

Briefing Document: The Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin (Luke 15:1-10)

This briefing document synthesizes key themes and ideas from the provided sources regarding the Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin in Luke 15:1-10. It highlights the nature of God, the significance of human "lostness" and repentance, and the radical hospitality of Jesus, contrasting these with the grumbling of religious elites.

I. The Context: Jesus, Sinners, and Grumbling Pharisees

The parables of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin are situated within a crucial interaction where "tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus" (Source 1). This drew criticism from "the Pharisees and the scribes," who were "grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" (Source 1).

- **Radical Embrace of Outcasts:** Jesus' practice of "table fellowship" with "tax collectors and sinners" demonstrates God's "radical embrace" and "insistent on closing chasms" (Source 2). These "outcasts are welcomed by Jesus" (Source 2), signaling that "the wayward are acceptable to God and find a home in God's reign" (Source 2). Lois Malcolm notes that Luke "brings [this contrast] to the fore," detailing several instances where Jesus interacts with and dines with "sinners," leading to their transformation while drawing criticism from Pharisees (Source 3).
- **The Pharisees' Perspective:** The Pharisees and scribes, as "disciplined law-keepers," were "understandably been scandalized to see Jesus... sitting in the company of 'the wicked'" (Source 2). Their "exclusive, judgmental understanding" of God contrasts sharply with Jesus' teachings (Source 7).
- **Purpose of the Parables:** Jesus tells these parables directly to the grumbling religious elite to challenge their narrow understanding of God and invite them to "see through different windows, and get a different perspective on the nature of God" (Source 7).

II. The Nature of God: A Seeking, Rejoicing, and Loving Shepherd and Householder

The parables primarily reveal the character of God as actively seeking the lost and rejoicing immensely at their return.

- **God as Faithful Shepherd:** In the parable of the Lost Sheep, a shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep to find the one that is lost. This is depicted as an "extravagant" act, as the loss of one sheep might seem "inconsequential" (Source 2). However, Jesus presents "a different kind of shepherd," one who "refuses to rest while a single sheep strays from the flock" (Source 2). The shepherd's action symbolizes "God's relentless and loving pursuit of the one lost sinner" (Source 4, "The Lost Sheep" by Alfred Usher Soord). Critically, there is no "wrath" or "anger" from the shepherd; instead, "when the shepherd finds the sheep, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices" (Source 7, quoting Source 1). This "image radiates love and compassion—and love, unlike wrath, is an attribute of God" (Source 7).
- **God as Persistent Woman:** The parable of the Lost Coin reinforces this theme through the diligent search of a poor woman for a lost silver coin, representing about "10 days of wages" (Source 2). Her search is "more vivid" and "intense," involving lighting a lamp, sweeping a

dusty floor, and searching "carefully until she finds" it (Source 2, quoting Source 1). This "striking portrait of a desperate woman who relentlessly searches for lost money" further illustrates God's commitment to finding the lost (Source 2). The poem "The Parable of the Lost Coin" by Lucy Wall explicitly connects the woman's search to the church's mission: "O' Church, be like the woman and share the Gospel's light! Sweep the corners of the Earth for those enslaved to sin, Venture into places dark and guide the lost to Him!" (Source 5).

- **Divine Joy and Celebration:** Both parables conclude with immense celebration upon finding what was lost. The shepherd calls "friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'" (Source 1). Similarly, the woman invites friends and neighbors to "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost" (Source 1). Jesus emphasizes, "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" (Source 1). Lois Malcolm notes that this "picture is quite extravagant" and "even more outrageous than the modest shepherd's celebration," highlighting that "God is a God who celebrates finding the lost, without restraint" (Source 2). "It's an odd calculus In the reign of God. Hard to believe. And harder to resist" (Source 6).

III. The Meaning of "Lostness" and "Repentance"

The parables define "lostness" and "repentance" in a way that challenges traditional notions, emphasizing God's proactive role in restoration.

