

Luke 15: Parables of the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, and Running Father

Overview

The three parables of Luke 15 describe the same thing in different ways—the recovery of the lost. In them we see Jesus Christ drawing publicans and sinners to himself and rebuking the Pharisees and scribes. Parables are like a double-edged sword, blinding and condemning those who refuse to hear, but teaching, exhorting, strengthening and ultimately gladdening those who hear in faith (Is. 6:9-10 cf. Mt. 13:10-15). The power of this story speaks for itself as you can hardly find anyone today who doesn't know what it means despite if they ever read it for themselves. The original audience was made up of two groups, one that came to hear and one that came to grumble (vv. 1-2). It would be fair to say that Jesus tells these stories not so much *to* these people, as *about* them.

Lost Sheep

Jesus responds to the murmuring of the scribes and Pharisees by asking them about their own possessions. The parable is a question that puts them in the place of the shepherd (v. 4). Of course this immediately makes the point that just as the sheep are the shepherds, so do the tax collectors and sinner belong to Jesus. The shepherd who loses his sheep leaves the 99, and goes and to find it. He doesn't say 'it's only 1%' or 'at least is wasn't a pregnant sheep.' He goes after the lost until he finds it, and when he finds it, he doesn't give it a swift kick for wandering off, but hoists it onto his shoulders and carries it back (v. 5). The recovery of the sheep brings the shepherd great joy, and he invites his friends and neighbors to share in his joy. Jesus compares this joy to the joy that erupts in heaven when one sinner repents, a greater joy than when ninety nine righteous men need no repentance (v. 7).

Lost Coin

The second parable is also framed as a rhetorical question directed at the scribes and Pharisees though the comparison is to a woman. Jesus asks if a woman lost one of her ten pieces of silver, wouldn't she light a candle, sweep the house and search until she found it (v. 8)? The implied 'yes' is left unstated. Like the recovered sheep, the result of finding the coin is joy that cannot be contained. The woman calls her friends and neighbors to rejoice with her (v. 9). So there is joy in the presence of the angels when one sinner repents.

Lost Son

The first two parables lead up to what might be the most memorable story Jesus ever told. It's the story of Gospel told in a parable describing with vivid accuracy the state of man and his restoration to his loving Father. A man had two sons, the younger of whom asked his father for his inheritance. Though it wasn't custom to give an inheritance until the parents' death, the father complies with this request, and it isn't many days until the son travels to a far country where he squanders all of his money on parties and hookers (vv. 13, 30). When a great famine arose, he could do nothing else but attach himself to a citizen of that land and put up with the defiling work of feeding pigs. His desperation is so great that the swine food looks like a feast, but no one would give him even that (v. 16). These circumstances bring him to his senses, and he remembers seeing many of his father's servants well treated with food to spare. He could return to his father, confess his folly and take up as a servant. While on his way home but still a great way off, his father sees him, falls on his neck and kisses him even before the son has a chance to confess (v. 20). He then confesses first that he sinned against heaven, and then against his father and now is no longer worthy to be a son. The father answers by telling his servants to bring the best robe, a ring, and shoes, tokens of royalty in sharp contrast to the deserved servitude. The father orders the fatted calf to be killed and everyone to join in the party; the dead has come back to life, the lost, found (vv. 23-4). From off in the field the elder son hears the music and dancing which causes him to ask the reason for all the commotion. When he finds out that his brother has returned and his father is celebrating, such a fierce yet petty anger makes him stay in the fields (v. 28). And so the father makes another trip out to welcome home one of his sons. But the invitation meets an accusation.

‘For many years,’ he says, ‘did I serve you without disobedience, and yet never did you give me a kid to make merry with my friends: but as soon as your son is back, who has devoured your living with whores, you kill the fatted calf for him.’ The father responds first by correcting his warped view of his own situation, and then his warped view of his younger brother’s. He tells his son that he is always with him, and therefore everything that he has is given to the son. And also that it was good and right to rejoice at his younger brother’s return. The sins don’t even deserve refuting. He who was dead is alive, and the lost is found (v. 32).

Applications

- 1) In these three parables we learn that there are many different kinds of lost people.
 - i. Like the Psalmist and the one that left the 99, we are prone to wander. The first thing you know about sheep is that they stupidly wander off. How easily do we forget where we belong!
 - ii. Some of us never leave for any number of reasons: shame, tradition, comfort etc. But that doesn’t stop us from falling off the table, rolling into the corner, slipping through cracks. How many Christians come church week after week and never commune with the Lord?
 - iii. Whereas sheep are ignorant and cowardly, prodigals are willful and driven. It’s obvious to go for parties and girls, but we do as much for money, reputation, etc. Gold, glory and girls. All end up in the same pig’s trough.
 - iv. Last, we have the elder brother. Notice that like the scribes and Pharisees, this elder brother is a command-keeping man. Like all good religious hypocrites who draw near to the Father with their mouths, his heart is far away. His first concern is himself. How have you treated *me*. When do *I* get *my* party. *I* never disobeyed. God wants mercy, not sacrifice (cf. Micah 6:7-8). Like the scribes and Pharisees, the fundamental problem of the elder son is his impression of his father. Because he thought the father was selfish and niggling, he spares himself of having to change his ways. But everything in his father’s house is his.
- 2) We also see the character of God.
 - i. He seeks the wandering and finds the lost.
 - ii. He sees the repentant before they see Him. He decks us with robes, kills the fatted calf, and calls all of His friends to rejoice together with Him.

Jerry Owen – Aug 8, 2004