

The Pharisees lived in the village among the common people—yet maintained purity laws  
Meals were a problem because of the purity rules and food restrictions  
Pharisees had decided that they could keep the rules and live with the people  
Meaning that they had to be very careful about what they ate and with whom

On the other hand, for Jesus, table fellowship with sinners was an expression of God's love  
The Pharisees blamed Jesus for this table fellowship with sinners and his acceptance of them  
Not only did he eat with sinners, but he broke the purity laws, causing him to be unclean  
For Jesus this was the basis of his work on this earth—loving people into the kingdom

For the Pharisees, it was bad enough his table fellowship with sinners—but worse was the tax collectors  
Tax collectors were not just the "ignorant" people—they were religiously defiled by the Gentiles  
Tax collectors were part of the oppressive foreign regime that stole from the people  
The Pharisees' hatred of the tax collector was both religious and political

For both the Pharisees and Jesus, table fellowship was key to their identity  
Naturally conflict arose between them—Luke 15:1-3

The Pharisees grumble and Jesus tells 3 parables... The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, and The Lost Son

The first parable is of the Lost Sheep—

Jesus likens the Pharisees to a shepherd (an insult to begin with) who loses 1 out of 100 sheep  
The shepherd leaves the 99 sheep alone in the wilderness to search for the 1 lost sheep  
Apparently assuming that the 99 will be fine  
Also assumes that the shepherd would in fact go find the 1 lost sheep  
And not decide it is better to lose 1 than to risk losing more  
When the shepherd finds the sheep, he carries the sheep home and calls his friends to celebrate

Then comes this surprising verse...

*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 15:7 NRSV*

Surprising because there is nothing in the parable that fits with our understanding of repentance  
Sheep don't enact sorrow at wandering off and getting lost  
In this story, it appears that repentance is synonymous with being found

The second parable is of the Lost Coin—

A woman has 10 coins and loses one of the coins  
She lights a lamp, sweeps the floor and searches until she finds the coin  
She then calls her friends and rejoices with them that she found the coin she lost

Then comes this surprising verse...

*Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. Luke 15:10 NRSV*

Again, there is nothing in the parable that fits with our understanding of repentance  
The coin is an inanimate object and cannot repent  
The repentance is synonymous with being found

The third parable is The Parable of the Lost Son – commonly called the Prodigal Son

The younger of two sons asks for his father's inheritance—an unthinkable request  
The father lets him go with the inheritance—a gracious response to a death wish  
For the son to take the inheritance, the land, livestock, etc. had to be sold  
That cannot be done without the father's action to do the sale as he is still alive  
This doesn't fit a Middle Eastern cultural pattern—clearly the father is God  
This is Jesus' defining parable about who God is and how God acts towards us  
God as Father is willing to let the son go, even though it costs him everything

The son takes his inheritance and goes to the far country where he squanders the money  
Ultimately, he spends all the money and then there is a famine in the land  
The son is desperate and gets work feeding the pigs, but has little to eat himself

*"When he came to himself" or "When he came to his senses"... Luke 15:17*

Some think of this as repentance—new awareness of his failure and his confession  
But with 2 parables, Jesus has redefined repentance—as being found  
Neither the lost sheep nor the lost coin did anything to be found  
The shepherd and the woman searched until they found them  
So why would Jesus suddenly change and say that it is something the son did—repent?  
Repentance is finding that which is lost—even finding the person who is lost  
Not something the person does for him or herself—not regret or remorse about sin  
In fact, I would say that true repentance as we understand it doesn't happen...  
until we have been found—only then do we really know our failure  
μετανοέω *mētanoēō* is the Greek word translated repent in Luke 15:7 and 10  
Repent means to *think differently or to have another mind*  
The prodigal son makes one more attempt to solve his problem and stay alive  
He has only himself to rely on—he decides to do something different

The son says to himself, why die if there's an alternative—because of shame, this is a last resort!  
Those that work for my father have bread to eat and some left over  
Why shouldn't I have what they have?  
The solution is clear—he must convince his father to hire him as a worker  
But first he must convince his father to support his plan with acceptable confession  
*"I have sinned against heaven and before you..."*—a practical way forward

Father is watching for his son—he knows he will fail  
But he also knows he is too proud to return until all is lost—therefore he'll return in rags  
The father sees him from a long way off and goes to meet him  
The father runs—again Middle Eastern gentlemen do not run  
Besides being hard to run in long robes, a prominent man does not run  
The father put his arms around his son and kissed him  
The kiss is a gesture of acceptance and friendship—forgiveness, peace, love

Before he can share his full plan, his father reinstates him as a son, with all rights and privileges  
He throws a huge party to celebrate—just like the celebration for the lost sheep and coin

The older brother comes home angry because he's worked hard and never had such a party  
The father begs him to come in, reminding him that everything the father has is his  
But they had to celebrate that what was lost is now found—he was dead and now lives

The older brother, like the Pharisees, resents those who haven't worked for their salvation  
They find it hard to accept this radical welcome and celebration of being found

This is the third celebration in response to the lost being found

*There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. Luke 15:7 and 10*

The lost is found  
The dead one lives  
Joy and welcome abound

Jesus is saying I do eat with sinners, celebrating with them their welcome home  
But I also welcome insiders—insiders and outsiders—Everyone!  
Older brothers and younger brothers—Pharisees and sinners—all are welcome  
You too can come and eat at the banquet table

Everyone is invited to enter the celebration and live with the father  
No sin is great enough to keep you out  
No obedience is good enough to get you in  
No words of contrition or sorrow—no regret or remorse about our sin is required  
Just come—for any reason  
Let yourself be found  
Turn around and come home  
It's enough!  
The radical and incomprehensible love of the Father God will welcome you home  
All must come through the love and welcome of the father—freely given to all