- **"Lostness" as a State of Being:** The Greek verb for "lost" (*apollumi*) "refers not only to losing something, but also to causing or experiencing destruction" (Source 3). It implies a state of being astray, cut off, or even perishing (Source 3). The artworks vividly depict the isolation and danger associated with being lost (Source 4, "The Lost Sheep" by William J. Webbe).
- **God's Decisive Action Before Human Repentance:** It is significant that "to be enfolded in God's embrace is more about God's decisive action in turning toward us than about us turning toward God" (Source 2). While the text does speak of repentance, "there is no obvious outward change among those Jesus welcomes and accepts" in the opening context (Source 2).
- **Repentance as a "Change of Mind":** The Greek word *metanoia*, translated as "repentance," implies "a change of mind and purpose — a shift in how we perceive and respond to life," rather than simply "contrition and remorse" (Source 3). When God finds the lost, "our usual ways of perceiving and responding to life are transformed" (Source 3).
- **Contrast between Sinners and the Righteous:** The parables highlight a "contrast between (a) God's finding and rejoicing over what was lost and (b) 'the one sinner who repents'" (Source 3). The "righteous persons who need no repentance" are those who "don't think they are lost" and thus "don't need God to find them; they are justified either in their own eyes or in the eyes of others" (Source 3). This distinction is about "two different types of responses to Jesus and God's reign," not a condemnation of specific groups (Source 3).

Sinners "repent because they know they are lost and thus can avail themselves of the transformation that comes with God's finding them" (Source 3).

IV. Artistic and Poetic Interpretations

Artwork and poetry offer rich interpretations of these parables, emphasizing different aspects of the narratives.

- **The Lost Sheep:** Alfred Usher Soord's "**The Lost Sheep**" (1898) "dramatically depicts... the shepherd hanging perilously over the edge, risking his own life to save it," symbolizing "God's relentless and loving pursuit" (Source 4).
- **Sir John Everett Millais's "The Lost Sheep" (1864)** focuses on the "joyous conclusion" with the shepherd "tenderly carrying the sheep on his shoulders" (Source 4).
- **William J. Webbe's "The Lost Sheep" (1864)** emphasizes "the isolation of the lost sheep and the protective care of the shepherd" in a "rugged, barren landscape" (Source 4).
- **Cara B. Hochhalter's "A Parable - The Lost Sheep" (2019)** is a contemporary work where "even the heavens seem to be rejoicing as a little shepherd finally finds his lost lamb," highlighting the "universal truths relevant to our modern lives" (Source 4).
- **The Lost Coin:** Domenico Fetti's "**The Parable of the Lost Coin**" (17th century) captures the "frantic nature of the woman's search," with "overturned furniture and scattered objects," representing "the church's role in seeking and restoring lost souls" (Source 4).
- **Lucy Wall's "The Parable of the Lost Coin"** frames the woman's actions as a model for the Church: "O' Church, be like the woman and share the Gospel's light! Sweep the corners of the Earth for those enslaved to sin, Venture into places dark and guide the lost to Him!" (Source 5).
- **"Bad at Math" by Joanna:** This poem humorously points out the "odd calculus" of God's reign, where the value of one lost item (sheep or coin) justifies extravagant efforts and celebration that "don't add up" in human terms, yet are "harder to resist" (Source 6).

V. Sermonic Implications and Contemporary Relevance

The parables offer profound implications for faith and community today.

- **Embodying God's Embrace:** Preachers are encouraged to consider how their audience identifies with the characters—whether "tax collectors and sinners" or "Pharisees and scribes"—and to illustrate "what it means to embody God's expansive embrace as individuals and as a community" (Source 2).
- **God's Unconditional Love, Not Wrath:** The message emphasizes God's love and compassion over wrath. Rev. Catherine Hicks highlights this, stating that "God's wrath does not figure at all in this parable" and that the shepherd's action "radiates love and compassion—and love, unlike wrath, is an attribute of God" (Source 7).
- **The Light of Christ:** The woman lighting a lamp is paralleled with Jesus' declaration, "I am the light of the world." This signifies that "when we enter into the darkest places in our lives,

God comes searching for us... this light of Christ is the light by which we're found, the light of our salvation" (Source 7).

- **Invitation to Joy and Celebration:** The "big parties" at the end of these parables (and the Prodigal Son) symbolize God's invitation to "utter joy" and "celebration and rejoicing" for the lost who are found (Source 7).

This briefing demonstrates that the parables of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin are not merely stories about finding lost items, but profound theological statements about the character of God, the nature of salvation, and the radical, celebratory embrace extended to all who are "lost." They challenge human judgment and invite an expansive understanding of divine love and mercy.