

“This Man Receives Sinners”

Luke 15:

¹ Then drew near to Him all the publicans and sinners for to hear Him. ² And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, “This man receives sinners, and eats with them.”

³ And He spoke this parable to them, saying, ⁴ “What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost.’

⁷ “I say to you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repents, more than over ninety-nine just persons, which need no repentance.

⁸ “Either what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, does not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it? ⁹ And when she has found it, she calls her friends and her neighbours together, saying, ‘Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece which I had lost.’

¹⁰ “Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repents.”

As the “publicans and sinners” gathered about Christ, the rabbis expressed their displeasure. “This man receives sinners,” they said, “and eats with them.”

By this accusation they insinuated that Christ liked to associate with the sinful and vile, and was insensible to their wickedness. The rabbis had been disappointed in Jesus. Why was it that one who claimed so lofty a character did not mingle with them and follow their methods of teaching? Why did He

go about so unpretendingly, working among all classes? If He were a true prophet, they said, He would harmonize with them, and would treat the publicans and sinners with the indifference they deserved. It angered these guardians of society that He with whom they were continually in controversy, yet whose purity of life awed and condemned them, should meet, in such apparent sympathy, with social outcasts. They did not approve of His methods. They regarded themselves as educated, refined, and pre-eminently religious; but Christ's example laid bare their selfishness.

It angered them also that those who showed only contempt for the rabbis and who were never seen in the synagogues should flock about Jesus and listen with rapt attention to His words. The scribes and Pharisees felt only condemnation in that pure presence; how was it, then, that publicans and sinners were drawn to Jesus?

They knew not that the explanation lay in the very words they had uttered as a scornful charge, "This man receives sinners." The souls who came to Jesus felt in His presence that even for them there was escape from the pit of sin. The Pharisees had only scorn and condemnation for them; but Christ greeted them as children of God, estranged indeed from the Father's house, but not forgotten by the Father's heart. And their very misery and sin made them only the more the objects of His compassion. The farther they had wandered from Him, the more earnest the longing and the greater the sacrifice for their rescue.

All this the teachers of Israel might have learned from the sacred scrolls of which it was their pride to be the keepers and expounders. Had not David written – David, who had fallen into deadly sin – "I have gone astray like a lost sheep, seek Your servant"? Psalm 119:176. Had not Micah revealed God's love to the sinner, saying, "Who is a God like to You, that pardons iniquity, and passes by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He retains not His anger forever, because He delights in mercy"? Micah 7:18.

The Lost Sheep

Christ did not at this time remind His hearers of the words of Scripture. He appealed to the witness of their own experience. The wide-spreading tablelands on the east of Jordan afforded abundant pasturage for flocks, and

through the gorges and over the wooded hills had wandered many a lost sheep, to be searched for and brought back by the shepherd's care. In the company about Jesus there were shepherds, and also men who had money invested in flocks and herds, and all could appreciate His illustration: "What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?"

These souls whom you despise, said Jesus, are the property of God. By creation and by redemption they are His, and they are of value in His sight. As the shepherd loves his sheep, and cannot rest if even one be missing, so, in an infinitely higher degree, does God love every outcast soul. Men may deny the claim of His love, they may wander from Him, they may choose another master; yet they are God's, and He longs to recover His own. He says, "As a shepherd seeks out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out My sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day." Ezekiel 34:12.

In the parable the shepherd goes out to search for one sheep – the very least that can be numbered. So if there had been but one lost soul, Christ would have died for that one.

The sheep that has strayed from the fold is the most helpless of all creatures. It must be sought for by the shepherd, for it cannot find its way back. So with the soul that has wandered away from God; he is as helpless as the lost sheep, and unless divine love had come to his rescue he could never find his way to God.

The shepherd who discovers that one of his sheep is missing does not look carelessly upon the flock that is safely housed, and say, "I have ninety and nine, and it will cost me too much trouble to go in search of the straying one. Let him come back, and I will open the door of the sheepfold, and let him in." No; no sooner does the sheep go astray than the shepherd is filled with grief and anxiety. He counts and recounts the flock. When he is sure that one sheep is lost, he slumbers not. He leaves the ninety and nine within the fold, and goes in search of the straying sheep. The darker and more tempestuous the night and the more perilous the way, the greater is the shepherd's anxiety

and the more earnest his search. He makes every effort to find that one lost sheep.

