

## 5. GOD COMES FOR US

### **The Hidden Treasure (Matthew 13:44)**

There are a couple more parables of 'the kingdom' in Matthew 13, about our encounter with God's saving kingly rule.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field (Matt. 13:44).

The 'fear of the LORD' is likened to 'treasure' in Proverbs 2:1–5; Isaiah 33:5–6. Selling all is done in 'joy', not out of duty or obligation—a modern equivalent might be the excitement of winning the lottery. Compare John 15:11 ('that my joy may be in you'). This matches the joy God has over the return of a sinner (see Matt. 18:13; compare Luke 15:7). This 'someone' goes and 'sells all that he has'—as the disciples had done in Matt. 3:18–22; 9:9; 19:27–30. Compare Paul on knowing Christ in Phil. 3:7–11. Jesus here encapsulates, in a one-sentence story, the dynamic of embracing the kingdom of God that has come in his person and action.

### **The Merchant and the Pearl (Matthew 13:45–46)**

Where in 13:44 the kingdom of heaven is compared to the treasure, here it is compared with the merchant, not the pearl. This may not be significant—'like' may have the sense of 'like when'<sup>1</sup>—but it could be speaking of God's approach to us rather than our response to him (compare Luke 15:8–10: the woman and the lost coin). Taken this way, it tells us much about our value to God, and what He has given in pursuit of us. Compare Rom. 8:32 ('did not withhold his own Son') and 1 Pet. 1:18–19 ('you were ransomed').

### **The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin (Luke 15:1–7; Matthew 18:10–14)**

Note the context in Luke 15:1–2. Who are the sinners here? 'Sinners' was a kind of technical term for outsiders, disqualified from going into the temple because of some wrong or uncleanness they were involved in. They may not have given God much thought or care at all—they were probably more interested in themselves and their own lives. This would have to change if they were going to come to know and love the God who made them, that they will have to answer to for their lives. The same with the Pharisees and scribes: they reckoned they knew God, but maybe, as far as they were concerned, God was there to approve the good things they did and give them His favour. And that would need to change also, to realise that God is not there for us, but we are here for Him—and wonderfully so! All of us start out hating God (Rom. 1:30; 8:7; 2 Tim. 3:2–4; Acts 20:21; Heb. 6:1). For all of us, who set out in life thinking more of ourselves than of God, our thinking and our whole attitude of heart needs to change—we need to come to repentance.

In Luke's gospel these parables are applied to sinners coming in from outside, in Matthew's account of the lost sheep the emphasis is more on bringing back weaker members of the church who have strayed into sin. The parables are applicable to both.

Repentance is not just feeling sorry for our sins, things we've done wrong. It means to have a change of mind, mindset, attitude of heart. Not primarily with regard to our sin, though that changes too, but with regard to God. A whole change of mind, heart, attitude, towards God.

How does that happen? Maybe we think we come to our senses—we work it through and come to a considered decision: 'I do realise that I really love myself more than I love God, and I do really think that it's high time I changed that, so, after due consideration, I think I will come to a reasonable and carefully worked-out decision to put God first, and to really love Him. Isn't that

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<sup>1</sup> See Jeremias, *Parables*, pp. 101–102.

good of me? And I expect that God is really delighted to have me back—is that how it is? And, if we are saying, ‘Isn’t that good of me, for repenting, and God should be really glad that I have’, have we then really repented? Aren’t we still there at the centre of our little world?

Is true repenting ever something we can actually do for ourselves? Did the coin ‘repent’—in that sense? How could it? It was just lying there in the dark and the dirt—it couldn’t ‘do’ anything—it had to be found. Same with the sheep—or maybe even worse—the sheep had got itself lost, it had gone astray, it hadn’t wanted to go with the shepherd, it had got away from the shepherd and the rest of the sheep—it had taken its own way, and got itself lost. That might be more like where we have got ourselves to. So the sheep isn’t interested in getting back to the shepherd. It’s the shepherd who comes looking for the sheep.

Is that not the message of these stories? We don’t get ourselves back to God—that may be the last thing we want to do, and the last thing we are able to do—like the sheep and the coin. We don’t go seeking or looking for God—God has come looking for us, whether we want it or not, whether we can do anything about it or not—God came looking for me. And in that action God effects within us the gift of repentance (see Acts 5:30–31; 11:18; Eph. 2:8–9).

