
The Gospel of the Outcasts

By David Wilkerson

August 3, 2007 Luke 15 has been called "The Gospel of the Outcasts." For centuries this chapter has been seen as God's Word to those who have fallen. It is a message for all who have wandered from Christ, who once were found but now are lost, who may be bound by a besetting sin.

What exactly is an outcast? In Luke 15, the outcasts are those who have been rejected as failures by society and by the church. They include those who feel rejected by God because of a moral failure.

This remarkable chapter opens with a crowd of sinners gathering to hear Jesus teach. Among them were publicans, or tax collectors, a profession rife with corruption. Publicans were despised by society, considered to be rank sinners alongside prostitutes, fornicators and drunkards. Indeed, all of these comprised the outcasts of the day, people who were "lost" in the eyes of the world.

Yet this was the very crowd that Jesus loved most. Indeed, they were the ones he especially had come to seek and save. They were the sick who needed a physician, and he was the physician they needed.

Let me ask you: does this "throwaway" group speak to you in any way? Perhaps you've drifted from the Lord. Maybe you're alienated from the things of God by some besetting habit: pornography, alcohol, drugs.

Whatever your struggle is, you no longer feel the closeness of Christ. You suspect that you're so deep in sin you can't be forgiven. Some struggle with the nagging thought that they are beyond redemption. If this describes you, then this message is meant specifically for you.

As Christ stood before that crowd, a group of proud Pharisees and scribes lingered nearby. Looking on the scene, these religious leaders must have said to each other: "My, my, look at the rabbi. Any good Jew, any true teacher, would not associate with such sinners. Yet this man hugs them and lays hands on them. They're outcasts, recognized sinners, yet he prays and eats with them."

As Jesus began to speak, the crowd hushed. He then spoke three parables, powerful illustrations about God's heart toward outcasts. These parables included stories about a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son.

Jesus' message that day was meant not only for those who gathered before him. It was intended for every generation and especially for our present one.

In these three parables, Jesus gives us a three-part message for all who have fallen into sin. Christ's message in these parables is for all who have fallen into sinful bondage. This can include pastors or teachers or simply any believer. It is for those who once were on fire for the Lord, but who now are drifting, growing cold, feeling unloved by God or the church.

I think of a pastor I've counseled who fell into adultery. This man lost his church and his family and was left without a dollar in his pocket. He told me, "God blessed me with much, and yet I sinned against so much light. I preached messages against the very thing I did. And here I am now, a castaway."

Jesus' message is for him and multitudes like him.

1. Christ begins with the parable of the lost sheep. "What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, *until he find it?*" (Luke 15:4, my italics).

Jesus is speaking here of a sheep that had been in the fold. Clearly, this represents a member of Christ's flock, one that's been well fed and led by a loving shepherd. Yet this sheep has gotten lost, so the shepherd has gone out looking for it.

Note what Jesus says about the shepherd here: "(He goes) after that which is lost, *until he find it*" (15:4). God never gives up on anyone who belongs to him and has gone astray. He never allows the downfallen to drift so far they can't be brought back. Instead, God goes out to find that sheep, embraces it and brings it back into the fold.

Simply put, you can go so far into sin that you come to the very brink of hell, and he will still pursue you. David testifies, "If I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there" (Psalm 139:8).

We all have heard the expression "hell on earth." That's what life is like for those who run from God. Their "bed in hell" is an awful, terrible condition. It means to be captivated by sin, drifting further and further from the Lord so that you eventually fall into a lifeless slumber. This slumber is accompanied by a nagging fear that whispers, "You're going deeper and deeper into hell. You may not ever get back to God."

For years, my wife Gwen and I counseled a preacher's fallen daughter. As a young girl she had been called to be a missionary, and she had a heart for the Lord. She was raised in a godly family, but as a teenager she rebelled. Eventually, at age eighteen, she ran away from home and married an atheist.

From time to time this young woman would visit our home, and Gwen and I ministered to her. She seemed to respond, but over the years she slowly hardened her heart. She and her husband had two sons, and both grew up to become atheists.

For years this woman lived haunted by her calling to minister, and over time she became deeply bitter over it. At one point she told us, "Please don't talk about my calling anymore. I made my bed and I've got to lie in it. I'm married to an atheist, and my life has been a living hell."

The woman was especially close to Gwen, who would always embrace her and tell her how much the Lord loved her. But at some point the woman became convinced, "I can't get back to where I was supposed to be. You see how far I've gone. It's over for me."

Yet still the Holy Spirit kept calling her and "leaving messages." As Jesus tells us in the parable, he goes after the lost sheep *until it is found*.

Years later, when the woman was in her sixties, she called us. She had just been divorced and was moving into a new apartment. She was fixing it up and had a new job. She actually sounded excited as she told us, "At last, I think I'm at a place in my life where I can have some peace. Maybe I'll be able to have a good life."

