

Parables of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin
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The Parable of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin, unique to Luke's gospel, in dramatic and unforgettable fashion, shows Jesus concerns for the spiritually lost and social outcasts. They are referred to some as "Parables of Joy,"¹ and by others as Parables of the Outcast."² I prefer "Parables of the Lost." With the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which follows immediately, they are a beautiful three-fold expression of God's love for the lost: lost sheep, lost coin and lost son.

The Parables of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin from Luke 15: 1-10

Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. 2 Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

3 So He told them this parable, saying, 4 "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? 5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 6 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 which was lost!' 7 I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

8 "Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!' 10 In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."³

¹ *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, Frank Gaeblein, general editor.

² *Sayings of Jesus*, T.W. Manson, (London, SCM Press, 1954), p. 282.

³ All scripture references are to the New American Standard Updated version unless otherwise noted.

The message of these two parables is the same:

Jesus is concerned for the lost ones of this world, and were it not for His graciousness in seeking and saving us, we would be still lost in trespasses and sins, even at this hour. But thanks be to God, Jesus has a heart for the lost, even the very lone outcast. His concern burns just and brightly and intensely for the one as for the ninety and nine. The return of such lost ones to the Lord should be an occasion of great joy to all involved, lost sinner and faithful Lord, and all others who see the transformational miracle in progress.

The foundation for both parables is in verses one and two of chapter 15.

The tax collectors. These were among a class of ostracized Jews, collaborators, if you will, of which class the apostle Matthew belonged. Roman taxation during this time was oppressive and burdensome, the burden of which was enough for whole provinces of the empire to throw off the yoke. Had it not been for the iron-fisted approach of the Roman governors with their powerful Roman legions, the entire system would have been sacked by the people.



Jesus' tax collector friends included the disciple Matthew

Local people were hired by the Romans to collect taxes from their own people. In effect they were offered a franchise to collect from a certain district. In return they could keep part of the proceeds. For Israel, this was tantamount to collaboration. What made matters worse was unethical tax collectors who charged more than they should have to increase their profit margins. For the vast majority of Jews, to fellowship with a tax collector, or eat with such a person was absolutely unthinkable.

The sinners. The tax collectors are categorized with “sinners,”⁴ a group which in many other groupings in the New Testament included prostitutes. In Jesus' day it was anathema to speak with such a person, but to actually dine with such a person would indicate complete acceptance of their person and practices. Good Pharisees would never consider any kind of fellowship with “sinners,” and especially the traitorous tax collectors. It would not have entered their consciousness that such people should be sought after, and certainly not loved or rejoiced over. If any should happen to repent they would likely not be welcomed but rather only tolerated with a civil leer and cold indifference.

A great contrast. Jesus attitude toward the tax collectors and sinners was in marked contrast with the Pharisees and Scribes, the religious teachers and authorities of the day. Instead of ostracizing them, Jesus chose to welcome them and even to eat with them. The contrast could not have been more stark or troubling to the Scribes and Pharisees.

Observations on the parables:

A flock of 100 sheep

⁴ The NIV uses quotation marks for “sinners” to indicate that that was the common view of tax collectors and not Luke's view.

Jesus begins with “What man among you . . .” The NIV renders this “Suppose one of you . . .” It applies with equal force to men and women.

One hundred sheep would be a common size for a sheepfold of the day. One shepherd and perhaps an assistant could manage this many sheep easily. However, it would not be wise, under most circumstances to leave the flock unprotected, night or day.

The knowledge of the common people about sheep and shepherding is drawn upon by our Lord to make a point. Shepherds regularly and carefully counted their sheep, at least once per day in the evening. If the shepherd realized that one of the hundred was lost he may well leave the 99, hopefully with an attendant, but if necessary, without a shepherd at all and go in search for the lost sheep. This even applies to leaving sheep in the open country where such animals could easily become confused and scattered. Nonetheless, the people would understand that the 99 must be left without shepherding, even in view of the attendant risks, in order to facilitate a search for the one lost sheep. They would further understand that the lost sheep might be wounded or injured. Consequently the animal would have to be carried back to the fold. The lost sheep therefore has, for the moment, great priority with that shepherd. Jesus uses this knowledge to show God’s tender concern for lost people.

Two lessons from the Parable of the Lost Sheep.

