

LUKE 15

Luke 15:1–2. Table Fellowship with Sinners

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 723–724.

In a brief two verses, Luke leads readers inside a world that jangles and jostles over food matters. For the Pharisees and their scribes, eating customs are paramount for conferring an aura of holiness on their homes and creating a temple-like atmosphere therein. Such practices extend from the dutiful tithing of each sprig of parsley to the proper preparation of foods and their containers, to a ritual washing before meals, and to an avoidance of sharing one’s table with unsuitable guests who, because of uncleanness, would render the table unclean and its foods inedible.¹ In this light, home stands at center stage. The main issues of conflict, of course, pivot on who the guest is and the guest’s state of ritual cleanness. For the Savior, every person is welcome no matter the circumstance.

As proof that Jesus’s welcoming embrace literally reaches all, He wraps His merciful clasp in His prior teaching around “the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind” as well as those from “the streets and lanes of the city” and “the highways” outside the town, potentially sweeping Gentiles into His inviting grasp (Luke 14:13, 21, 23). Now He stretches Himself toward “the publicans and sinners” (15:1). The first group, “the publicans,” of course, consists of tax collectors. But the term also represents all who find themselves in despised occupations, including donkey drivers, peddlers, shepherds, and tanners. The second group, “sinners,” holds up those who lead immoral lives, such as harlots, adulterers, and swindlers, people who stand condemned and ostracized from their societies (18:11). Such people Jesus not only allows to share His table but also warmly invites to join. In this remarkable sense, His actions become the vivid, concrete demonstration of His teachings, as they have from the beginning of His ministry (5:29–31). In a word, He teaches by His elevated and elevating examples.

Luke 15:3–7. Parable of the Lost Sheep

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 726–727.

The Savior draws on a common occurrence—losing a sheep from a flock—to make an uncommon point—that recovering the lost draws the happy attention of heaven. In stark contrast comes a saying from the rabbis, the spiritual descendants of the Pharisees and scribes, that characterizes sinners as nettlesome, loathsome creatures: “There is joy before God when those who provoke Him perish from the world.” For His part, Jesus’s concern for lost souls breathes the same air that wafts through Ezekiel’s prophecy about the Lord’s future attempts to recover His wandering people. Ezekiel’s words paint a picture of leaders who, rather than taking care of the Lord’s flock, “feed themselves” and “with force and with cruelty have [they] ruled them” (Ezekiel 34:2, 4). Because the “shepherds” shirk their responsibility for the sheep, the Lord’s “flock was scattered upon all the face of the earth, and none did search or seek after them.” As a result, and in a passage that is saturated with first-person pronouns—*I, my, mine*—the Lord declares that “I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out” and “I will feed my flock . . . [and] I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away” (Ezekiel 34:6, 11, 15–16). The compassion and love of the Lord for His sheep are mirrored plainly in Jesus’s actions toward and stories about the lost.

Luke 15:8–10. Parable of the Lost Coin

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 729.

Continuing a pattern since chapter 13, Luke offers another teaching of the Savior that no other writer preserves, enhancing his record all the more. This parable focuses on the beginning of a marriage because the woman is likely looking for a coin now missing from her special scarf onto which she had sewn coins she received from her husband on their wedding night, one coin for each garment she removed. Hence, the coin has to do with her identity as a married woman. Moreover, Jesus’s story about the lost coin fits within a now-established pattern of emphasizing the rescue, mainly His mission to rescue. He has not come on His journey chiefly to make people feel good or to bring them to reconsider their political and social environment, though His words occasionally carry this latter point.² He has come primarily to offer deliverance, to proffer redemption. And He brings us inside a woman’s home to make His point, emphasizing the home as a place of discovery and recovery. For it is here that family members find what matters most in their lives. What is more and different, as the stories of the lost sheep and lost coin demonstrate, the individual weighs much on an eternal scale—“There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one.”³

Commentators are correct in drawing attention to the woman’s poor condition in contrast to the moderately well-off owner of the sheep, who possesses a flock of one hundred. But the fact that Luke pairs

the two stories, a feature likely from his source, continues a visible, singular pattern of pushing women forward in companion stories throughout his Gospel, beginning with Zacharias and Mary and continuing with Simeon and Anna.⁴ Just as impressive are Jesus’s linkages to celestial realities—“joy shall be in heaven” and “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God” (Luke 15:7, 10). For in this context we learn that God, represented in the sheep owner and the woman, is One who seeks, who looks for the individual—the owner leaves “the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and [goes] after that which is lost” and the woman seeks the coin “diligently till she [finds it]” (15:4, 8).

