

The Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:3-7)

Introduction and background -- Losing money is not a forgettable experience. More than 35 years ago I lost a \$5 dollar note at the bus stop in front of Coronation Plaza. It was like a king's ransom to a young boy who received a fixed amount of weekly allowance from parents. Foolishly but hopefully I looked at the ground where I thought the money had fallen each time I waited at that particular bus stop. Of course it was a futile exercise. The money was long gone but the loss was very difficult to forget. Have you lost something that means a lot to you? Then you would empathize with the shepherd in this Parable.

Jesus asked a rhetorical question to all assembled there but in particular to the Pharisees and Scribes. The reason is that they murmured saying, "This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them." These were highly religious individuals who were viewed by the ordinary Israelites as spiritual elitists. If anyone was to enter the Kingdom of Heaven it would be the Pharisees and the Scribes. **The Pharisees** were the separatists. In the inter-Testamental period they were the zealots who refused to compromise their faith by imbibing Grecian culture and later Roman culture. Other Israelites did so to gain economic wealth and societal acceptability. But these zealots refused to be contaminated by these gentile practices. They began to look down on their fellow Israelites who had compromised their faith. In time to come when the Sanhedrin [literally it means "sitting together or an assembly"] Council was convened to manage the affairs of Israel under Roman rule, the Pharisees were the obvious choice as one of the groups to sit in this council. They became filled with pride believing that whatever they did and believe in and practised were of God. Anyone who taught or lived differently, according to them, could not be of God and would be charged with opposing God and the Truth of God as taught in Holy Scriptures i.e. the OT. They saw in Jesus of Nazareth a threat because all that Jesus stood for and did were in direct contradiction to what they did and taught! **The scribes** were also known as the lawyers. They were the copiers of OT Scriptures. Therefore they would have been very well versed in God's Word. Since they spent practically every waking minute copying the Scriptures, the Scribes were known for their knowledge of God's Holy Word. For anyone with any question about God's Word, the Scribes would be the ones to ask. The people did not have easy access to God's written word as they were very expensive to purchase before the invention of the printing press in the 15th Century AD. As doctors of the law they were also part of the Sanhedrin Council (see Mark 15:1). Both these groups found in Jesus an opponent and a threat, for He stood for all that they condemned.

The Elements in the Parable – The man who has 100 sheep (probably a shepherd) is God; lost sheep refers to the publicans and sinners; Ninety and nine refers to the Scribes and Pharisees; lost state refers to sinful state; friends and neighbours refer to the angels in heaven.

The Explanation of the Parable -- Jesus gave this parable to educate them as well as all the sinners and publicans (tax collectors who were the most hated in Israel because they were seen as traitors who collected taxes for their Roman masters!) assembled before Him. If a shepherd owned 100 sheep and then lost one, would he not leave the ninety-nine to seek out that one lost sheep? Anyone of us who is in that shepherd's shoes would have done the same! The lost sheep was foremost in his mind. He would not return until the lost sheep was found. He was not thinking of the danger to himself. He was consumed by one single thought and that was "I must find my lost sheep." He knows that if he does not find the sheep soon the sheep would die. Sheep are dumb animals. They cannot fend for themselves. They are extremely timid so much so that they dare not even drink from a flowing stream. They will

drink only from quiet waters. If they find puddles of unclean water they will drink from it and if the water was poisonous they would die. They cannot tell the difference. Knowing full well the disposition of the sheep, the urgency was in the heart and mind of the shepherd as he looked for his one lost sheep. He would not say “never mind, I have 99 more”! That was unthinkable. That one lost sheep must be found with no time to lose!

From the perspective of the sheep, it would not know that it was lost. The sheep would wander away merrily thinking that all was well and that it was safe. Totally oblivious of its dire predicament the sheep demonstrates no urgency. Carelessly it would roam like a little child in the midst of ferocious predators waiting to make it its supper. The lost sheep’s absolute ignorance of the shepherd’s concern does not at all dampen the shepherd’s love and care for his lost sheep! The care and love for the lost sheep was one sided but it matters not to the shepherd. This was the strength of his unconditional love and care for the sheep. It was not dependent upon the sheep’s knowledge or rather lack of knowledge of his love.

When the shepherd found the sheep he carried it on his shoulders. This is normally the method used when the sheep is injured. It is reported that when a sheep is wild and uncontrollable and would soon injure or kill itself by its wandering, the shepherd would break one of its legs to keep it from wandering. Then the shepherd would lovingly carry the sheep on his shoulders and bring it home to tend to its wounds. The shepherd would carry this sheep rejoicing. He was so relieved to have found his lost sheep alive. All his anxiety for the well being of his lost sheep dissipated immediately.

He did not keep his joy to himself for he called his friends and neighbours and he celebrated with them. He told them the good news of his lost sheep being found! He could not keep the joy in his heart only. The feeling of finding something precious that was lost was too good to be kept a secret and within his own heart.

If we, like the shepherd would do so much for one lost sheep, how much more when there are multitudes of lost souls waiting to be saved from their sin! Like the lost sheep they do not know that they are lost. But the Good Shepherd knows and he would not rest till He finds them all. He would carry them on His shoulders to bring them back to the fold. When they are brought into the fold our LORD would not keep the joy in His heart but would share His joy with all. Hence the verse in **Luke 15:7**, *“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.”*

The ones who think that they are not lost are the Pharisees and the Scribes. They are the self righteous sinners who will remain in their state of sin not realizing that they are in fact very lost. They will not repent and cannot repent as long as this self-righteous disposition remains. And when the lost sheep is brought back they will not rejoice but will in self righteousness turn up their noses at the lost sheep and probably utter “I am not and will not be like that lost sheep!”

Even as the LORD Jesus Christ reassured the publicans and sinners of His love for them, he also reached out to the Pharisees and Scribes with this mild rebuke, that they might see the sins in their lives and also repent!