First we learn of God’s concern for the lost and wayward. Whether once a man or woman was serving the Lord and now is rebellious, or whether he or she had never become a believer, serving the Lord, they are lost. The Good Shepherd seeks His sheep as a matter of priority.

In the parable, the shepherd knows the 99 sheep left in the open pasture well enough that his direct attention to them can be deferred for a few hours while he searches for the lost one. This gives us a picture of God’s priority in seeking the lost. Fortunately, the Good Shepherd Jesus does not have to neglect His found sheep to seek the lost. Though God aggressively pursues those lost, He never neglects the 99.



The 99 “righteous persons” does not mean that they were sinless. Rather, a righteous person is one who is in right-standing with God, having been purified from his sins by the blood of the Lamb, not living in open rebellion against Him. He or she is a devout, honorable saint, one who is not living openly in rebellion or secretly in sin.

We can rejoice greatly that we have Jesus as our Great Shepherd who will not allow us to become separated from the flock and devoured. We may wander away for a season, but He will not let us get hopelessly lost. If we are truly His sheep, we can count on it; Jesus will institute a rescue mission should we wander away.

Of course, it is very important to know that we are indeed His sheep. Consider these verses for a moment which reveal to us first, if we are His then He will never let us become hopelessly lost, and second, failure to believe (acknowledging Jesus as Savior and Lord) means that such a person is not one of Jesus' sheep.

1 Peter 2:24-25

. . . and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.

John 10:26-29

But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.

The lost sheep has great priority with the Lord Jesus. Our Lord does not look at His flock and see a white woolly mass—He sees individual sheep. He is ever seeing individuals where we are prone only to see groups. For example, in Luke 19:3-5 He was passing through Jericho. A large crowd was surrounding him. Zaccheus, a very short individual, wanted to get a closer look and climbed up into a sycamore tree so he could see. Passing under the tree, Jesus looked up and seeking Zaccheus said, “Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house.” Interestingly, Zaccheus was a chief tax collector, just the kind of individual the Pharisees loved to hate. But Jesus did not see a traitor, but a lost sheep. His eye was not on the size of the crowd, but on the individual. In the midst of a pressing mob He once said, “Who touched me?”⁵

Pastors and church leaders today must take care not to be overwhelmed with the crowd, even in a large church, and fail to see the needs of individuals. If the church has become large and inattentive to individual needs, more leaders must be trained to absorb the increased workload.

The lost sheep in this parable could have been injured and unable to keep up with the moving flock, or perhaps it was willful and wandered off entirely of its own accord. No matter, the Good Shepherd is searching for the lost sheep.

When the shepherd finds that one lost sheep he lays it on his shoulders and carries it home. The sheep is not beaten or driven home like a wayward ox. In the same way, Jesus is nurturing toward the wayward one. He is not left to die, he is rescued.



Second, we see the joy in heaven over a repentant sinner. “I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

⁵ See also The Parable of the Lost Sheep on www.bcbsr.com (Boston Christian Bible Study Resource).

Who in heaven is joyful? The implication of the verse is that God and all His angels are rejoicing. Indeed the assumption is confirmed as we read the next parable, The Lost Coin, which tells us, “In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

The Parable of the Lost Coin.

These two parables are obviously linked. They have similar language and identical messages. Only the metaphor changes from sheep to coins.

The coins.



The woman swept her house, searching for the lost coin

Here the coins mentioned are Greek *drachmas*, equal to a Roman *denarius*, with a value equivalent to one day’s wage. The coins may have been all she had, her total net worth. It is conceivable that she wore them in her head dress.⁶ Upon losing one coin she lights a lamp (because the house was too dark to discern a lost coin, even in the day) and begins sweeping the house. On the hard earthen floor she may have heard the clink of the coin as the broom pushed it into the corner.

Consider, for a moment, the joy of this woman. How would you feel, if after losing a bank book which documented your claim to fully 10 percent of your net worth you were able to locate the lost bank book? Your joy, not to mention your relief, would be immense. You, like the woman, would celebrate finding that which was lost.

With these two parables Jesus reaches the hardened men among the Jews who are not the religious experts, He appeals to the women who could certainly identify with one of their own who had lost a coin and He again brings a convicting word to the Scribes and Pharisees. All well and good. But the Lord also brings hope for anyone who is lost, estranged from the Father heart of God. God is looking for those who are lost.

“For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45.) “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.” (Luke 19:10).

⁶ Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, pg. 134 and Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, pg. 603.