

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

A Catholic Bible Study

· SESSION FOUR ·

The Father Who Runs

The Lost Sheep · The Lost Coin · The Prodigal Son

“For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Luke 19:10 (RSV2CE)

LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE · WITH PARTICIPANT DISCUSSION

SESSION OVERVIEW

Luke 15 is the only place in the four Gospels where Jesus tells three parables in sequence as a direct response to a single complaint. The Pharisees and scribes grumble, “This man receives sinners and eats with them” (Lk 15:2). Jesus does not defend himself with an argument; he tells three stories, each intensifying the last. The Lost Sheep (one of a hundred) becomes the Lost Coin (one of ten) becomes the Lost Son (one of two). The value of what is lost rises, the intimacy of the relationship rises, and the celebration that follows each recovery grows more extravagant, culminating in the feast. By the third parable we are no longer watching livestock or money; we are watching a father run.

The session’s task is not to cover every point in this guide. It is to create the conditions in which your group meets the God who runs. Everything else is secondary.

Audience note: Luke 15 lands for some as familiar comfort and for others as fresh news. For the young adult who has been away and is returning, the Prodigal Son is electric; for the high-school participant who has always been faithful, the elder son is the harder question. Both readings belong in your group, and both are intended by Jesus.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The structure of the trilogy

Luke 15:3-32 presents a deliberate progression. Notice what changes from parable to parable: the number of items lost (one in a hundred, then one in ten, then one in two); the seeker (a shepherd, a

woman, a father); the length of the story (a few verses each for the sheep and the coin, then twenty-two verses in two acts for the son); the intimacy of the relationship (animal, possession, son); and the celebration that follows each finding (friends and neighbors called to rejoice in the first two, then a full household feast with music, dancing, and the fatted calf in the third).

A strand of the Christian tradition has read this progression with a Trinitarian sensibility: the Son who seeks the lost (the Good Shepherd), the Holy Spirit who searches the interior of the soul (the woman with the lamp who sweeps the house), and the Father who receives and restores. This particular allocation is a later devotional reading rather than a standard patristic one; St. Gregory the Great, for example, preached on Luke 15:1-10 (Forty Gospel Homilies, Homily 34) but reads the woman as divine Wisdom, with the lamp signifying Christ's humanity. This is patristic allegory, faithful to the broader rule of faith but not Jesus' explicit interpretation in the text; offer it to your group as one Christian way of contemplating the trilogy, not as its primary meaning.

The Prodigal Son: covenant rupture and merciful restoration

The Prodigal Son is not merely a family drama; it is the story of salvation history compressed into one narrative. The son's journey into the far country, his degradation, his coming to himself, his return, and the father's response trace the biblical pattern of creation, fall, exile, and redemption. Three details in the father's response would have shocked a first-century audience, and each carries theological weight.

First, the father runs. Scholars of Middle Eastern culture (notably Kenneth E. Bailey) have argued that a wealthy patriarch in the ancient Mediterranean world would not run, since running was undignified and exposed the legs beneath the long garment, and that the father's run publicly sets aside his honor to reach his son first. On this widely cited reading, he absorbs the shame of the return so the son does not have to: a picture of God meeting the sinner with public, costly love.

Second, the robe, ring, and sandals are not mere gifts of welcome. The robe is the best robe (Lk 15:22), reserved for honored persons; the patristic tradition (St. Augustine especially) has often read it as the robe of original innocence lost in Adam and restored in Christ. The ring is likely a signet, a sign of legal and familial authority: the son is publicly reinstated with full standing, not received back as a hired servant. The sandals were commonly the mark of a free member of the household rather than a servant. The father does not merely forgive; he fully restores.

Third, the fatted calf is not an everyday meal; killing it in a village context is an entire community feast. The father publicly declares before the whole village that this son is welcomed without shame.

