

The Mission of Jesus



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Luke 15:4–7, 11–32; 16:19–31; 18:35–43; 19:1–10.*

Memory Text: “‘The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost’ ” (*Luke 19:10, NKJV*).

If we were to write a mission statement for Jesus, we could not do any better than to repeat His own words: “‘To seek and to save that which was lost.’ ”

What was lost? It was humanity itself, which was alienated from God, subject to death, and filled with fear, disappointment, and despair. If nothing were done in our behalf, all would be lost.

Thanks to Jesus, though, we all have great reasons to be hopeful.

“In the apostasy, man alienated himself from God; earth was cut off from heaven. Across the gulf that lay between, there could be no communion. But through Christ, earth is again linked with heaven. With His own merits, Christ has bridged the gulf which sin had made. . . . Christ connects fallen man in his weakness and helplessness with the Source of infinite power.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 20.

From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is a story of God seeking after lost humanity. Luke illustrates this truth by using three important parables: the lost sheep (*Luke 15:4–7*), the lost coin (*vss. 8–10*), and the lost son (*vss. 11–32*).

* *Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 23.*

The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin

Read Luke 15:4–7. What does this tell us about God’s love for us? Why is it so important to understand that it was the shepherd who went looking for the lost sheep?

In a world that can appear uncaring and indifferent to us, this parable reveals a startling truth: God loves us so much that He Himself will come after us, in order to bring us to Him. We often talk about people seeking God; in reality, God is seeking us.

“The soul that has given himself to Christ is more precious in His sight than the whole world. The Saviour would have passed through the agony of Calvary that one might be saved in His kingdom. He will never abandon one for whom He has died. Unless His followers choose to leave Him, He will hold them fast.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 483.

Read Luke 15:8, 9. This parable is found only in Luke. The lost coin could have one of two meanings. First, Judea during the time of Jesus was full of poor people, and in most homes one coin (*drachma*) could have been more than a day’s wage, barely enough to keep the family from starving. Second, as a mark of being married, some women wore a headdress made up of ten coins—a huge sum, saved over a long time in the case of poor families.

In either case, the loss was a serious matter. So, the woman, utterly broken and in deep grief, lights a lamp (the house perhaps had no windows or perhaps only a small window), picks up a broom, and turns the house upside down until she finds that coin. Her soul is filled with overflowing joy, and the overflow floods to all her friends.

“The coin, though lying among dust and rubbish, is a piece of silver or gold still. Its owner seeks it because it is of value. So, every soul, however degraded by sin, is in God’s sight accounted precious. As the coin bears the image and superscription of the reigning power, so man at his creation bore the image and superscription of God; and though now marred and dim through the influence of sin, the traces of this inscription remain upon every soul.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 194.

So much of modern science and philosophy tells us that we are nothing but chance creations in a meaningless universe that does not care at all about our fate or us. What completely different worldview is presented in these two parables?

The Parable of the Lost Son: Part 1

Hailed in history as the most beautiful short story ever told on the forgiving nature of love, the parable of the prodigal son (*Luke 15:11–32*), narrated only by Luke, may well be called the parable of the loving father and two lost sons. One son chose the lawlessness of the distant land over the love of the father. The other son chose to stay in the home but did not fully know the love of the father or the meaning of a brother. The parable may be studied in seven parts, four dealing with the prodigal, two with the Father, and one with the elder brother.

1. “Give me” (*Luke 15:12*). The younger son’s decision to demand of his father his portion of the property was no sudden, impulsive urge. Sin often results after a long time of brooding over misplaced priorities. The younger son must have heard from friends about the glitter and glamour of distant lands. Life at home was too rigid. Love was there, but it had its own boundaries; the distant land offered him life without restrictions. The father was too protective, his love too embracing. The son wanted freedom, and in the quest for unhindered freedom was the seed of rebellion.

2. “Why me?” (*Luke 15:13–16*). The son cashed in his entire share and set off to the “far country.” The far country is a place far away from the father’s home. Love’s caring eyes, law’s protective fence, grace’s ever-present embrace are foreign to the far country. It is a distant land of “riotous living” (*vs. 13*). The Greek word for “riotous” (*asotos*) appears three other times as a noun in the New Testament: for drunkenness (*Eph. 5:18*), rebelliousness (*Titus 1:6*), and debauchery that includes “lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries” (*1 Pet. 4:3, 4, NKJV*). Such pleasures of godless living wasted away his health and wealth, and soon he became moneyless, friendless, and foodless. His glittering life wound up in a gutter. Starved to the point of being in perpetual want, he found employment in caring for the pigs, a harsh fate for a Jew.

3. “Make me” (*Luke 15:17–19*). But even the prodigal is still a son, with the power of choice to turn around. So, the son “ ‘came to his senses’ ” and remembered a place called home, a person known as father, a relational bond called love. He walked back home, with a speech in his hand, to plead with the father: “ ‘Make me.’ ” That is, make me whatever you want, but let me be within your watchful eyes, within the care of your love. What better home is there but the Father’s heart.

