

Finding Those who are Lost

Luke chapter 19 describes the mission of our Master, Jesus Christ: “the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Lu. 19:10). In our reading for today in Luke chapter 15, we have a threefold parable which demonstrates this point: the Lord’s finding again of those which were previously lost, in terms of a shepherd finding his sheep, a woman finding her piece of silver, and a father receiving his son once again.

Finding a Lost Sheep

This first aspect of the parable describes how that a shepherd will diligently seek after a sheep that has become lost. There may be many reasons why the sheep got lost: it could be that it wandered off, being distracted by something. It may have run from wild animals, and lost its way. Either way, the shepherd is determined to find the missing sheep, and bring it back into the sheepfold. The application of this parable is clear. The prophet Isaiah describes those who have strayed from the sheepfold: “All we like sheep have gone astray ...” (Isa. 53:6). And again: “He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.” (Isa. 40:11). The sheep are those who follow the Good Shepherd, and who will allow him to bring them back to the fold. And when the wayward sheep is returned, there is great joy and rejoicing at its restoration. So the conclusion is given: “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: (Lu. 15:7).

The language expresses a certain irony here: there is no man, save Messiah himself, who does not need to repent. The point is, they do not see the need, they do not think they need to repent. In a similar fashion, when the Pharisees asked his disciples: “Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners?” Jesus answered: “they that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick ... I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Mat. 9:13). Of course, there are none who are free from the malaise of human weakness, and who do not need the services of the great physician – but there are plenty who think they are whole, and do not need to repent.

But returning back to our parable, Peter seems to allude to it later: “Ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls” (1 Pet. 2:25). Being once astray ourselves, we ought to have compassion on those who are in danger of becoming lost, and seek to guide them back into the ecclesial sheepfold.

Finding the Missing Silver:

The second aspect of this parable is to do with a woman who has lost a tenth of her money, and diligently seeks for it, not ceasing until it is found. Evidently, the import is the same as that which we have just considered, but with a different emphasis. The first aspect was to do with that which is lost, but in the case of the missing silver, the emphasis is that of *seeking* that which was missing. A similar conclusion is given:

“Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth” (Lu. 15:10).

The piece of silver then, represents an individual sinner, previously treasured, but now gone. But notice where the sinner is lost: in the house! How can it be, that a brother or sister can be lost within the ecclesial household? Yes, it can be so, as the majority overlooks their needs, and their falling away goes unnoticed. We must always be ever tending to the needs of our brothers and sisters: “look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others” (Phil. 2:4). Here is a tragic situation: the ecclesia may have doctrinal purity, as in the case of the Philippians, but nevertheless individuals can feel lost there. It is the case that one can be lost and alone in a crowd: we must ensure that in our ecclesias, the needs of those who feel lost are catered for, being every much a piece of treasure than any of the others in the household.

The woman of the parable had previously possessed the piece of silver, but had lost it. So it is that we must ensure that we do not lose one of Christ’s little ones through our inaction/negligence or any other cause. And in this we have the example of Christ himself: “... those that thou gavest me I have kept, *and none of them is lost*, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled” (Jno. 17:12).

Return of the Prodigal Son:

This last aspect of the parable is different from the first two in a number of points: whereas the sheep and the lost silver had gone missing for whatever reason, here the Son makes a deliberate and concerted decision to leave the household. There is always much sorrow at the departure of men and women out of the ecclesia, who are tempted and distracted by the way of the world, and the temporal benefits of this life. The word “prodigal”, though not in the text of our Bibles literally means: “*spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant*”, and accurately describes those who are lovers of pleasures at the expense of spiritual things. The prodigal Son fits the description of Paul to Timothy, of those who are “lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God” (2 Tim. 3:4). Preferring the attractions of the world as being better than the delights of his father’s household, he indulged in the pleasures of sin for a season.

However, Proverbs chapter 21 tells a profound truth: “He that loveth pleasure shall be a poor man: he that loveth wine and oil shall not be rich” (Prov. 21:17). Constantly feeding the lust of the flesh will eventually lead to ruin, and this was the case with the son in question. He “wasted his substance with riotous living” (Lu. 15:13), and soon “began to be in want”. There was a famine in the country, and he had no means to sustain himself, or meet his natural needs. There are a number of Proverbs that meet this description:

“Whoso keepeth the law is a wise son: but he that is a companion of riotous men shameth his father” (Prov. 28:7).

“Whoso loveth wisdom rejoiceth his father: but he that keepeth company with harlots spendeth his substance” (Prov. 29:3).

