

Parables of Luke 15

The Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, and Lost Son

***“I say unto you,
there is joy in the
presence of the
angels of God over
one sinner that
repenteth.”***

—Luke 15:10

THE THREE PARABLES

found in Luke chapter 15 are not recorded in any of the other gospel accounts. This, however, in no way diminishes their importance to us. They were addressed particularly to the scribes and the Pharisees, but within the hearing of “the publicans and sinners” who “drew near . . . to hear” Jesus.—vss. 1-3

As they had done on previous occasions, the scribes and Pharisees murmured because Jesus associated himself with sinners, even eating with them. It was the attitude of vaunted self-righteousness of these Jewish religious leaders, and their resentment of the fact that Jesus showed interest in the publicans and sinners, which gave rise to the three parables of our lesson. Of equal importance is that Jesus also taught, by these parables, that upon the basis of true repentance, sinners could attain the favor of his Heavenly Father.

THE LOST SHEEP

In the parable of the lost sheep, we are told of a shepherd who had a hundred sheep, ninety-nine of which were safely in the fold. However, one had gone astray and was lost. The parable shows that the shepherd under such circumstances would leave the ninety-nine, “and go after that which is lost, until he find it.”—vs. 4

As a rebuke to the attitude of the scribes and Pharisees, the application of this lesson is evident. These religious leaders of Israel considered themselves to be in harmony with God and therefore safe within the “sheepfold” of divine care. To them the publicans and sinners were outside the realm of God’s blessings, and were “lost.” Yet, they were doing little or nothing to find and rescue them, and murmured against Jesus when he showed an interest in them.

On another occasion, and for the same reason, the scribes and Pharisees questioned the propriety of Jesus’ eating with publicans and sinners. The account says, “When Jesus heard it, he saith unto them, They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” (Mark 2:17) The sinners being called to repentance in this lesson would correspond to the lost sheep of the parable.

Actually, the scribes and the Pharisees were as much “lost” as were the publicans and sinners. Outwardly they made professions of holiness, but inwardly they were “full of dead men’s bones,” and were hypocritical in most of their professions. (Matt. 23:16-33) However, the lesson of the parable

was based upon the professions of this hypocritical class, not what they actually were. They claimed to be the shepherds of Israel, but showed little concern for those who had gone astray, and they resented it when Jesus displayed interest in these “lost” sheep.

The parable clearly sets forth the divine attitude toward those who are lost in sin and condemned to death. That attitude is one of sympathy and love which is reflected in that most precious text, “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16) This love was demonstrated toward us “while we were yet sinners.” (Rom. 5:8) Paul wrote that “Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”—I Tim. 1:15

Since this is the loving attitude of our Heavenly Father and of Jesus toward those not yet within the special fold of divine care, it should be ours also. We should shun the attitude of the scribes and Pharisees, and make ourselves available to assist the “lost” and needy ones in the world around us. This does not mean that we are to lose interest in our brethren who are safely within the fold in order to seek and help the lost. Rather, our love should be extended beyond those who love us and with whom we are closely associated.—Matt. 5:46-48

In applying this general lesson of the parable, we do not need to make a specific application of the proportion of those in the fold to the lost sheep, which is ninety-nine to one. The reverse of this has been more nearly true, for the vast majority of mankind in all ages have not been among those safe in the fold of special divine care. Even within

the nation of Israel at the time of our Lord, the publicans and sinners doubtless outnumbered those who made serious professions of endeavoring to be pleasing to God.

The ratio of the professed righteous to the sinners, however, could have been the Master's way of driving this lesson home with greater force. The thought would be that even if it were true that there was only one lost sheep, those who really loved the Lord and desired to be guided by his spirit of love could not be content until that sheep was found and brought back to the fold. This is the principle which should guide all of the Lord's people.

There is also a possible further meaning of the parable, based on the fact that in many respects the nation of Israel was typical of all mankind. We might think of the lost sheep as representing God's entire human creation, while the ninety-nine sheep which did not go astray could represent the many orders of creation which remained in harmony with God. Among these are the holy angels, "principalities and powers," "thrones," and "dominions."—Eph. 3:10; Col. 1:16

In this view, Jesus would be the "good shepherd," the representative of the Heavenly Father, the even greater shepherd. (John 10:11; Ps. 23:1) The work of recovering the lost sheep began at our Lord's First Advent. Here Jesus left the "ninety and nine"—the various orders of heavenly hosts—and came to earth "to seek and to save" the lost sheep. (Luke 19:10) This required that he be made flesh, and that he give his flesh, his humanity, in sacrifice for the sins of the world. (Heb. 2:9,14; John 1:14; 6:51) This phase of Jesus' rescue mission has already been

accomplished. The lost sheep—the fallen Adamic race—has been “found,” so to speak, but is not yet restored to the fold of the Creator’s favor and care.