We tend to think that a coin has some value in itself. But a coin is just a little piece of metal. Its value is determined by what it means to the person it belongs to, and what they can do with it. When that coin was lost, it had no value at all in itself—lying there in the dirt, it couldn’t do anything for anyone. Maybe we are the same: we have no value in ourselves—especially when we are lost in the dirt—but when we belong to God and are being used by Him to do things, that is our true value. Same with the lost sheep. A sheep lost out on its own is no use too anyone—it just keeps growing wool and no one ever shears it—its wool becomes thick and matted and filthy. But when the sheep is found and brought back into the flock, then it can be shorn—or slaughtered—and so is very useful to the shepherd.

Here are the pictures Jesus gives of God when He comes looking for us. He’s like a shepherd, intent on finding that one lost sheep. He’s also like a housewife on a spring-cleaning spree. Jesus has no qualms about comparing God to a woman on a mission. Jesus once compared himself to a mother hen! God made us in His image as male and female, and it takes both to give us a true picture of God. So there is a likeness of God there in the way the woman was determined to keep looking until she found that coin—she lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and searches diligently until she finds it—just as God comes looking for us in Christ and will not give up until He has found us and has restored us to the place and function that He has for us.

Can we picture ourselves as that sheep riding on the shoulders of the shepherd as he carries us back to the sheepfold, and the other sheep looking up at us, and all the friends and neighbours? Might be a bit embarrassing, but we’d get a good view of it all from up there. Most important of all, we are close to the shepherd—we are wrapped around his head—we are held there by his firm grip. We’re back home. And He’s rejoicing—He’s over the moon about that.

This is where the story starts to get a bit far-fetched. Have you ever heard of a woman throwing a big party for all her friends and neighbours just because she has found a coin that she has lost, or have you ever heard of a shepherd or sheep farmer putting on a barbecue for all his neighbours and friends, just because he has found one lost sheep? The party would most likely cost more than the value of the coin, or the sheep! No way would anyone in their right mind throw a party like that, just because they found something they’d lost. But Jesus is making a point here: that’s what God does over us. He’s crazy with joy when He finds us and brings us back to Himself.

At the end of the story of the lost sheep Jesus says there will be ‘joy in heaven’, and at the end of the story of the lost coin he says, ‘I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God

over one sinner who repents' (Matt. 18:10). So who is it that has this joy? Just listening to that we may get the picture that the angels—all the population of heaven—are rejoicing over the sinner who repents, and that may well be true. But listen to it again more carefully: there is joy 'in heaven' 'there is joy in the *presence* of the angels of God'. So Who is 'in the presence of the angels of God'? Who is 'in heaven'? Jesus said, the 'angels always see the face of *My Father* who is in heaven'. So who first of all is having joy over sinners who repent? Our Father God.

This joy is not primarily dependent on us coming back. God always has joy—it's part of His nature. There was joy in God's own being—as Father, Son and Holy Spirit—before anything else ever happened—a deep sense of the rightness of things—who would have that more than God? Some of the fruit of the Spirit is joy—joy that comes from the heart of God—the joy and deep peace and satisfaction and contentment that God has in being Who He is, and in doing what He does. We are told 'all the heavenly beings shouted for joy' when God made everything and saw that it was very good (Job 38:7; Gen. 1:31). Yet even before He made anything, there was a joy at the heart of God. And it seems that it was ever God's purpose in making us, that we should come to participate in that joy that is in the heart of God, and know that with Him for ourselves. So when Jesus said, 'there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents', it is not just God saying: 'Great—here comes another one!' It is the overflow of the joy that has been in God from the beginning, as another sinner is saved into *that* pre-existing joy of God that God ever intended that one to know and embrace and participate in.

Have we ever been with someone when they came to faith in Christ? Or can we remember when we did ourselves? There is no greater joy than that.

### **The Father and the Two Lost Sons**

Much could be said. 'Nearly everyone who wrestles with this . . . ends up with a sense of awe at its inexhaustible content'. Long regarded as the whole gospel in one parable, an instance of Jesus' 'creative genius' and of 'his sheer intellectual stature',<sup>2</sup> to say nothing of Jesus' love and respect for and appreciation of his Father, and of his Father's love for us, His defiant and rebellious children, whether open or covert.

