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“A Threefold Remedy”: Parables of Salvation in Luke 15

Thomas Oden writes, “Regrettably the term salvation has been cheapened by an extensive history of misuse. To understand what it means to be saved, you must first understand what it means to be lost.”¹ But what exactly does it mean to be lost? Conversely, what does it mean to be found? This paper will explore these questions through the three lost-and-found parables of Luke 15—the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son—particularly focusing on patristic writers such as Ambrose, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine. These early Christian exegetes describe the lostness in these parables as a state of being, an estrangement from one’s true home, true identity, true community, and true self, in language that speaks powerfully to the anxiety and loneliness of the present age. Conversely, they imagine “foundness” as a joyful, all-encompassing, multi-layered salvation event. Together, these images of lost and found convey a compellingly rich vision of salvation with profound homiletic and evangelistic potential in a postmodern secular context.

Introduction to the Parables

Luke 15 begins with a typical gospel scene: “tax collectors and sinners” surround Jesus to hear him teach, while Pharisees and scribes grumble that Jesus “welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:1-2, NRSV). Immediately after their grumbling, the text states, “So he [Jesus] told them this parable” (15:3). This “so” implies that what follows is a response to Pharisaical

¹ Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York, NY: Harper One, 1992), 562. Oden does not explain what he means by “cheapened by an extensive misuse.” However, much has been written in recent years about a loss of understanding of traditional Christian theological terms and a need to recover biblical imagery and story for effective Christian communication in a secular context. See, for example: Tim Muelhoff and Richard Charles Langer, *Winsome Persuasion: Christian Influence in a Post-Christian World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), and Jonathan Merritt, *Learning to Speak God from Scratch* (New York, NY: Convergent, 2018).

grumbling, an implication supported by the repeated emphasis on joyful celebration as the proper response to the repentance of sinners. The final scene in the final parable of the sequence—in which the elder son refuses to celebrate his prodigal brother’s homecoming—drives home this point, returning the parable to its origin with a picture of self-righteous resentment toward the welcome of sinners that mirrors the Pharisees’ in 15:2.

Limitations of Modern Interpretation

Thus, the circumstance that gives rise to these parables is quite straightforward: the Pharisees’ grumbling. Calvin writes plainly: “For what gave rise to this parable was the grumbling of the scribes, who could not bear Christ’s humanity toward the wretched and men of doubtful lives.”² Exegetes from the Reformation era onward tend to emphasize this original plane of interpretation, particularly focusing on the brothers of the final parable as a warning against Pharisaical “impious hardness of heart” on the one hand, and prodigal waywardness on the other.³ Many recent works of popular theology have continued in this vein.⁴ Others have taken a different approach, centering the father and shepherd figures as the heroes of the chapter to emphasize God’s gracious pursuit of those on the fringes, inviting readers to see themselves as sheep and prodigals, recipients of this divine pursuit and partakers of the divine hospitality.⁵

² David Lyle Jeffrey, *Luke*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012), 337. Cyril of Alexandria similarly connects the grumbling scribes to the eldest brother: “The Pharisees and Scribes reproved Him because He received sinners; He set forth the parable in which He calls God the man who is the father of the two sons, (that is, the righteous and the sinners).” Quoted in the “Gospel of St. Luke, Chapter 15,” *Catena Aurea of Thomas Aquinas*, <https://sensusfidelium.us/bible-catechesis/catena-aurea-commentary-on-the-four-gospels-collected-out-of-the-works-of-the-fathers-volumes-1-to-4/catena-aurea-of-st-thomas-aquinas-gospel-of-st-luke/catena-aurea-of-st-thomas-aquinas-gospel-of-st-luke-chapter-15/>.

³ The quote is from John Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Gospels* 45:511, as quoted in Beth Kreitzer, Timothy George, and Scott M. Manetsch, *Luke*, Reformation Commentary on Scripture: New Testament III (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 859.

⁴ For example, see Tim Keller, *The Prodigal God* (New York, NY: Dutton, 2008). Keller writes that to focus on the father’s grace is to “sentimentalize the parable”; instead, “Jesus is pleading not so much with immoral outsiders as moral insiders. He wants to show them their blindness, narrowness, [and] self-righteousness . . .” (9-10).

