

# Rescuing the Lost

COUNSEL for  
PARENTS and  
LEADERS

*The Savior's parables in Luke 15 provide guidance for reaching out and rescuing children who have strayed from the gospel path.*

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**B**linking away tears, Jeff and Samantha (names have been changed) sat in my office talking about their children's struggles with addiction, mental illness, and poor decision making. As Jeff and Samantha described their situation, they wrestled with a complex mix of feelings, ranging from sadness and anger to love and compassion.

Their son and daughter, now ages 22 and 25, were raised in a family where the gospel was preached and lived. When they were young, the children got along with siblings, behaved well at home and at church, and had several good friendships. However, by their mid-teens they were failing classes, refusing to attend church, and were both in overly serious dating relationships.

By the end of high school, their behaviors had worsened, and the children were regularly using drugs and alcohol, which created even more conflict and turmoil for the family. Now, in young adulthood, both children were a source of concern due to their poor life decisions, failed marriages, Church inactivity, employment difficulties, and disconnection from the family.

In my work as a marriage and family therapist, I have found that few matters bring greater heartache and anguish than losing a child to the adversary's influence. Well-acquainted with this pain, our Heavenly Father provides reassurance and guidance to parents and Church leaders facing this challenge. Some of the best counsel can be found in Luke 15, where the Savior gives the parables of the lost sheep, the misplaced silver coin, and the prodigal son. Each parable begins with something that is missing and ends in a celebration of the rescue and return of that which was lost. There are several lessons we can learn from each parable, and a careful examination provides three separate options for *how* the rescue can be carried out.



## The Lost Sheep: Searching Diligently

*“What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine and go into the wilderness after that which is lost, until he find it?” (Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 15:4 [in Luke 15:4, footnote a].)*

In this parable, the shepherd leaves the 99 and enters the wilderness to search for the lost sheep. The shepherd is single-minded in his focus on the lost sheep, demonstrating both bravery and unselfishness. In doing so, he follows the example of the Master Shepherd, who has numbered His sheep and knows each one individually (see John 10:14–15; 3 Nephi 18:30–32).

Today’s parents and leaders can apply this parable and undertake their own diligent search. It could involve praying fervently and constantly, holding a family fast each month, and striving to make regular contact with the child. It may involve serving the child even when it is not convenient or planning activities around their interests without expecting an immediate return to Church activity. These efforts are most helpful when the child hears a voice that he or she knows to be reassuring and loving (see John 10:4).

It is also worth noting that the shepherd likely did not leave the 99 sheep unattended for too long, as neglect of those sheep can also have its own set of negative consequences.

Samantha and Jeff had a firm conviction that true happiness was possible only through obedience to the commandments (see Alma 3:26). They also needed to be reminded to have fun and edifying moments with their wayward children. After recognizing this, they visited favorite picnic spots and went camping with their children. They took a road trip with the whole family and did a service project for an elderly neighbor who had been good to the children in their youth. On the trip, they re-created several old family photos and posted them proudly on social media, refusing to let any of the problems define their family. In the process, they found it easier to love all

their children as they enjoyed activities together. They also found that these more happy times kept their children’s problems from destroying their hopeful feelings about the family and its eternal purpose.

## The Lost Coin: Searching Inwardly

*“What woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it?” (Luke 15:8).*

As she searches for the lost coin, the woman’s efforts are focused, literally, on cleaning her own house. Likewise, for today’s families it may be necessary for some parents to look inwardly at their own lives as they try to rescue a lost family member. Through individual introspection and a search for personal revelation, parents and families can repent, clear away bad habits, develop a closer connection to God, and apologize for any mistakes made.

Looking inwardly can help parents identify individual weaknesses or the marital and family problems that may have contributed to a child’s alienation. For example, a child may be driven away through parental neglect or insensitivity or perhaps because parents weren’t as willing to forgive and forget as they could have been. These shortcomings can be discovered through prayerful self-examination and open conversations with trusted friends. In more complicated or stubborn circumstances, family therapy can be helpful as a way to search inwardly and help address contributing issues. Self-examination can be humbling and difficult, as it is always much easier to see the failings of a wayward child, even when there is a real need for improvement in one’s own life (see Matthew 7:3–5).

For Mario and Jessica, one such problem area was in their constant disagreements about rules and consequences for their daughter, Megan, age 16. Megan was struggling with substance abuse and poor school performance, which had resulted in family arguments about curfew and other rules. Fear and worry led Jessica and Mario to blame each other for Megan’s mistakes, and as a result, they had drifted apart instead of pulling together in their time of need. As is



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common for many couples in these high-stress situations, one parent (in this case, Mario) had become rigid and unforgiving, pushing the other parent, Jessica, to deal more permissively with their daughter in an attempt to keep the parenting balanced.

In meeting with them, I immediately saw their willingness to improve as parents and a strong desire to help their daughter. I explained that while children should be provided with both structure (rules and consequences) and flexibility (empathy and personalized adjustments), it is healthier when each parent provides *both* elements. Otherwise, one parent will work to establish more rules to control the child's behavior while the other parent will argue for fewer rules and less strictness so as to not push the child away.

