

Parables – Short Stories by Jesus – Week One – Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, Lost Son

Parables can be interpreted in many ways, but modern readers should always assume a parable's original audience would have been able to find meaning in it; therefore, modern readers must consider the historical and social setting in which a parable originated (in the case of Jesus' parables, first-century Galilee and Judea). Jesus told his parables as a form of religious instruction.

Read Mark 4: 10-13 – When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, ““they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!””

What is Mark telling us about why Jesus taught in parables? How do you react to this reason?

Read Luke 15

*What is lost in each story, and why? There are no outcasts in these three parables - The shepherd did not expel the sheep, he lost it. The woman did not throw away the coin - she lost it. The son was not thrown out of the house - he left on his own.

*What do the protagonists' reactions to these losses, and to the findings, suggest about them?

*Forgetting for the moment the interpretations offered in Luke 15, what would you say these stories were “about” Why?

The Lost Son

Levine tells us that Jewish sources do not support the commonly repeated idea that the younger son sinned in asking for his share of the inheritance, or that he “treated his father as if he were as good as dead.” At the same time, Jesus lived in a world where “honor” was as important as money. “Honor your father” meant doing as he wished, and not doing so brought dishonor to the father. What do you think about the son's request?

- ! What do you think about the father's choice to “divide his life” *Levine's literal translation of verse 12* between them?
- ! Levine also points out that the parable does not support the idea that the younger son sinned in working with pigs in Gentile territory. He did not eat the pigs (Lev. 11: 7-8) the prodigal is in an impossible situation but the issue is not Jewish xenophobia or purity – the problem is starvation. Yet, there were purity laws about coming into contact with unclean animals, like pigs.
- ! Is the younger son truly sorry for having left home and wasted his half of the inheritance or is he planning a practical way out of his predicament (verses 17-19) Why do you think as you do?
- ! In her book, Levine writes “Jewish fathers of the first century were not, at least according to the sources we have, distant or wrathful. What do you make of the father's reaction to the younger son's return (verses 20-24; compare 15: 6-9)?

- ! How much sympathy do you have for the elder son's reaction?
- ! Levine – “the father in this parable is like the sheep owner and the woman in the previous two parables because he lost something – or more accurately, someone. How did the father “lose” his eldest son? What do you think of his efforts to “find” the oldest son again (verses 31-32)?

We can infer from Luke's placement of this parable immediately after the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin that Luke wanted to read it, too, as mostly a story about repentance and heavenly joy. What other meanings do you see in the parable when you examine it independently? To what extent do these multiple meanings contradict or complement each other?

So, who's lost in our communities.....our church.....our families?

Who has been written out? Who have we forgotten to count?