

“The Parable of the Lost Sheep”

Luke 15:1-7

CXV. Expositions of the Gospel According to Luke

July 27, 2014

¹Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”³So he told them this parable: ⁴“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷Just 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.

In the preceding verses in Luke’s gospel, Jesus explained the difficult way of the disciple. He must *hate* his family members, Jesus said, or he “cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14:26). He must “bear his own cross and come after me” (Lk 14:27). He must “count the cost” (Lk 14:28). Jesus said,

So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:33)

Finally, He said,

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” (Luke 14:35b)

Setting

Who has the ears with which “to hear” (*akouein*) this demanding call to discipleship?

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. (Lk 15:1)

Surprisingly, we are told the “tax-gatherers and sinners,” that is, the worst and most degraded and most despised of sinners “were drawing near to hear (*akouein*) Him.” According to Marshall, “The use of *akouein* (to hear) gives a verbal link with 14:35: *such were the kind of people who did have ears to listen to Jesus.*”¹ Tax-gatherers “were ostracized by many and regarded as outcasts by the religious,” says Morris. “Sinners” were “the immoral or those who followed occupations that the religious regarded as incompatible with the Law.”² Tax-gatherers were collaborators with Rome. Sinners were promiscuous. Together they were “outcasts from the Jewish religious and national life,” says Geldenhuys.³ They were considered unclean, both morally and ritually (see Jn 7:49). In spite of the difficulty of Jesus’ demands for His disciples, this unlikely and unsavory audience has assembled to hear from Him the way of salvation. Jesus didn’t dilute his message for their sake. He didn’t soften his requirements for the “unchurched.” They were drawn because they could sense that Jesus was authentic. They felt that he genuinely

¹ Marshall, 599 (my emphasis)

² Morris, 237.

³ Geldenhuys, 402.

cared for them and spoke the truth to them. “Let us mark the accessibility and affability of our Lord’s demeanor in this expression. He was one of whom people were not afraid,” says Ryle.⁴

Normally religious people wouldn’t associate with sinners, “even to teach (them) the Law (cf. Acts 10:28),” as Morris points out.⁵ The Pharisees had said, “Let not a man associate with the wicked, not even to bring him to the law.”⁶ Socializing with them implied guilt by association. It implied condoning their sinfulness or treating their evil as a thing indifferent. Of course the criticism was unfair. Jesus’s teaching against immorality was stricter than that of the strictest Pharisees. (Mt 5:27-32). Yet the religious establishment objected:

And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15:2)

Ironically, “As the one class drew near, so the other stood off and found fault,” observes Lenski.⁷ They “grumbled,” or as Plummer renders it, “murmured among themselves.”⁸ They should be rejoicing that sinners are taking the first tentative steps back to God. Jesus is wooing them. They ignore his *motive*. Jesus is teaching them. They ignore his *activity*. Their complaint was twofold. He “receives sinners,” he “allows them access, gives them a welcome.”⁹ Moreover, He “eats with them.” This is a summary of the indictment of the Pharisees and legal experts. According to Morris, “. . . eating with these people was regarded as worse than mere association: it *implied*

⁴ Ryle, II:177.

⁵ Morris, 237.

⁶ cited in Marshall, 599.

⁷ Lenski, 794.

⁸ Plummer, 368; (he refers to Ex 16:2,7,8; Josh 9:19; Num 14:2)

⁹ Ibid., 368.

welcome and *recognition*.”¹⁰ They were willing to work with sinners who were penitent and ready to be taught. However, they were not willing to seek them out. “Sinners might indeed, after their conversion, come to them, but they did not first go to them to use their influence with them spiritually,” says Geldenhuys.¹¹

J. C. Ryle is right to point out that “the thing which they found fault with was the very thing He came on earth to do, and a thing of which he was not ashamed.”¹² Saving sinners is the reason behind both the *cradle* and the *cross*. “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,” writes the Apostle Paul, “of whom I am the foremost” (1 Tim 1:15). He came “to save His people from their sins” (Mt 1:21). He came to call not the righteous but “sinners to repentance” (Lk 5:32). He came “to seek and to save the lost” (Lk 19:10). Jesus was willing to pursue sinners. He was willing to search for them, to rub shoulders with them, to interact with them, to persist in drawing them, that they might be saved. Consequently Jesus explains his ways through a parable:

