

## **The Parable of the Lost Coin**

**Luke 15: 8 – 10**

### **CXVI. Expositions of the Gospel According to Luke**

**August 3, 2014**

Jesus is under assault by Pharisees and scribes who complain, for the second time recorded by Luke (5:29-32), that Jesus “receives sinners and eats with them” (15:2). This is completely unacceptable to the religious community. The “sinners” were immoral. The “tax-gatherers” were collaborators. Both were outcasts from society, regarded as irreligious, unclean, unfit for social life, and excluded from the synagogue. Socializing with them implied indifference to their evil or even condoning it.

Jesus explains his fraternizing with sinners by teaching three parables of lostness: the sheep, the coin, and the son (15:3-32). The three parables teach the same lesson of God’s love for the lost sinner. Jesus is pursuing the lost as would a shepherd for a lost sheep, a woman for a lost coin, and a father for a lost son. The God of heaven is a searching, pursuing God. Jesus came into the world that He might seek and save the lost (Lk 19:10). Jesus continues His lesson:

*Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? (Lk 15:8)*

Palestinian houses were dark, light coming in by only one circular window about 18 inches across. The floor consisted of beaten earth covered with dried reeds and rushes. Barclay says,

“To look for a coin on a floor like that was very much like looking for a needle in a haystack.”<sup>1</sup> Yet this is what she does “diligently” or “carefully” (NASB) “until she finds it.” In the previous parable, the emphasis was on the persistence of the search, which continues until the lost sheep is found. Here the emphasis is upon “the thoroughness with which the search is carried out,” says Geldenhuys.<sup>2</sup> She then responds as the shepherd does upon recovery of the lost item:

*And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying,  
'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' (Lk 15:9)*

And the conclusion is the same,

*“In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (Lk 15:10)*

The “Lost Coin” teaches the same lessons as the “Lost Sheep” but nuanced to make certain points more emphatic. Primarily the differences arise out of the difference between searching for a living being such as a *sheep*, versus searching for an inanimate object, a *coin*, as well as the declining ratio of the lost to the found.

### **Human hopelessness**

First, *Jesus is highlighting the hopelessness of the lost*. A lost sinner is like a lost coin. It cannot assist in its recovery. Sheep can wander. It *might* wander home. Sheep can bleat. It *might* be

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<sup>1</sup> Barclay, 209.

<sup>2</sup> Geldenhuys, 402.

heard. However, a coin can do nothing. It can't move. It can't cry out. The finding of the coin is entirely up to the Searcher. The point would be that when God seeks and searches for helpless sinners they offer no assistance at all. Jesus would have me understand the hopelessness and helplessness of the lost. *I am the lost coin*. He would also have us understand that all the initiative in finding the lost is with Him.

Most of the world's religions portray fallen humanity as seekers, even honest searchers after the truth. Man yearns for God, they say. Religion is the history of man's pursuit of God. Jesus, by way of contrast, likens us to lifeless coins. "I'm trying to find myself," an earnest person might say. It can't be done. A coin cannot find itself. I cannot find my way back to God by establishing new priorities, or by moral reformation, or by turning over a new leaf, or by walking a new path. I cannot do it. I am incapable.

I am like the coin. I haven't the *eyes* with which to see spiritual truth, I haven't the *ears* with which to hear spiritual truth, I haven't the *heart* with which to receive spiritual truth, and I haven't the *mouth* with which to cry out for help. The biblical picture of lost humanity is that of death: "you were dead in the trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1-3). We have all the responsive capacities of a coin or a corpse. "While we were still weak," or "helpless" (NASB), "at the right time Christ died for the ungodly," writes the Apostle Paul (Rom 5:6). Without Christ we have "no hope" and are "without God in the world" (Eph 2:12).

Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones is one to which we return again and again to understand our lostness. Our spiritual condition is like that of dead, dry bones. Ezekiel is commanded to preach to them,

*Then he said to me, "Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. (Ezek 37:4)*

This would appear to be the ultimate exercise in futility. Dead bones cannot respond: they have no eyes, no ears, no hearts and no interest. This is the condition of lost sinners. This is why Jesus socializes with the outcasts. Their situation is helpless.

The Christian religion is not a religion of moral reformation through personal effort. Christianity is a religion of grace. I cannot find myself. I cannot change myself. I cannot reform myself. I cannot pick myself up by the bootstraps. This was the mistake of the Pelagius (354-420 AD), the nemesis of Augustine (354-430). We could if we would, he said. Through moral effort we can believe and obey God, he insisted. Augustine correctly responded, no we can't—not without the grace of God. Grace must enable. Grace must give us the eyes with which to see, the ears with which to hear, the tongue with which to cry out, the heart with which to receive. We "cannot" understand the things of God (1 Cor 2:14). We "cannot please God" (Rom 8:8). "No one can come to Me," Jesus says, "unless the Father who sent me draws him" (Jn 6:44). We are not just lost, but *very* lost indeed.

