

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Luke 15: 1-7

A Seeking Saviour

*[Please note: sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
The King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

You know, I have to say that whenever I start to read Luke 15, I have a strong, innate tendency to jump straight in at verse 3. I am sure that I am not alone in that, and I am just as sure that many of you will understand why. Nothing stings like the truth, and the truth is implicit in verses 1 and 2. What does it tell us?

First of all, the parable in Luke chapter 15 verses 1 to 7 was against the following background. The teaching ministry of our Lord recorded in chapter 14 seemed to have attracted the despised publicans, that is, tax gatherers, and others who were regarded by their own countrymen as sinners. Although Jesus reproved their sins, many of them acknowledged that He was right. They took sides with Jesus against themselves. In true repentance they acknowledged Him as Lord. Wherever Jesus found people that were willing to acknowledge their sins, He gravitated toward them and showered spiritual help and blessing upon them.

At the time under consideration, the people of the nation of Israel were subjects of, and subject to, the Roman Empire. One aspect of this situation was that the Roman authorities used willing Jews to extract the specific amounts of tax from their fellow Jews to cover what the Romans themselves regarded as adequate to cover the cost of the government the Romans provided for their colonies.

The Romans were not particularly interested in how much these tax collectors actually extracted from the Jews, as long as they, the Roman authorities, received what they had decreed as necessary. The Jewish population was well aware that the tax collectors themselves extracted as much as they could get away with. They made what we might call a very good living out of their own fellow Jews. The knowledge of this well-known arrangement made the Jewish citizens doubly disgruntled. Firstly, that they, who correctly considered themselves to be God's special nation on earth, had to pay the Roman tax at all! Secondly, that they were being bullied by citizens of their own nation to actually hand over even more than the Roman authorities demanded! I think, too, that the tax collectors were especially despised by the officials of the Jewish Temple and Synagogues, who regarded themselves as those who should lay down the laws as to how their nation should live and behave.

Taking all in all, the Jewish ecclesiastical officials were very glad to call the tax collectors 'sinners', a term which was used by them to classify together the worst, most blatant, obvious sinners in the population.

Happily, it was not unknown for both tax collectors and other blatant sinners to be attracted to the Lord Jesus, and to believe His teaching. Their unrighteous living made them quite receptive to hear, and respond to, the righteous teaching and preaching of the Son of God. Because of this, the Pharisees and scribes mockingly called the Lord Jesus 'a friend of tax collectors and sinners' (or, as we might say nowadays, 'rogues and vagabonds'). Furthermore, they announced, "This

man receiveth sinners and eateth with them". The accusation was quite correct, but they could not see that this was a fulfilment of the very purpose for which the Son of God came into the world. As we read in Luke chapter 19 verse 10:

"The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which is lost."

That is, the Lord Jesus came as a Seeking Saviour, and this statement is very often, and very rightly, taken as a headline for the whole of the Gospel of Luke, and its fundamental message. I shall now read the relevant scripture, Luke 15 verses 1 to 7, before talking about it:

"Then drew near unto [Jesus] all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them. And he spake this parable unto them, saying, What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. 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."

From the first two verses, we get the right impression that the Lord's message to the tax collectors and sinners drew many of them directly towards Himself. He made it very plain that He was always ready to receive sinners and speak freely with them. Furthermore, He was ever willing to show great grace towards those who were willing to receive His message. However, He not only received sinners because they pressed themselves on Him. He and His disciples personally and positively sought out sinners and made known to them the happy reception and blessing that was ever available to those who put their personal trust in Him.

In the parable of the lost sheep (given in verses 3 to 7 in our chapter) we see a picture of the Lord Jesus Himself, pictured under the symbol of a shepherd. The shepherd has a hundred sheep. When he realises that one of his sheep is lost, He leaves the other ninety and nine, not in the field, but in the wilderness. He goes after the lost sheep until he finds it. As far as our Lord was concerned, His journey included descent to earth, His birth into the world, His growth into manhood, His years of public ministry, His rejection by His own nation, His suffering and death upon the Cross, and ultimately His glorious resurrection.