The next week, she developed a sore throat. She admitted herself to a hospital, but within days she died. This woman had never been sick, and in such a short time her life was over.

A relative who had seen her in the hospital later told us that the woman had prayed to Jesus just before dying. Apparently, the Lord reached out at the last minute and lifted her in his arms, then took her home to be with him.

I believe Jesus captured her at midnight, just as she slipped into eternity. I picture him saying, in essence, "I have been coming for this sheep for decades. And all along, I was waiting for just one heart-cry."

Christ tells me through this, "It doesn't matter what you may have done. You may have made your bed in hell. But you are not too deep in sin for me to reach you and receive you with open arms."

"And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing" (Luke 15:5). When the shepherd finds the lost, injured sheep, he doesn't take it back to the fold right away. According to the parable, he carries the wounded creature into his house. Then he calls all his friends and neighbors together, exclaiming, "Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost" (Luke 15:6).

In this last verse, we find the heart of Jesus' message in all three parables. In each, Christ speaks of *the finder's rejoicing*: "Likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance" (15:7).

Over the years I have witnessed the finding and healing of many lost sheep. Too often, I later discovered that most of those who were brought back and restored did not truly enjoy Jesus afterward. They knew they were forgiven and loved. But after much time they still condemned themselves, thinking, "I've been so awful. I have to make it up to the Lord, to my loved ones, to the body of Christ."

They have been haunted by a sense of lost time, of wasted years, of fears they would never be able to please the Lord. And so they spent all their energies and thoughts trying to placate God. They constantly poured themselves into works of the flesh. But all along, Jesus had been more willing to forgive them than they were to receive his pardon.

Could this be why Christ speaks repeatedly in these parables of how God *rejoices over finding lost ones*? Consider the parable of the sheep: if we were to peer inside the shepherd's house, we would see the recovered sheep being cared for lovingly, washed and combed and nursed back to health.

The shepherd never scolded that injured creature. He didn't spread the word to others about how it had run away. Instead, this shepherd rejoiced before everyone, saying, "Look at this lost one, which has been found. Here is a trophy of my grace!"

Moreover, all the wasted time, when the sheep was lost, would now be restored. God's Word says: "Be glad and rejoice: for the Lord will do great things.... I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm... Ye shall eat in plenty, and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, that hath dealt wondrously with you... And ye shall know...that I am the Lord your God, and none else: and *my people shall never be ashamed*" (Joel 2:21, 25-27, my italics).

Note the last phrase. It doesn't matter what you may have done, how far you may have strayed. Once the shepherd brings you back, you are redeemed in full. There is no reason to labor in your flesh to try to make up for the fall you took. Your Redeemer has declared, "There is no more reason for you to be ashamed. I have redeemed you!"

2. Now comes the second parable in Jesus' message to that crowd of sinners: the story of the lost coin. "What woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently *till she find it?*" (Luke 15:8, my italics). Once again, a pursuer goes after her lost, precious object until she finds it.

"When she hath found it, she calleth her friends and her neighbors together, saying, Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece which I had lost" (15:9). In this second parable also, the first thing the pursuer does when she recovers her precious object is to rejoice. Both parables emphasize this theme: *there is great rejoicing over finding the lost item*. "Likewise... there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth" (15:10).

In the early 1960s, after my father had passed away, I came to New York City to work with gang members and addicts. My mother and a good friend of hers named Faye worked with us in the ministry. It was the beginning of the hippie era, and the streets of Greenwich Village were filled with poetry readings, rock bands and homosexuals.

Mom loved to minister on the streets in the Village, so she asked us to open a coffeehouse there. We would serve free donuts and coffee to young people who walked in, and she would witness to them. We called that coffeehouse "The Lost Coin." Mom spoke about Jesus to everyone who dropped in, always operating with the motto: "If only one person gets saved, the ministry will have been worth it."

One day a young Jewish man walked in and sat at a table. Mom sat down beside him and began to tell him about the Messiah. This young man was a castaway of both American society and his Jewish heritage. His name was Kurt, and like many young people of that era he was searching for truth. He kept coming to the coffeehouse, and each time Mom witnessed to him and prayed for him. Kurt finally gave his life to Jesus.

There were many young people who dropped into that coffeehouse, were convicted by the Holy Spirit and prayed and accepted Jesus. But there was one lost coin in particular that the Holy Spirit had been determined to sweep up and find on the streets of Greenwich Village: Kurt.

My mother has since gone on to be with the Lord. And in the years since, Kurt's testimony has continued manifold. His story has been read throughout the world in *Guideposts* magazine. He and his wife, Barbara, have printed and distributed my sermons for over thirty-five years, including on their web site, Misslink.org, which has received hundreds of thousands of hits and downloads from people worldwide.