⁵ For example, Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992) and Eugene Peterson, *Tell it Slant: A Conversation on the Language of Jesus in His Stories and Prayers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008)

All of these post-reformation, modern interpretations are pastorally and catechetically helpful, arising from a narrative that lends itself to a multiplicity of applications. However, they tend to emphasize sin as lawless acts rather than a state of lawlessness;⁶ that is, as what one does rather than who one is and cannot help but be. Whether the focus is on the sinfulness of the younger or older brother, the effect is to emphasize sin as behaviors and motives rather than a state of being. While this view of sin is certainly supported by the prodigal son parable, it fails to adequately capture the meaning of sinful lostness in the prior two parables. What's more, communicating this view of sin relies on a preexistent Christian moral framework and vocabulary that many in the secular, post-modern West possess. Many patristic readings, on the other hand, provide fresh insights into lostness as a state of sin characterized by a profound estrangement more readily understood in post-Christian contexts.

Another weakness of modern interpretation is its tendency to view the parables as distinct entities—often culminating in the longer and more emotionally charged prodigal parable—rather than as a cohesive unit. The parables are arranged in “a spiral of intensification”⁷ with the stories of the sheep and coin, if they are addressed at all, serving “more to anticipate the third parable” than to speak directly about lostness and foundness in their own right.⁸

By contrast, Luke introduces the parables as “this parable” rather than “these parables,” suggesting a singular thematic coherence between them (15:3). Perhaps, then, the lost sheep and lost coin are not merely prologues to the prodigal son, but themselves offer unique and significant contributions to the salvation narrative. Patristic sources viewed the three parables in just this manner, as a single interconnected unit, each informing the other and together conveying

⁶ Dr. Tim Perry, “Repentance” (online lecture delivered for Trinity School for Ministry, Ambridge, PA. Accessed 30 March 2020, https://youtu.be/2x_rPszZcYI).

⁷ Eugene Peterson, *Tell it Slant: A Conversation on the Language of Jesus in His Stories and Prayers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), Kindle Location 1071.

⁸ Frank Craddock, *Luke, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1990), 283.

a comprehensive Christological, soteriological, and ecclesiological picture.⁹ This early emphasis the interconnectedness of the parables presents what Ambrose calls “a threefold remedy,”¹⁰ a broad picture of lostness and foundness in the divine salvation narrative. This paper will explore this threefold remedy as imagined by patristic interpreters before drawing conclusions for homiletic and evangelistic application.

The Lost Sheep

Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and 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. (Luke 15:4-7)

The final line of this parable connects the restored sheep to “one sinner who repents.” How is a wandering sheep like a sinner? How is its rescue like repentance? A sheep wanders by its nature; it lacks the rational will and intelligence to remain within the safety of the shepherded flock. Thus in this parable, the lostness of the sheep seems to be primarily a matter of nature, not will. Sheep wander and become lost not because they knowingly disobey the shepherd, but simply because they are sheep. In this way, the lostness of the sheep is more akin to the state of sin than the act of sin, and is thus the sort of lostness that afflicts all mankind stained by original sin.

The motif of sheep and shepherd runs throughout Old Testament messianic passages such as Isaiah 40:11, Zechariah 13:7, and Ezekiel 34:11-16. There, God’s exiled people are like sheep scattered in the wilderness, and the Messiah is a shepherd who will gather them to himself and to

⁹ Jeffrey, 336.

¹⁰ Ambrose, *Exposition of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke with Fragments on the Prophecy of Isaias*, 7.209, translated by T. Tomkinson (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 1998). Quoted in Thomas Oden and Arthur Just, *Luke*, ACCS (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 244.

one another. This motif emphasizes another aspect of lostness: scatteredness. To be a lost sheep is to be an exile, estranged from community and home and shepherd, alone in a hostile world without protection or guidance. This imagery, again, evokes the sheep's state of original sin more than its act of willful sin. Ambrose underscores this interpretation by calling the lost sheep "the sheep that had strayed in Adam."¹¹ The sheep's lostness is included in Adam's lostness; it is the state of original strayed-ness with which all have been afflicted since the fall.

