

The Parables of Jesus

- The Lost Sheep

(Matthew 18:12-14, Luke 15:4-7)

This parable is found in both the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew's account Jesus is in Capernaum (Matthew 17:24). Matthew 18:1 states, "At the same time..." which would mean that He was still in or around Capernaum. In Luke's account, we see that He was also was

on the outskirts of Capernaum on the road that would ultimately lead Him to Jerusalem and the cross.

Matthew's account tells us that Jesus gave the parable as part of His response to the disciple's question of "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Matthew 18:1) Luke's account tells that following His teaching on the "Cost of Discipleship" (Luke 14:26-35) many of the publicans and sinners drew near to hear more of what Jesus had to say. (Luke 15:1) This led the religious leaders to murmur among themselves saying, "This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them." To which Jesus responded with this parable.

Based on all of the above information, even though it doesn't necessarily say or seem as if it was at the same time, we know definitely that in both accounts Jesus was in or about Capernaum getting ready to head towards Jerusalem and the cross. Therefore, it is quite possible both accounts refer to the same time of teaching by Jesus but expressed and remembered by and from different sources.

Luke's account:

In Luke 15:1, we read that after Jesus' teaching about what "the cost" of being a true disciple of His really meant and how it would affect the lives of anyone choosing to truly follow Him, we see that strangely enough it was the publicans and sinners who were drawing nearer to Him. ("*...Then drew near to him all the publicans and sinners to hear him.*") In Luke 15:2, we see the Pharisees and scribes that were present were "offended" by this and began to murmur among themselves. ("*And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.*") In Luke this parable is the first of a "trilogy" of parables concerning redemption of those who were "lost."

In Luke 15:3, it tells us, " *And he spake this parable unto **them**, saying...*" Who was the "**them**" that the scripture is referring to? It was the Pharisees and scribes. In Luke's account it tells us this parable was not directed necessarily towards the "publicans and sinners" although, as we will see, it was all about them. However, it was directed to expose the incorrect attitude of heart of the Pharisees and scribes had towards, not just Jesus because of His love and compassion towards these "publicans and sinners," but it was directed to reveal the lack of love and compassion that the Pharisees and scribes had towards the "publicans and sinners."

The Pharisees, scribes and the other religious leaders looked upon these folks as being "cursed of God" because of their lifestyle and behavior. Yes, it was true that these people were not perfect and they were in a wrong lifestyle behavior pattern. That is exactly why Jesus came - because we are all under the rule and reign of a sinful nature - including the Pharisees, scribes and the other religious leaders. Unfortunately, they refused to see their own sin. We all need to be set free from sin's grip over our lives. Jesus then proceeds to tell the parable of the "Lost Sheep."

Matthew's account:

Matthew 18:1 tells us that the disciples had posed a question concerning, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Luke 9:46-48 tells of this same question asked by His disciples. In Luke it tells us that the argument was about which one of **them** "would be the greatest" in the kingdom to come. In other words, pride and hypocrisy was entering into the disciples, just as it did with the religious leaders. Hmmm...

Jesus responds to their question by using an object lesson. In both Luke 9 and Matthew 18, He draws a little child to Him and begins to teach on humility and the importance of not "offending" others and pushing them away from their Father God because of pride and hypocrisy.

Who was the “**them**” in Matthew 18:2 that this scripture was referring to? It would seem that Jesus was speaking to the disciples. He was addressing this parable to the disciples – both at that time and for all of His disciples to come. In this teaching setting Jesus is teaching that every person is looked upon by God, the Father as His “little one.” Each and every person is important to Him and each and every person must be just as humble and trusting as a little child’s heart is.

Similar to Luke’s account as Jesus was telling the religious leaders that the publicans and sinners were important to Him, in Matthew’s account, Jesus was stressing this same point to His disciples. It would seem that by the very question that the disciple’s had posed to Jesus in Matthew 18:2 concerning who would be considered the greatest in the kingdom that they also had some issues and incorrect understandings concerning the relationship between a person’s “status” here on earth and its reflection on the person’s “status” in the Kingdom.

Unfortunately, this was a common thought that arose among the Jewish people. Their incorrect and prejudicial way of looking at people brought about the false understanding that the richer or higher in status a person was, must have meant that they were in a better relationship with God and therefore, would enjoy a “higher position” in the kingdom – and vice versa. So from both accounts we see that it was both, the religious leaders **and** His disciples who were under an incorrect way of thinking which therefore led to an incorrect attitude of heart.

In **both** accounts we see a problem with pride, prejudice, discrimination and hypocrisy when it comes to their understanding of the Kingdom of God upon the earth. It was an existing problem with the religious leadership. It was beginning to creep into the mentality of the disciples because they began to think of themselves now as “having some status” because they were Jesus’ disciples, hand-picked by Him. Jesus proceeds to bring forth our parable to bring correction to that way of thinking and to that incorrect attitude of heart.

