

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 18 July 1999

No. T0067

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Great Chapters of the Bible: Luke 15

The fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel is one of the great chapters of the Bible. Indeed, in its own setting, it is the middle one of three great chapters, Luke 14, Luke 15 and Luke 16. Chapter 14 tells us about a great philanthropist who prepared a great feast. He sent out his servants to offer invitations to the feast. Sadly those who were invited made it very plain that they had no interest at all in taking advantage of the offer. This offer, and the lack of interest in those invited, is a picture of God, Who has prepared great blessing and great joy for anyone who is willing to receive it. However, generally speaking, people don't want to know about it.

Chapter 15 broadly speaking, tells us about what God has done to provide the blessing for any who are willing to receive it. Chapter 16 reminds us that if we refuse the blessing God freely offers us, the only alternative is to expose ourselves to the justice of God and, on that basis, eternal torment is the inevitable destiny.

In the goodness of God, He has phrased these things in a way that commends itself to our memories, particularly in our common English Version.

In chapter 14, we read of a Great Feast.

In chapter 15, the crisis comes when we read of the younger son who, because of his own inclinations and activities found himself a Great Way Off from his father and home.

In chapter 16 we learn of a Great Gulf Fixed between those who are brought into blessing and those who refuse it.

Putting it another way:

In chapter 14, God provided a Feast.

In chapter 15, God provided a Famine to bring the younger son to his senses.

In chapter 16, God provided the Flame of Eternal Judgement for those who refused to come to the Feast.

Let us learn from these vivid contrasts, and so to chapter 15.

At first reading through, we might easily get the impression that it is the record of three parables Jesus delivered to the scribes and the Pharisees. On closer examination, we find that the parable is one. Verse 3 says, "Jesus spake this parable unto them." There are certainly three parts to it, but the parts are so intertwined that it is rightly considered to be one parable. The first part is about a sheep that was lost. The second is about a coin that was lost. The third part is about a young man who became lost. Putting these parts together, it is clear that they give us a picture of the spiritual condition of those who have no personal knowledge of God.

Before we pull together the threads of chapter 15, let us think back to chapter 14. Those who eventually accepted the invitation to the Great Feast came from those who are said to be poor, maimed, lame and blind. That is, in being poor, they couldn't pay for admission to the feast. In being maimed, they couldn't work for it. In being lame, they had to be carried there. In being blind, they needed guidance, every step of the way. Taken together, this is a comprehensive picture of a sinner before he comes to Christ. In other words, a graphic picture of you and me, if we have not yet trusted Christ as our Saviour.

Chapter 15 paints the same picture. The wayward sheep was unable to find its own way back to the flock. The inanimate piece of silver was dead, inert. It had no idea that it was lost. The younger son, until he came to himself, didn't even want to be back home. Putting it alliteratively the wayward sheep was incapable. The lost coin was insensible. The younger son was insubordinate.

So, in chapter 15, as in chapter 14, scripture gives us a graphic, comprehensive picture of man in his natural state, away from God. The lesson is plain. A sense of need, spiritual need, is the first essential step towards eventual blessing. This is detailed in another great chapter telling us about what God has done for us, when we were in no position to do anything for ourselves. That chapter is found in the letter written by the Apostle Paul, Ephesians 2.

We read there of those who, like the wayward sheep, were walking according to the course of this world. We read of those who, like the inert piece of silver, were dead in trespasses and sins. We read of those who, like the younger son, were children of disobedience. How clear the word of God is, giving these comprehensive pictures of the results of sin. Summarising them, putting together the three elements of the message of Luke 15, we learn: Without Christ, we are like wayward sheep, we are incapable of finding our way back to God without help, because we are walking according to the course of this world. Like a lost coin, we are insensible; we don't even know we are spiritually lost, dead in trespasses and sins. Like the younger son, until we are given a sense of spiritual need we are insubordinate we have no desire to get back to God, children of disobedience.