Lostness in this parable, then, has more to do with living in accordance with one's sinful nature than willfully disobeying the divine shepherd. Lostness is the loneliness, estrangement, and vulnerability in which all humans live in the world as a result of Adam's sin. If this is how a lost sheep is like a sinner, then how is a found sheep like one who repents (15:7)?

In a word, passively. The sheep merely yields to the arms of the shepherd who has abandoned his flock, searched the wilderness, and lifted the sheep onto his shoulders to carry him home, rejoicing (15:5). This picture of repentance is one of passive yielding rather than active turning through contrition or confession. Ambrose describes the sheep/sinner's response simply as "la[ying] down" and "rest[ing]."¹² And with good reason: according to Ambrose, "the shoulders of Christ are the arms of the cross. . . . 'The Son of man came to seek and save what was lost.' He sought all, because 'as in Adam all men die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.'¹³ This parable to Ambrose, is profound Christological picture of the power of the cross to rescue all who "strayed in Adam" and will rest on the arms of the cross to be carried home. In this way, the retrieval of the lost sheep is like "one sinner who repents" (15:7), an earthy act with cosmic dimensions as a picture of Christ undoing the curse of sin.

¹¹ Ambrose, ACCS, 244.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Does such a reading confuse the traditional *ordo salutis* by placing faith before repentance? The sheep's resting in the shepherd's arms is a clear picture of faith, yet the text (somewhat surprisingly) compares it to repentance. Oden resolves this tension by citing both Gregory of Nyssa and Melancthon on the relationship of repentance and faith:

Repentance is a turning away from sin [in this parable, a state of estranged lostness], while faith is turning toward grace [being carried home]. Together they constitute a single decisive turning. . . . In this way repentance and faith are so inextricably joined together in scripture that it is impossible to assign to one or the other a temporal or logical priority.¹⁴

Or does this reading reduce repentance to something dangerously passive, a mere resting or yielding rather than a decisive turning around and following? In his lecture on repentance, Dr. Perry speaks to these questions by quoting Hendrik Kraemer: "It is often not an awareness of sin that leads people to Christ. It is being led to Christ that brings people to an awareness of sin."¹⁵ This is the picture of repentance given by the parable: a nearness to Christ that effects a *metanoia* upon the sheep. The sheep is, in fact, turned around and carried in the opposite direction toward home; he simply lacks agency in the process. Instead, he yields to *metanoia* in the shepherd's presence, a picture of repentance as divine gift rather than creaturely striving.

The Lost Coin

Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? 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 in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. (Luke 15:8-10)

As in the lost sheep parable, the lost coin parable ends by comparing the finding of the coin to the repentance of a sinner. But the lostness and foundness of the coin lacks far more agency than that of the sheep; lacking life and will, a coin can only be lost by the careless action

¹⁴ Oden, 579.

¹⁵ Perry, "Repentance."

of another. Therefore, this parable again emphasizes lostness as a state of sin, and not merely an act of sinning. This state, again, is one of estrangement from one's rightful place and one's designated protector. But the coin also demonstrates a unique new dimension of the lost state: an obscuring of one's divine imprint and true kingdom. Gregory of Nyssa, Chrysostom, Augustine and Ambrose all noted that coins were typically stamped with the image of the emperor, and thus saw the coin as representative of the image of God stamped upon mankind, as well as a symbol of one's belonging to the kingdom of heaven.¹⁶ However, according to Gregory of Nyssa, this divine imprint is "not entirely defaced, but is hid under the dirt, which signifies its corruption of the flesh."¹⁷

Whereas lostness for the sheep conveys estrangement from one's home, safety, and community, lostness for the coin conveys estrangement from one's true identity and worth. Foundness, then, is the recovery of this identity as the "brightness of the divine image" reflected in the coin by lamplight.¹⁸ Cyril of Alexandria summarizes this foundness in the language of transformation: "We, who had fallen and had been lost, have been found by Christ and transformed by holiness and righteousness into his image."¹⁹ Ambrose and Chrysostom, however, see the woman of the parable not as Christ but as his church, holding forth the light of Christ to find lost coins and bring forth their brightness.²⁰ Regardless of the allegorical identity of the woman, however, the premise remains the same: a coin is hopelessly lost and its royal identity hidden. A search is conducted, a lamp is lit, the coin is found, and its divine imprint

¹⁶ Various excerpts from "Gospel of St. Luke, Chapter 15," *Catena Aurea of Thomas Aquinas*, <https://sensusfidelium.us/bible-catechesis/catena-aurea-commentary-on-the-four-gospels-collected-out-of-the-works-of-the-fathers-volumes-1-to-4/catena-aurea-of-st-thomas-aquinas-gospel-of-st-luke/catena-aurea-of-st-thomas-aquinas-gospel-of-st-luke-chapter-15/>.