### **Divine initiative**

Second, Jesus is highlighting *the unilateral nature of the search*. All three of these parables are primarily about God. The dead coin, over against the living sheep, throws all of the focus onto the action of the searcher while reducing the capacities of the lost one to that of the inanimate. We are no longer distracted by the pitiful condition of the sheep. The coin does not evoke our sympathy. All our attention is on the woman as she “light(s) a lamp” and “sweep(s) the house” and “search(es) diligently.” She is relentless and comprehensive in her search. When she finds it, it is no thanks to the coin. It is entirely due to her diligence in searching.

We all know what it is like to lose a thing of value. All of my life I’ve needed to remember two items. I rise from my desk and check one pocket for my wallet, then the other for my keys. Two items. Then my eyes weakened and I needed reading glasses. Three items. Then it became “necessary” to carry a cell phone. Four. I seem incapable of remembering all four items. What do I lose? Typically? My glasses. All the time. What do I do? Tear the house apart until I find them. Then tear my study apart at the church. Then retrace my steps. I feel uneasy while they are lost, restless. I diligently search. I have to find them. What if the lost item is my wallet, with its cash and credit cards? Add to the unease and restlessness agitation and nervousness. I must find my wallet.

What am I to understand? The lengths to which God goes to save sinners. Isn’t this what the incarnation is all about? Isn’t this what the cross is all about? If I am to be found, it will be as a result of a sovereign and gracious action of a persistent, searching, pursuing God. We see the same sovereign activity in Ezekiel’s Valley of Dry Bones:

*Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD. (Ezek 37:5, 6)*

Only God can bring life to the dead. Notice the repetition: “I will...I will,” and only then can the dry bones live. Further, I am to understand the great lengths to which God goes to find me. We don’t help. We’re oblivious and impervious. We’re indifferent. Yet he has been in pursuit. He has brought circumstances to bear upon me—perhaps an affliction, or a broken heart, or the loss of a loved one. Perhaps he has brought blessing and abundance, His kindness being meant to lead me to repentance (Romans 2:4). He has brought people into my life and opportunities. I have been placed in just the right place at just the right time to hear what I needed to hear. He’s knocking at our door. He’s dealing with us. He’s pursuing us at work, at meals, at leisure, at school, in the neighborhood.

Like the woman in the parable, He too lights a lamp, and sweeps the house and searches carefully. He persists until He finds us. If I am a believer today it is because God went on the hunt. It is “by His doing” that I am “in Christ Jesus” (1 Corinthians 1:30). I did not choose Him, He chose me (John 15:5). I did not love Him, He loved me (1 John 4:10). I did not believe Him, He gave me faith (Ephesians 2:8,9). As with the Apostle Paul, He caused the scales to fall from my eyes (Acts 9:18). “I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” The Apostle Paul writes,

*But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.. (1 Cor 1:27-29)*

Believers believe *not* because they are “wise,” “strong,” or something noteworthy. Quite to the contrary. They are “foolish,” “weak,” “base,” “despised,” and nothing (“things that are not”). We cannot boast in being “found.” We are found only because of the relentless, comprehensive, gracious search of the Searcher.

The implication of this diligent searching of God would not be lost on the scribes and Pharisees who are listening. Jesus is explaining why He socializes with tax collectors and sinners. His answer, that He is like the searching woman, implies that we too are to be like the searching woman. The focus on the woman as the searcher makes the role of the Christian community, as God’s agents on earth in searching for the lost coins of the world, more emphatic. The lost will not be found unless we go and find them. God uses a lamp. We are that lamp. God uses a broom. We are that broom. He searches “diligently.” We are His hands and feet in that careful search. If the Parable of the Lost Sheep evoked our sense of *sympathy* for the lost one, this parable evokes our sense of *responsibility*. Don’t expect the lost coin, the lost soul to crawl out from under the straw covering the floor. Don’t expect it to call out for help. Don’t expect it to wave its arms or send up a flare. Lost sheep want to be rescued. Lost coins are oblivious to all.

We have regularly explained our responsibility for the lost as that of *praying, giving, and going* on their behalf. We *pray* for the lost, we *give* to support others who proclaim the gospel to the lost, and we *go* ourselves with the gospel to the lost. We pray, give, and go for those who are lost at home, and we pray, give and go for those who are lost across borders and oceans. This is not a secondary matter to us. We take the broom of the law and the light of the gospel, and we “search diligently.” Like Jesus we go that we might “seek and save” the lost (Luke 19:10). We preach, teach, and live the gospel as Christ’s ambassadors, pleading, entreating, begging to “be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20).

