

THE LOST KEY

LUKE 15:1-32

Much of the teaching of Jesus Christ came to us in the form of stories. We call them parables. Jesus taught a lot in parables. If you are new to scripture and not sure what a parable is, a parable is a story that reveals a truth about God's kingdom, or a truth about God's heaven, a truth about the way things work in the kingdom of God. I like to think of parables as kind of like keys.

I've got my keys up here, and my wife would tell you that I am notorious for losing these things. It's true. I put them down, I walk away, and I totally forget where they are. I lose my keys. The terrible thing about losing your keys is that when you lose your keys you can't get to where you need to go. This is my car key. And you can't get through the doors you need to. This is my house key. You need your keys to go where you want to go in life.

That same truth applies to parables. The truths in parables are keys that unlock spiritual truth for your life to take you where you need to go, to unlock the doors that you need to walk through. From Luke Chapter 15, Jesus gives us three parables, three stories back to back to back. I like to call it the one-two-three punch to knock us out. He wants to get a truth across, because there are three separate stories, but they are kind of all about the same thing. Three stories, but they have one main idea.

So, we are going to learn from three parables this morning from Luke Chapter 15, three stories with four keys to unlock truth for your life. What I would like to do is pray for us, and then we will read the parables together. Let's pray.

Father, we pray that you will speak to us through your word now. Speak to us through these parables, Lord. Jesus, you have warned us it's possible to hear a parable and have the truth of the kingdom hidden from us. So Lord, I pray for any here this morning who are unable to see your truth, that you would open their eyes, remove that veil, so that the core truth of these stories would hit our souls and unlock our hearts, Lord. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, the context of these three parables is set up in verses 1 and 2. Look down to Chapter 15, verse 1, and I will set up the parables for us here. It says, "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him." The "him" here is referring to Jesus. The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus. Let me push pause here. When you see tax collectors and sinners clustered together like that in the bible, you are supposed to instantly picture some really shady people, alright? Tax collectors and sinners draw near to Jesus, because in bible times when this

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was written, everybody is Jewish. Jesus is Jewish. All his followers are Jewish. The people of Israel are living in their land, but they are not in charge. The Romans are in charge. The Roman soldiers are policing the state and they have the final say so. They are the final authority. It would be as if North Korea came over here and set up shop, and we had to pay taxes to North Korea. You wouldn't like that, would you? Would you? I wouldn't like that. They don't like it.

Now, if you are a tax collector, this is your brother, your uncle, your dad that has sold himself out to the enemy, to the people you hate the most. They are taking your hard-earned money and giving it to the people you hate. And they were known for taking a little bit extra for themselves as a service fee, of course. So, tax collectors were despised.

If you have been a Christian for a while, you know this truth: We are all sinners. We all fall short of God's standard. But the way Luke is using it here, this is a Jewish audience, they are all Jewish, they are all trying to follow God's law, like the law of Moses -- the Ten Commandments, for example -- but a sinner here is a Jewish person who is not even trying. They are not even trying to follow the law anymore. They are just living however they want to live. The tax collectors and sinners are all drawing near to hear Jesus. Verse 2 says, "And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'"

When you see Pharisees and scribes, you should think of the opposite side of the spectrum. These are the very, very religious people. These are the people who try extra hard, think like priests with robes and collars on, or the pastors, the ministers, the clergy, or whatever the most goody two-shoe person you can think of -- that's who these people are, and they are grumbling.

My kids grumble sometimes. I say, "clean your room," or "do your homework," right? "Argh!" Why do we grumble? We grumble when we see something we don't like, or we are told to do something we don't like. And they see something that they don't like. What is it? They are complaining, saying, "This man (Jesus) receives sinners and eats with them."

Many of you know I also work for First Priority. We do outreach in the public schools -- middle schools, high schools. I went to public school too in middle school and high school. I learned this truth really fast when I walked into that cafeteria. Ready? Who you eat with matters. It shows your crowd, who you identify with, right? The same is true today: Who you go out to lunch with after church, who you have over to your home shows the people that you're close to, who you identify with. Jesus here is identifying with sinners and tax collectors, and these guys do not like it, so they grumble, and that sets up the context for these three stories. Are you ready?