The world can appear very alluring. What specific things of the world do you find yourself particularly tempted by, that you find yourself thinking, “Oh, that’s not so bad,” when deep down you know it is?

The Parable of the Lost Son: Part 2

4. The return home (*Luke 15:17–20*) was a journey of repentance. The journey began “‘when he came to himself’ ” (NKJV). Recognition of where he was, in comparison with what his father’s home was, drove him to “arise” and “go” to his father. The prodigal son returns home with a four-part speech that defines the true meaning of repentance.

First, there is an *acknowledgment* of the father as “‘my father’ ” (*vs. 18, NKJV*). The prodigal son now needs to lean upon and trust his father’s love and forgiveness, just as we must learn to trust in our heavenly Father’s love and forgiveness.

Second, *confession*: what the prodigal did is not an error of judgment, but a sin against God and his father (*vs. 18*).

Third, *contrition*: “‘I am no longer worthy’ ” (*vs. 19, NKJV*). Recognition of one’s unworthiness, in contrast to the worthiness of God, is essential for true repentance to take place.

Fourth, *petition*: “‘Make me’ ” (*vs. 19, NKJV*). Surrender to whatever God wills is the destination of repentance. The son has come home.

5. The waiting father (*Luke 15:20, 21*). The wait and the vigil, the grief and the hope, began at the moment the prodigal son stepped out of the home. The wait was over when the father saw him “a great way off,” and then “had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him” (*vs. 20*). No other image captures the character of God as that of the waiting father.

6. The rejoicing family (*Luke 15:22–25*). The father embraced the son, clothed him with a new robe, put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet, and ordered a feast. The family was in celebration. If leaving the home was death, the return was a resurrection, and worthy of rejoicing. The son was indeed a prodigal, but nevertheless a son, and over every repentant son there is joy in heaven (*vs. 7*).

7. The elder son (*Luke 15:25–32*). The younger son was lost when he stepped out of the home to go to a distant land; the older son was lost because, though he was home in the body, his heart was in a distant land. Such a heart is angry (*vs. 28*), complaining, and self-righteous (*vs. 29*), and refuses to recognize a brother. Instead, it recognizes only a “‘son of yours,’ ” a spendthrift without character (*vs. 30, NKJV*). The elder son’s attitude toward the father is the same as that of the Pharisees who accused Jesus: “‘This Man receives sinners and eats with them’ ” (*vs. 2, NKJV*). The father’s final word with his elder son reflects heaven’s attitude to all repentant sinners: “‘It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found’ ” (*vs. 32, NKJV*).

Put yourself in the older brother’s shoes. However wrong his thinking, why does it make so much “sense” that he would feel that way? How does this story reveal ways in which the gospel goes beyond what “makes sense”?

Lost Opportunities

Although Jesus came to seek and save those lost in sin, He never forces anyone to accept the salvation He offers. Salvation is free and available to all, but one must accept the free offer in faith, which results in a life in conformity with God's will. The only time we have for such an experience is while we live on earth; no other opportunity exists.

Read Luke 16:19–31. What's the main message of this parable?

The parable is recorded only in Luke, and it teaches two great truths with respect to salvation: the importance of “today” in the process of salvation and the absence of another opportunity for salvation after death.

Today is the day of salvation. The parable does not teach that there is something inherently evil in riches or something inescapably good in being poor. What it does teach is that the opportunity of being saved and living saved must not be missed while we are on this earth. Rich or poor, educated or illiterate, powerful or powerless, we have no second chance. All are saved and judged by their attitude today, now, to Jesus. “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2).

The parable also teaches that eternal reward has nothing to do with material possessions. The rich man was “ ‘clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day’ ” (Luke 16:19, NKJV) but missed the essential of life: God. Where God is not recognized, fellow human beings are not noticed. The rich man's sin was not in his richness but in his failure to recognize that God's family is broader than he was prepared to accept.

There is no second chance for salvation after death. The second inescapable truth that Jesus teaches here is that there is no second chance for salvation after death. “It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment” (Heb. 9:27, NKJV). Another point of this parable is to show people that we have been given enough evidence now, in this life, to make a conscious choice for or against God. Any theology that teaches some kind of “second chance” after death is a great deception.

We love to talk about how much God loves us and all that He has done and is doing to save us. What should this parable teach us, though, about the danger of taking God's love and offer of salvation for granted?

Was Blind but Now I See

The mission statement of Jesus that He came to seek and save that which was lost is an affirmation of a holistic ministry. He came to make men and women whole, to transform them physically, mentally, spiritually, and socially. Luke gives us two instances that illustrate how Jesus restored two broken men into wholeness. One was blind physically, the other spiritually; both were outcasts—one a beggar and the other a tax collector. But both men were candidates for Christ’s saving mission, and neither was beyond His heart or reach.

Read Luke 18:35–43. What does this passage teach about our utter dependence upon God? Who among us at times has not cried out, “Have mercy on me”?

