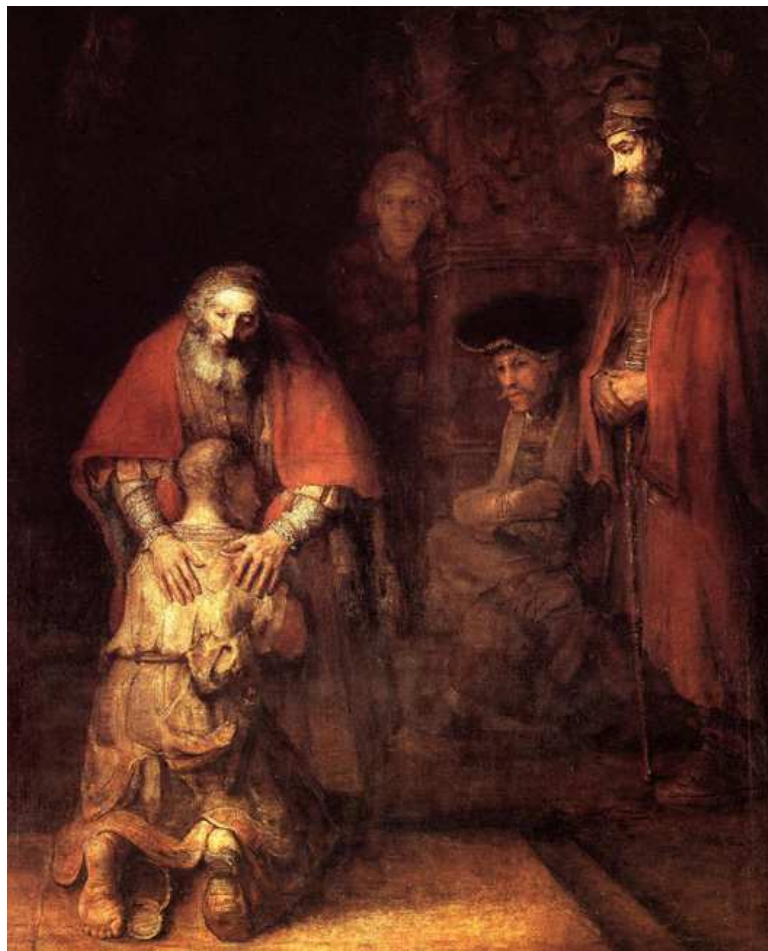


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# The Return of the Prodigal Son 4



**What are you like?**

Luke 15 contains some incredible words from Jesus. It was the reaction of the "spiritual" the Pharisees and the teachers of the law to the company that Jesus was keeping that caused such a response.

### **The Pharisees**

The name Pharisees is thought to come from a hebrew word which meant "separatist". These "separatists" were a group of pious Jews who were concerned about preserving the Jewish faith in the face of Greek culture and rule which was seeking to be the dominant influence in the world.

They were in Jesus's day a group who were zealous in their obedience to ritual purity. They sought to live in rigorous obedience to their understanding of Israel's law. The problem was that the law ceased to be a way to holiness but became in their eyes holiness itself.

Within the gospels, the Pharisees are often critical of Jesus. Their most scathing criticism of Jesus was to say that he was able to cast out demons by drawing upon demonic power Mark 3.22.

Jesus is not slow to highlight the danger that their teaching and practices bring, see Matthew 23.

However not all Pharisees were bad some were misguided others were genuinely seeking God. It is worth noting that Saul was a zealous Pharisee who became a Christian and whose name was changed to Paul (Acts 9). It was Nicodemus a Pharisee who came to Jesus at night (John 3), and he also helped to prepare Jesus' body for placing in the tomb after he had been crucified (John 19.39).

### **Jesus**

*<sup>1-3</sup>By this time a lot of men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, "He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends." Their grumbling triggered this story.*

*Luke 15.1-2 The Message.*

Jesus was in trouble with the Pharisees because they did not like the company that he kept. Jesus was friendly with sinners. Of course Jesus being the Son of God if he was friendly with anyone was being friendly with sinners!

Yet from their perspective Jesus seemed to collect the undesirables take Matthew for example a tax collector, a collaborator with Rome, and exploiter of people. Matthew had friends and Jesus didn't shun them. As you read through the gospels you will see that Jesus is not

afraid to be friends with those who others would look down upon; whether they be the outcast, the poor, the tax collectors, the prostitutes.

Jesus when he looks to judgment day has some telling words about who will be the sheep and who will be the goats.

*<sup>34</sup> "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. <sup>36</sup> I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.' Matthew 25.34-36 NIV*

It was this criticism on the part of the Pharisees that give rise to these three great parables in Luke 15 – which all relate to being lost. Lost in the sense of not being where they belong. The sheep belonged with the flock, although only one, it mattered. Having ninety nine did not compensate for this one. With the lost coin this belonged with the other nine, possibly this was a necklace and was incomplete. With the son, he was not at home and what was more important was not in relationship.