The Parable of the Lost Sheep - Luke 15:4-7- *"What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. 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."*

What was Jesus teaching through this parable? Before we get into discussing what Jesus was teaching through this parable, let us first look at the “characters” in our parable.

- The “man” who had the one hundred sheep” – In Matthew 18:11, the scripture just prior to our parable, Jesus states that the Son of Man came to save the lost. Therefore, the “man” in our parable is obviously referring to Jesus. They are His “sheep.”
- The “hundred sheep” – In the scriptures the Jewish people are always referred to as sheep. (Ezekiel 34:31) In Psalm 95:7 it states that they are “the sheep of His hand.” In Psalm 100:3 it refers to the Jewish people as the “sheep of His pasture.” They are also referred to as the “lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (1st Kings 22:17; Jeremiah 50:6 and 17; Ezekiel 34:10-12 In John 10:1-15, Jesus refers to the sheep of His flock referring to the Jewish people. He does say in John 10:16 that there are “other sheep that are not of this fold” who will hear His voice, however, that is referring to the Gentiles that will soon be called out to as we see in the Book of Acts. In our parable, Jesus is referring to the Jewish people. This “hundred sheep” is then broken up into two “groups.”
 - The “lost sheep” – This is referring to one of the sheep that has wandered away and does not know how to get back.

- The “ninety nine just” sheep/ people which need no repentance – The sheep referred to in this parable again refer to Jewish people. However, it is a special group of Jewish people which we will discuss further later on in our study.
- The friends and neighbors of the owner of the sheep – Jesus gives the identity of who these represent. Jesus tells us that they are those who reside in heaven a.k.a. the angels.

As previously mentioned, this parable in the Gospel of Luke is the first of a trilogy of parables expressing Jesus’ mission in going forth and seeking the “lost” and bringing redemption to them and restoring them back into relationship with the Father. Also, as previously mentioned this parable is specifically referring to the “lost sheep” of the house of Israel.

This parable was used to express the great love that God, the Father and Jesus has for the lost sinners of this world, even just one. However, as we have discussed, this parable is directed towards the Jewish people because of Jesus’ use of the term “sheep.” Jesus is referring to the children of Abraham, those Jewish people who have truly strayed from the faith and are now walking in the ways of sin.

We see the desire of God to seek after those who have gone astray so that “none would perish” but that all would repent and come to the saving knowledge of Jesus. (2Peter 3:9) It expresses the great joy that Jesus who is the Good Shepherd experiences, as well as all heaven itself, when one Jewish soul who was “lost” in sin and bound up in bondage to darkness and death is now found and brought back into the flock.

This is something that each and every one of us now (Jew or Gentile) who have been born again has experienced at that moment when Jesus entered our lives and became our Lord and Savior. Each of us were as, “sheep that had gone astray.” (Isaiah 53:6) For each of us there was “joy in heaven” when we were “picked up and placed on the Good Shepherd’s shoulders” and carried back to where we belong – back into relationship with the Father.

What a tremendous expression of God’s love for the “lost sheep” of Israel and we can also say that He has for the sinners of this world in which everyone, including each one of us is included. This aspect concerning the love that both, the Father and Jesus have for all of His beloved creation is so very, very true.

However, I believe there was also a secondary point to Jesus giving this parable? Yes, this parable did speak to the “publicans and sinners” in the crowd and HE concerning God’s love and compassion for them in Luke’s account. Yes, in Matthew’s account Jesus was expressing the preciousness of all of God’s “little ones,” the Jewish people. However, remember, we mentioned that Jesus was also directing this parable towards the attitude of heart of the Pharisees and scribes (in Luke) as well as His disciples (in Matthew).

As we seek to understand a secondary aspect of the message found in the Parable of the “Lost Sheep,” we must remember the context in which this parable was given – in both accounts. In Luke’s account it was being spoken to the Pharisees and Scribes who “thought” they were righteous. You see, Jesus was speaking of the “attitude of heart” that the Pharisee and Scribes had, or I should say, had lacked towards those that have “gone astray.” Instead of having compassion on them and desiring to see them brought back into relationship with God, they became judgmental towards them and actually “wrote them off” as not being “worthy” of the Kingdom of God.

In Matthew’s account it would be the disciples and anyone else who would soon come to believe and accept Him as their Lord and Savior who may be in danger of starting to think in the same way as the religious leaders. Very soon, they would be the ones sent by Jesus to the lost sheep, not just of the house of Israel but to the “lost sheep” of that “other flock” spoken of in John 10. He was teaching and warning those who were and would become His disciples of the dangers of pride and hypocrisy that would try to enter in

and distort their way of looking at others. Through their questioning of who was the greatest, it would seem that it was already trying to creep into the disciple's minds. They would be in danger of becoming just like the religious leaders if not corrected.

The Pharisees and scribes lacked the desire to go and find the lost. It became all about themselves being a "step above" everyone else. They failed to realize that they were very much in the same situation, possibly even worse because they were deceived into thinking that they were okay. Jesus was teaching His disciples to beware of not falling into the same trap as these religious leaders when it was their turn to be assigned to care for and seek after the lost.