In the parable, the shepherd seeks out the sheep that is lost. Having found it, he secures it on his shoulder. His joy in the rescued sheep begins and he brings it home. The saved sheep enjoyed a place of privilege and intimacy it never knew as long as it was identified and numbered with the other ninety-nine. The shepherd then summoned his neighbours to rejoice with him over the salvation of the lost sheep. This speaks of the Saviour's joy in seeing a sinner repent. The one sheep that was lost represented symbolically those described as tax collectors and acknowledged sinners. They knew and accepted that they were spiritually lost, and therefore in need of confessing their need to repent. The lesson to be drawn from the story is very clear. There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents but there is no joy at all over the ninety and nine sinners who have never been convicted of their lost, sinful condition.

Sadly, on the other hand, the Pharisees rejected completely His messages to them. The ninety and nine, who represent the Pharisee and scribe class, were left not in the fold but out in the wilderness, representing a place of moral and spiritual barrenness and death. On the other hand, we need to see that verse 7 does not actually mean that there are some persons who need no repentance. All of us are sinners, and all must repent in order to be saved. The verse briefly describes those who, as far as they see themselves, need no repentance.

The Lord recounted the parable of the lost sheep in answer to the charge of the Pharisees and scribes. The message was aimed directly at those who had not been broken down before God to admit their lost condition. The fact was, they were as lost spiritually as the tax collectors and the sinners, but they refused to admit it. Overall, it is impossible to actually find on earth 'ninety and nine just persons, who need no repentance', though it is also sadly easy to find many people who imagine themselves to be such. Yet, if they could be found, there is more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than there could be over any number of unrepentant sinners. It is also true that the holy angels in heaven rejoice over one repentant sinner (see verses 7 and 9 of our chapter). This is grace indeed!

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 'Gospel' chapters, Luke 14, 15 and 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, all 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. 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 our inevitable destiny.

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

In chapter 14 verses 15 – 24, 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 verses 19 – 31, God provided the **Flame of Eternal Judgment** for those who refused to come to the **Feast**. Let us learn from these vivid contrasts.

First of all, then, an overview of chapter 15.

At first reading it 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 (singular) unto them." There are certainly three parts to it, but the parts are so intertwined that it is rightly seen to be one parable. The first part is about a sheep that was lost to its shepherd. 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 as a Saviour God.

Before we pull together the threads of chapter 15, let us think back to chapter 14 for a moment. Those who eventually accepted the invitation to the **Great Feast** came from those who are said in verse 13 to be "the poor, the maimed, the lame,[and] the blind." That is, in being poor, they couldn't afford to 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 at all to do anything to help ourselves. That chapter is found in the letter written by the apostle Paul to the Ephesians, chapter 2. We read there of those who, like the wayward sheep, “walked according to the course of this world” (verse 2). Also, we read of those who, like the inert piece of silver, were spiritually dead in “trespasses and sins” (verse 1). The third part tells us of those who, like the younger son, were “children of disobedience” (verse 2). How clear the word of God is, giving these comprehensive pictures of the results of sin!

Putting together the three elements of the message of Luke 15, the total picture is clear. Without Christ, we are like wayward sheep, incapable of finding our way back to God without help, because we are “walking according to the course of this world.” Like the 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 spiritually insubordinate. We have no desire to get back to God, we're “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 Spirit have worked together to bring us into what the Bible rightly calls “so great salvation” (Hebrews chapter 2 verse 3).

Let us think further about the Saviour seeking the sheep that was lost. Some time ago, I tried out a theory of mine on an experienced shepherd whom I knew very well. 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 entirely 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 such 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 in verse 6, “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 loving, seeking shepherd 24:23.

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, of Whom we read in First Timothy chapter 1 verse 15, “This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” The introduction to Luke 15 says, “This man receiveth sinners.” We also read in Luke chapter 19 verse 10, “The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which [is] lost.” How did He do it? We learn the answer from Jesus Himself, in John chapter 10 verse 11, “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 chapter 53 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.” This links with First Peter chapter 3 verse 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 in Luke 15 ends with the assertion that there is joy in heaven when a sinner repents and comes to Christ.

Once we've got the fundamental 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 must 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 chapter 14 verse 6). What joy! What blessing awaits us when we do just that! The scripture says, “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him” (First Corinthians chapter 2 verse 9).

How encouraging! God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, all interested in us, all working together for our eternal, 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 me say, “Thank you very much” for your patience in listening to this Truth for Today talk number T1215, entitled ‘A Seeking Saviour’ (based on Luke chapter 15 verses 1 – 7).

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