

LUKE 15

LOST SHEEP, LOST COIN, LOST SON!

The precious and matchless parable of the prodigal son seems to naturally belong within the pages of Luke's Gospel! Its literary charm, its tender beauty, its deep human interest, its wideness of sympathy, and its perfect picture of the grace and love of God are all in perfect harmony with the purpose and genius of this Gospel. The parable is linked with two others: the parables of the lost sheep and of the lost coin. The occasion of all three parables was the censure passed by the Pharisees upon Jesus because of His association with social outcasts and His cordial welcome to repentant sinners. "This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them," they murmured – or, in the sense of the word in the original language, they "kept angrily muttering to each other." But Jesus rebuked His enemies by showing that it is natural to rejoice in the recovery of a lost sheep or a lost coin or a lost child; and much more, then, must God rejoice in the recovery of a lost soul! Evidently, those who fail to share in His joy must be out of sympathy and fellowship with Him.

The first parable, concerning the lost sheep, reveals the love of the Lord by showing His compassion for the distress and helplessness of the sinner. The second parable, which speaks of the woman's lost coin, shows how precious a lost soul is in the sight of this loving God. Both of them depict His longing and patient effort for the recovery of the sinner, and His abounding joy in the restoration of the lost.

We must make it clear, though, that the statement that "there shall be joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine righteous persons, who need no repentance" is not to be interpreted too literally. It does not mean that God finds more satisfaction in a repentant sinner than in a supposedly sinless saint. Here Jesus was definitely referring to the penitent publicans and the self-righteous Pharisees. God did not take delight in the sins of the former; but neither did He regard the state of the latter as perfect, even taking the Pharisees at their best and regarding them as being faithful to His laws. Whether or not its motive is right, morality is always better than reckless lawlessness and impurity. However, what Jesus meant to teach us here is that a repentant sinner who understands the grace and mercy of God is always more pleasing to Him than a proud, critical, and unloving Pharisee – no matter how correct he may be in his moral behavior.

This truth is made even more clear in the parable of the prodigal son. Here we have a perfect description of the experience of the repentant sinner, as well

Outline of the chapter:

- ❖ *The parable of the lost sheep – verses 1-7*
- ❖ *The parable of the lost piece of silver – verses 8-10*
- ❖ *The parable of the prodigal son – verses 11-32*

as of the unsympathetic attitude of the disdainful Pharisee. The first is represented in the parable by the prodigal son, and the second is pictured by the conduct of his elder brother. In describing the waywardness of this younger son, Jesus gave a complete picture of the character and consequences of sin. Some have thought that the parable of the lost sheep indicates that sin is sometimes partially due to ignorance and folly, and that the parable of the lost coin shows that it may sometimes be occasioned by misfortune or accident. The parable of the prodigal son, however, shows that it is usually due to willful choice, and to a desire for indulgence. Its results are sketched in appalling colors. Here we are shown all of its disillusion, suffering, slavery, and despair. As a picture of the inevitable consequences of sin, no better illustration could be sketched than that which is found in these verses. The scene shows the prodigal in a faraway country; he had squandered away all his inheritance; a terrible famine had arisen; he had sold himself as a slave to feed pigs, and he was not even able to satisfy his hunger by sharing the disgusting meal that he was providing for these unclean beasts.

But on the other hand, neither can we find a more beautiful picture of repentance than that which was here drawn by our Master Himself. He described the prodigal as “he came to himself” – showing us that his sin had not been mere folly, nor had it been an unfortunate mistake; it had been sheer madness! As he sat in the muck of the pigsties, slopping the creatures around him with the worthless husks that filled their hungry bellies but not his own, the poor boy remembered a former time of joy and plenty in his childhood home. He realized his present desperate need, and he resolved to arise and go back home to his father. Most of all, however, he saw that his offense had not been merely against a loving earthly parent; for it had also been a crime of rebellion against God, and so he was totally undeserving of fellowship with his father. Here we are taught that true repentance is not only a sorrow for sin; it is also an acknowledgment that the offense has been committed against the holy God. It is a change of heart toward Him; and it is a resolution for a new life, which manifests itself in definite action: “he arose, and came to his father.”

