PARABLES

The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin
Luke 15:1-10

Introduction

Luke 15 begins with the rumblings of discontent. The religious establishment felt increasingly threatened by the innovations and the authority with which the Lord Jesus was teaching in public. When Jesus told these three stories – The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, The Amazing Father and The Two Lost Sons – He was on his way to Jerusalem and to the Cross. (Lk. 9:51)

These three stories are deceptively simple. Here we will look at the first two. They build towards a tense climax. But the climax is missing!

The audience is mainly made up of Pharisees and Scribes – the "righteous" in the community. Their complaint is that the Lord Jesus, ***"Receives sinners and eats with them"***. So there are three parties involved:

- The religious
- The irreligious or common people including the disciples
- The Lord Jesus

In these two stories only the irreligious and the Lord Jesus appear. In the third story – The Lost Sons – the self-righteous come into the story in the person of the older brother.

Tax collectors and sinners

The Romans and the Greeks before them used "tax farmers". "Tax farmers" are still common in parts of the Arab World especially in the delta region of Egypt. A man bought from the government the right to collect taxes in a certain area. He set his own rates of taxation and collected all he could. He was bound by contract to deliver a certain sum to the government and the rest he kept. In first century Palestine the government hired local people to do this. Often these people were unscrupulous and there was a great deal of graft and favouritism.

Tax collectors were unpopular for their extortionate ways. But they were even more hated because they were "collaborators" with the Gentile imperial power – Rome. In modern Arab politics, the bitterest of all insults is, "You are an agent of the imperialists". [The imperialists are the British and the Americans!]

Already revolt was building up against the Romans. The Zealots were popular and "betrayal" by tax collectors was almost unendurable. Their feelings finally erupted in 66 A.D. in what the Romans called the Jewish War that ended in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Sinners and the welcome of Jesus

For Pharisees, "sinners" are "unclean" – i.e. "breakers of the law". They are what we would call "nominal" Jews and the Pharisees dismissed them as of low moral character. These people were drawing near to the Lord Jesus. The issue that made the Pharisees angry was that He welcomed them! The Pharisees and Scribes **"murmured"** – i.e. they complained verbally about Jesus. There was probably an undercurrent of discontent and anger about the actions of Jesus. These rumblings finally rose to the shout of hate, ***"Crucify Him"***.

What the Lord Jesus did was to "welcome into fellowship" sinners – i.e. He accepted them as family! The Greek word is '*prosdechomai'*. Paul uses this word in Rom. 16:2 and Phil. 2:29 to welcome a man as a brother in the Lord.

This was bad enough but there was worse, ***"He eats with them!"*** In the Middle East eating with people **is a sign of total acceptance**. If you eat with a man you show that you completely accept him as family. It is an offer of peace, trust, brotherhood and forgiveness. Above all, it is a giving of honour. When the Lord Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners it is an expression of His mission and a message of the fullness of God's redeeming love.

The president or King/Emir of a Middle Eastern country may provide food for hundreds of people as a sign of his great generosity, but **he does not eat with them**. He will only eat with a very select, trusted few. In Mk. 2:15-17 It is clear that Jesus is the host at a meal with "sinners".

If the guest is a pastor or leader of some sort, the family senses it is being "blessed" by the presence of such a guest. Remember the big fight between Peter and Paul over this matter of eating (Gal. 2:11-12). Who you eat with is very important in Middle East culture. Pharisees could eat with non-Pharisees – i.e. with Jesus – but under very scrupulous limitations. They could never eat with Gentiles, with those associated with Gentiles (tax collectors) or with "sinners". So Jesus was honouring those the Pharisees rejected. He was deeply offending the Scribes and Pharisees both culturally and theologically. There is no cultural adaptation here. Jesus defends His position in three interconnected stories.

"So He told them a parable …." Luke introduces the three stories as one. Luke sees them as a unit spoken to the Scribes and Pharisees although many others also heard them. Jesus told them in order to explain **why** He associated with "sinners" and how "the righteous" should respond.

A problem: many Western Christians allegorize the parables of Jesus too quickly and so miss the point or force of what Jesus wants to say. In this way they cheapen the values of Jesus' teaching – i.e. the Good Shepherd looks for and finds a lost sheep. Jesus is the Good Shepherd so the story is about His love for us.

