

Losing Stuff

We have three parables in Luke chapter 15, all on a similar theme, losing stuff. This all came about because Pharisees openly criticised Jesus for eating with sinners. To be able to eat with a Pharisee, you needed two qualities 1.) To be upright and respectable and 2.) Jewish. If you had lots of money, then that's an added bonus. Let's have a look at what God's law said about these two qualities. Obviously, there's nothing there that compels one to make a judgement about a guest's or a host's moral standing and respectability to make sure that they're roughly equal with your own before accepting or giving an invitation to eat. The only verse that loosely supports the 2nd quality, being Jewish, is Exodus 34:13-16, the relevant bit:

'and one of them invites you and you eat of his sacrifice.' But counter that against Daniel 1:8-12. Daniel wasn't bothered about who else was present in the canteen while he was eating. No, he was more concerned about eating non-kosher food, so that day he went veggie. No, this rule of the Pharisees had no scriptural authority but yet Jesus came across it time and again. This was another example of the Pharisees making up God's law as they went and part of Jesus's mission was to expose these vile laws, rituals and traditions. See our study of Mark 7:1-23 called Boring Rituals.

Anyway, onto the crux of what this passage is about. Three parables about the stress of losing something that's really important and the relief and joy when they are found. This is something that we're all familiar with, running around the house rooting through drawers and cupboards, looking for your passport when you should be on the way to the airport. Rifling through pockets and bags looking for your car keys or credit cards or wandering around a huge multi-storey car park looking for your car. We've all been there; this is something we can all relate to. Let's look at Jesus's examples in a bit more detail.

The parable of the lost sheep. Temporarily, I want to switch to John Chapter 10, which is more about sheep getting stolen rather than lost. John gives a different take on a similar parable, and then we'll come back to Luke. John 10:1-17. John sets out the premise of the story; the relationship that sheep have with their shepherd. From the early days of the state of Israel, sheep farming had been an important industry. Many of the Old Testament heroes began life as or were previously shepherds. Examples, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses, David, Amos; and I'm sure this was still the case during the time that Jesus was undergoing His ministry. So it's safe to assume that even for those people not directly or indirectly employed in sheep farming, there would have been at least a basic level of understanding of sheep farming and shepherding.

In both Luke 15 and John 10, Jesus was aiming these parables at the Pharisees. They would have been familiar with Ezekiel's teaching on the parable of the bad shepherds Ezekiel 34:1-8. Can we see a resonance between Ezekiel and John.

John's account emphasises the relationship and the bond there is between Him and His followers. So which verses in particular describe that bond and do they resonate with your own experience of your relationship with God? Jesus starts with a warning. Inside the pen, there's a precious stock that are vulnerable to sheep rustlers. He distinguishes between the thief and the shepherd by their means of entry. One climbs in through a window, the other is let in through the gate via the gatekeeper. Very important question: who are represented by the sheep in these parables? So who's the gatekeeper? The sheep are comfortable enough with the shepherd, he knows their names and so they instinctively follow Him. So, who is the thief in this parable? Jesus further describes the sheep as loyal, following the shepherd but running away from a stranger. Who's the stranger? Then there's a hireling. Who's the hireling? Finally, there's a wolf: who's the wolf in this story? So what's going on in this story and how do we apply it to what's going on around us? Most important of all is the Good Shepherd.

What lessons do we draw from this parable of the good shepherd? Romans 8:38-39.

Back to Luke 15:4-7. The story of the lost sheep. Who are the sheep in this parable? (Verse 7). The shepherd leaves the 99 to fend for themselves? This is where the parable's detail doesn't quite cover every base and eventuality. An earthly shepherd, no matter how good he is, can only be in one place at a time. Our Heavenly shepherd is omnipresent. But what Jesus is trying to get across is that He, as the good shepherd, takes action when any of His followers stray from Him. This picture that Jesus gives us is a sheep that hasn't just been left behind and wandered into the next field. No, this sheep was completely lost and needed rescuing. It wasn't in any immediate danger like the sheep in John 10 but was completely lost and vulnerable.

Note, that the shepherd doesn't shout or stress at the sheep, he just rescues it. In the same way, the mother who loses her toddler in the supermarket is just massively relieved when she's reunited with her baby.

Now we're all familiar with sheep; we've all seen them when we've been out in the countryside or on Country File. It's going to take a lot of strength to pick one up, put it over your shoulders and carry it 2 or 3 miles back home. Jesus has that strength to seek you out and rescue you from whatever mess we've got yourself into.

The sheep is returned to the fold safe and sound. Then it's party time. The shepherd calls his friends and invites them around for a celebration. If we were talking about sheep, that would be a bit over the top, wouldn't it? What does Jesus mean when he talks about the 99 righteous people who do not need to repent?

What lessons can we draw from this parable?

In actual fact, it was the 99 that were lost.

Then Jesus drives home His message with another simpler parable. The Parable of the Lost Coin. Luke 15:8-10. Can you spot a big difference between these two parables? The sheep presumably wandered off because it fancied a bit of adventure or it was still hungry; the sheep was being rebellious. But in the parable of the lost coin, it's not the coin's fault that it got lost; it was the woman's. Her house was a tip and she needed to give it a good and thorough tidy up. We can not always take every detail of Jesus's parables and take from that detail, a literal lesson. Some parables you have to look at the overall message.

Who were the coins in this parable? He was talking about the Jews. So if we equate the 9 coins with the 99 sheep, Jesus is saying that the celebration is about the recovery of the one lost coin, and there is actually no celebration over the fact that the 9 coins weren't lost because in these parables the 99 sheep and the 9 coins were the Pharisees and the 'religious righteous', and so in actual fact, it was they that were lost.

Lessons from this parable.

Every person belongs to God and they are all very precious to Him but some are lost and He will do all that He can to recover them. When He does, all of Heaven celebrates.