When created perfect, man not only had the opportunity to live forever in what would have become a worldwide paradise, but he was also given dominion over all of God’s lower earthly creatures. (Gen. 1:27,28) The return of the lost sheep to the fold implies the restoration of this dominion which was lost because of sin. Paul wrote, “We see not yet all things put under” man, “but we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man.” (Heb. 2:8,9) In other words, the rescue work has begun, and eventually—at the end of the Messianic kingdom—the lost sheep will have been returned to the fold.

This work of rescuing the sin-cursed and dying race from death is made possible by the death of Jesus as man’s Redeemer. Paul wrote that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, . . . and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.” Because of this, “we are ambassadors for Christ.” (II Cor. 5:19,20) The followers of Jesus are associated with him in the work of reconciling the world to God. During the Gospel Age these are being prepared to be “kings and priests unto God” to assist in bringing back the lost sheep during the age to come.—Rev. 1:6

The parable states that when the shepherd returned home after rescuing the sheep, “he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost.”

To this, Jesus added, “I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.”—Luke 15:6,7

The fact that Jesus speaks of the joy in heaven that results from the shepherd’s return with the announcement that the lost sheep has been recovered, lends weight to the thought that there is a proper larger application of the parable to the entire human race as the lost sheep, and to the ninety and nine as representing the heavenly hosts. Certainly there will be joy among all God’s intelligent creatures on every plane of existence when sinful man has been reconciled to the Creator and restored to the fold of his loving favor and care.

In this we are also reminded that all who are filled and guided by God’s Holy Spirit are of necessity pained to realize that there are those who are alienated from him through sin and its effects. We can also be sure that even now, whenever a member of the Adamic race is led to repentance through the “word of reconciliation,” and surrenders himself fully to do God’s will, there is rejoicing in heaven. Indeed, there should also be gladness among all of the Lord’s people here on earth on such occasions.

THE LOST COIN

The parable of the lost coin is similar in import to that of the lost sheep. Indeed, by comparing the introduction to each it becomes evident that Jesus intended one to supplement the other. (Luke 15:4,8) It was customary among Jewish women at that time to wear on the forehead a fringe of coin bangles.

These might be of gold or silver, and sometimes represented her dowry. Therefore, the loss of one of these coins would be of greater significance than merely what was represented by its intrinsic value.

The search for the coin would mean that, instead of being abandoned as something of little consequence, it was considered of great importance. The neighbors, learning first of the loss, and then of the recovery, rejoiced greatly with the woman who suffered the loss. Jesus points out, as he concludes the parable, that it is another illustration of the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.—Luke 15:8,9

In addition to the larger application of this parable to the recovery of the human race from sin and death, it further impresses the principle of interest in, and consideration for, those who are in need of help. Even one human life is of great value to our Heavenly Father, and should likewise be to us. It is important that we manifest this interest in others in our daily lives.

In this regard, we should examine ourselves and pose certain questions as to our daily dealings with mankind. How do we manifest God's spirit of love toward our fellowmen? What are we doing from day to day that substantiates our professed interest in humanity in general? How are we showing our concern for neighbors, coworkers, friends, and family? How much are we doing to help others who are sincerely trying to find their way back to God? How much are we sacrificing of time and energy in seeking to find those who may be a "lost sheep" or "lost coin?"

We know, of course, that this is not the time in God's plan for the recovery of humanity as a whole from sin and death. However, if we are to be

associated with Jesus in that great future rescue work, it is essential that we demonstrate our enthusiasm now by the spirit of love which will be the basis of that great kingdom work. This we can do only by diligently, and at whatever cost may be involved, doing all we can to bless those all about us. We should be happy to provide any and all who may have a hearing ear the knowledge of God and his loving provision to restore all who are lost back to the fold of his gracious care through the Good Shepherd.

THE PRODIGAL SON

The third parable of Jesus recorded in Luke chapter 15 is an interesting story, and one which might well have been true in the experience of many throughout the centuries. A certain man, apparently of means, had two sons who, in the ordinary course of events, would inherit their father's estate. The younger of these two sons said to his father, "Give me the portion of goods that falleth to me." The father granted the son's request, and a short time later "the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living."—vss. 12,13

Not surprisingly, as the parable continues, difficulties then came to pass. "There arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine." (vss. 14,15) However, this was far from satisfactory. "He would have been glad to eat what the pigs were eating, but no one gave him a thing."—vs. 16, *Contemporary English Version* (Continued on page 36)

(Continued from page 31) In this degrading situation of dire need this younger son finally “came to himself,” in that he realized he had acted very foolishly, and became repentant. He reflected upon the contrasting situation at home, where even his father’s hired servants had plenty to eat. (Luke 15:17) He was now so humbled that he decided he would be glad to return to his father as merely a servant, not feeling worthy to be called a son any longer.