So he told them this parable: (Luke 15:3)

“This parable” is actually three parables: the lost sheep, lost coin, and lost (or prodigal) son. Through these parables He is saying (in Ryles’ words), “If you would know my feeling towards sinners, mark the conduct of a shepherd seeing a lost sheep, a woman seeking a lost piece of money, and a kind father receiving a prodigal son.”¹³ The point of each parable, says Plummer,

¹⁰ Morris, 237.

¹¹ Geldenhuys, 403.

¹² Ryle, II:179.

¹³ Plummer, 178.

is “the particular love of God for each individual soul.”¹⁴ “God so loved the world,” says the familiar verse (Jn 3:16). The “characteristic feature” of each parable, “says T. W. Manson, is “the divine love that goes out to seek the sinner before he repents.”¹⁵

Matthew’s version of the Parable of the Lost Sheep targets *straying disciples* who are to be pursued until *recovered*, whereas Luke’s version targets *unbelievers* who are to be pursued until *converted*. Luke’s parables in his 15th chapter have much more to say to us about one particular subject to which they give their primary attention: *the love of God for each lost soul*.¹⁶ All the various circumstances of these parables (the ratios of lost to found, laying the sheep across the shoulders, gathering of friends and neighbors, the diligent searching of the woman) “were simply intended to illustrate one great leading truth—the deep self-sacrificing love of Christ towards sinners, and the pleasure with which He saves them,” says J. C. Ryle.¹⁷ While each parable has its distinctive nuances, they all focus on this central point.

The Parable

What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? (Luke 15:4)

“What man?” Jesus asks. He can appeal to what was common practice among them. If I love one sheep, though only one of a hundred strays, what do I do? I search for the one until I find it.

¹⁴ Ibid, 368.

¹⁵ Cited in Geldenhuys, 404.

¹⁶ “These parables are fundamentally about God.” (Green, 573).

¹⁷ Ryle, II:179.

“Jesus tells the Pharisees and the scribes that they do the same thing that he is doing, they in the case of only a lost sheep, he in the case of a lost soul,” says Lenski.¹⁸

We will elaborate on the five ways that Jesus emphasizes the love of God for the lost.

First, *Jesus uses the metaphor of the sheep*. It is commonplace in Scripture to liken fallen humanity to sheep. “All we like sheep have gone astray,” said the prophet Isaiah (53:6). Because we are like sheep we need the Lord to be our Shepherd (Ps 23), even our “Good Shepherd” (Jn 10:1-18). It is not a flattering metaphor. Sheep are among the most defenseless, easily confused, and pitiful of all animals. If separated from the flock they cannot *fight*: they have no claws, no sharp teeth, no means of defense; they cannot *flee* (as might a deer): they are slow in relation to their predators; they cannot *find their way* home (as a dog might), lacking the instincts and sensory preceptors by which to navigate their way. If knocked over they are not even able to right themselves. As one commentator summarized regarding sheep, “It is destitute both of the instinct necessary to find its way, and of every weapon of self-defense. It is prey to any beast which may meet it.” Note that in the terms of the parable we are all sheep—defenseless, easily confused, pitiful.

Unbelievers are like *lost* sheep. Believers are sheep too, but at least they are safely within the fold. However, unbelievers are lost. They wander from one thing to the next, failing at each step to find themselves, to find meaning, to find purpose, to find home. They are short-sighted, unable to look beyond the immediate. They are vulnerable, wandering further and further from

¹⁸ Lenski, 795.

the fold, constantly exposed to dangers from which they cannot defend themselves, succumbing to the attacks upon their souls.