The Lost Sheep

- **The Structure**

  If the story is back-translated into Aramaic, it has a poetic form rather than being prose as it is in Greek and in English.

  A ***"What man of <u>you</u>, having a hundred sheep***

  B ***and having lost <u>one</u>*** *(hadh)* ***of them***

  C ***does not leave the ninety nine in the wilderness***

  1 ***and go after the <u>lost</u> one***

  2 ***until he <u>finds</u> it and having <u>found</u> it***

  3 ***he places it on his shoulder rejoicing*** (*hedhwa*)

  4 ***and coming to the <u>home</u>, he calls to his <u>friends</u> and neighbours***

  3* ***saying to them, 'Rejoice*** *(hedhwa)* ***with me***

  2* ***because I have <u>found</u> my sheep***

  1* ***that was <u>lost</u>'***

  A* ***I say to <u>you</u> that there is more <u>joy</u>*** *(hedhwa)* ***in heaven***

  B* ***over one*** *(hadh)* ***sinner who repents***

  C* ***than over ninety nine righteous persons who need no repentance."***

  To simplify this:

  A which man of **you** (a direct address to the audience)

  B one

  C ninety nine

1 the lost

2 find

3 joy

4 restoration

3* joy

2* find

1* the lost

A* I say to you (a direct address to the audience)

B* one

C* ninety nine

So there is a parallelism in the structure ABC and A*B*C* and also parabolic inversion.
There is also word play in the Aramaic – *hadh* (one is *wahad* in Arabic) and *hedhwa* (joy).
The key focus of the story is the centre of the parabolic inversion: 4 – i.e. "joy in restoration".

The Cultural Aspects of the Story

1. Addressing Pharisees as if they were shepherds

In an honour-shame society you don't talk to a king as you would to a street sweeper. If you do, you anger him very considerably! If you talk to a Pharisee as you would to a shepherd, you infuriate him. Yet this is exactly what Jesus does! He refuses to show deference to rank and in the East showing honour is everything!

Jesus addresses the Scribes and Pharisees, not in some formal debate of fine points of the law, but as if they were uneducated villagers telling them a simple village story. Worse than this! He puts the Pharisees in a class with the "unclean" shepherds. If a Pharisee had a hundred sheep, he would rather lose them all than search for even one himself!

Moses was accepted as a shepherd. Ezekiel referred to Old Testament kings as shepherds (Ez. 34). David spoke of God as a Shepherd (Ps. 23). But in first century Palestine shepherds were considered "unclean". (In Arabic the word is '*haram*'.) To a Pharisee "a sinner" was either immoral, a person who didn't keep the law or a person who was engaged in a proscribed trade and one of the proscribed trades was herding sheep. Why were shepherds despised and considered "law-breakers"? As the shepherd drove his flock about his sheep may be eating private property, thus breaking the law.

Jesus began His parable to the Pharisees with, ***"Which man of <u>you</u> having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them doesn't leave the ninety nine in the open country and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?"*** No Pharisee would ever be a shepherd under any circumstances! In the Middle East social status is identified with particular professions and is taken very seriously. Family origins mean everything in the Middle East. A carpenter's son is socially fairly low. Camel drivers are considered much higher on the ladder than fishermen who are nearly as low as shepherds.

So the decision of the Lord Jesus to address the Pharisees as shepherds was a cultural and theological decision. The Pharisees were probably shocked and insulted by this story right from the start.

2. Who owns the sheep?

If you are wealthy enough to own a hundred sheep, you will **hire a shepherd**. This is true now and there is evidence it was true then. If the owner wasn't rich enough to hire a shepherd, he would get someone poorer in his extended family to look after the sheep. An average family may have 10 and 15 sheep today, so 100 sheep could possibly belong to the extended family.

An extended family may include 10 to 20 families collectively known as, “The house of ……” (‘*Dar*’ in Arabic).

So the shepherd in the story was probably not the sole owner nor a hireling, but a member of the extended family who probably owned some of the sheep. But he feels responsible for **all** of them on the behalf of the entire family clan. This makes sense of the joy the community (the extended family) felt that **all** the sheep came home. The neighbours were probably his cousins, brothers, uncles, and nephews. Rejoicing is an important part of the story. One shepherd can handle about 25 sheep. So there were other shepherds in addition to him.