Kenneth Bailey, from a detailed examination of Middle Eastern cultural expectations then and now, draws attention to a number of unexpected or inexplicable features that would have alarmed or confounded the listeners:<sup>3</sup>

- The son's request for his inheritance while the father is still living is tantamount to wishing his father dead—a profound break of relationship.
- That the father concurs, rather than refuses and punishes, is an unprecedented example of love in the face of rejection.
- The older son does not take up his responsibility to reconcile the father and the younger son, but callously accepts his share of the deal, thus breaking his relationship with both.
- The younger son's hasty disposing of his share of the property for cash, to expend it on gentiles, would have earned him the intense displeasure of the entire community.
- The younger son's acceptance of working with unclean animals (see Lev. 11:7), when he would have been expected to refuse, shows his abrogation of the practice of his religion, and the degradation to which he has sunk.
- The younger son's intended proposition to his father would have been seen as a partial work of repentant reparation and atonement.
- The father's public running to meet his son, calculated to protect the boy from the hostility of the village, was a shattering subjection of himself to undignified humiliation

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, p. 158, in *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, Eerdmanns, Grand Rapids, Michigan, combined edition 1983.

<sup>3</sup> Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, pp. 158–206.

and obloquy: 'An Oriental nobleman with flowing robes never runs anywhere'—'an unexpected, visible demonstration of love in humiliation'—total acceptance in earnest searching.

- The son sees his father's love, and abandons his self-saving proposition. He foregoes all pride and attempted independence, and any self-satisfaction of having earned his own way, and comes under the total authority of his father, as he accepts his father's gracious gift of a new restored relationship, in full recognition of his own unworthiness.
- The 'best robe' would have been the father's own robe to be worn on special occasions, and would have required acceptance from the community, the ring would have been the father's authoritative signet ring, and the shoes, put on him by the servants, would have entailed their acceptance of him as their free master.
- The 'fatted calf' would have been large enough to feed the whole village in celebration.
- The older son approaches the house from outside, as the younger son has done.
- His unnatural suspicion, demanding explanation, and his angry refusal to enter and fulfil his obligations as joint host, indicates the older son's characteristic and insulting relational distance from his father.
- The Father humiliates himself before the guests to come out to the older son, as he did for the younger son.
- The older son chooses to humiliate his father publicly by quarrelling while guests are present.
- The older son demonstrates the attitude and spirit of a slave, not of a son, while insisting that he has obeyed his father's commands (see John 8:34–38).
- He has indicated his preference to feast separately with his friends, and with the words 'this son of yours' the older son declares that he is not part of the family.
- The father responds to the older son with conciliatory affection and generosity, as he has with the younger son. The older son enjoys all that the father still has, but his desire to be able to dispose of it as he wishes is moving towards the same desire the younger son had at the start to have his father out of the way.
- The true joy of restored life and relationship is reaffirmed.
- The story is left open-ended, for a conclusion yet to be provided in the response of the hearers.

Some nineteenth-century liberals, along with Islamic polemicists, used this parable to claim that 'the true gospel has no atonement. The gospel in Harnack's view "has to do with the Father only and not with the Son"'.<sup>4</sup> However, the running of the father to the lost son has been described as equivalent to 'the leap from heaven to the Cross'.

### **The Tower and the War Party (Luke 14:25–33)**

Sometimes these are taken as saying we must be properly prepared to cope with the issues of life. But both stories are about people who could not possibly succeed with the resources they set out with, and who needed to come to terms with that. The point of the stories is not 'be better prepared', but 'renounce all that you have' (v. 33). We need to realise that we start from an impossible position. We must abandon everything we think we've got going for us that we think will help us to 'make it' in life, and abandon ourselves and all our 'unfinished business' to the mercy of God, and make our peace with Him (see Philippians 3:3–12). We are to acknowledge that we needed to be 'crucified with Christ' (Galatians 2:20; see v. 27), and that we were in truth embraced there in his death on the cross by God's great love.

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<sup>4</sup> Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, p. 188. P. T. Forsyth engages with this view in a wholistic way in *The Preaching of Jesus and the Gospel of Christ*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1987.