With what relief he hears in the distance its first faint cry. Following the sound, he climbs the steepest heights, he goes to the very edge of the precipice, at the risk of his own life. Thus he searches, while the cry, growing fainter, tells him that his sheep is ready to die. At last his effort is rewarded; the lost is found. Then he does not scold it because it has caused him so much trouble. He does not drive it with a whip. He does not even try to lead it home. In his joy he takes the trembling creature upon his shoulders; if it is bruised and wounded, he gathers it in his arms, pressing it close to his bosom, that the warmth of his own heart may give it life. With gratitude that his search has not been in vain, he bears it back to the fold.

Thank God, He has presented to our imagination no picture of a sorrowful shepherd returning without the sheep. The parable does not speak of failure but of success and joy in the recovery. Here is the divine guarantee that not even one of the straying sheep of God's fold is overlooked, not one is left unsuccored. Every one that will submit to be ransomed, Christ will rescue from the pit of corruption and from the briers of sin.

Desponding soul, take courage, even though you have done wickedly. Do not think that perhaps God will pardon your transgressions and permit you to come into His presence. God has made the first advance. While you were in rebellion against Him, He went forth to seek you. With the tender heart of the shepherd He left the ninety and nine and went out into the wilderness to find that which was lost. The soul, bruised and wounded and ready to perish, He encircles in His arms of love and joyfully bears it to the fold of safety.

It was taught by the Jews that before God's love is extended to the sinner, he must first repent. In their view, repentance is a work by which men earn the favour of Heaven. And it was this thought that led the Pharisees to exclaim in astonishment and anger. "This man receives sinners." According to their ideas He should permit none to approach Him but those who had repented. But in the parable of the lost sheep, Christ teaches that salvation does not come through our seeking after God but through God's seeking after us. "There is none that understands, there is none that seeks after God. They are

all gone out of the way.” Romans 3:11-12. We do not repent in order that God may love us, but He reveals to us His love in order that we may repent.

When the straying sheep is at last brought home, the shepherd's gratitude finds expression in melodious songs of rejoicing. He calls upon his friends and neighbors, saying to them, “Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost.” So when a wanderer is found by the great Shepherd of the sheep, heaven and earth unite in thanksgiving and rejoicing.

“Joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repents, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.” You Pharisees, said Christ, regard yourselves as the favorites of heaven. You think yourselves secure in your own righteousness. Know, then, that if you need no repentance, My mission is not to you. These poor souls who feel their poverty and sinfulness, are the very ones whom I have come to rescue. Angels of heaven are interested in these lost ones whom you despise. You complain and sneer when one of these souls joins himself to Me; but know that angels rejoice, and the song of triumph rings through the courts above.

The rabbis had a saying that there is rejoicing in heaven when one who has sinned against God is destroyed; but Jesus taught that to God the work of destruction is a strange work. That in which all heaven delights is the restoration of God's own image in the souls whom He has made.

When one who has wandered far in sin seeks to return to God, he will encounter criticism and distrust. There are those who will doubt whether his repentance is genuine, or will whisper, “He has no stability; I do not believe that he will hold out.” These persons are doing not the work of God but the work of Satan, who is the accuser of the brethren. Through their criticisms the wicked one hopes to discourage that soul, and to drive him still farther from hope and from God. Let the repenting sinner contemplate the rejoicing in heaven over the return of the one that was lost. Let him rest in the love of God and in no case be disheartened by the scorn and suspicion of the Pharisees.

The rabbis understood Christ's parable as applying to the publicans and sinners; but it has also a wider meaning. By the lost sheep Christ represents not only the individual sinner but the one world that has apostatized and has

been ruined by sin. This world is but an atom in the vast dominions over which God presides, yet this little fallen world – the one lost sheep – is more precious in His sight than are the ninety and nine that went not astray from the fold. Christ, the loved Commander in the heavenly courts, stooped from His high estate, laid aside the glory that He had with the Father, in order to save the one lost world. For this He left the sinless worlds on high, the ninety and nine that loved Him, and came to this earth, to be “wounded for our transgressions” and “bruised for our iniquities.” (Isaiah 53:5.) God gave Himself in His Son that He might have the joy of receiving back the sheep that was lost.

“Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God.” 1 John 3:1. And Christ says, “As You have sent Me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world” (John 17:18) – to “fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ, . . . for His body's sake, which is the church.” Colossians 1:24. Every soul whom Christ has rescued is called to work in His name for the saving of the lost. This work had been neglected in Israel. Is it not neglected today by those who profess to be Christ's followers?

How many of the wandering ones have you, reader, sought for and brought back to the fold? When you turn from those who seem unpromising and unattractive, do you realize that you are neglecting the souls for whom Christ is seeking? At the very time when you turn from them, they may be in the greatest need of your compassion. In every assembly for worship, there are souls longing for rest and peace. They may appear to be living careless lives, but they are not insensible to the influence of the Holy Spirit. Many among them might be won for Christ.

If the lost sheep is not brought back to the fold, it wanders until it perishes. And many souls go down to ruin for want of a hand stretched out to save. These erring ones may appear hard and reckless; but if they had received the same advantages that others have had, they might have revealed far more nobility of soul, and greater talent for usefulness. Angels pity these wandering ones. Angels weep, while human eyes are dry and hearts are closed to pity.

O the lack of deep, soul-touching sympathy for the tempted and the erring!
O for more of Christ's spirit, and for less, far less, of self!

The Pharisees understood Christ's parable as a rebuke to them. Instead of accepting their criticism of His work, He had reproved their neglect of the publicans and sinners. He had not done this openly, lest it should close their hearts against Him; but His illustration set before them the very work which God required of them, and which they had failed to do. Had they been true shepherds, these leaders in Israel would have done the work of a shepherd. They would have manifested the mercy and love of Christ, and would have united with Him in His mission. Their refusal to do this had proved their claims of piety to be false. Now many rejected Christ's reproof; yet to some His words brought conviction. Upon these, after Christ's ascension to heaven, the Holy Spirit came, and they united with His disciples in the very work outlined in the parable of the lost sheep.

The Lost Piece of Silver

After giving the parable of the lost sheep Christ spoke another, saying, "What woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, does not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it?"

In the East the houses of the poor usually consisted of but one room, often windowless and dark. The room was rarely swept, and a piece of money falling on the floor would be speedily covered by the dust and rubbish. In order that it might be found, even in the daytime, a candle must be lighted, and the house must be swept diligently.

The wife's marriage portion usually consisted of pieces of money, which she carefully preserved as her most cherished possession, to be transmitted to her own daughters. The loss of one of these pieces would be regarded as a serious calamity, and its recovery would cause great rejoicing, in which the neighboring women would readily share.

"When she has found it," Christ said, "she calls her friends and her neighbors together, saying, Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I had lost. Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repents."

This parable, like the preceding, sets forth the loss of something which with proper search may be recovered, and that with great joy. But the two parables represent different classes. The lost sheep knows that it is lost. It has left the shepherd and the flock, and it cannot recover itself. It represents those who realize that they are separated from God and who are in a cloud of perplexity, in humiliation, and sorely tempted. The lost coin represents those who are lost in trespasses and sins, but who have no sense of their condition. They are estranged from God, but they know it not. Their souls are in peril, but they are unconscious and unconcerned. In this parable Christ teaches that even those who are indifferent to the claims of God are the objects of His pitying love. They are to be sought for that they may be brought back to God.

The sheep wandered away from the fold; it was lost in the wilderness or upon the mountains. The piece of silver was lost in the house. It was close at hand, yet it could be recovered only by diligent search.

This parable has a lesson to families. In the household there is often great carelessness concerning the souls of its members. Among their number may be one who is estranged from God; but how little anxiety is felt lest in the family relationship there be lost one of God's entrusted gifts.

The coin, though lying among dust and rubbish, is a piece of silver still. Its owner seeks it because it is of value. So every soul, however degraded by sin, is in God's sight accounted precious. As the coin bears the image and superscription of the reigning power, so man at his creation bore the image and superscription of God; and though now marred and dim through the influence of sin, the traces of this inscription remain upon every soul. God desires to recover that soul and to retrace upon it His own image in righteousness and holiness.