1. Parable #1

So he (Jesus) told them this parable: “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

The first parable is called “The Parable of the Lost Sheep.”

2. Parable #2

“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

The second parable is called “The Parable of the Lost Coin.”

3. Parable #3

And he said, “There was a man who had two sons.”

This one is a little longer, so I’m going to tell it to you, but keep your bible open, because you can check and make sure I get my facts straight, alright? Make sure I don’t pull a fast and loose one on you.

There is a dad, a father who is super wealthy with a big estate, big property, lots of animals, real estate, and servants that work for him. And he’s got two sons -- older son/younger son, older brother/younger brother. Older brother is super responsible, always does what he’s told, works very hard on his father’s estate; younger brother — not so much. Younger brother is a little bit of a free spirit. Do we have any free spirits in the sanctuary this morning? I see a hand over here. Mom is like, “Put your hand down!” Yes.

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The younger son doesn't really like working at his dad's place, the father's house. But there is something the son does really like about his father: it's his money. And he gets this idea. He says, "Dad, give me my share of the property that is coming to me." He is basically asking for his inheritance, and he is asking for it now. We all know what an inheritance is, right? When do you get an inheritance? When he dies, right? So, what is the son saying? He is saying, "Dad, I love your stuff more than you. I wish I could have it. I wish you were dead now, but since you're not, why don't you just give it to me anyway?" Right? That's basically what he is saying, isn't it?

What do you think you would do if you were the dad? "I brought you into this world, boy, I can take you out." Right? I know who is getting written out of the will. In Jesus' parable, the father goes along with the plan. It's crazy! Now, keep in mind, this is not 2016. He doesn't write a big, fat check. He doesn't go to the ATM or hit up the bank. Half of his wealth is in animals, and servants, and property. He has to sell off, liquidate half of his assets, let half of his team go, and turn all that into money, some sort of currency that his son can receive.

Then it says the son takes the money and goes to a far off country away from the father's house. He takes it to get away from his father's house, and there he squanders the money on reckless living. The Old King James says "prodigal living." That's where we get the term "prodigal son." Reckless -- just blows the money quickly. The older son tells us later that he blows it on prostitutes. I'm sure he's out there partying, gambling, drinking, sleeping with prostitutes -- you know, pretty much anything you can do here in South Florida, right? That's what he's blowing his money on. Terrible! He burns through all of his dad's money really fast.

There's a place you have to go when you run out of money. Do you know where it is? To work, right? You've got to go to work. That's how the world really works, by the way. Go to work if you need money. So he said, "I've got to get a job!" But a famine hits the land. There is no rain. There is not a lot of work to do. Finally he sells himself off to feeding pigs in this area. Keep in mind, that's a dirty job, right? Feeding pigs? But especially if you're Jewish, because you are not supposed to eat pigs, let alone feed them. He's got the lowest of the low jobs, the dirtiest of the dirty jobs.

Here he is: knee deep in the pig sty he has created of his life. It gets so bad that Jesus tells us that he longs to fill his stomach with the pods that he is feeding the pigs. The slop that he is feeding the

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pigs looks pretty good right about now. Would you agree that his life had gotten pretty bad? Would you agree that he has hit bottom, maybe?

But here is what happens. Jesus says that he comes to himself. He comes to his senses in that moment and says, "You know what? Even my father's servants have it better than I have it right now. I know what I have to do. I'm going to go back to my father, and I'm going to say, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I'm not even worthy to be called your son anymore. I get it. I've blown it. But if you would just take me back as one of your hired servants, I would love to work for you.'"

