

# Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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## Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):  
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

## Luke 15:1-10

Year C - Proper 19, Text: Luke 15:1-10  
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Luke 15 contains three of Jesus' best-known parables: the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Two Lost Sons. The parables of The Lost Sheep (Luke 15:1–7) and The Lost Coin (15:8–10) may be viewed as a double parable, with the second reinforcing the themes of the first. In all three parables, Jesus defends his association with sinners. Luke 15:1–2 states:

*Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

It is possible that Jesus Himself hosted the meal referred to in v. 2. Still today in the Middle East, to invite someone to share a meal is to bestow a great honor on that person. It is an offer of peace, trust, brotherhood, and forgiveness. When Jesus shares meals with publicans and sinners, He lives out the message of the redeeming love of His heavenly Father.

In the Middle East today, as in the past, a nobleman may feed any number of needy persons of lower rank than himself as a sign of his generosity. But he does not eat with them. However, when guests are received, the host receiving the guests does eat with them. His doing so is a special sign of acceptance. If this is the focus of verse 2, Jesus' actions are very significant.

For Jesus to host sinners would have been a much more serious offense to the Pharisees than merely to eat with sinners informally or to accept their invitations, e.g. Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10). It is little wonder that Jesus' table fellowship with sinners offended the cultural and theological sensitivities of the Pharisees. Little wonder that they grumbled as they did!

### The Parable of the Lost Sheep

People living in Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon tell us that anyone wealthy enough to own a hundred sheep will hire a shepherd or let some less affluent member of the extended family take care of them. Among the less affluent, the average family may have five to 15

animals. Common practice is for a number of families to work together to hire a shepherd. The shepherd himself may be from one of the families and may even own some of the animals. Where a herd consists of about 40 animals, the shepherd leading them may be their sole owner. Where a herd consists of a hundred sheep, the shepherd leading them is probably not their sole owner. Thus, "to have a hundred sheep" can mean "to be responsible for a hundred sheep." It need not necessarily mean to own a hundred sheep.

It is unlikely that the shepherd in the parable is merely a hireling or a stranger. The sheep that he is caring for belong to the extended family of his community. He is a member of that extended family and naturally feels responsible before the entire family clan. Any loss is a loss to all of them. This understanding of the culture clarifies the joy in the community reflected in the closing section of the parable's message. In short, the extended family loses if a sheep is lost; the whole clan rejoices if a lost sheep is found.

**Verses 15:3-4:** When answering His accusers, Jesus begins by telling them a parable (verses 3–7) about a shepherd, who, while caring for a hundred sheep, loses one (v. 4). How, we are not told. Negligence on the shepherd's part is implied, although it is not a key factor in determining the parable's meaning.

The sheep strayed without being aware that it was straying. Suddenly, it senses that something is wrong and that it is lost. It does not cry out for the shepherd or go looking for him. Rather, the shepherd goes looking for the sheep. The sheep is "found." Still today, shepherds in Galilee inform us that a lost sheep will lie down helplessly and refuse to budge.

**Verse 15:5:** After the sheep is found, it has to be restored to the flock. This implies that the shepherd must lift the sheep (of considerable weight), place it around his shoulders, and carry it back to the village, possibly a long distance away.

**Verses 15:6–7:** Even so, the shepherd rejoices twice: first, when he finds it and while he carries it, and second, when he arrives back in the village. The theme of joy is prominent throughout.

When the shepherd returns to his village, the community rejoices for two reasons: first, the community rejoices to hear that the shepherd is safe; second, the flock is most likely owned by these same friends and neighbors. The lost sheep is a community loss. The recovered sheep is an occasion for joy for all members of the community.

### **The Parable of the Lost Coin**

**Verses 15:8-10:** In this second parable, a woman counts the coins that she has in her possession, only to find that one is missing. She is deeply concerned. She lights a lamp, gets her broom, and sweeps the house. She persists in her search until she finds the missing coin. After finding the coin, she calls her friends and neighbors together and invites them to rejoice with her.

Although there is reference to a “double joy” in the parable of the Lost Sheep, the theme of joy is not doubled in this parable. After all, there is no reference to the burden of restoration. Once the coin is found it is automatically restored. Yet the theme of joy does appear in the center and at the end, and is therefore the parable’s high point. Although the theme of the burden of restoration is missing, the themes of grace, repentance, and joy all play a central role in the parable. A number of cultural elements need to be noted:

- The introduction is shortened to “which woman,” because to say, “which woman of you” to a group of Middle Eastern men would have been an unpardonable insult.
- The coin in question is a most likely a drachma, representing about a day’s wages.
- To a large extent, those living in a peasant village support themselves by making their own clothes and growing their own food. Cash is a rare commodity, so the loss of a coin is a sad event.
- It has often been observed that the coin may have been part of the woman’s jewelry or dowry. However, a distinction must be made between the Bedouin and the villager. Bedouin women wear their dowry in the form of coins hanging on their veils; village women do not.

- The movement of women in a peasant village was and still is extremely limited. The woman in the parable knew that the coin was in the house. She had not been out. Her diligence was prompted by the knowledge that she would find the coin if she persisted in her sweeping.
- In the cultural world of first-century Palestine, reference to a woman in a story told publicly involved a significant moral issue. Jesus again rejects Pharisaic attitudes toward groups of people within society. First it was proscribed shepherds; now it is an “inferior” woman.
- Two aspects of the imagery in the parable of the Lost Sheep are intensified in the parable of the Lost Coin. First, the relative value of the thing lost is intensified. It is now one in ten, not one in a hundred. The coin may have had a value beyond its monetary worth. Second, the place of search for the lost is more narrowly confined. It is now the confines of a house, not the wide wilderness. Thus, the assurance is intensified that the lost one can be found if the searcher is willing to expend sufficient effort.

In these two parables, the sheep does not find the shepherd, and the coin does not find the woman. Neither the shepherd nor the woman was lost. Similarly, God is not lost and therefore we do not find God. We are lost, and God finds us. We cannot boast, “I found the Lord!” Rather, we can rejoice that God has found us. God does not need changing. We need changing.

The Bible does not offer advice about how to reconcile God to us. God does not need to be reconciled to humanity. We need to be reconciled to God! God’s gracious concern is to reconcile us to Himself. He achieved just that through the life, death, burial, and resurrection of His Son. Praise God, we lost ones have been found by God! The implication is that we are to remain in the presence of the Good Shepherd, listen to His words of grace and forgiveness, and then follow Him wherever He might lead us in the course of life’s journey.