Chapter 11

Hope

The Parable of the Lost Sheep
{Luke 15:1-7}
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One Main Thing

Peter said it best: "The Lord...is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9). The "all" means even the vilest outcast from society.

Introduction

Luke portrayed two sides of Jewish society in the setting of this parable and the two that follow. The "publicans and sinners" were rejected by the upper levels of Jewish society, while the "Pharisees and scribes" considered themselves holy, righteous, and better than the "publicans and sinners." These Jewish leaders quickly condemned others for trying to teach the publicans and sinners, but they themselves never evangelized the rejected. It seems that they were self-appointed critics following Jesus—standing afar just to find fault

with His teachings and activities. On the other hand, those who had been treated as though they were some kind of contaminating disease were the ones who drew near to Jesus. They came to Jesus, not for His approval, but, rather, to learn more of God and His love for the lost. In so doing, many of them were converted. Matthew and Zacchaeus are good examples.

When we share the gospel with others, many times we encounter those who do their best to hinder our efforts. Sometimes it will be a family member or members of those being taught. Sometimes it may be a "good ole boy or girl" who does not want to lose a drinking buddy or a party mate. If Christ, the master teacher, was persecuted for this, who are we to think that the same thing will not happen to us sometime? Peter reminds us that "Christ suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow in his steps" (1 Pet 2:21). We will bear up under any hindrance in order to further the spread of the gospel, that the lost might be rescued; just as the sheep in our parable was lost, sought, found, and rescued.

Setting

The Parable of the Lost Sheep is one of three shorter parables within a larger parable. Each

smaller parable is a self-contained unit that fits into the larger parable. Combined, they demonstrate the love that God has for the lost and His desire that they would come to repentance. "For 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).

In this larger parable, there is the "lost sheep" which represents the "bewildered lost" that knows it is lost, but does not know how to get back to the flock. The second, smaller parable is of the "lost coin" and represents the "unconsciously lost" that is lost but does not know it. The first two shorter parables demonstrate there is something lost and it must be sought, found, and retrieved. The third parable represents those who are "willfully lost," one who chose to go astray, knowing the consequences, yet still going into sin. This "lost son" in the third parable still needed to be saved. It took his repentance and the Father's forgiveness to complete this third part of the larger parable.

With the three connected, they demonstrate the value of a lost soul. In the first, one out of one hundred sheep was lost and found. In the second, one coin out of ten was lost and found. In the third parable, one son out of two was lost and found. The parables combined show God's love and

concern for their repentance. From the least to the greatest, all have need of salvation. From one of one hundred being lost to one of two being lost, the parables illustrate that salvation was for the least as well as the greatest. That which society counts as nothing God counts worthy of saving.

The parable of the "lost sheep" was fitting in the culture of the first century. Everyone in Palestine was familiar with shepherds and sheep. Perhaps this is why God mentions sheep in the Bible 188 times. The first family of mankind had a "keeper of sheep" (Gen 4:2). Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David were all keepers of sheep. Therefore, they were shepherds at some point in their lives. It is reasonable that Jesus would use things very familiar to His audiences as objects in His teaching.

Interpretation

In order to understand the meaning of Luke's Parable of the Lost Sheep, we must not confuse this parable with the lost sheep in Matthew 18 where Jesus used a similar illustration. These parables were told in different contexts and intended to make different points. Matthew shows Jesus as teaching against those who cause others to stumble. Luke shows Jesus as teaching on repentance. The parables pointed to two

different meanings. We must understand parables according to context and purpose in order to get the correct meaning of the text.

Here, in Luke, the setting included publicans and sinners coming to hear the teachings of Jesus and Pharisees and scribes standing near and condemning what they saw. Jesus knew their thoughts and was prompted to give this parable along with the two that followed.

In verse 4, He asked a simple question: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?" So he searches and searches. He goes into the hedges, the byways, the wilderness, and the mountains looking for the lost, just as Christ was doing here. That was part of His ministry. "For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost" (Matt 18:11; Luke 19:10). He went to where the lost could be found, unlike the Pharisees and scribes who were not even the slightest evangelistically-minded. They feared contamination from any personal exchange with the publicans and sinners. The Pharisees and scribes thought themselves to be righteous because they had kept themselves "pure" from the lower classes of humanity. The Pharisee in Luke 18:11 said, "God, I thank thee,

that I am not as other men are, extortionists, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican," words indicating a self-righteous attitude. The Pharisees knew the law, but failed in keeping it: "All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do ye not after their works: for they say and do not" (Matt 23:3).

Jesus, in a seemingly sarcastic move, allowed the Pharisees and scribes to think they were the saved of the ninety-nine sheep in the fold. He shames them by asking, if it were real sheep and one was lost, whether they would seek it until it was found. He then strikes a deeper cord in their hearts by illustrating that God the Father was seeking that which was lost. If God was looking, as any good shepherd would, why were they not caring enough to go and seek the lost?

In verses 5–7, He further points to the shepherd figure as being God or Christ or both. The shepherd is portrayed as taking the lost sheep, when found, and placing it upon his own shoulders and taking it to safety. This signifies the care that God has for the penitent sinner and how He pours His grace and mercy upon "that which was lost and is found." And when he arrives home with the rescued sheep he calls all of his friends to share in his joy over the returned sheep. God experiences the same joy

over the returned sinner. Not only was God happy for the sinner now returned to the flock, clean and forgiven, but there was also rejoicing in heaven "over one sinner that repenteth" (Luke 15:10).

Conclusion

This parable magnifies the grace and kindness of God toward us sinners. He desires that we should be saved and that we should be willing to do as He did. This parable also demonstrates that we should be joyful when a sinner who was lost is returned to the fold. God teaches us His character so that we may be like Him. Let us seek, find, bring back, and be joyful.

Discussion

1. Why do people read this parable and draw so many different conclusions?

2. Is it possible that the different conclusions come because the reader does not know how to read a parable?

3. What is the real objective of Jesus in giving this parable?

4. How does this parable connect to the two parables that immediately follow?

5. What is the recurring theme in the three parables?