3. What usually happens when a sheep is lost?

We don't know how long he searched. Any Jordanian shepherd will tell you it could have taken days climbing over the rugged wilderness, always listening for the bleating of his lost sheep. But finding the sheep is not the hardest part! He has to get the heavy sheep back home!

The shepherd rejoices twice – once when he finds the lost sheep and again when he gets home. A lost sheep will often lie down helplessly and refuse to budge. So the frustrated shepherd is forced to carry it a long distance (Jn. 10:11). The shepherd places the sheep on his shoulders knowing the hard work is important. Remember, the sheep is probably very smelly and this shepherd **rejoices** when the work is still **before** him! The Middle Eastern shepherd has always carried a sheep over his two shoulders, with its stomach against the back of his neck and all four feet tied together in front of his face. This gives him full control of the sheep and still leaves one hand free. You rarely see this depicted in our innumerable stained glass windows! So the burden of restoration and the expressed joy is the climax of the entire poem. Within it is the Cross!

4. How was the sheep lost?

The story says that the shepherd lost the sheep. The listeners probably expected the passive, “the sheep was lost”. This would exonerate the shepherd from any blame. Passive speech is very important in an honour-shame society. Active speech **always** implies **intention**. “A cup was dropped” or “the bus went without me” – never, “I dropped the cup” or “I missed the bus” for this would imply that I deliberately threw the cup on the floor – i.e. I accept blame for an accident. So here the active is used. The shepherd clearly assumed he was negligent in his duty as a shepherd – he “loses” the sheep.

Christian workers have debated with Communist philosophers in China the point of the value of the 99 in respect to the one. The philosophers argue that the sacrifice of the one sheep in the name of the larger group is ethically correct. The flock/state is more important than the individual. The answer of the workers has been that the shepherd's willingness to try and recover the one sheep gives the other sheep their real security. If one is lost and sacrificed to the greater good, then each individual in the group is insecure for he knows he is of little value and, if lost, he too will die. When the shepherd pays a high price to find the one he offers the profoundest security to the many!

5. What happened to the ninety-nine sheep?

There were two types of shepherds. There were roving tribesmen (like the Bedouin today) who kept sheep out in all weathers – like the shepherds to whom the angels appeared at the birth of the Lord Jesus. So here we have several shepherds guarding the sheep.

The other type of shepherd was the **peasant** living in small villages on the edge of pasture lands. He would bring his sheep home to the various family courtyards at the end of each day. The reference to home/house (v. 6) implies we are dealing with peasant shepherds.

Sheep are wayward animals. If you have 25 sheep one shepherd could look after them. But 100 sheep would require several shepherds. So if one sheep is lost and the shepherd goes to seek it, the other shepherds would take the flock back to the village. On arrival back with the flock, family/neighbours would immediately be told what had happened and the possibility of a lost sheep and a wounded shepherd would occur to everyone.

The point is that the shepherd counted the sheep out in the open country. After discovering one was missing, he took responsibility and shame for the loss and went to find the lost sheep.

As Jesus told this story to the Pharisees, they not only disliked being associated with shepherds, but with an incompetent shepherd who was responsible for losing a sheep!

But in the story the ninety-nine sheep are left hanging. We are **not told** what happened to them!

6. The attitude of the community

The joy of the community is due to:

- The shepherd returning safely as he is part of an extended family
- The sheep being found for it clearly belongs to someone in the community

There was a potential double loss. So the recovery of both is a source of joy for all the families and neighbours in the community.

A Palestinian shepherd would keep on searching until he finds the sheep. A frightened sheep lies down and starts a loud, incessant bleating. So finding it is not considered impossible. The ground covered by a peasant shepherd is not extensive and so a diligent shepherd would probably find a lost sheep if it was still alive. The noise of bleating would also attract predator foxes that could easily kill it. But a sheep is too heavy for a wild animal to drag a great distance. In any case, the shepherd would have to bring the sheep back – alive or dead – as proof that he had not secretly sold it. So it is a diligent search, ***"Until he found it"***. [See Amos 3:12 for a small remnant of a killed sheep.]

Before radio and TV, village men gathered almost every night to discuss the day's events, any outside news and to tell stories in the oral tradition. So it is natural that he calls the community together for a celebration.