So he takes that long walk of shame from the far off country back to the father's house. I'm sure he is practicing in his mind, "I'm not worthy, I have sinned, I'm not worthy, I have sinned, I'm not worthy." Then Jesus tells us that his father is waiting for him. His father sees him a long way down the road and his father runs to him. His father runs to him, his father embraces him, his father kisses him. His father calls together the servants and says, "Bring the best robe. Put a ring on his finger. Put sandals on his feet. Kill the fatted calf. We are going to have steak and filet mignon tonight. We are going to have a big party!"

He throws a huge party! It's a bumpin' party, it's a loud party, and everybody comes to the party at the estate -- everybody except for one person. Guess who it is -- older brother! Older brother comes in from working for the day and hears some music. What's that sound? Boom, boom, boom. "Oh," the servants call, "your brother came back! He was dead. He's alive! He was lost. He is found! Your father threw a big party for him!" "What?! That's not right." Older brother won't go in to the party.

In the end of the parable the father is outside, pleading with him to come. He says, "Listen, my son, your brother - he was dead, he is alive now. He was lost, now he's found. It's right to celebrate." He says, "No. I deserve more than this. I deserve this, and I never got this kind of treatment. I'm not going in to the party." The father pleads with him, the son refuses, and that's where the parable ends.

Three parables. Four keys. Are you ready for your first key?

- I. Key #1 - You matter to God.

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In all three stories, something very precious was lost. Something very valuable was missing. In the first parable a sheep was lost. The shepherd left the ninety-nine until he found that one. In the second parable a coin was lost. A woman swept the house, lit a lamp, and wouldn't stop searching until she found it. When she found it -- huge party. Both stories -- huge party, because they found what was missing that meant so much to them. In the third story the son was so precious to the father he was willing to forgive everything to receive him back safely. In all three parables Jesus is trying to show us how precious we are to God, how valuable we are to the Father, how much lost people matter.

Most of you know this, but if you are new or you don't, I am an identical twin. It's true -- there are two of us. My brother Matthew lives in Pennsylvania, but when he comes down here it freaks a bunch of you out. I've seen it. You go, "What?" There's a ripple in reality -- there's two of us.

When I was 3 or 4 years old I went to the mall with my mom and dad and I got lost. My dad was supposed to keep an eye on me and he wasn't doing his job. While my mom was shopping I got lost. They couldn't find me. They called the security guards together. My mom was freaking out. She said, "Help, help, I've lost my son! I've lost my son! Please help me find him!" They said, "Ma'am, what does he look like?" They picked up Matthew and said, "He looks like this!" They said, "Well, Ma'am, you've got him right there then." She said, "No -- there are two of them!" Whoa! They locked down the whole mall, shut the whole thing down. Nobody could come or go until they found me. I was in the other end of the mall, in a department store, apparently trying to buy candy. I had a candy bar. I thought, "You just take this to the counter and you get whatever you want, right?" I don't remember it.

But here is the point. It didn't matter that she had Matthew already. They were going to lock down that whole mall until they found me because I was so precious to them. Jesus is trying to get our attention in these parables, saying, "Listen, even if 99% of this room is saved right now, one of you matters so much to God the Father that he brought you here to hear this word, maybe so that you could be found today, because that's how much you matter to God, and he's not going to stop searching until he finds you."

You can tell how precious something is to a person by what they are willing to pay for it. Have you ever thought about that before? I have my phone up here. I am going to use this as an illustration of that. Are you ready? Pretend this isn't my phone. This is an iPhone 5 or 6, I forget where they

are, but it's your phone now, alright? And I want it from you. I say, "Is that one of those new iPhones? I really want that. I want it bad. That's really precious to me! I want it so bad, I will give you a dollar for it." What do you think? Not very precious to me, is it? It doesn't mean that much to me. Alright, let's replay this. "Is that one of those new iPhones? I've wanted one of those a really long time. I will give you \$1,000,000 if you give me that thing." What do you think? Do the deal! Sold! You say, "Man, that's precious."