The son's early request for his inheritance can be heard, in its ancient Near Eastern context, as a grave repudiation of the father, effectively treating him as already dead (a reading emphasized in covenantal interpretations such as Scott Hahn's work on Luke, and in Kenneth E. Bailey's cultural studies of the parable). When the son rehearses his return speech (Lk 15:18-19), he plans to come back as a hired servant, on terms of works rather than sonship. In the text as we have it, the son never voices the rehearsed request to be made a hired servant; the father's commands break in immediately (Lk 15:21-22). Many interpreters read this as the father cutting off the bargain before it can be offered, restoring him through the robe, ring, and sandals. The father refuses to receive him as an employee earning his keep and restores him as a son by pure gift. This is, in narrative form, what Paul teaches: we are justified by God's grace as a gift (Rom 3:24) and receive not a spirit of slavery but the spirit of sonship (Rom 8:15), a mercy that then invites and enables our free response.

The elder son: faithful, hardworking, and outside the feast

The parable does not end with the younger son's return; it is unfinished. We never learn whether the elder son enters the feast, and the open ending is deliberate, because Jesus is speaking to Pharisees and scribes and the elder son is their portrait. The elder son's complaint is not unreasonable by ordinary human standards: he has been faithful, obedient, and present. But his words reveal a relationship closer to employee than son: "Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command" (Lk 15:29). The Greek for "served" (*douleuō*) is the language of a slave or hired worker, and he calls his brother "this son of yours" (15:30), not "my brother." He has been in the father's house for years without ever knowing the father's heart.

The consistent patristic point on the elder son is that he had access to everything the father had (Lk 15:31, "all that is mine is yours") and yet lived in a posture of poverty and grievance. His tragedy is not his anger; it is that he has lived as a hired man in his own father's house. The parable is a warning to the religiously faithful as much as consolation to the prodigal. Both sons need conversion: the younger from his rebellion, the elder from his contractualism.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

These passages are the deep roots of Luke 15. The Ezekiel text is opened with the group in the Going Deeper discovery; the rest are developed here for your preparation.

EZEKIEL 34:11-12, 15-16 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

"For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out ... I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak."

This is the explicit promise that the God of Israel would himself become the shepherd the kings and priests of Israel had failed to be. When Jesus tells the Lost Sheep parable, he is not merely teaching a moral lesson: told in defense of his own welcome of sinners, the parable places him in the shepherd's role that Ezekiel promised God himself would fill, a claim John 10:11 makes explicit.

JEREMIAH 31:18-20 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

"I have heard Ephraim bemoaning ... 'bring me back that I may be restored, for thou art the Lord my God.' ... Is Ephraim my dear son? ... my heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says the Lord."

Jeremiah 31 is the closest Old Testament parallel to the father's emotion in the Prodigal Son. God speaks of Israel in exile with the aching tenderness of a parent who cannot stop loving a child who has wandered. The parable turns this divine emotion into narrative.

HOSEA 11:1, 8 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son ... How can I give you up, O Ephraim! ... my heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender."

Hosea's God is a Father whose love is not distant or dispassionate; he is moved within at the thought of giving up his child. The Prodigal Son gives this God a face and a pair of running legs.

PSALM 23:1, 4 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want ... Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me."

Psalm 23 is the prayer of the sheep who has been found. When Jesus stands as the Shepherd in Luke 15, he gathers up every promise the Old Testament has made about the God who refuses to lose what is his.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

Method: *Direct quotations appear in quotation marks with citation; faithfully represented teaching without a single quotable line is given as paraphrase with citation.*

St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430)

St. Augustine's engagement with the Prodigal Son runs throughout his preaching and supremely through the *Confessions*, which is in many ways an extended meditation on the prodigal's coming to himself in the far country. The far country, for St. Augustine, is not geography but the distance of the soul's will from God. From *Confessions* I.1: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." The prodigal's misery is the universal restlessness of every soul that has tried to rest in something less than God.

St. John Chrysostom (347–407)

St. John Chrysostom's teaching on Luke 15 (for example in his homilies *On Repentance and Almsgiving*) emphasizes the disproportion between the sinner's misery and the Father's mercy. Do not delay return because the road back seems too long; the Father's eye is already on the road, watching for you. On the elder son he does not dismiss the complaint as petty: the elder son has, by ordinary measures, kept the rules, but the rules were never the relationship, and a faithfulness that has missed the relationship has missed the entire estate.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897)