¹⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, "Gospel of St. Luke, Chapter 15," *Catena Aurea*.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on Luke, Homily 106*. Translated by R. Payne Smith (Long Island, NY: Studion, 1983), quoted in Thomas Oden and Arthur Just, *Luke*, ACCS (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 245.

²⁰ Ambrose and Chrysostom, "Gospel of St. Luke, Chapter 15," *Catena Aurea*.

revealed in a picture of transformation that echoes 2 Corinthians 3:18: “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror [or a silver drachma], are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.”

As in the sheep parable, the image of “one sinner who repents” in the coin parable seems to muddle the *ordo salutis*, at least in the patristic interpretation. As with the sheep, the coin’s lack of agency in repentance underscores the power of the prevenient grace that seeks, finds, and illumines its long-obscured divine likeness. And as with the sheep, the “repentance” of the coin encompasses more of the *ordo salutis* than a single moment of *metanoia*. Whereas the lost sheep’s repentance also encompassed faith, the lost coin’s repentance also encompasses sanctification, or transformation. To this, John Calvin responds decisively that the various movements of salvation are all encompassed within one another in the work of Christ: “Although we may distinguish them, Christ contains both of them inseparably in himself.”²¹

The Lost Son

Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." (Luke 15:31-32)

The previous two parables have explored the nature of lostness and foundness, portraying lostness as a state of sin rather than acts of sin. In this state, one is lonely, estranged, and vulnerable, and one’s worth as a bearer of the divine image is concealed. Foundness, on the other hand, is an externally effected movement toward faith, transformation, and restoration. The final parable in Luke 15, however, is far more familiar and straightforward; therefore, it does not warrant as extensive an exploration as the others. Here, lostness is actual geographic estrangement, a meager existence in a far country without food or money. But unlike the other

²¹ Oden, 661.

parables, lostness is also active sinning, whether the “dissolute living” and ceremonial uncleanness of the younger brother (15:13-16), or the Pharisaical grumbling of the older brother (15:25-30). Repentance is equally straightforward: the son “came to himself,” and in an act of contrition he turns toward home to plead the mercy of his father (15:19-20).

These human characters possess a rational will with which to actively sin and actively repent in ways that align with a familiar Protestant *ordo salutis*: repentance, justification, and regeneration (“this brother of yours was dead and has come to life”, Luke 15:32). The father, like the shepherd and the woman, is proactive in his seeking the lost, preempting the son’s return by running to embrace him and shower him with symbols of complete restoration: a kiss, ring, shoes, robe, and feast.

However straightforward this parable may seem, Ambrose nonetheless brings fresh insight. He asks, “What is farther away than to depart from oneself, and not from a place? . . . He rightly returns to himself, because he departed from himself. For he who returns to God restores himself to himself, and he who departs from Christ rejects himself from himself.”²² Ambrose thus perceives an existential dimension to the prodigal’s lostness that feels profoundly modern: estrangement from oneself.

Pastoral Application and Conclusion

Taken together, the three parables of Luke 15 depict lostness as far more than active, willful sinning. Instead, lostness is a picture of profound estrangement from home, safety, community, protection, worth, identity, and themselves. Moreover, they cannot possibly prevent or heal this estrangement; this is the permanent post-fall state of sinful man, and requires an external actor to seek, find, and restore. That foundness, while merely called repentance in the parables, encompasses the whole sweep of divine rescue: repentance, faith, justification,

²² Ambrose, “Gospel of St. Luke, Chapter 15,” *Catena Aurea*.

regeneration, union with Christ, and transformation. A retrieval of this patristic interpretation holds promise for re-energizing a conversation on sin and salvation, re-enriching its “cheapened” terms with fresh insights gleaned from a more robust picture of lostness and foundness from the entirety of Luke 15.