The bible says that you and I are so precious to God that he purchased us, not with gold or silver, costly metals or jewels, but something far more costly: the priceless blood of his son. The Author of Life died. No higher price, no louder statement could be said about how precious we are to God. Jesus died for you. You matter to him. You matter to God.

II. Key #2 - Sin gets you lost.

In all three stories something precious is lost. What got them lost? It's hard to tell with a sheep or a coin. I mean, who can blame a coin? But Jesus clarifies. Remember, at the end of the first two parables he says, "There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents." It's their sin that got them lost. The younger son said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you." It's his sin that got him lost. And the third parable not only tells us that it's sin, it shows us what sin looks like.

There are a lot of ways you could describe sin. Sin is missing the mark, which is true. Sin is breaking God's law. That's true. But I think the way the third parable illustrates sin really helps us get our hands around it a little bit more, because in it we see how personal it is. We see that sin is loving the Father's stuff more than we love the Father. God created everything, and we love his creation more than we love the Creator.

Paul picks it up in Romans 1. Those who are taking the Romans class -- we hit that this week, right? We love the creature and the created thing and we worship that instead of God. We use the good things that God has created to get away from him instead of to stay close to him in the Father's house. We use it to go to a far off country, and there we use those good gifts and squander them. We blow it. We live how we want to live. That's the nature of sin. It's that we love God's stuff more than we love him. And sin will always take you to the pigsty. Sin will always ruin your life -- in this life, yes; in the next life, for sure. There are consequences for your sins and they will destroy you. Sin will destroy your life. Sin gets you lost.

You know, it's a scary thing to be lost, if you know it. I didn't know when I was little. Anyone here ever get lost when you were little? Or maybe you got lost when you were older? You know you are lost and you are like, "Oh my gosh -- I'm lost!"

I took my family to Disney World last year. Most of you know I have four kids. My second oldest is five now. Last year he was four. So we had a six-year-old, a four-year-old, a two-year-old, and a newborn, who is one, almost two now. So, we've got four kids. It's crazy. There are huge crowds at Disney World. We are coming off of a ride and my four-year-old is not very far from me, but he's short and I'm tall, and there are a lot of people between us, so he can't see me. But I could see him, and I saw that look of terror grip his little face when he thought that he was lost. I yelled his name and said, "I'm right here!" "Whew...okay."

It's scary. It's a scary thing to be lost. But do you know what's even scarier? To be lost and not even know it. That is the scariest thing of all, because you should be scared, but you're not. Here's the sad thing about sin. The nature of sin is to make you lost to your lostness, to make you blind to your blindness, so that you are lost and you don't even know that you're lost. There are literally billions of people in the world right now who are lost and they don't even know it. There are some people in this room this morning – you are lost and you don't think you are. Or maybe you're lost and you are realizing it for the first time.

We sang about it. Grace is what opens our eyes to see that we are even lost. It's what makes us afraid in the first place. It teaches our hearts to fear, but grace relieves our fears. Sin gets you lost.

III. Key #3 – If sin gets you lost, self-righteousness keeps you lost.

Test your memory. Are you ready? Who were these parables told to? Pharisees and scribes, that's right. Usually people think it's the sinners and the tax collectors, but it's not. They are already drawing near to hear Jesus. Pharisees and scribes grumble; Jesus tells them these stories. Alright, who is kept out of the party in the third parable? Who? Older brother, right? Who do you think the older brother represents in Jesus' story? Pharisees and scribes, that's right.

Now listen, the party in all three parables represents this: It represents salvation. It represents going to heaven. It represents your sins being forgiven. It represents death to life, lost/found, and everybody gets to go to the party! Everybody is celebrating, except for the older brothers. Why?

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Because they are self-righteous. Self-righteousness keeps you out of the party. Self-righteousness keeps you lost.