The point of the metaphor is one of simple compassion. How can one not look with pity upon such a helpless beast? In fact, we do look with pity on it, Jesus is saying, and that's why we would all do what is described in the parable. We would search. How then could we not look with compassion on lost souls? We wouldn't feel superior to them because we too are sheep with all the same characteristics. Our only distinction is that we're in the fold. One is reminded of God's question to Jonah when he was pouting over God's sparing Nineveh, while grieving the destruction of a plant, the shade of which he had enjoyed:

And the LORD said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"
(Jonah 4:10, 11)

How can we be filled only with contempt or indignation?, God is asking Jonah. Where is your pity? Where is your compassion? "Sinners," the unbelieving, the rebellious, are lost sheep. They are weak, foolish, short-sighted, vulnerable. I take as one of the first signs that the Holy Spirit is at work in a person's life that there is a burden for lost souls. We begin to look at the unbelieving, not with *indifference*, as though eternity were not at stake; not with *contempt*, as though we were their spiritual superiors, but with pity, with concern, with compassion that

translates into action. Go after them! Save them! Pursue them! Persist! God does. That is what God does with each of us. He sought us. He seeks to save us.

The second way that Jesus emphasizes God's love for the lost is that *Jesus employs a found/lost ratio of 99 to 1*. According to Jeremias, "A hundred sheep would be a herd of fairly normal size for a small farmer."¹⁹ The shepherd discovers that he has lost one of his sheep. So he "go (es) after the one which is lost." He does this though he suffers a relatively minor loss. He still has 99 that are safe. One penny out of a 100 or one dime out of \$10.00 is not much. Even the loss of \$1 million out of a total investment of \$100 million would be a minor, though significant loss. "The point is, not that he possesses so much, but that the loss in comparison to what remains is so small," explains Plummer.²⁰ He hasn't lost half of the herd. He has not even lost ten or fifteen sheep.

The point: just one lost sheep is significant. Jesus demonstrates that God values just one lost soul out of a hundred. This is the love of Christ for lost sinners. This is His outlook. Though His kingdom is 99% full, yet He does not cease to seek the few lost ones remaining. This teaches us about Jesus' love and concern for each one of us. "The safe possession of the ninety-nine is not substitute for the loss of one," says Morris.²¹ Similarly, Christ's disciples can never rest while there are lost ones around us. We are to so cherish one soul that we persist in pursuing its salvation until it is found. If surrounded by not ten, but 10,000 times 10,000 lost souls, how much greater must be our willingness to befriend, love, rescue, provide for the lost that they might be found? They go to school with us. They shop with us. They live next door to us. We

¹⁹ Cited in Marshall, 601.

²⁰ Plummer, 368.

²¹ Morris, 238.

can't be content with a church full of fellow believers. We are to "go after the one that is lost." Even one soul is of great value.

Third, *Jesus speaks of a persistent search by the shepherd/owner*. Matthew's version leaves the result of the search in doubt ("if it turns out that he finds it" [Mt18:13]). Here in Luke Jesus makes its success certain. He undertakes what Milne calls a "personal rescue mission."²² He searches "until he finds it." This would involve some hardship and danger. The 99 are left safely behind "in the open country." Yet he heads out into the wilderness, braving the heat and cold, dangerous cliffs and gorges for the sake of the lost one. The shepherd so values even one sheep that he searches persistently, unceasingly until he finds it. He refuses to quit. He refuses to give up. He considers "no trouble, sacrifice and suffering too great to find the lost sheep and bring it back," says Geldenhuys.²³ This is what the incarnation reveals; this is what the cross expresses; the seeking God, prompted by His great pity. It reveals His mercy on the lost. Do I feel distant from God, alienated? I must assign the blame elsewhere than with God. I've withdrawn. I've wandered off. Or I need to learn to interpret my experience differently. My sense of God's distance does not reflect reality. With God in Christ there is an eagerness to find the lost and a readiness to forgive. There is still an open heart, an open invitation, and open arms. There is persistent seeking, searching, inviting, welcoming.