St. Thérèse's "little way" in *Story of a Soul* resonates deeply with the logic of Luke 15: the soul that approaches God with empty hands has nothing to claim from merit and therefore receives everything from mercy. The younger son's poverty is not a barrier to the Father's love; it is the very occasion for it. Her image of being lifted up to God by his arms rather than climbing by one's own effort (*Story of a Soul*, Manuscript C) can be read alongside Luke 15:20, where the father runs to the son before the prepared speech is finished; this is an application of her image, not her own exegesis of the parable.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)

St. Thomas treats the dynamics of conversion in his account of the justification of the ungodly (*Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 113). His precision illuminates the parable: the son's "coming to himself" (Lk 15:17) is the moment prevenient grace stirs the will to recognize its own misery; the return journey is the will

moving with grace; and the father's embrace before the speech is finished signals that justification is ultimately God's gift, not the sinner's achievement.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 545

"Jesus invites sinners to the table of the kingdom: 'I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.' He invites them to that conversion without which one cannot enter the kingdom, but shows them in word and deed his Father's boundless mercy for them and the vast 'joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.'"

CCC 1439

"The process of conversion and repentance was described by Jesus in the parable of the prodigal son, the center of which is the merciful father: the fascination of illusory freedom, the abandonment of the father's house ... the journey back, the generous welcome by the father; the father's joy. ... Only the heart of Christ who knows the depths of his Father's love could reveal to us the abyss of his mercy in so simple and beautiful a way."

CCC 1846

"The Gospel is the revelation in Jesus Christ of God's mercy to sinners. The angel announced to Joseph: 'You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' The same is true of the Eucharist, the sacrament of redemption."

SESSION GOALS AND TIME ESTIMATE

Goals for the leader

1. Help participants encounter, not merely understand, the recklessness of the Father's mercy. **2.** Surface the elder-son dynamic. Many in the room are not the prodigal; they are the older brother. **3.** Connect the trilogy to the sacrament of Penance as its living continuation. **4.** Leave the group with one question they cannot shake: which son am I right now? **Time estimate (90 minutes)**



Opening prayer and check-in: 10 min



The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin (read together, brief discussion): 15 min



The Prodigal Son, part one (read 15:11-24, discussion): 30 min



The Elder Son (read 15:25-32, discussion): 20 min



Application and concrete commitment: 10 min



Closing prayer: 5 min

This is the most emotionally charged session of the series. Be ready for tears, for stories, and for honest silence. Do not rush. If you must abbreviate, abbreviate the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin, not the elder son.

PARTICIPANT DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

“Heavenly Father, you receive sinners and eat with them. You leave the ninety-nine for the one. You search the house in the lamplight until you find the lost coin. You run to meet your children when they are still a great way off. Tonight let us hear your voice, whatever the shape of our wandering, and let us learn what it means to come home. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Check-In (5–10 min)

Briefly: did anyone follow through on the concrete “going” from last week? What did it teach you?

READ ALOUD

Luke 15 is the only place in the Gospels where Jesus tells three parables in a row in answer to a single complaint. The religious leaders are offended that he eats with sinners. He does not argue; he tells three stories, and each asks the same question: what does God do when something precious is lost? Pay attention to how the answer changes each time.

PART ONE · THE LOST SHEEP AND THE LOST COIN (LUKE 15:3-10)

Have someone read Luke 15:3-10 aloud.

LUKE 15:4-7 (RSV2CE)

“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which 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 which 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 15:8-10 (RSV2CE)

“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 which I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Q1. [TEXT] Notice the shepherd’s action when he finds the sheep, and the woman’s action when she loses the coin. What details does Luke include that he did not have to include?

Leader note: *The shepherd lays the sheep on his shoulders (it cannot walk back on its own) and the celebration is communal, not private. The woman lights a lamp, sweeps the whole house, and seeks diligently. The details paint a God who does not stop seeking until he finds, and whose joy in finding is a joy he insists on sharing.*

Q2. [TEXT] The coin is entirely passive; it cannot seek itself, and the sheep has wandered and is helpless. What does it mean for our understanding of grace that God seeks us before we can turn back toward him?

Leader note: *This is prevenient grace in narrative form: we do not turn to God on our own; God turns toward us first, and his initiative makes our return possible. For some this is comfort (God was looking for me even when I was lost); for others a corrective (I did not save myself).*

Q3. [TRADITION] Jesus says there is more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous persons. What does this tell you about how God values you personally? What does it not say about the ninety-nine?