How clear the picture is! In case we miss the point, the message becomes more and more concentrated as the story unfolds. With the sheep, the loss is one out of a hundred. With the piece of silver, the loss is one out of ten. With the sons, the loss is one out of two. So, because of our sins, we are in a position and condition we can do nothing to put right. What can be done? Who can do it? As always, scripture has the answer. In particular, Luke 15 has the answer. God, in His wonderful love, has done for us what we could never do for ourselves. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost have worked together to bring us into what the Bible rightly calls SO GREAT SALVATION.

Let us think, then, about the sheep that was lost. Some time ago, I tried out a theory of mine on an experienced shepherd. I asked him, "Would it be right to say that a sheep can get lost on its own, but needs help to get back where it belongs?" He thought about it for a few seconds and then smiled. "Oh, yes," he replied. "It is natural to a sheep to wander away and get lost. But, it certainly cannot work out how to retrace its steps. That's why sheep need a shepherd. In addition, of course, they need protection from their natural enemies."

The Bible abounds with examples and illustrations, likening people to sheep. We members of the human race have an innate tendency to act like sheep, getting ourselves into difficulties, needing help and even getting lost. One of the most famous chapters of the Bible, Isaiah 53, includes the passage: "All we like sheep have gone astray." And if we can be described as sheep going astray, the Lord Jesus can certainly be described as a shepherd.

It is no accident that many of the great men we read about in the Bible were shepherds, used to spending long years caring for sheep. Abet, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David and many more were all shepherds and knew how to care for those who were in need. This instinct and training stood them in good stead when they accepted responsibility to care for people as well as sheep.

There can be no doubt that the rescue of the wayward sheep is intended to be a clear picture of the unwearying labour of the Lord Jesus Christ, Who came into the world to save sinners. The introduction to our chapter says, "This man receiveth sinners." We also read in Luke 19:10, "The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost." How did He do it? We learn, from John 10:11, that Jesus Himself said, "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth His life for the sheep." How touching! As a shepherd does everything he can for the protection and care of his sheep, so the Lord Jesus has died at Calvary, making the supreme sacrifice in order that we, as wayward sheep, might be brought back to God. He bore the burden of our sins, that we might be forgiven. Going back to Isaiah 53, we learn in verse 6, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all." In the New Testament, we have in 1 Peter 3:18, "Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, to bring us to God."

What wonderful love! In case we are in any doubt, this part of the parable ends with the assertion that there is joy in heaven when a sinner repents and comes to Christ. The second part of the parable is brief, but very telling. The work of Christ in the plan of redemption is absolutely vital. The work of the Holy Spirit is equally important.

One of the many effects of sin upon us is that, in ourselves, we are spiritually inert. We have no spiritual life, naturally speaking. Until the Holy Spirit works in our hearts, there is not one spark of response Godward. As we quoted earlier from Ephesians 2:1, we are "dead in trespasses and sins." This is illustrated so well in this graphic picture of a woman losing a precious piece of silver. There seems to be strong support for the suggestion that this piece of silver, while valuable in itself, was no ordinary coin. It seems that, in those days, when a young woman became betrothed to be married, her fiancée gave her, as a memento of the contract entered into, a silver necklace of ten pieces of silver. I suppose the modern equivalent would be an engagement ring. Imagine the horror experienced by any young woman who lost her engagement ring. So, in this case, without all ten pieces of silver on display, the necklace would be relatively worthless. It would also be an open comment on how careless she had been in allowing one valuable piece of her treasured necklace to go astray.

As we read in verse 8, how diligently she would search for the missing piece, until she found it. As with the wayward sheep, so with the lost piece of silver. Recovery led to celebration. Here, again, it is tied in with the salvation of a lost sinner. Another nice touch is that the material was silver. You will remember that throughout the Old Testament, the price of redemption had to be paid in silver. Here we have it, then. A necessary part of the work of redemption is the activity of the Holy Spirit in the soul of the sinner. As described in the parable, He sweeps diligently. He probes, He

prompts, He searches, He makes the sinner feel uncomfortable, thoroughly miserable, until a sense of spiritual need is produced in the soul. This is a vital prelude to the acceptance by the sinner of the value to God of the death of the Saviour on the sinner's behalf.