Now, I have shared my faith a lot, not just publicly like this, but in a lot of one-on-ones. You know, one of the biggest objections I hear time and time again is this. “Listen, if there is a heaven, I’m going because I’m a good person. I’m a good person! I live pretty good, especially compared to a bunch of other people. If anybody deserves heaven, it’s me. And if my good deeds aren’t enough, maybe my good deeds cancel out my bad. If God grades on a curve, I’ll get in. Listen, I deserve it!” Jesus is warning you: That will keep you out of the party. Your self-righteousness keeps you lost.

Sometimes it’s your religion that gets in the way of God’s grace. Not always. You don’t have to be religious, by the way, to be self-righteous. But it helps. Self-righteous people have a big problem with something in Christianity. Do you know what it is? We sang about it. It’s grace.

Grace says, “I don’t deserve this. I deserve to be treated like a servant, but I get to be treated like a son. I don’t deserve to be forgiven, but God forgives me by his grace because Jesus died for my sins. I don’t deserve this. I deserve the wrath of God. Instead, when I came home I got his compassion. Because Jesus took the wrath of God, all that’s left for me is his mercy, his grace, and his love. Instead of getting the worst, I got the best.” That’s Christianity. That is grace.

Nobody is excluded here. It doesn’t matter what you’ve done, because you know who is going to be in heaven? A bunch of forgiven sinners. There’s nobody getting into heaven except for Jesus, who is perfect. The rest of us were made perfect only by the blood of Jesus. We are all going to be forgiven! The only thing that will keep you back from that is thinking, “You know what? I don’t need that. I don’t need that because I’m good. I’ve earned it.” Jesus says that keeps you out of the party.

You matter to God. Sin gets you lost. Self-righteousness keeps you lost.

IV. Fourth and Final Key – Repentance brings you home.

There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, the first two parables tell us. The third parable doesn’t use the word “repent,” but it beautifully illustrates it. You want to see where repentance happens? Here it is. Knee deep in the pigsty, looking at the pods (looks good), he comes to his senses. “Wait a second. I was wrong. The father is right. I don’t want the pigsty. I want to go home. I’m going home to the father’s house. I sinned. I was wrong. I’m going home.”

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Repentance is this. It sounds like a big religious word, so I want to just break it down and show you in really simple terms. It's just a change in your thinking, a change of mind, which leads to a change of heart, to a change of action. If we are in the pigsty we say, "I was wrong, God is right," and we go back to the Father's house. The bible says that all of us on our own through sin - we choose the pigsty. We like the pigsty. We want the pigsty. But when you see your sin for what it really is, you repent. You go to the Father's house.

Repentance is not simply turning from something, it's turning to something. It's turning to the cross of Jesus Christ and saying that is where my forgiveness has been purchased, that is where reconciliation occurs, that is where compassion is poured out on me. It's not through my turning that I am forgiven, it's through Jesus that I am forgiven, and I turn from my sin and I go to the cross.

Both the older brother and the younger brother need to repent, don't they? Sometimes it's your sin, like the younger brother, that holds you in the pigsty. But for some of us, it's our self-righteousness that keeps us out of the party. Honestly, we are all a little bit of both, aren't we? I'm not sure any of us is just one or the other. It shows the tendency of the human heart. We are sinners and self-righteous. Usually we judge other people and we are gracious with ourselves. That's how it works.

A Christian is a person who looks at all the evil things that they've done in the pigsty and looks at all the things they've done in the Father's house or the self-righteous things that they've done -- their bad deeds and their good deeds -- and they repent and flee from both to the cross of Jesus Christ. They turn to the cross of Jesus Christ because your sins are forgiven on the cross, and your good deeds are not good enough, but Jesus is good enough. You turn. You don't place your trust in them, you trust in Jesus. You say, "Jesus is my righteousness. Jesus is my pardon. Jesus is my forgiveness, and I am trusting in him. I'm not trusting in myself. My sin won't keep me out of heaven because he has purchased my forgiveness, and my good deeds won't get me into heaven because they are not good enough. Jesus is the way to the Father."

So here's where I want to end. I want to invite the worship band back up. We are going to finish with one song. Let's all stand up. We are going to sing one more song together.