Luke 15:11–32. Parable of the Prodigal Son

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 739–742.

In a most beloved parable, the Savior paints a portrait of a family. The painting captures a broad swath of time, portraying tones and textures of family interaction whose first hues are splashed on the canvas by a younger son who not only seeks his fortune but also goes off to spend it frivolously. It is as if he is showing his father and brother that he has grown up and will make his decisions independent of them, thereby splitting himself from hearth and home. Jesus’s words both picture the willful behavior of this son and draw onto the canvas the thin, dark lines of his older brother’s slow-burning resentment for his youthful manipulations of their father. Jesus’s parable thus captures in vivid colors a sibling rivalry that almost defies a father’s best mediating efforts, much like those between Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, and Laman and Nephi. Of the three pairs, only Esau and Jacob reconcile, and that occurs only in their later years—not promising odds.

Some commentators read this parable, and the prior two in this chapter, substantially as Jesus’s defense against critics of His table fellowship with publicans and sinners. But this reading seems too flat, too insipid. Others see this parable, in large measure, as a portrait of the Pharisees and their allies in the person of the older son, a portrait that takes them down to size. To be sure, the Pharisees and scribes stand front and center when the chapter opens (Luke 15:2). But this view diminishes the energizing sweep of the story and its timeless lessons for all who will hear. For it is just as possible that Jesus genuinely intends His words for His followers, who will soon take their place in His nascent church and will face questions that have to do with worthiness and wickedness and, beyond those, forgiveness and acceptability.

If, in this light, Jesus seems to be lenient on one who has committed frightful sins and then has staggered back into the arms of his father, His parable simply matches His words both when He asks His disciples to forgive another “seven times in a day,” when He generously forgives the “sinner” woman who washes and anoints His feet, when He underscores the generosity of the landowner who hires day laborers, and when He treats the woman taken in adultery with measured respect and provides healing stipulations about her future behavior.⁵

Another view holds that the father has failed as a parent by indulging his sons and by refusing to set limits on their behavior as they grow older, keeping them dependent on his generosity. In this view, the younger son senses that he can grow up only if he escapes his father's influence, but he is ill-equipped to deal with life because his father has not prepared him. Similarly, the older son rests within the comfort of his father's largesse and toils unappreciated on the estate until he too comes to realize that he possesses no value apart from his father and is left permanently unable to cope. But this approach stands on a soft web of psychological assumptions that makes sense only in the modern world of psychoanalysis rather than in the world of ancient storytelling.

Turning to the refined skill that underlies the cluster of parables in this chapter, we soon leave behind any view that Jesus retells these stories chiefly to defend His behavior or to shine a light on the low actions of His critics. Setting aside questions of how much Luke's literary skills are at play in these stories because such queries seem endlessly bogged down in disputes over notable details that Jesus may well have introduced rather than Luke, we notice as an example the progressive character of the three parables, building a crescendo of sorts. For Jesus begins with a parable that focuses on one lost from a hundred, then one out of ten, and finally one of two. In effect, the relative value rises the longer Jesus talks. Naturally, the human soul is worth much more than a precious coin, no matter its temporal worth. We are reminded of the market scene that the seer describes in the book of Revelation, which shows a clustering of items of similar types with the most precious listed at the end.⁶

On another literary level, the parable of the prodigal son is really two stories, both of which concern a father and a son. In the first, the younger son moves on the stage with his father and without his older brother. The personal flaws emerge into the light of day as he demands his share of the inheritance and then distances himself from any family connections. His part in the story comes to an end when, after coming to himself, he returns home and finds a warm welcome, complete with a dinner party and dancing. In the second, the older son stands at center stage, with the younger son unseen but present in the wings. The older son draws the reader's sympathy because unlike his brother in the prior scene, he has been true and faithful to his father and to his attendant responsibilities. But like his younger brother, he also is beset with flaws. Indeed, his flaws are not as debilitating as those that trouble the younger brother, but they are real nonetheless. His challenge is also to come to himself and to see what lies at his feet both in terms of his inheritance and, more to the point, in terms of his opportunity to graciously welcome his lost and now repentant brother.