Jesus is encouraging in us the same commitment to the search. Remember, He is instructing grumbling Pharisees. We are not merely to condescend to associate with the unbelieving, we are to actively pursue them. This means trouble, sacrifice, suffering. It means moving from

²² Milne, 239.

²³ Geldenhuys, 402

comfortable surroundings to uncomfortable. It means mixing with people who are socially unfamiliar. It means crossing borders and oceans. It means leaving safety behind and diligently pursuing the lost. Are we as engaged in reaching the lost as we should be; as Jesus indicates we ought to be according to this parable?

Fourth, Jesus speaks of a *joyful response on the part of the searcher*.

“and when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.” (Lk 15:5).

Marshall points out that carrying the sheep “represents normal rural practice.”²⁴ We mustn’t read too much into it. Still, as Marshall himself explains, “the action illustrates the care of the shepherd.”²⁵ “The owner does not drive it back, or lead it back, or have it carried: he carries it himself,” Plummer points out.²⁶ He carries the sheep “rejoicing.” The tired shepherd is so overjoyed that he forgets his weary limbs and happily carries the beast home. This sheep, even one of a hundred, is no mere possession. He is emotionally invested in its well-being. It is an object of his love. He has great affection for it. So he gathers his friends:

And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ (Luke 15:6)

²⁴ Marshall, 601

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Plummer, 368.

“It is a mark of great joy that it seeks sympathy,” says Plummer.²⁷ One who rejoices seeks others to share in that joy. Are we as emotionally invested, as wholeheartedly committed to the plight of the unbelieving as Jesus indicates we ought to be? We’re emotionally invested in any number of temporal matters, even trivial temporal matters. Are we thrilled over the salvation of a single lost sheep?

Fifth, *Jesus speaks of a joyful response in heaven*. Verse 7 gives us the main point of the parable:

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)

If we are not rejoicing with heaven over the saving of the lost, we are out of touch with reality. Heaven is neither unaware nor indifferent when a sinner repents. It rejoices. Heaven celebrates. I remember as a boy my surprise and pleasure when important people like my parents and their friends cheered me when I accomplished something noteworthy in athletics or the classroom. Imagine a whole state or a nation or allied nations celebrating something we have done. This heavenly celebration exceeds any earthly response. This is the ultimate audience. God and His angels are rejoicing (vs 10). If we want to please God and receive the applause of the angels, then repent and turn to Christ. Already done so? Then lead others to do the same. Why? Because this is a victory over which He delights. The rescue of even one soul sets heaven rejoicing!²⁸

²⁷ Ibid, 369.

²⁸ “Nothing could signal more clearly and movingly how important to God and to citizens of heaven, is the recovery of fallen men and women” (Milne, 239).

The commentators are not sure whether verse 7 is intended in an ironic sense (as “people who *think* they are righteous and have no need to repent”) or straightforward (God is pleased with the righteous but more celebrative at the repentance of the unrighteous). The latter sense fits the parable better. The ninety-nine are safely in the fold. Lenski offers a helpful analogy from Luther:

Luther understands this rightly when he speaks of the great and sudden joy of a mother, to find her sick child restored, a joy that is greater than for all her other children who are sound and well.²⁹

Whereas the Rabbis had spoken of God’s joy over the *downfall* of the godless, Jesus speaks of God’s joy at the *salvation* of the godless. Notice the certainty with which Jesus speaks about heaven. He is able to speak emphatically and with certainty about what goes on in heaven. He knows. There is a special joy at the repentance of a lost sinner. For us to feel the same it will be necessary for us to be emotionally invested in the plight. Great joy is a product of great concern. It means we care. It means we are concerned.

Jesus mingled with the “sinners,” and while doing so managed neither to condone the sin nor be contaminated by it. His ministry served not a social purpose *per se*, but a redemptive one. His example is not a justification for believers to favor the company of the unbelieving over that of God’s people. Jesus taught the “sinners.” They came to “hear” Him. He, in turn, regards them as lost, needing to be led back to the Shepherd, needing to repent, that they might be saved.

²⁹ Lenski, 803.