The paradox of course being that the older son was not truly at home and if the Pharisees were discerning they would have realised who was the younger son and who was the older. Would they like the older son stay out of the celebrations and would they fail to enjoy the benefits of being a son of the father.

It is probably not pushing these stories too far to say that they are about belonging to the family of God. Receiving the love, welcome, forgiveness and restoration, that God offers. Jesus is like the Good Shepherd who looks for the lost sheep. The Holy Spirit is like the woman looking for the lost coin. The Father being like the father who wants all his children to be able to enter into family life and along with heaven join in with the family celebrations when one more returns home. Luke 15.7,10

*<sup>7</sup> In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away!*

*<sup>10</sup> In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents."*

*<sup>31</sup> "His father said to him, 'Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!'"*

## **The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector**

<sup>9</sup>And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: <sup>10</sup>"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>"The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'

<sup>13</sup>"But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' <sup>14</sup>"I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted." Luke 18.9-14 NASV

In Rembrandt's day this parable was associated with the parable of the Prodigal Son. It is simple and yet profound.

It highlights the Pharisee being full of self-importance and praying "to himself" and the tax collector recognizing his sinfulness "the sinner". It was the tax collector, who threw himself on God's mercy and received his forgiveness.

### **Back to the painting!**

There are 4 observers one is the older son and represents the Pharisees. The other three a man and two women, possibly one of the women is meant to be the mother (not mentioned in the parable).

So what or who are you like?

As you have heard this story have you remained an observer or have you begun to allow yourself to be like each of the characters? To recognise the different aspects of their lives that can all so easily be true of us. The challenge is of course to be like our heavenly father. To be able to like him and to demonstrate that understanding, that love, that acceptance, that compassion, that grace.

Maybe you have discovered afresh "growing pains", it all begins when we make the amazing discovery that Henri Nouwen did:

***"It might sound stange, but God wants to find me as much, if not more than I want to find God"***

## Luke 15

### Parable of the Lost Sheep

<sup>1</sup> Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. <sup>2</sup> This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!

<sup>3</sup> So Jesus told them this story: <sup>4</sup> “If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won’t he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? <sup>5</sup> And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. <sup>6</sup> When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’ <sup>7</sup> In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away!

### Parable of the Lost Coin

<sup>8</sup> “Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins<sup>[a]</sup> and loses one. Won’t she light a lamp and sweep the entire house and search carefully until she finds it? <sup>9</sup> And when she finds it, she will call in her friends and neighbors and say, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost coin.’ <sup>10</sup> In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God’s angels when even one sinner repents.”

### Parable of the Lost Son

<sup>11</sup> To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: “A man had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger son told his father, ‘I want my share of your estate now before you die.’ So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

<sup>13</sup> “A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. <sup>14</sup> About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. <sup>15</sup> He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. <sup>16</sup> The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup> “When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will go home to my father and say, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, <sup>19</sup> and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.’”

<sup>20</sup> “So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.’<sup>[b]</sup>’

<sup>22</sup> “But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. <sup>23</sup> And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, <sup>24</sup> for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.’ So the party began.

<sup>25</sup> “Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, <sup>26</sup> and he asked one of the servants what was going on. <sup>27</sup> ‘Your brother is back,’ he was told, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.’

<sup>28</sup> “The older brother was angry and wouldn’t go in. His father came out and begged him, <sup>29</sup> but he replied, ‘All these years I’ve slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. <sup>30</sup> Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!’

<sup>31</sup> "His father said to him, 'Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!"

## **Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector**

<sup>9</sup> Then Jesus told this story to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else: <sup>10</sup> "Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a despised tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer<sup>[a]</sup>: 'I thank you, God, that I am not a sinner like everyone else. For I don't cheat, I don't sin, and I don't commit adultery. I'm certainly not like that tax collector! <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.'

<sup>13</sup> "But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, 'O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.' <sup>14</sup> I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

### **Footnotes:**

The Pharisees – the Rule Keepers

Jesus – the Friendship Maker

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican – Understanding more of the heart of God Luke 18.

God working together to find the lost.

Luke 15 the whole lot.

About the Pharisees – Jewish business men, devout, memorizers of scripture zealously trying to obey it.

Heaven rejoices over the obliteration of the sinner,

Jesus friend of sinners – heaven rejoices – George Kovar Principle of Trinity.

About the parables

Lost Coin – ref to Holy Spirit, Displaced. Unaware of being lost like older brother.

Lost Sheep – Jesus the good shepherd, searching for lost sheep discovers it is away from the flock,

Lost sons – focus upon the Father – the waiting father waits for the sinners and waits for others to realize they are sinners too.

About the painting – observers

About you – what have you learnt rediscovered from this story and the painting and Henri Nouwen and interaction.

In Rembrandt's time tied in with the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.