The woman in the parable searches diligently for her lost coin. She lights the candle and sweeps the house. She removes everything that might obstruct her search. Though only one piece is lost, she will not cease her efforts until that piece is found. So in the family if one member is lost to God every means should be used for his recovery. On the part of all the others let there be diligent, careful self-examination. Let the life-practice be investigated. See if there is not some mistake, some error in management, by which that soul is confirmed in impenitence.

If there is in the family one child who is unconscious of his sinful state, parents should not rest. Let the candle be lighted. Search the word of God, and by its light let everything in the home be diligently examined, to see why this child is lost. Let parents search their own hearts, examine their habits and practices. Children are the heritage of the LORD, and we are answerable to Him for our management of His property.

There are fathers and mothers who long to labour in some foreign mission field; there are many who are active in Christian work outside the home, while their own children are strangers to the Saviour and His love. The work of winning their children for Christ many parents trust to the minister or the Sabbath school teacher, but in doing this they are neglecting their own God-given responsibility. The education and training of their children to be Christians is the highest service that parents can render to God. It is a work that demands patient labour, a lifelong diligent and persevering effort. By a neglect of this trust we prove ourselves unfaithful stewards. No excuse for such neglect will be accepted by God.

But those who have been guilty of neglect are not to despair. The woman whose coin was lost searched until she found it. So in love, faith, and prayer let parents work for their households, until with joy they can come to God saying, "Behold, I and the children whom the LORD has given me." Isaiah 8:18.

This is true home missionary work, and it is as helpful to those who do it as to those for whom it is done. By our faithful interest for the home circle we are fitting ourselves to work for the members of the LORD's family, with whom, if loyal to Christ, we shall live through eternal ages. For our brethren [and sisters] in Christ we are to show the same interest that as members of one family we have for one another.

And God designs that all this shall fit us to labour for still others. As our sympathies shall broaden and our love increase, we shall find everywhere a work to do. God's great human household embraces the world, and none of its members are to be passed by with neglect.

Wherever we may be, there the lost piece of silver awaits our search. Are we seeking for it? Day by day we meet with those who take no interest in religious things; we talk with them, we visit among them; do we show an interest in their spiritual welfare? Do we present Christ to them as the sin-pardoning Saviour? With our own hearts warm with the love of Christ, do we tell them about that love? If we do not, how shall we meet these souls – lost, eternally lost – when with them we stand before the throne of God?

The value of a soul, who can estimate? Would you know its worth, go to Gethsemane, and there watch with Christ through those hours of anguish, when He sweat as it were great drops of blood. Look upon the Saviour uplifted on the cross. Hear that despairing cry, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” Mark 15:34. Look upon the wounded head, the pierced side, the marred feet. Remember that Christ risked all. For our redemption, heaven itself was imperiled. At the foot of the cross, remembering that for one sinner Christ would have laid down His life, you may estimate the value of a soul.

If you are in communion with Christ, you will place His estimate upon every human being. You will feel for others the same deep love that Christ has felt for you. Then you will be able to win, not drive, to attract, not repulse, those for whom He died. None would ever have been brought back to God if Christ had not made a personal effort for them; and it is by this personal work that we can rescue souls. When you see those who are going down to death, you will not rest in quiet indifference and ease. The greater their sin and the deeper their misery, the more earnest and tender will be your efforts for their recovery. You will discern the need of those who are suffering, who have been sinning against God, and who are oppressed with a burden of guilt. Your heart will go out in sympathy for them, and you will reach out to them a helping hand. In the arms of your faith and love you will bring them to Christ. You will watch over and encourage them, and your sympathy and confidence will make it hard for them to fall from their steadfastness.

In this work all the angels of heaven are ready to co-operate. All the resources of heaven are at the command of those who are seeking to save the lost. Angels will help you to reach the most careless and the most hardened. And when one is brought back to God, all heaven is made glad; seraphs and

cherubs touch their golden harps, and sing praises to God and the Lamb for their mercy and loving-kindness to the children of men.

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