

Yes, What Man Would?

Luke 15:1-10

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable: “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?”

Seriously, what man would leave the 99 sheep in open country and go off to find one that was lost? Shepherds are necessary because they did not keep sheep in a pen and bring them the feed. Sheep wandered an area that was confined by the shepherd, moving the flock frequently. The places they take the sheep so that they can graze, if they are not in the wilderness, they are very close, for they are often far off the beaten track where the other domesticated animals are pastured.

Given that situation, the proximity to wild predators and the constant danger of people taking your sheep, what man would leave the ninety-nine in open country and go after one lost sheep? Would you leave your sheep untended? Would you leave the ninety-nine easy prey for lions, tigers, bears, and thieves? Of course not! Nobody would be that foolish.

And, if you were poor, poor enough that losing one silver coin meant you search diligently till you find it, would you seriously spend probably a few silver coins to throw a party to rejoice over finding the one coin? Probably not!

Jesus is not you! Jesus is not normal! Both these parables are about God’s desire for those who are lost.

Let us consider the context so that we can truly understand what is going on here. Our text begins by informing us of some facts. *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”*

Jesus receives sinners and eats with them? Horror of horrors! It is evident that the Pharisees and scribes must not be sinners – or at least, so they believe about themselves. Who are the sinners? Do you know who they are, just like the Pharisees and scribes did – knowing who all the really bad sinners are? Always someone else?

Or do you know who they are, just like Jesus did? Which one is not a sinner? Which one of us is not a sinner?

Jesus ends these two parables with the comment, “Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

How many people see the word repent as something people do? Many have come to see repent as meaning, a change of one’s heart, especially a change of one’s heart about one’s sins.

If that is true, then what about the two parables Jesus gives in our text? Did the lost sheep or the lost coin do anything? Did they have a change of heart or mind, suddenly becoming unlost?

Neither the lost sheep or the lost coin were capable of repentance. The lost sheep was found solely because of the foolishness of the shepherd who left the ninety-nine alone in the open country to seek it out. And the lost coin was found because of the woman’s determination to seek it out. The lost were found because of the will and the work of the shepherd and the woman.

Likewise, the lost do not seek God.

We know that God is somewhere in these parables. We know that He is not the lost sheep or the lost coin. God is in this parable, He is both the Shepherd and the woman. The coin and the sheep simply sit around in their state of lostness.

Dear friends, this means that it is precisely our sins that commend us most to the grace of God, not the things in us that we like to think are good.

If we try to consider that the sinner must first give up their sins before God will forgive them, then we are saying that they lost must somehow find themselves before the finder will get up off the couch and look for them. If this is how we think, that the lost are somehow seekers, then we are going against the very obvious meaning of both parables.

A lost sheep is essentially a dead sheep. OK, it might be alive at the moment it becomes lost, but without the shepherd it is dead – lions, tigers, bears, wolves, and other predators. A lost coin is a dead asset, it is worth exactly zero in its lostness!

These two parables are not exhortations to repentance. They were not told by Jesus to motivate you to some level of remorse over your sinfulness so that you spiritually pull yourselves up by your bootstraps to some acceptable level of moral or spiritual improvement, and then God will forgive you.

These two parables show God's incredible grace, His determination to act in your behalf before you even consider moving. It is the fact that you are lost, dead in trespasses and sin which bring the grace of God into your life to act – to seek you out, to find you, to bring you into the family, and to rejoice in your new state because of all God did.

There is nothing in these parables about earning or merit. They contain not so much as a hint about a reward granted for those who have earned it. There is only the gracious determination of the shepherd and the woman to seek and to find that which is lost.

What does that mean Jesus is saying about repentance? What light does this shed on confession, contrition, absolution? Confession then is not an admission of a mistake, which we have finally recognized and corrected.

Confession is the admission that we are dead in our sins. We have no power in and of ourselves to change that condition. Nor, if we are dead, can we convince someone we are worth saving. As the dead, the only way we can have life is if someone performs spiritual CPR!

The shepherd seeks the sheep that is lost because it is lost. We are lost, dead in trespasses and sins, life is out of our hands. Our life is entirely the gift of the gracious giver, the Seeker of the Lost.

It also begins to be clear that the absolution is not God understanding our weaknesses and making allowances for our errors. God takes our sins and disposes of them. God takes hold of us in our deadness and gives us a new life.

Jesus asks, "What man would...?" What man would seek a lost sheep and leave the others behind in the wilderness? What man would seek the lost coin and the spend the others to rejoice that he'd found it?

No man would, but God does!

God gave His Son to seek and to save that which was lost. It is God, the very Son of God, who gives His life unto death and buries our sinfulness in His own tomb. He finds us walking lost in the valley of the shadow of death, and He puts on His shoulders and brings us home to the songs of rejoicing.

Christ brings us home and sets us down at His table, the meal He sets before you. It is a celebration meal, you celebrate Christ's death in the eating of His body pierced for you, and in the drinking of His blood shed for you. God remembers your sins against the agony, suffering, and death of Christ.

Today dear friends is the celebration of your being found. You gather at the feast, and all heaven rejoices! Amen.