Mark names the man as Bartimaeus (*Mark 10:46*). He was a beggar outside of Jericho. Physically challenged, socially of no consequence, and poverty stricken, he suddenly found himself in the sweep of heaven’s wonder: “Jesus of Nazareth was passing by” (*Luke 18:37, NKJV*), and his faith surged upward to cry out, “ ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’ ” (*vs. 39, NKJV*). Faith requires neither eyes nor ears, neither feet nor hands, but only a heart that connects to the Creator of the world.

Read Luke 19:1–10. Who was the “blind” man in this story?

Only Luke records the story of Zacchaeus, the last of Jesus’ many encounters with outcasts. Christ’s mission, to seek and save that which was lost, was gloriously fulfilled in this encounter with Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was Jericho’s chief tax collector, a chief sinner in the judgment of the city’s Pharisees, but a chief sinner sought and saved by the Savior. What strange places and methods Jesus used to accomplish His mission: a sycamore tree, a curious man seeking to see who Jesus was, and a loving Lord commanding the man to come down, for He had a self-invited lunch appointment with him. But more important, Jesus had a delivery to make: “ ‘Today salvation has come to this house’ ” (*Luke 19:9, NKJV*), but not before Zacchaeus made things right (*vs. 8*).

It’s easy to see other people’s faults and shortcomings, isn’t it? But we can so often be blind to our own. What are some areas in your life that you need to face up to, confess, and get the victory over which you have been putting off for way too long?

Further Study: “By the lost sheep Christ represents not only the individual sinner but the one world that has apostatized and has been ruined by sin.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 190.

On the value of one soul: “The value of a soul, who can estimate? Would you know its worth, go to Gethsemane, and there watch with Christ through those hours of anguish, when He sweat as it were great drops of blood. Look upon the Saviour uplifted on the cross. . . . At the foot of the cross, remembering that for one sinner Christ would have laid down His life, you may estimate the value of a soul.”—*Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 196.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 While all religions portray the human being in search of God, Christianity presents God as the seeker: Adam, where are you (*Gen. 3:9*)? Cain, where is your brother (*Gen. 4:9*)? Elijah, what are you doing here (*1 Kings 19:9*)? Zacchaeus, come down (*Luke 19:5*). What has been your own experience with God seeking you out?
- 2 Look again at the final question at the end of Tuesday’s study. What was the fatal mistake that the older son made? What spiritual defects were revealed in his attitude? Why is it easier to have that same attitude than we might think? See also Matthew 20:1–16.
- 3 In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus said that even if someone were to come back from the dead, there would be those who would not believe. In what ways did this parable foretell the reaction of some to the resurrection of Jesus, in which some still didn’t believe despite the powerful evidence for His resurrection?
- 4 One of the most impressive aspects of Jesus’ saving ministry is the equality with which He treated all people, such as the blind beggar and Zacchaeus, or Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman. The Cross, more than anything else, shows the equality of all people before God. How should this crucial truth impact how we treat others, even those toward whom—because of politics, culture, ethnicity, whatever—we might have previously held ill feelings? Why is that attitude so anti-Jesus?
- 5 Compare the story of the prodigal son with the story of the rich man and Lazarus. How do the two balance each other out?

Praise Instead of Prejudice

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Office buildings surround the Seoul Central Seventh-day Adventist Church, and it is very difficult to make contact with people. When I was pastoring there, I thought that it might be effective for the church to operate a vegetarian restaurant. If we provided fresh food and friendly service, perhaps the nearby office workers would like it.

When I first approached the church about this idea, most members were against it because they already had tried this but had failed. I assured them that I wouldn't use the church budget and that Ellen White had said many times that if we established this kind of restaurant in the cities, it would be very successful. At last, the members agreed.

As a nonprofit organization, the church isn't permitted to own a restaurant, so I organized a health association and invited those working in the surrounding offices to join so that they could eat in our restaurant. During the next three months, I visited every office and invited each person to become a member of our health association. I explained that we would provide the freshest vegetarian food and that by becoming a member of the association they could eat this delicious food Monday through Friday. The membership fee was the equivalent of US\$100 per month. Many people signed up.

The church members and I distributed more than five hundred free meal tickets. Each recipient was entitled to one free meal on a certain day at the restaurant. We were happily surprised when nearly five hundred guests arrived. As they enjoyed their meals, I announced that as members of the health association, they could eat here every day. Many joined.

To operate this kind of restaurant is not easy. It's important to have a good building, and the church pastor must have a good relationship with the community. Of course, the food is important—if it isn't tasty the guests won't continue coming. A few years after we started, we lost our cook, and her replacement wasn't as skilled. As the food quality went down, so did the number of guests. Once we replaced her, the food quality improved and again membership in the health association rose.

We found that there are many benefits coming from this venture. In Korea, many people think that Adventists are an unwanted sect. Because of this mind-set, some were reluctant to visit the restaurant.

But as our vegetarian restaurant became more well-known, Christian church pastors, Buddhist monks, and priests decided to come. After getting to know us, these people have only praise for our church, instead of prejudice. Many of our guests have high statuses in the community.

By God's grace, our vegetarian restaurant has been operating successfully for more than 12 years. It is one of 117 centers of influence in South Korea.