Before we conclude, as I had mentioned previously, I would like to address a portion of this parable that has become a "sticking point" for many when it comes to discussing this parable. I am referring to the section where it states, "...likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, **which need no repentance.**" The scriptures state it very clearly that these ninety nine sheep had "no need to repent." This seems to contradict some of the scriptures such as Romans 3:10-12 that state that there are "*none righteous, no not one.*" Paul was quoting from Psalm 53:1 and Psalm 14:11-3.

On the other hand we know that as it states in Genesis 16:6, Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as "righteousness." Paul reiterates this in Romans 4:9 and 22, Galatians 3:6 and James 2:23. We read of the "Heroes of Faith" in Hebrews 11 who had faith and believed in God's promises and it was counted to them as righteousness just as with Abraham.

So what did Jesus mean by saying what He said at the conclusion of this parable? I believe that before we go any further in this we must understand that Jesus was speaking to an audience **prior** to His crucifixion and resurrection. Therefore, we cannot look at this scripture as meaning or referring to anything post-resurrection. By this I mean that Jesus was not speaking about the soon coming Body of Christ made up of believers who would be "saved" from eternal death and made totally righteous through His blood.

However, we do see that there were "righteous people" who believed God's promises and it was counted to them as righteousness. Those who believed in the promises, as it states in Hebrews 11:39, "*having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise...*" In other words they were looked upon as "righteous" but did not receive salvation as of yet. These were those, I believe, who were in that place known as "Abraham's bosom" who were waiting for the "day" when Jesus did what He did by dying and then rising from the dead. That is when their "righteousness" that came by believing in God's promises of salvation through Messiah, would come to fruition and they would receive the fulfillment of believing the promise which would be salvation.

When Paul states that there are "*none that are righteous, not one,*" in the context of Romans 3, he was referring to the fact that there were none that could be made righteous by the deeds and rituals of the Law. As Paul continues on in chapter 4 of Romans we read that righteousness only comes through and by faith in God and His promises. All of God's promises are answered and fulfilled now in believing in Jesus as the Son of God, the Savior of the World and Lord of all. Those who believed the promises of God would be fulfilled and died looking forward to that "day" God counted it as righteousness to them. They then received their salvation (the resulting blessing of their faithfulness in believing God and His promises) when Jesus accomplished what He did at the cross and at His resurrection. Today, belief in Jesus and His atoning work on the cross and His resurrection brings believers into His righteousness and salvation.

As we read this parable and hear Jesus' words we must resist the temptation to put a "spin" on this scripture trying to make it say something that it is not to fit our own purposes and understanding. It is saying what it is saying. Yes, before Jesus' resurrection there were those who were "righteous" in the eyes of God because of their belief in His promises. However, they were not "saved" yet. They had to wait for the final work of the atoning blood of Jesus to experience salvation just as everyone else does.

What many teach and have taught was that these "ninety nine" was speaking of the future believers who would be made righteous and saved through Jesus. However, that is not what the text and Jesus is saying. His audience who was listening would have understood this more than we do today.

As we conclude our discussion of this parable, we must recognize the two messages that Jesus was bringing forth to the religious leaders, His disciples, to the "publicans and sinners", and anyone else who was listening. The first message was that truly God loves His people – the Jewish people. It is His desire to reach out to all who were "lost" which ultimately included all of those just mentioned.

It is interesting to note that the owner of the sheep, the "man" left the other ninety nine. This is peculiar because of the love that any owner or shepherd would have for all his sheep. What this is showing us is that indeed the "owner" (God – The Father and Jesus) loved all of His flock – the "righteous ninety nine" as well as the one who went astray and was lost. God loved the lost sheep of Israel so much that He sent Jesus to come and not only save those that believed the promises of God (the ninety nine) but to go and seek out those that were lost and destined for total destruction.

The other aspect of this message was that it was an admonition to the religious leaders and a warning to His disciples. Jesus was warning the disciples to not become as the Pharisees and scribes were concerning an elitist way of thinking. As we read the Gospel accounts, we see that this was a very real problem that was "creeping" into the hearts of the disciples. They were beginning to get caught up in this "culturally" incorrect way of thinking. Jesus was constantly correcting them in this very "carnal" way of thinking.

Many times we as believers can have this same type of incorrect attitude whether we want to admit it or not. Most of us are so blind to this aspect of our heart that we look at this parable and say immediately, "Shame on you Pharisees and Scribes - Hypocrites!!" We fail to see our own "pharisaical" tendencies within our own hearts.

As His ambassadors and representatives here on this earth, we are to have the same heart that Jesus had for the lost, whoever they may be. We are to go forth and seek for the lost and desire to bring them back into the fold. We are to rejoice along with heaven when they do. A repentant heart is what brings rejoicing in heaven and it should bring joy to the heart of every believer.