

Lowing in the Distance

I stepped outside early this morning to hear a mama cow lowing in the distance. Our Cattle for Christ herd has grown to 150 mama cows. We have mamas and babies scattered all around our place. To wake up to the lowing of a mama cow always signals trouble—her baby is either lost or dead. She is doing all she can, calling out and searching everywhere to find the calf that belongs to her, but is lost.

This episode reminds me of a series of three parables in Luke 15: The parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the lost son. Each of these parables taught by Jesus, while different, have a common theme. The faithfulness of the owner to seek and find what belongs to them, but which is lost. (Please take the time to get your Bible and read Luke 15)

In the first parable, Jesus teaches about a shepherd who owned a hundred sheep and one of them was lost. The shepherd left the 99 to go and find the one which was lost. When he found it, he put it on his shoulders and carried it home and celebrated on the restoration of the lost sheep back to the flock.

The second parable is of a woman who had ten silver coins, but she lost one. She lit her lamp, swept the floor, and cleaned the house until she found it. When she found it, she celebrated because what belonged to her, but was lost, was now found.

The third parable, and the one I want to focus on, is that of the father who had two sons. The younger son came to his father and said: "Father, give me my share of the estate." So the father divided his property between the two sons and gave the younger son his share of the inheritance. (It is important to note that the son was not due an inheritance as long as his father was living. It all belonged to his father and he owed none of his possessions to his son). The story goes on to say that the younger son gathered all of his possessions and set off for a distant country where he squandered all of his inheritance (his father's possessions) in wild living and with prostitutes. After he had lost everything, a severe famine struck the whole country and he began to be in need. He became so desperate; he hired himself out to a local pig farmer. For a Jew, feeding pigs would be a last resort.

The son became so hungry that he longed to eat with the pigs, but no one would give him any slop. In this time of desperation, he came to his senses and said: "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men." So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." (Though he was still filthy and stunk like pigs). The son began to tell him what he had decided in his heart: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (but before he could ask his father to make him a servant) "The Father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

What a magnificent illustration of God's love for us, of our sinfulness, of our need to repent and return to the Father, and of His longing to receive us back—not as a slave, but as a son or as a daughter! The robe signified royalty and authority. The ring signified that he was a member of the family and had ownership. Shoes were not worn by slaves, so they also represented his acceptance as a son.

There are many more important lessons that we can learn from this parable.

1. 'Give me my inheritance so I can leave.' Why would a son want to leave his father? He stopped loving his father and being loved by his father. The moment that we just want what God the Father can give us instead of having a relationship with the Father Himself, we have headed down the wrong road spiritually. We do the same today when we call out to God for His GOODS rather than calling out to God because we love Him and want a relationship with Him.
2. "Distant country." The son removed himself from the father's oversight and care. Though we are never out of the sight of our Heavenly Father, we can be out of relationship with Him and remove ourselves from His blessings and leadership. The son sought his independence and the son sought to hide what he was going to do from his father. Both of these actions were a result of not wanting to be accountable. We convince ourselves there is no God, we invent a god of our liking, or we try and out run God's presence.
3. The lost son had to hit rock bottom - feeding pigs - which led him to repentance. These experiences bring the necessary humiliation to bring us to repentance. Humility is most essential because it will always lead us back to God. The son's motivation in repentance was not particularly virtuous, but rather selfish. But this is acceptable to God nonetheless. For the repentant are not sinless, just humble enough to recognize their sin, its destructive effect on themselves and others, and their need to turn from their sin and be in right relationship with God the Father.
4. God has an incredible love for the lost.
5. Repentance is a key element in the salvation process. Saying you're sorry is not repentance. Feeling bad about what you've done is not repentance. Saying you've sinned is not repentance. Repentance is making a 180° turn from your life of sin to a life of following Christ.
6. How did the prodigal son change?
 - a. He realized his need.
 - b. He admitted his sin was against God and against his father.
 - c. He humbly returned in repentance.
7. The father's love did not begin with the son's return. The father never stopped loving his son,
but the son had to return in order to receive his father's love.

Do you hear Jesus loving for you in the distance? He is longing for you to come home—regardless of where you have been. He has a robe and ring for you!