Very early in the Bible, Genesis 6:3, God says, "My Spirit shall not always strive with man." Clearly, then, striving with man is part of the Holy Spirit's work in the soul. Confirming the illustration in clear, precise terms, we read in John 6:63, "It is the Spirit that gives life." Again, in Titus 3:5, "God has saved us ... by the renewing of the Holy Ghost." The Lord's own words to Nicodemus in John 3 leave us in no doubt that the work of the Holy Spirit has a vital role in the blessing of the sinner.

Where are we, then? The shepherd rescuing the wayward sheep. A picture of a loving Saviour, giving His life for the sinner. The inert coin, a picture of the Holy Spirit's work in alerting the sinner to his need of salvation. What about the third part of the parable? Before we go into the detail, let us consider this. God is a triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Time and again, in the New Testament, it is emphasised that, whenever anything important is being considered, all persons of the Godhead, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are seen to be involved and acting in absolute concert. All things, that is, involving the glory of God and the blessing of mankind.

We have seen, then, the work of God the Son illustrated in the rescue of the wayward sheep. We have also seen the work of God the Holy Spirit, illustrated in the diligent search for the lost piece of silver. In the third part of the parable we shall be looking out for the work of God the Father in bringing the sinner back to Himself. This is a lovely picture of God's love for the unconverted sinner, who is at a distance from God because of his sins. Isaiah 59:2 says, "Your iniquities have separated between you and your God." Let us think about this well known story, step by step.

A young man, enjoying the best of everything in a good home, decides he would rather "go it alone." He doesn't see why he should wait for his share of the family inheritance until his father dies. He asks his father to let him have it straight away, so that he can go off and make his own way in life. Like many before him, and many since, he insists on having his own way and suffers for it. He quickly squanders the resources carefully built up over many years. He loses everything. Wealth, friends, even his self respect. Far from home, he finds himself scavenging for food.

It is at this stage that there is a glimmer of light. It says of him, "He came to himself." That is, he came to a proper self judgement of himself. "I must be mad," he thought. "Here am I, scrounging my meals, when I have a loving father who will be delighted to have me back home. I would be far better off as a servant in my father's home, rather than starving and scraping about here far from home." He decides to do the right thing and go home. He makes the journey. And, of course, he was right. His father was even more pleased to have him back home than the son was to be there. What a welcome! This father was waiting, as he evidently had been since his son had left home. Seeing his son in the distance, the father hurried to meet him and warmly embraced him. "Welcome home, son. We're all ready. The best of everything is all prepared. Clothes, food, friends, family. There's no shortage of anything you will ever need. Welcome home." There was no question of his being a servant. A son he was and as a son he would be treated. As with the wayward sheep and the lost coin, so with the young man who was determined to do his own thing. The picture is consistent. Recovery led to celebration.

Once we've got the message, we cannot miss it. God loves us. He wants us to enjoy His company, to be at home in His presence. If we are away from God, not interested at all in all the spiritual blessing He wants to give us, it's because we are determined to do our own thing in our own way, leaving God completely out of our lives. Like the young man in the parable, we have to take stock of ourselves. We must realise that we are personally responsible to God for the position in which we find ourselves, away from Him. If we come to Him, we will find that He is far more anxious to have us in His presence than we are to be there.

How do we come to Him? In faith, through Christ, the good shepherd, Who gave His life for the sheep. As the Lord Himself said, "No man cometh unto the Father, but by Me." John 14:6. What joy, what blessing awaits us when we do just that! The scripture says, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath entered into the heart of man, the things that God hath prepared for them that love Him." 1 Corinthians 2:9.

How encouraging! God, the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, all interested in us, all working together for our spiritual blessing. What a terrible waste if we don't respond in faith and receive and enjoy all the good things God has prepared for us through Christ!

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, we thank Thee that, as the good shepherd, Thou hast given Thy life for us. Help us to understand better, and appreciate more, the wonderful love that has provided for our every need. Amen.

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