It all goes back to the parable of the lost coin. The woman swept and swept until she turned up the missing coin, telling herself, "I'm going to sweep until I find it." At the Lost Coin, that precious coin was Kurt.

I recall another wonderful true story of the Holy Ghost going after what was lost until he found it. This story involves *two* lost coins, and it took place in war-torn Kosovo, Serbia. As opposing troops swept through the bombed-out streets of that city and missiles fell all around, the Holy Spirit was also sweeping the streets, searching for the lost.

A young man and his wife were heroin addicts, living on the city's streets. A Christian passing by happened upon the couple and handed them a copy of my book *The Cross and the Switchblade*. The couple decided to read one chapter at a time, then trip out on heroin between chapters.

Chapter after chapter, this couple got high. Yet each new chapter of the book brought them a glimmer of hope. The young man and woman began to wonder if God could bring change to their lives, too. They thought, "Maybe we're not beyond redemption." So they got up, walked into a little church and surrendered their lives to Jesus.

Today, this couple directs the Teen Challenge drug rehabilitation outreach in Serbia. It is all because the Holy Spirit, like a determined widow, swept the streets of a war-torn city looking for outcasts. Imagine how greatly God rejoices over having found those two lost coins!

3. Finally, we come to Jesus' third parable: the story of the lost son. We call this man the prodigal, or lost son. The story is very familiar to most readers, so I won't go into all the details. But I do want to say this about it: it is not primarily about a lost son. Rather, it is about the delight of the father.

To be sure, the parable of the prodigal son is about returning. It is also about grace, forgiveness and restoration. But it is not just about the son finally coming home. Read the story again, and you'll note that, significantly, the story doesn't end when he returns.

No, this parable is also about what *keeps* the son home. What accomplishes this? It is the knowledge that his father delights in him. "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry...(with) music and dancing" (15:24-25).

The prodigal's father never rebuked him, never condemned him, never even spoke about his son running away. Instead, he threw a party for the son and invited all the family's friends and neighbors. This father had been longing for his son to come home, and now it had come to pass.

The prodigal protested at first, telling his dad, "No, no, I'm unworthy." But his father ignored him, calling for a robe to be put on his shoulders, rings on his fingers and shoes on his feet. Now everything that the father owned was once again made available to the son. And there was great rejoicing, with music, dancing and feasting.

I believe that love brought this young man home. But it was the father's delight that kept him there. You see, the prodigal was kept with the father by the simple act of waking up each day to see that his dad was pleased to have him home. His father delighted at having him present with him. Moreover, everything in that young man's life that had been eaten by the cankerworm was being restored.

I have known many former addicts who are like the prodigal. They can only focus on what was lost years ago because of their habit: a spouse, children, a ministry. They feel the Lord's chastening, and that can be grievous. But Jesus tells them in this parable, "Nothing is lost in my kingdom. You're going to be made stronger through this. You are home now. And my grace will restore you in full."

Let me share one last story. While I was preparing this message, I read through the notes of a sermon I had preached previously, some seventeen years ago. It contains an illustration I gave, a true account about one of my spiritual sons.

Gwen and I loved this young man from the beginning. He was deeply devoted to the Lord, a true soul winner and greatly respected by many. But he was surprised by sin and took a moral fall.

He felt great shame by what had happened and was grieved by the pain he had caused others. Most of all, he was ashamed that he had dishonored the Lord. In his turmoil, he turned back to his old

cocaine habit, to try to drown out his feelings.

This man became the prodigal son. He ended up divorcing his wife, then went into business and became very successful. He drove fancy cars and socialized with the rich and famous. All that time, he kept doing cocaine and began drinking heavily. He lived in spiritual fear, constantly worrying, "Will I drift so far from God I can't get back?"

Like the prodigal, he spent everything on worldly pleasures. Troubles piled up, and his health deteriorated. He developed heart problems and began spitting up blood. At one point, he shut himself up for three days in a room, doing coke and hoping to die.

One day, near the end of his rope, he was alone in a room, drinking and hurting. He was convinced he was damned to hell. Finally, he fell on his face and cried out to God: "Please, help me. Take me back."

The Father responded immediately to this man's cry. He embraced him and received him back. What a joy it was when I asked a friend about this prodigal and was told, "Haven't you heard? He's back. He's cleaned up, and God is blessing him."

That returned prodigal sat in the congregation of Times Square Church as I preached this very message last month. He had come to visit Gwen and me.

Dear hurting one, do you feel like an outcast? Have you felt unworthy of the Father's love for you? All you have to do is reach out, to utter one cry for help, and the True Shepherd will reach out and bring you into his arms. The One who has been going after you for years is ready to receive you. It is time to come home to Jesus! ☐

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