A Summary of Cultural Aspects

- Jesus opposes the Pharisaic idea of proscribed professions and status through professional background.
- The shepherd may not own all the sheep, but he is not a hireling.
- Joy comes twice in the story – joy at finding the sheep irrespective of the burden of restoration **and** community joy at the success of restoration.
- The shepherd is blamed for the loss of the sheep. He takes responsibility for finding the sheep. He keeps searching without counting the cost until he finds it. He rejoices in the burden of restoration. He returns to the village to celebrate the restoration with the extended family and others.

In the same way, the lost person is a loss to the entire family of God. When a person is lost the "family" should mourn and the shepherd who returns restoring the person should receive a hero's welcome! The standard that Jesus has set for His church is very high in any age. We stand with the Pharisees under His judgment!

Four theological themes in the story

As we have noted, we have a sad tendency to allegorize parables too readily. So in this story:

- The shepherd is the Lord Jesus (even if the story blames Him for the loss of the sheep).
- The wilderness is the Jewish nation.
- The house is the church etc.

Let's look at the theological issues arising out of the structural and cultural context:

1. **Joy**: one clear emphasis is the **joy** of the shepherd and this is shared with the community. We too should share in the joy over the conversion of anyone – joy expressed and shared.

2. Related to the joy is **the burden of restoration**. The shepherd has to pay a price – the search for the sheep and the heavy load of restoration. The shepherd must carry on his shoulders the burden of the lost sheep. If there is no shouldering of the burden then there is no restoration. This is a clear indication of the meaning of the Cross. Jesus is defending His welcome of sinners and this welcome includes the burden of restoration to the whole community. In our case the cost of the search is in evangelism and the cost of restoration (much higher) is discipleship where we often carry people for years.

3. **The gracious love that seeks the lost**: people in general will take endless trouble to recover lost property. They have deep satisfaction when they succeed. The inference in this story is that the tax collectors and "sinners" really belong to God despite appearances to the contrary and God wants them back again and will take great trouble to win them back again to Himself. The Pharisees were meant to identify with the shepherd and seek out and restore "sinners".

   So one emphasis in this story is not so much the joy of a repentant sinner, as **love for sinners even before they repent**! Jesus seems to be saying to the listening Pharisees, *"The shepherd sought the lost. I seek the lost and so should you!"*

4. **The fourth theme is repentance.** The story raises two questions about repentance: **'who is expected to repent?'** and **'what is the nature of this repentance?'**

   In the first century AD, there was a debate about whether people could be "completely righteous" – those whom God loved in a special way. This is somewhat similar to the "sinless perfection" debate promoted by John Wesley. Some rabbis taught that God's greatest love was extended to repentant sinners. In the Talmud the majority of rabbis taught that God prefers the "completely righteous" in spite of Is. 53:6, "***All we like sheep have gone astray"***. So the statement of Jesus in verse 7 in regard to ***"The ninety nine righteous persons who need no repentance"*** is ironic! The subtle humour of the Lord Jesus comes through for ***"the righteous that have no need of repentance"*** don't exist!

   For Jesus, **all** are lost sheep needing a shepherd to restore them. All people must repent. Remember that in the story the ninety-nine sheep are left in the open countryside. We aren't told if they get home or not. Jesus **may be** saying, *"The angels can't rejoice over the ninety-nine 'completely righteous' because they are not home yet"*. In effect, what Jesus said is that all people are lost and all must repent.

   So what is the nature and function of this repentance? In first century A.D. Judaism, repentance was a way of bringing in the Kingdom of God. In the preaching of Jesus, repentance was the response to the Kingdom that had already come. The rabbis taught that repentance was a **pre-condition for grace**. It was a work that a righteous man did and so showed himself to be righteous.

   The Lord Jesus directly contradicts this view of righteousness. The sheep does nothing to prompt the shepherd to begin his search, except to become lost. The shepherd finds the sheep. So in this story "being found" is equated with "repentance". So there is joy over one sinner who repents. The implication is that the one found must accept his lost condition and need to be found and restored. This is a very radical, new understanding of the nature of repentance.

So in summary the four themes are:

- Joy in restoration to the community
- Joy in the burden and cost of that restoration
- An unconditional grace that seeks the lost
- A new understanding of repentance

All these are reinforced in the story of The Lost Coin.