In another literary vein that illustrates Jesus's consummate skill in telling this story, the parable does not bring the story to an end. Rather, Jesus allows His hearers to complete the narration in their own minds. Questions abound, and this feature underscores the lofty, accomplished character of the parable. For example, what is the end of the jangling conversation between the father and older son? Does the older son finally join the party? And if so, does he continue to nurse his spite or genuinely embrace his younger brother and begin to enjoy the festivities? Over time, does the gap between the brothers remain,

even expanding, or does it shrink, leading to mutual respect? Further, does the younger son really change his behavior and turn his energies to building what he loses when he squandered his inheritance? The parable does not address such questions, adding appeal to the story.

The tight, interwoven character of the parable, complete with its obvious links to the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin, points clearly to a single mind that masters the intricacies of storytelling and presents the three accounts as fresh and compelling declarations about recovering the lost. Moreover, the three narratives fit comfortably within the parameters of discipleship that Jesus sets out in the prior chapter. But rather than raising questions about how to become a disciple, as in chapter 14, these stories approach the topic of discipleship by illustrating how one holds onto what one has received as a trust, how one holds onto the relationship of master and disciple. A disciple grasps and continues to possess such a relationship by effort and by establishing and reestablishing a submissive demeanor and attitude. In all cases, just like the father in the parable, the master welcomes back the wayward disciple with joyous celebration.

In this connection, does not the parable also represent conversion? In important ways, the younger son mirrors those who hold in their hands the precious truths of the gospel and, for some reason, drop them and walk away, choosing a different path in life. But then, stirred perhaps by influences outside themselves, they return to their former lives, welcomed and embraced by those who love and have stewardship for them. Similarly, the older son represents the faithful who pass through inner trials, in this case asking the question whether it is possible to accept those who are hard to accept because of temperament or past actions. The crucial question for the faithful person is whether to truly forgive as the Lord requires and, thus refreshed, come inside (see Mosiah 26:31; Doctrine and Covenants 64:9–10).

In the parable of the prodigal son, does the father represent God? The answer is no and yes. No, in the sense that the father is willing to divide his inheritance with the younger son before that son has proven himself as a responsible person worthy of receiving and managing a substantial estate. No, in the sense that the father does not and cannot confer another portion of his estate on the younger son, unable to add reward to what he has already given. Of course, opportunity stands in front of this son to rebuild his life, but he is no longer eligible to inherit anything from his father. Yes, in the sense that the father takes the risk that the son, as well as his portion of the estate, will be lost. But he takes the risk anyway. Yes, in the sense that when the son returns repentant and humble, the father welcomes him back with genuine forgiveness and affection, remembering his transgressions “no more” (Doctrine and Covenants 58:42). And yes, in the sense that Jesus speaks the words, conferring on them a timeless and exalted tenor, including the role of the father, even if a piece or two seems out of place. For within Jesus’s words rises the divine will.

Notes

- 1 Luke 11:42, 39; 18:12; Mark 7:2–4; see the comments on Luke 8:43–48.
- 2 See the comments on Luke 14:12–14.

- 3 Luke 15:10; see also 3 Nephi 11:15; 17:21; 18:36; 28:12.
- 4 Luke 1:5–38; 2:25–38; 4:25–27, 33–39; 7:1–15; 8:1–3, 26–56; see the comments on Luke 13:18–21.
- 5 Matthew 20:1–15; Luke 7:36–50; 17:4; John 8:2–11; also Matthew 18:21–22; Doctrine and Covenants 98:40.
- 6 See Revelation 18:12–13; also 1 Nephi 13:7.

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