Both keeping company with harlots, and being a companion of riotous men, the Son was quickly brought to ruin, and was compelled to take drastic measures to survive. “He went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine” (Lu. 15:15). The word translated “joined” in this verse refers to a strong adherence, rather than a loose association. The word is used on a number of occasions, including 1 Corinthians chapter 6: “What, know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? For two saith he, shall be one flesh. But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit” (1 Cor. 6:16-17).

The Son joined himself to harlots in a literal sense, but there is also the sense of being joined to the Harlot apostasy, described in Revelation 17. There, we find a mother of harlots and abominations, to which men can become joined, becoming one with her. But the disciple of Christ will instead be joined to him as a multitudinous ecclesial bride, to become one spirit, rejoicing together with him throughout the ages to come.

Having fallen on hard times, the Son joined himself to a citizen of that country, to be given the lowly job of feeding swine, being so hungry that he was tempted to eat some of the swine’s food. But then we read that: “when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!” (Lu. 15:17),

“when he came to himself”: The overindulgence of sin is form of madness! So saith the wise preacher: “... the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and *madness is in their heart* while they live, and after that they go to the dead” (Eccl. 9:3). But by the effect of straitened circumstances, the Son remembered the house of his father, and how much better things were then. Even the lowliest of his father’s servants were provided for, when he had nothing. But this is the deceitfulness of sin, which we are all prone to. The pleasures of the world can pull us away from the household of faith, and we can indulge ourselves in them for a season. But at the last, the attractions of sin will prove to lead only to spiritual poverty. “All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world *passeth away*, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.” (1 Jno. 2:16-17). The delightfulness of the world’s attractions soon failed the Son, passing away. They were not of his Father, and could not sustain him in a day of evil.

The parable continues to describe how that the Son resolved to return to his father, humbling himself, by saying: “I have sinned against heaven and before thee ...” (Lu. 15:18), and offering himself as a servant to do his Master’s wishes. We find however, that “when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him” (Lu. 15:20).

Notice that here the Father appears to be watching for his Son. He was patiently waiting for him, and saw him when “he was yet a great way off”. Such is our heavenly Father’s desire to have those who turned back, yet repent and return in humility before Him. And just as in the parable, so in reality, our Father is good and willing to forgive those who return to Him. Consider the following passages:

“... thou Lord, art good and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee” (Psa. 86:5)

“like as a Father pitieth his children, so Yahweh pitieth them that fear him” (Psa. 103:13).

“let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto Yahweh, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon” (Isa. 55:7).

Such is the greatness of our Heavenly Father, that he will pity and abundantly forgive those who repent before him – indeed there truly is joy in heaven at the return of a wayward sinner. Accordingly, the Father clothed him with the best garments, and made a feast to celebrate his return.

The next section of the parable deals with the Son’s elder brother. He stands as a representative of the Pharisees, whose boast was in their own works and in whose eyes no repentance is needed. He had no regard for his brother, and considered only his own circumstance. In his anger (verse 28) “he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do **I** serve thee, neither transgressed **I** at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest **me** a kid, that **I** might make merry with **my** friends” (verse 29). Notice the emphasis here (marked in bold): his primary concern was for himself – but such is not the mind of Christ. “Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others” (Phil. 2:4) is the apostolic maxim. This was the position of the Pharisees, who considered themselves to be without transgression, and more worthy of blessing than his wayward brother. The situation is epitomized in another parable taught by the Master, the parable of the Pharisee and Publican.

In this parable, two men went up to pray in the temple, a Pharisee and a Publican. The Pharisees prayer was similar to the sentiments of the older brother:

“The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess” (Lu. 18:11-12).

But the Publican displayed the spirit of the returning Son:

“the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me, a sinner” (Lu. 18:13).

And then we have the Master’s assessment:

“I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for everyone that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (Lu. 11:14).

Here is a warning that we must be careful to observe. When brethren and sisters return to the fold after a period of waywardness, we ought not to consider ourselves

any better than they. We must rather humble ourselves in the recognition that we, too, need forgiveness from our Father, in whose service we labour.

In each of the three aspects of this parable, we have seen the principle of seeking out, and restoring that which was lost. We individually have that responsibility of seeking out those whose way is in error, having strayed from the paths of righteousness. So says the Spirit through James:

“Brethren, if any of you do err from the Truth, and one convert him; Let him know that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins” (Jas. 5:20).

In this, we have the supreme example of Christ as the Good Shepherd, who will lose none of those who remain in his care and protection. Here is the true spirit of fellowship: to bear one another’s burdens, and to search out the wellbeing of the brethren and sisters in Christ. Let us learn from the parable before us, so that both we, and our formerly prodigal brethren and sisters might be given the blessings of returning to, and remaining in the Father’s household.

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