The Story of the Lost Coin (Lk. 15:8-10)

In this story the Lord Jesus is talking about "money". Whenever money is involved people's reactions are usually much less complicated by hypocrisy than by status.

The Structure of the Story

Introduction: ***"Or what woman, having ten silver coins …"***

A ***if she <u>loses</u> one coin***

B ***does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek it diligently until she <u>finds</u> it and <u>finding</u> it***

C ***she calls together her friends and neighbours saying <u>rejoice with me</u>***

B* ***for I have <u>found</u> the coin***

A* ***that I had lost"***

Application: ***"Even so I tell you there is <u>joy</u> before the angels of God over <u>one</u> sinner who repents."***

To simplify this:

Introduction: a woman with ten coins

A one is **lost**

B search until she **finds**

C **joy** in community restoration

B* because she had **found**

A* what was **lost**

Application: joy over one who repents

There are differences from the story of the Lost Sheep. For example: in the Lost Coin there is no burden of restoration. Once the coin is found it is restored. Yet the focus (C) is again joy in community restoration. Again there is a word play in Aramaic with "one" and "joy".

Some cultural features

1. The introduction is culture sensitive. Jesus said to these **men**, ***"What woman"***. To have said, as He did in the story of the Lost Sheep, ***"Which woman among you"*** would have been an unpardonable insult.
2. To an ordinary village woman the loss of a coin would have been a sad event. A village was largely self-supporting – growing food, making clothes etc. So cash was rare and precious.
3. The coin was probably part if the woman's dowry. Arab bedouin wear that dowry around their necks all the time, but Arab village women do not. They also keep their dowry on a necklace but it is usually kept at home. To lose a coin was more than the loss of a single coin. It meant that the whole necklace was broken. This dowry is usually the woman's only security. It is all she has. When her husband gives her a gift it is usually another pierced coin or a medallion. The coin mentioned is a drachma – a coin weighing 4.3 grams of silver. This was the daily wage of a labourer. So she was a poor woman. When you have little the loss of 10% of your savings is devastating.
4. Village women mostly keep to the house or the courtyard. They may go daily to the village well. So the women in the story knew that the coin was in the house for she had not been out. Most floors would have been made of packed earth. A Palestinian villager keeps his animals in a central open courtyard or in the lower half of the house in winter. There are many places where a coin can roll, fall into the mud/dust and be lost. In a simple village home windows are often small and high for security reasons. Even in broad

daylight she needs lamps for the corners. Her diligence was prompted by the knowledge that **the coin could be found** if she kept sweeping/searching.

5. The Lord Jesus is rejecting Pharisaical attitudes towards women. First there were the despised shepherds and now inferior women! This required a moral decision on the part of the Lord Jesus.

The intensification of the parable

- In the Lost Sheep one out of a hundred was lost.
- In the Lost Coin it is one out of ten.
- In the third story of the Lost Son it is one out of two.

- The search for the sheep was in the wide open spaces.
- The search for the coin was confined to the house.
- In the Lost Son it was in the family.

In this intensification, Jesus is emphasizing that **the lost can be found**.

Theological issues

The lost sinner was in the House of Israel. He was not in the far country. He could be found. He was within the house of the Scribes and Pharisees. He was part of their wealth. If they search diligently, they can find him.

The woman is more responsible than the shepherd. Perhaps the shepherd could be excused for he does have one hundred sheep and, to a certain extent, sheep do have a will of their own. The open country is wide.

But this village woman has no-one to blame but herself. As she searches she probably says over and over to herself, "How stupid of me! Why, oh why didn't I secure the coin more firmly on the cord?" Her remorse and desperation grow out of this sense of undeniable responsibility. And her joy cries out to be shared. So she has a party only for women in the village. It would be very improper for her to mix socially with the village men. Village life was extremely dull and **this** woman finding her dowry certainly merits a party. She probably enjoys telling the story of how she lost the coin, when she discovered the loss, where she searched and how she felt when she finally saw it there glinting in the soft light of the oil lamp. The finding of one lost tax collector should have stimulated in the Pharisees similar joy and excitement.

In Summary	**The Lost Sheep**	**The Lost Coin**	**The Lost Son**
The main player in the story in each case is the Lord Jesus	As a shepherd	As a woman	As the Father
Tax collectors and sinners	One lost sheep	The lost coin	The younger son
Pharisees	99 sheep	The nine coins	The older son