



What are you worthy of this Christmas?

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Where the lost things go

Jesus tells three parables about lost things in Luke 15. First, he describes a sheep lost out in the darkness, away from the rest of the flock. The shepherd leaves 99 behind to go and find the one that is missing.

In a second parable, Jesus describes a woman who has ten coins, each worth a day's wages. She loses one of them and for whatever reason, be it that they belong together as a set or simply that she cannot afford the loss of that day's money she sets about searching until she has found it.

In the third story, a son demands his share of the inheritance and then leaves home, losing everything, he goes home ready to be taken back as a hired hand. Instead, his dad throws him a party and welcomes him home.

What have these stories got to do with Christmas? They don't seem very festive. However, these three parables point us to the events of the first Christmas because that's exactly what Christmas is all about. It's the story of how God sets out to seek and find you and me. When we were lost, he found us, when we were in danger, he rescued us. When we were dead, he gave us life.

Our big theme in this little booklet is "Worthy". What are you worthy of this Christmas? The question is all about what you and I are worth. Our starting point is that Christmas tells us that Jesus considered us worth stepping into history, worth finding, worth dying for. Why is that so? Well, we are going to discover more as we explore the story of the lost son.

Because I'm worth it

"Because you're worth it" the L'Oreal advertisements used to announce. The younger brother in Jesus' parable believed that he was worth it (Luke 15:11-32). He went to his father to demand his share of the inheritance. In effect, he was telling dad that he was as good as dead to him. Too impatient to wait until when his father grew old and died, he was desperate to get his hands on what he considered himself entitled to immediately.

It strikes me that we live in a world that focuses on rights and entitlement. There's a specific focus on personal autonomy and this leads to ethical decisions such as abortion and euthanasia. My right to self-autonomy trumps all other rights. I come first because I deserve the right to choose and the right to control my life and my body. The consequence of course is that other lives are considered of less value and the risk of others suffering does not matter. Self-autonomy has become the idol for which everything else must be sacrificed.

The son's desire is to take what is his and get away, to enjoy it all by himself. In the end, the craving for personal autonomy takes us on a lonely journey. We want to believe that each person is an island but we are not. An isolated, self-centred life is not a fulfilled life. It is no life at all.

In the Christmas story we meet people who consider themselves "worth it". Herod, the Roman appointed king in Jerusalem considered himself to be the one worthy of respect, obedience and service. He is willing to sacrifice the lives of toddlers and babies, quite literally on the altar of his ego. Herod fails in his plot; he cannot dethrone Christ and eventually he has to face a reckoning with God.

Jesus is the obedient son who loves his father and gives up all that he is worthy of to come and live among us. Jesus is the true and better king, the servant king who puts the needs of other before his own glory in contrast to Herod.

Unworthy

A Son is a long way from home, homeless, treated as an outcaste, on the brink of death. The younger son has left home for a far-off country. There, he has wasted everything and at that point, famine hits. Penniless and hungry, he takes up work looking after pigs. He is so hungry that he could eat the pigs' food.

The Christmas story is about another son, Jesus who leaves his Father and his home in heaven to come and live among us. However, he does not seek to seize his share of an inheritance, he is not rebelling or running away. It is The Father's Will. Nor does he waste everything or end up among the unclean out of desperation. Rather, he actively seeks out those labelled unclean and called sinners: lepers, tax collectors and prostitutes.

The lad in the parable comes to his senses and resolves to go back home and plead with his dad to take him back but not as a son. He thinks that this is impossible. Instead, he prepares to offer himself as a hired worker.

He moves from considering himself to be worthy to recognising that he is unworthy. He has got himself into this mess and he deserves all the consequences coming. There has to come a point in my life and yours where we realise that we are unworthy too. We are not entitled to the good things we think we deserve. In fact, the Bible says that we deserve the penalty of death which is about more than just the physical event when we stop breathing. Rather, it is about being exiled from God's loving presence forever.

The good news of Christmas is that Jesus came specifically to identify with those who are unworthy and to take their unworthiness upon himself. Jesus died on the cross, not receiving what he was truly worth but receiving the punishment we deserve. If Jesus came for the unworthy, then the first step for you and me is to identify with the unworthy too, to recognise that we carry shame and guilt for the wrong things we have thought said and done.