Thus, with this repentant attitude, the younger son said, “I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.” He carried out this purpose, and upon arriving home offered himself to his father as a servant.—vss. 18-21

Then comes the important lesson of the parable. The father forgave his son, and received him back into his family. Indeed, a feast was arranged to celebrate the occasion of the prodigal son’s return, including the killing of a “fatted calf.” (vs. 23) The feast and its accompanying merrymaking were in progress when the elder son came in from the field. However, when he learned what had happened, he was not at all pleased.

The elder son refused to take part in the celebration. He complained to his father that although he had served him faithfully throughout the years that his brother had been wasting his life, no celebration had ever been arranged for him. For him no “fatted calf” had ever been killed and no opportunity given to make merry with his friends.—vss. 28-30

This parable plainly illustrates the sin of jealousy in connection with a matter of no less importance

than life itself. Unlike the elder son, who was jealous of the favor which returned to his younger brother, the father looked upon the homecoming of his wayward son as though he had received him back from the dead. (vs. 24) His sin had not destroyed the father's love for him. In fact, the father seemed to have even greater love for him than before he went astray.

It is important to note that the prodigal son had repented of his wrongdoing, and had returned humbly to his father, not even asking to be reinstated as a son, but merely that he might become one of the servants. Here we have illustrated an important principle in God's dealings with all his intelligent creatures, whether angels or men, Jews or Gentiles, Pharisees or publicans. The humble realization of one's mistakes and true heart repentance are essential in order to receive God's forgiveness.

God's love for the sin-cursed and Satan-blinded human race motivated him to send his beloved Son to be man's Redeemer and Savior. Thus he made provision for the reconciliation of mankind. As individuals, however, no one receives any lasting benefit from this except upon the basis of repentance and humble dedication to do the Father's will. This fact points out to us that there are two aspects of a sinner's return to God. There is God's part in providing the atoning blood, and there is the sinner's part of repentance and consecration.

As for the scribes and Pharisees to whom the parable was addressed, they were very much like the elder son, who thought that he was entitled to special consideration because of his superior conduct. Nothing is said in the parable to indicate that the

elder son had been hypocritically righteous, although Jesus had charged the scribes and Pharisees on other occasions with hypocrisy. Evidently the Master wanted us to know that even those who sincerely serve God, and to the best of their ability endeavor to be righteous, have no right to be jealous when sinners repent and are accepted with rejoicing into the favor of the Lord.

On the other hand, the lesson might also be that no matter how outwardly righteous one might appear, to take the attitude of the elder brother in the parable would itself indicate an impure heart condition. It would surely reveal a lack of true godlikeness. Our Heavenly Father stands ready to embrace all who return to him in humility and true repentance. This is illustrated in the brief parable Jesus gave on another occasion of the Pharisee and publican who went up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee thanked God that he was not like other debased men, especially the publican. The publican, however, smote upon his breast, and asked God to be merciful to him, a sinner. He went away justified, but the Pharisee did not.—Luke 18:10-14

Jesus said to the scribes and Pharisees, “Ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in.” “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.”—Matt. 23:13,23

From these denunciations it is obvious that the scribes and Pharisees had little or no compassion

for those whom they considered at variance with their own standards of holiness. Justice and mercy, based on true faith in the divine arrangements of love, had little place in their viewpoints and attitudes.

In the parable of the prodigal son, the father spoke of having received him back from the dead. (Luke 15:24) To him it was as though the young man had really been dead. Certainly we can understand the heart rejoicing and sympathetic understanding of this loving father when he saw his son “when he was yet a great way off,” walking toward him.—vs. 20

Sadly, the father’s sentiments are not shared by many, even today. Most are not willing to believe that sinners who have gone into death will be restored to life, or can possibly receive any consideration from the Heavenly Father. How thankful we are to have learned that the love of God is broader than the measure of many human minds which have been distorted by erroneous views concerning him.

The important lesson of the parable to us is that we are to maintain a sympathetic and loving attitude toward mankind. We should also rejoice at any evidence of repentance and endeavors by fallen man to walk in the ways of the Lord more uprightly. Our attitude toward those who repent of their wrongdoing should be based upon what they are today, rather than on their erroneous conduct of yesterday. Only thus we will be like our loving and merciful Heavenly Father. ■