The shift to more balanced and shared parental roles was not easy for Mario and Jessica, but it was aided when Mario worked harder to build a loving relationship with Megan. As he stepped out of his "rule enforcer" role, there was less conflict at home and Jessica saw that he wasn't trying to punish Megan at every turn. This helped Jessica feel better about enforcing rules and consequences, resulting in more even and balanced expectations for curfew. Not surprisingly, when Jessica and Mario stopped treating each other as the enemy, they became more united in rewarding, disciplining, negotiating with, and loving their daughter.

### **The Prodigal Son: Parents Remaining Steadfast**

*"The younger son . . . took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living" (Luke 15:13).*

When one's best efforts do not result in the return of lost children, parents can feel desperate and hopeless. Aware of these feelings, perhaps from His own and His Father's experiences, the Savior provides lasting counsel in this final and frequently referenced parable (see Luke 15:11–24). In it, there is a dramatic presentation of the options that remain for families after parents and others have done everything they can think to do.

First, the father trusts in God's loving plan for his son. Despite his wealth and ability to fund a desperate and expansive search, the father does not send his servants out after the wayward young man in the middle of his "riotous living." Instead, the father follows God's own respect for mortal agency, permitting the son to be humbled and to come to his own remembrance of the value of family and faith.

*"And when [the son] came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!"*

*"I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee"*  
*(Luke 15:17–18).*

In moments like this, families need to trust the Lord and let Him work to ready their son or daughter for change. In my experience, many children do not "come to themselves" or become humble enough to listen to good counsel until *after* they have learned life lessons the hard way. For example, if a child has been unable to stay drug free, then it is probably time for him or her to experience the consequences of jail time and other penalties. If parents or other loved ones respond too quickly in rescuing the child from his or her own mistakes, this can delay or even interfere with the child's change of heart (see Alma 5:12–15).

When facing these challenging moments, it is important for family members to encourage one another to be patient because it is difficult to stand by and not help when a child is suffering, even when that suffering is a consequence of the child's own mistakes.

Second, from this parable we see that father, family, and home did not move. As a result, when the young man was finally humble enough to come home, he knew right where to find it. In this regard, the father remained spiritually "fixed, immovable, and unchangeable" (D&C 88:133) in his faith and actions.

Taking this parable to heart, parents must strive to remain unwavering in their obedience to God's laws, despite any disappointment and worry about children.



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## WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

"We cannot pray away another's agency. Remember the father of the prodigal son, who patiently waited for his son to '[come] to himself,' all the while watching for him. And 'when he was yet a great way off,' he ran to him [Luke 15:17, 20]. We can pray for guidance about when to speak, what to say, and yes, on some occasions, when to be still. Remember, our children and family members already chose to follow the Savior in their premortal realm. Sometimes it is only by their own life's experiences that those sacred feelings are awakened again. Ultimately, the choice to love and follow the Lord has to be their own."

Elder Robert D. Hales of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, "'Come, Follow Me' by Practicing Christian Love and Service," *Ensign*, Nov. 2016, 24.

Sadly, some parents begin to falter themselves and lose faith in the promises of eternal families when their children fall away. Please remember that some self-doubt and worry about God's unfulfilled promises are commonplace when dealing with a lost son or daughter; however, these insecurities can be conquered in many ways. As recommendations, parents should focus on the blessings that they have received and find ways to reach out and serve those they are able to influence.

Third, the father, watching the path leading up to the home, saw his son "yet a great way off, . . . had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him" (Luke 15:20). While most of the return journey was made by the son alone—finding his way to true change—the father rushed out to greet him and to bring him the rest of the way home. This welcome helped bond the father and son together and eased the shame the son might have felt as he returned home.

To help families more patiently endure the waiting, I have counseled parents to create a mental portrait of their Heavenly Father at the window of the home, watching the path, ready to rush out and welcome the lost soul home. In the words of one client, this "image helps me not worry so much, because I can see the Lord watching and waiting for my daughter. It also helps me to replace moments of fear with feelings of hope, and I know that God will help me know when I should run out to help." Given the unique circumstances of each family, it is also a good idea for parents to discuss how they will support their child who is still "a great way off" but who is now following the path home.

Fourth, the father's forgiveness is admirable and worthy of emulation as he embraces his son. All the heartache and sleepless nights were real and very painful for the father, but these are diminished as he reunites with his son. This kind of compassion and forgiveness is no small accomplishment for family members who have been hurt by the actions and absence of a prodigal (see the reaction of the other son in Luke 15:25–32). Surely, the Savior had challenging moments like these in mind when he commanded us to "bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you" (Matthew 5:44).

The parable of the prodigal son stands as one of the greatest stories of God's love and compassion for His children and has considerable value beyond simply offering hope and reassurance to saddened parents. For example, it may remind faithful parents that they too face their own struggles and failings and need forgiveness. This recognition can help them be patient with and understanding toward their children.

Through these three parables, dedicated parents, leaders, and loved ones can find inspiration in their efforts to respond appropriately to children who falter. Prayerful consideration and personal inspiration will help all to know God's will for the lost soul. Studied carefully and applied diligently, these parables as well as teachings provided by our prophets will allow the promises of eternal families to be realized and enjoyed forever. ■