Indignation

As the party begins, there is someone missing. The older brother is outside, refusing to come in. His dad goes to find him and encourages him in.

He refuses point blank. He complains that his brother is welcome back with open arms whilst he gets nothing. He has slaved for his dad for years with nothing to show for it.

Jesus' story was particularly addressing the religious leaders of his day who resented that he spent his time with those they considered worthless, unclean, sinners. He wanted to warn them that they, like the older brother risked missing out on the joy of God's present because of their hard-hearted legalism and bitterness. There is a warning for us too. Pride is dangerous. The Bible says that "all have sinned and fall short of God's glory."

The Father's response to the older brother is twofold. First, he reminds him that as his son, everything belongs to him as his inheritance. The Son has forgotten that it was in his interest to work the farm. He too is acting as though he isn't a son, as though he is a servant.

Secondly, his dad tells him that he has thrown the party because his son was lost and now is found, was dead and is now alive. The theme of the three parables is all about lost things being found. Here there is an added dynamic, it is about dead people coming to life.

Sin brings death. Even before you physically die, you are spiritually dead because you are not living for our intended purpose, to know and be loved by God. Jesus came so that you and I might have real life.

Someone is worthy

As the prodigal son set off on his journey home, he kept rehearsing the little speech he had prepared.

“Dad, I’ve done you wrong I’m not worthy to be your son anymore, please take me back as one of your hired workers.”

His father sees him whilst he’s still a long way in the distance and runs to meet him. Before the lad can get the words of his instructions out of his mouth, his dad has embraced and kissed him and started giving instructions. He calls for new clothes for his son, a ring for his finger that will confirm his status as son and preparations for a party for his son who has come home.

The son has been welcomed back, not because he is worthy but because of his father’s underserved love and kindness. This is what we call grace. How is this possible? Well, the story doesn’t explicitly spell it out. However, we have been seeing the clues as we’ve realised that Jesus effectively lives the life of the disobedient son but faithful and obediently. If he stands in the place of the rebellious, ungrateful and shamed then when we come to our sense and realise our state, there is a sense in which we are united to him. He dies our death so that we can live his life.

Just as the returning son is welcomed by his father and confirmed as son, the Bible tells us that Jesus was identified as “Son of God in power” when he rose from the dead. If we are reconciled to God and welcomed back as family, then it is because we are with Jesus

What are you worthy of this Christmas?

I wonder which bit of the story of the younger son you identify with most of all at the moment. I think there are three possibilities. First, it is possible that you don't identify with the younger brother at all. Instead, you identify with the older son.

We can become proud, resentful and bitter when we see others who we consider "unworthy" getting love, compassion and help. However, the Bible makes it clear that all of us are "unworthy." All of us deserve God's judgement. Yet, God in Jesus chooses to freely love and forgive us. We all need grace.

Some of us, if we are truly honest with ourselves find ourselves at the beginning of the story. We see ourselves deserving, worthy of better than what we have got in life. It may be that this arises out of deep pain and experience of suffering. Perhaps you are even angry at God. The Bible has much to say about how we can walk through pain and suffering and still discover that God is good and loving.

Perhaps you find yourself in the middle of the story. Your life has got into a mess and you feel a heavy sense of guilt and shame. Could anyone love you? Is forgiveness possible. You long to be accepted unconditionally into a family.

The good news in the story is that the son is welcomed back, forgiven and restored back into the family. He is loved unconditionally. He receives grace. Christmas is all about God's desire to offer you that same love and forgiveness, to welcome you into his family. 33 years after his birth, Jesus was falsely accused, handed over to Roman executioners and killed on the cross. The Bible tells us that he did this to bear the punishment of alienation and death that you and I deserve. Jesus did not stay dead but rose to life again to show that God was satisfied, death was defeated and sin forgiven. Jesus took your guilt and shame on himself so that you could know forgiveness, life and peace with God.

The story in this little booklet is found in Luke 15. Luke was a doctor who travelled with another early Christian called Paul on his journeys planting churches around the Mediterranean. He wrote a “Gospel” or “Good news story” seeking to provide a detailed and orderly account of Jesus’ life based on eyewitness reports.

If you would like to find out more about Jesus, what Christians believe and Lue’s account, why not check out “First Look” at <https://faithroot.com/firstlook>