Strictly speaking, that is the end of the parable of the prodigal son – for the most beautiful part immediately follows! It is a description of the matchless love that is shown by God to every repentant soul. The father had never ceased to love the prodigal, or to hope and long for his return! He had been eagerly looking for his wayward child. The first sight of his returning son filled his heart with compassion, and he “ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him!” The prodigal was ready to confess his fault; but the father scarcely heard his words as he commanded the servants to “bring forth quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: and bring the fatted calf, and



kill it, and let us eat, and make merry!” Here is a picture – not only of pardon, but also of complete restoration. It assures the sinner that as soon as he or she returns to their heavenly Father, they will be received into the closest fellowship of a child and heir. Moreover, their return will give joy to the heart of God, Who will regard them as one who “was dead, and is alive again,” and as one who “was lost, and is found.”

The picture of the elder son in this parable is also exquisitely sketched. It was unquestionably intended to describe the loveless Pharisees of Jesus’ day, who envied the joy of the repentant publicans and sinners. But it does more than that; for it also brings a message to all persons in every age, to whom religion is nothing more than a matter of unwilling obedience and lifeless faithfulness to the laws of God. It depicts souls who are out of fellowship with God; for they feel no real joy in His service, and they share none of His gladness in the salvation of lost souls.

The elder brother knew nothing of the experience of a true son. He acted and spoke as if he were merely a slave in his father’s household. When his brother returned, the elder son was not with his father; he was out “in the field.” But when he learned that his brother had been welcomed back into the home, he was filled with anger. He refused to even enter the house; and when his father came out to entreat him, he accused him of partiality and unkindness. His words admirably described the self-righteousness of the Pharisees of the times: “I never

transgressed a commandment of thine!” They also show how little he appreciated his true privileges as a son: “thou never gavest me a kid.” But the reply of his father hints at the possibilities which he had never appreciated, and the privileges which he had never enjoyed: “Son, thou art ever with me, and all that is mine is thine!” In the Pharisees’ case, it had always been possible for them to enjoy the grace, mercy, and love of God; but to them, religion had become nothing more than a burdensome round of rituals and duties. It had given no true satisfaction or gladness to their hearts. Something of their experience is paralleled even by some Christians of the present day. They fail to appreciate the gracious pardon of God and His willingness to supply every spiritual need, they forget the possibility of living in daily communion and fellowship with Him, and they know nothing of His joys in the salvation and repentance of lost souls. In their own strength, they are wearily and joylessly seeking to do the things that they believe to be right. They want to obey the commands of God, which is very right and commendable. But sadly, their lives are like those of slaves; and not like the free, joyous, and loving experience of true sons and daughters.

Possibly the most artistic touch in this particular parable is its abrupt closing. We do not know whether or not the elder son yielded to the entreaty of his father. This was an appeal to the Pharisees of Jesus’ day. Would they accept the grace of God, and help promote His plans for the salvation of the lost; or would they continue to criticize and envy the repentant sinner? And the appeal is still open to us also, if we are already a child of the heavenly Father: shall we live as drudging slaves, or shall we live like His loving sons and daughters?

Lord, we bow before You as our gracious and loving Father in a spirit of humility and repentance, and confess to You that we have sinned against heaven, and in Your sight, and are no more worthy to be called Your child. But we also thank You for the assurance that You will mercifully receive us home again, and clothe us in the best robe of Christ’s righteousness! We pray for grace that we may accept Your rich grace, and not live as if we were slaves, in a state of ritualistic bondage to You; but rather, cause us to live in the joyful liberty of Your presence, as Your own precious sons and daughters! Amen.