Let’s nuance our discussion a bit. A recent *Christianity Today* article asked the question, “Would Jesus hang out at a strip club?” One of the responders wrote, Yes!, “there is no context, environment, or event that Jesus would choose not to be in.” Citing the estimated 400,000 strippers working in nearly 4,000 clubs in the United States he argues, “as followers of Christ, we should hang out in these places too.”<sup>3</sup> A very moving account was given of Christian *women* who are going into these clubs and leading employees to Christ. Another responder, a man, admits that initially he thought it was a trick question. Hang out? You must be kidding. Absolutely not. He recommends meditating on Matthew 5:28-29 (Jesus’ teaching on lust).

There is a great deal of foolishness today disguised as relating to the unbelieving world. Obscenity, visual and verbal, is tolerated by sincere believers in books, films, television shows; alcohol is consumed at excessive quantities; clubs are joined and luxuries devoured; all in the name of “outreach.” The destructive power of sin as well as the seductive tactics of the devil are not being taken seriously enough. It would be foolhardy for any man to “hang out” in a strip club

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<sup>3</sup> “Would Jesus hang out in a strip club?” *Christianity Today*, July/August 2014, 31.

in order to evangelize strippers. A woman *might*. A normal man should never do so, any more than an alcoholic should evangelize in a bar, a glutton in a donut shop, or a compulsive consumer at the mall.

Jesus did not and would not “hang out” in houses of prostitution, or drug dens, or pagan temples. He *would* eat bread with anyone. He *would* socialize with anyone. Why? So that he might lead them to repentance. Why? So that they might be saved from their bondage now and damnation later. He found ways to be with them, but not while they were plying their trades, indulging their lusts, or feeding their habits. The outreach message, “Jesus loves porn stars,” to which the article refers, is misleading. It sounds like, Jesus loves what they do. Lots of men love porn stars. The love Jesus has is that which calls sinners to repent. Let’s leave it at, “Jesus loves sinners.” He saves all manner of sinners, even the worst, even the most degraded and unclean.

We are to be separate from evil (2 Cor 6:17), yet we are not to leave the world (2 Cor 5:9, 10). We are to engage it, yet not be conformed to it (Rom 12:1, 2). We are to be light and salt in the world, yet blameless and innocent and without blemish “in the midst” of our “crooked and twisted generation” and not corrupted by it (Mt 5:13-16; Phil 2:14-15). This means some prudent distance from the seductive environments which have caused others to fall.

On the other hand, consider the case of the Rev. Henry Gerecke (rhymes with Cherokee), who at the age of 53 was asked to serve as U.S. Army chaplain for the Nazi prisoners at Nuremberg as they stood trial beginning in November 1945. Some people thought that those evil men did not deserve the benefit of Christian clergy. His lost sheep would include Reichsmarshal, Hermann

Goering, the #2 ranking Nazi and commander of the *Luftwaffe*; Julius Streicher, publisher of the hate-soaked newspaper *Der Stürmer*; Field Marshall Wilhelm Keitel, Chief of Staff of the *Wehrmacht*, second in command of the German army only to Hitler; Hans Fritzsche, Hitler's radio propaganda chief; Baldur von Schirach, leader of the Hitler *Jugend*, the Hitler Youth; Albert Speer, the architect who designed many of Hitler's buildings and eventually was placed in charge of war production; Rudolf Hess, at one time Hitler's closest friend and the third in line to succeed Hitler; Joachim von Ribbentrop, Hitler's lead diplomat; Karl Doenitz, commander of the German U-Boats and Hitler's actual successor; Alfred Rosenberg, the Nazi's chief philosopher; Fritz Sauckel, Hitler's labor chief and the man responsible for bringing eight million foreign (slave) laborers into Germany; and Hans Frank, governor general of Poland, nicknamed the "Butcher of Krakow;" and many others. Gerecke was shaken by the request. Tim Townsend, in his *Mission at Nuremberg*, put it this way:

He was terrified by the prospect of being close to the men who had tried to take over the world. Would he have to shake their hands? He imagined that simply feeling their breath on his face would be sickening. How could he comfort these Nazis who had caused the world so much heartache? How could he minister to the leaders of a movement that had taken millions of lives?<sup>4</sup>

What was he being asked to do?