Leader note: *It says God is not a manager evaluating output but a Father whose joy is real and whose love does not divide by numbers. It does not say the ninety-nine do not matter; it says the lost one matters with an intensity any parent recognizes. The crowd does not dilute the individual before God.*

PART TWO · THE PRODIGAL SON, PART ONE (LUKE 15:11-24)

Have someone read Luke 15:11-24 aloud, the younger son’s story.

LUKE 15:17-20 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

“But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.’ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.”

READ ALOUD

Scholars of Middle Eastern culture (notably Kenneth E. Bailey) have argued that in the ancient Near East a wealthy patriarch would not run; running was undignified and exposed the legs beneath the long robe. On this widely cited reading, the father runs to publicly set aside his own honor and reach his son first, absorbing the shame so the son does not have to. And the robe, ring, and sandals are not just a warm welcome: the robe is the best one in the house, the ring is likely a signet (a sign of legal standing), and sandals were commonly the mark of a free member of the household rather than a servant. The

father is declaring before the whole village: this is my son. He belongs here. The shame is gone.

Q4. [TEXT] The son rehearses a careful speech in verses 18-19, planning to come back as a hired servant. Compare his rehearsed speech with what he actually gets to say in verse 21. What does the father not let him finish, and why does that matter?

Leader note: *The son had planned to add, “treat me as one of your hired servants.” He gets through the confession, but the hired-servant request is never spoken, and the father’s actions refuse those terms. The son planned to return as an employee, earning his keep; the father insists on receiving him as a son. This is the Gospel in one scene: the sinner plans to return through merit, and the Father restores through gift.*

Q5. [TRADITION] St. Augustine reads this scene as the arc of his own conversion; St. Thérèse of Lisieux sees the soul that comes with empty hands and is lifted up by God’s arms rather than by its own climbing. What does it mean to come home with empty hands?

Leader note: *It means the only thing the soul can offer is its need. The Christian life is not begun by collecting enough religious credit to deserve God’s welcome, but by recognizing that no amount of credit is sufficient and turning home anyway. This consoles both the recovering perfectionist and the person who feels too far gone.*

Q6. [LIFE] Have you ever tried to come back to God on your own terms, with a plan to earn your way back, before you would let yourself be received? What was that like?

Leader note: *Give space; this is often the most vulnerable question of the session. Many carry a long history of religious self-improvement projects designed to make themselves acceptable before they will let God love them. Naming the pattern gently is part of the healing.*

Q7. [LIFE] The father saw the son “while he was yet at a distance.” What does that tell you about where the father’s attention had been during the son’s absence?

Leader note: *He had been watching for him. He had not moved on; he was waiting. Let this land. For someone who has wandered for years, the image of the watching father is often the moment the parable becomes personal.*

PART THREE · THE ELDER SON (LUKE 15:25-32)

Have someone read Luke 15:25-32 aloud.

LUKE 15:28-31 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

“But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’”

READ ALOUD

As you reread the elder son’s words, listen for two things: what he calls his brother, and the word he uses for his own years in the household. Hold onto what you notice; the next question turns on it.

Q8. [TEXT] Look closely at the elder son's language: he says "this son of yours," not "my brother," and "I have served you" (the word is for an employee). Then read the father's reply: "you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." What had the elder son been missing all along?

***Leader note:** He had access to everything and lived in poverty because he never received what was freely available. He kept the rules and missed the relationship; he was in the house and outside the feast at once. The tragedy is not his anger but that he was already entitled to everything he was complaining about. Let the group assemble this from his own words rather than hearing it announced.*

Q9. [LIFE] It is possible to be religiously faithful, hardworking, and obedient, and still relate to God more like an employee than a child. Does any part of you recognize the elder son? What would it look like to start receiving from your Father what is already yours?

***Leader note:** Often the most convicting question for people who grew up Catholic, completed multiple sacraments, and have done many religious programs. Do not soften it. The elder son's condition is dangerous precisely because it can persist for a lifetime without anyone noticing. The first step out of it is recognition.*

Q10. [TRADITION] The parable does not tell us whether the elder son enters the feast; the ending is open because Jesus is speaking to real people in real time. What does it mean that the question is now ours to answer too?