For example, the lostness-as-estrangement metaphor feels particularly potent in my parish context. Many of my parishioners did not grow up in the Christian faith, and even those who did often lack a rudimentary understanding of the bible. We regularly run Alpha (an evangelistic course) and outreach events that bring people with no prior Christian knowledge through our doors, many of whom are from different cultural backgrounds since we are in a largely immigrant neighborhood. For these reasons, we have little shared language and shared biblical context for articulating theological truths. This parish context requires homilies with concrete imagery, stories, and clear gospel presentations devoid of jargon.

Moreover, many younger evangelicals in my congregation are disillusioned by the ways Christianity has been co-opted for various political purposes; they are discouraged by media caricatures of Christians as hateful bigots and want to avoid such associations. Though they sincerely want to share their faith with others, they are unsure how to articulate the gospel while avoiding Christian moralism, instead opening doors for deeper conversation.

Finally, beyond these necessities of preaching and evangelism, I notice in my pastoral appointments that nearly all my parishioners, as well as friends, neighbors, and family, experience a deep and pervasive loneliness and anxiety. Such feelings seem to be the hallmarks of life in a secular, modern world. During a 2010 visit to Turin, Italy, Pope Benedict XVI movingly described this predicament of the modern soul as a prolonged Holy Saturday, a growing estrangement from God and others:

Dear brothers and sisters, in our time, especially after having lived through the past century, humanity has become particularly sensitive to the mystery of Holy Saturday. The concealment of God is part of contemporary man's spirituality, in an existential almost subconscious manner, like a void in the heart that has continued to grow larger and larger. . . . After the two World Wars, the lagers and the gulags, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, our epoch has become increasingly a Holy Saturday: this day's darkness challenges all who are wondering about life and it challenges us believers in particular. We too have something to do with this darkness.²³

“The concealment of God” is a devastating description of modern lostness. Modern man is far from home, alone and vulnerable, uncertain of his worth, and an alien even to himself. But Christ seeks the lost like the shepherd, woman, and father. He hoists the lost lamb onto his cruciform shoulders and carries him home. He dusts off the lost coin until it reflects his own face. And he runs out to embrace the son who is still far off, bringing him back to life and seating him at a banquet in his honor. These parables of lost and found infuse the ever-enlarging “void in the heart” with the joyful celebration of neighbors and angels over each sinner who repents and returns home. Poet Christian Wiman describes precisely this experience of foundness in his essay “Love Bade Me Welcome”:

Then one morning we found ourselves going to church. Found ourselves. That's exactly what it felt like, in both senses of the phrase, as if some impulse in each of us had finally been catalyzed into action, so that we were casting aside the Sunday paper and moving toward the door with barely a word between us; and as if, once inside the church, we were discovering exactly where and who we were meant to be.²⁴

To repent is to turn toward home, to yield to pursuit, and to receive the joyful welcome offered by the one who seeks and finds what is lost. This is the broad and hopeful picture of lost and found, of sin and repentance, that is found in the patristic interpretation of Luke's parables. Together, these parables extend a liberating invitation to trust the work of God who seeks and

²³ Pope Benedict XVI, “Meditation of His Holiness Benedict XVI,” 2 May 2010, accessed at http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100502_meditazione-torino.html

²⁴ Christian Wiman, “Love Bade Me Welcome,” 2013, accessed at <https://www.reckonings.net/reckonings/2013/10/love-bade-me-welcome-by-christian-wiman.html>.

finds the lost, while communicating sin and salvation with the language and imagery of estrangement that resonates in modern ears. I will let Ambrose have the final word, inviting us all to participate in the joyful, comprehensive foundness of our salvation in Christ:

We are sheep. Let us seek pastures. We are coins. Let us have a price. We are sons. Let us hurry to the Father. . . . Already meeting you on the way, he falls on your neck, “for the Lord sets the fallen right.” He will give you a kiss, that is, the pledge of piety and love. He will order the robe, ring and the shoes to be brought. You still dread harshness, but he has restored dignity. You are terrified of punishment, but he offers a kiss. You fear reproach, but he prepares a banquet.²⁵

²⁵ Ambrose, ACCS, 245-6.