The U.S. Army was asking one of its chaplains to kneel down with the architects of the Holocaust and calm their spirits as they answered for their crimes in front

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<sup>4</sup> Tim Townsend, *Mission at Nuremberg*, (William Morrow, An Imprint of HarperCollins, 2014), 104.

of the world. With those images of Dachau fresh in his memory, Gerecke had to decide if he could share his faith, the thing he held most dear in life, with the men who had given the orders to construct such a place.<sup>5</sup>

In the end he determined to accept the assignment. Over a period of many months he conducted services with these men and met privately with them for prayer and Bible study. In the end he saw many reconciled to Christ, to the church, penitent and eager to receive the sacrament. He placed the bar to communion fairly high. Months of instruction plus personal evaluation by Gerecke: “I must feel convinced that each candidate not only understands its significance, but that, in penitence and faith, he is ready.”<sup>6</sup> Remarkably, Keitel returned to the faith of his youth. Just prior to his hanging, he knelt in his cell and prayed. Townsend narrates:

“On his knees and under deep emotional stress, [Keitel] received the Body and Blood of our Savior,” Gerecke wrote later. “With tears in his voice he said, ‘You have helped me more than you know. May Christ, my Savior, stand by me all the way. I shall need him so much.’”<sup>7</sup>

At the top of the gallows Keitel recited a prayer that his mother taught him as a child: “Christ’s blood and judgment are my adornment and robe of honor; therein I will stand before God when I go to Heaven. Amen.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 11

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 272, 273

Sauckel often pleaded for God's mercy as he knelt beside Gerecke, wiping his tears as he admitted his sin. He studied the Bible with seriousness as well as the Lutheran catechism. On the occasion of his first communion, he rose from his knees, threw his hands into the air, and cried aloud, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." On the day of his execution Ribbentrop, the man who negotiated the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact in 1939 that paved the way for the invasion of Poland which started World War II, according to Gerecke, "put all his trust in the Blood of the Lamb that taketh away the sins of the world. He asked that God have mercy on his soul."<sup>9</sup> Even Hans Frank, the "Killer of Poles" (another of his nicknames), came to repent, reaffirming his faith in Christ and receiving communion.

This is what it means to seek and to save the lost, even lost Nazis. Albert Speer came to admit the guilt of the Nazi regime and recognize "that the neglect of genuine Christianity caused its downfall."<sup>10</sup> Gerecke pursued lost sinners with exceptional results. Yet again, God sent Gerecke to these despised war criminals. He is the sending God, beyond whose reach and care lies no one.

### **Great joy**

Third, Jesus is highlighting *the greatness of the joy*.<sup>11</sup>

*And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.'<sup>10</sup> Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."* (Lk 15:9, 10)

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>11</sup> "The emphasis again falls on the heavenly joy" (Green, 576).

The emphasis upon joy is brought out by the ten-fold reduction of the ratio from 1 of 100 to 1 out of 10. The loss of the woman was much greater than that of the shepherd. He lost only one of a hundred sheep. She lost one of only ten coins. Left unrecovered, the loss of the coin would be considerably more severe. The ten coins, says Green, represents ten days wages. “The loss of even one coin would be a catastrophic incident,” underscoring “even more the urgency in finding what is lost.”<sup>12</sup> Consequently its recovery proportionately brings more relief and rejoicing. Perhaps this is why the expression in verse 10 is slightly different, being more personalized. The joy is not just “in heaven” but “in the presence of the angels of God.” If so, then what kind of priority ought joining this search for the loss be for us? We cannot stand aloof from the lost. We cannot despise the “tax collectors and sinners, the Islamists and Nazis.” We cannot ignore them or be indifferent to their plight.

What are the occasions when we rejoice? When a thing of great importance, or one that we greatly value, occurs. We cheer for the touchdown and home run. We celebrate victory on the battlefield. We delight in a beautiful musical or artistic presentation. We rejoice at births, birthdays, weddings, and anniversaries. If we are looking at things as we should, we rejoice in gathering with the saints each Sunday to worship God and to hear His word. These are the things that we consider important or of great worth. Jesus is saying that if we value lost souls, we will find their repentance an occasion of great rejoicing, as do the angels of God. We will long to see the immoral man or woman, the dishonest crook, the harsh or cruel leader, the abuser of drugs and alcohol, the pusher, the gangster, the pornographer, the thug, the criminal, the Nazi, the Islamic terrorist, as well as the “religious” but nominal believer, the religious but fraudulent, the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

religious but counterfeit and hypocritical, repent. “And such were some of you,” the Apostle Paul says of the early Corinthian assembly (1 Cor 6:11). When they do, we will rejoice.

This all requires a certain outlook. I must:

- Perceive the worth of each lost soul, value that lost soul, and become emotionally invested in their plight
- Know the love of God for each lost soul
- Diligently engage in loving and befriending and reaching out to lost souls
- Rejoice when lost souls are brought to repentance

Let us not be like scribes and Pharisees who have contempt for the lost and despise them. Our pattern is that of Jesus, who “receives sinners and eats with them.”