***Leader note:** The feast is happening, the father is at the door, and we are not told what to do; we are asked. The open ending is a literary gesture and a pastoral one: the parable is unfinished because we are not finished. Each of us has to decide whether we will go in.*

APPLICATION AND CLOSING

CLOSING CHALLENGE

Two practices this week. First, if you have been the prodigal in any area, name it specifically and consider going to confession before our next session. The walk home is what the parable describes; do not stay in the far country. Second, if the elder son's portrait fit you anywhere, pray one sentence this week: "Father, all that is yours is mine. Help me receive it." Do not say it as a request; say it as a fact and let your heart catch up.

Scripture Memory

LUKE 15:20 (RSV2CE)

"And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him."

Closing Prayer

"Heavenly Father, we confess that we are sometimes the prodigal, wandering into far countries of our own making, certain we have gone too far for you to find us. And we confess that we are sometimes the elder son, faithful on the outside, closed in our hearts to your reckless mercy and to our own brother. Tonight you have shown us a father who runs. Give us the courage to begin the walk home, and the humility to enter the feast. We ask this through Christ our Lord, the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the lost sheep. Amen."

GOING DEEPER (OPTIONAL)

Use any of these as your group has time and interest.

QGD1. [TEXT] The progression in Luke 15 moves from one in a hundred to one in ten to one in two. What does the rising proportion suggest about the way God values the lost?

Leader note: The value of the lost rises as the relationship deepens: a lost sheep is one in a hundred, a lost coin one in ten, a lost son one in two. By the third parable, half of what the father has is missing. The closer the relationship, the higher the proportion of grief.

QGD2. [TRADITION] One strand of the tradition reads the trilogy as a Trinitarian pattern: the Son who seeks (Good Shepherd), the Spirit who searches the soul's interior (the woman with the lamp), and the Father who receives. This is patristic allegory rather than Jesus' explicit interpretation. Why might it still be a faithful reading?

Leader note: It is consistent with the rule of faith: salvation is the work of the whole Trinity, each Person acting according to his proper role. Offer it as a way of contemplating the parable, not as exegetical proof. It is faithful so long as it is held as contemplation rather than as the parable's primary meaning.

QGD3. [LIFE] CCC 1439 uses the Prodigal Son to describe the whole process of conversion and repentance. If your group is open, talk about how, as a pastoral analogy, the parable maps onto going to confession: the coming to oneself, the journey, the words prepared, the absolution that meets us before we finish.

Leader note: Many Catholics have a complicated relationship with confession, and mapping it onto Luke 15 can help. The walk to the confessional is the journey home; the act of contrition is the prepared speech; the absolution is the embrace. The point is that the Father is already running before we have finished saying anything.

QGD4. [TRADITION] Read Ezekiel 34:11-16 aloud, then set it beside the Lost Sheep. What did God promise there that only he could do, and what is Jesus claiming about himself by taking up the shepherd's role?

Leader note: In Ezekiel, God promises "I, I myself will search for my sheep." When Jesus tells the Lost Sheep parable, he implicitly takes up exactly that role in defense of his own practice, a claim made explicit in John 10:11. Let the group draw the conclusion: to say "Jesus is the Good Shepherd" is to say Jesus is the God of Israel come in the flesh to do what God said only he could do. The parable is not only moral teaching; read in context and alongside John 10, it is a Christological claim.

SCRIPTURE INDEX FOR THIS SESSION

Primary parables: Luke 15:3-7 | Luke 15:8-10 | Luke 15:11-32

Old Testament background: Ezekiel 34:11-16 | Jeremiah 31:18-20 | Hosea 11:1-8 | Psalm 23

New Testament support: Luke 19:10 | John 10:11-16 | 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 | Romans 5:8 | 1 John 4:10

Catechism: CCC 545, 1439, 1846

Sources cited: St. Augustine, *Confessions* I.1 and Book VIII | St. John Chrysostom, *On Repentance and Almsgiving* | St. Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, Homily 34 | St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul* | St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 113 | Scott Hahn (covenantal reading of Luke 15).