

The Lost Coin

Luke 15:8-10

With Study Questions

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Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds *it*?⁹ And when she has found *it*, she calls *her* friends and neighbors together, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I lost!'¹⁰ Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:8-10).

Preface

I am not sure if everybody is this way, but I find myself psychologically tortured when I lose something. Just recently we took a family vacation and I lost a little nano (little ipod). My son knew how this would almost ruin my trip so he dedicated himself to find it in order for his father to have some mental respite (he succeeded). The same can be said for the remote control, my wallet, keys, you name it.

But I can say, without fear of contradiction, that the most torturous moment of my married life (I think I speak for my wife as well) is when our three children (we only had three at the time—probably about nine, seven and five) took their first walk around the block. After about 15 minutes they hadn't returned so my wife went looking. After a few minutes she pulled into our driveway with tears in her eyes telling me to call the police. Our children were lost.

In desperation I jumped in my car and swept the neighborhood, exercising moderate disregard for stop signs and speed limits. I rudely interrupted conversations in an effort to find out if strangers had seen my children. I enlisted everyone willing to help me find them. All inhibitions were gone; nothing on earth mattered.

Finally one of my enlisted neighbors (a former student) who had been searching as aggressively and I found them and directed them home. The five of us embraced in the front yard with tears. Although the kids were wondering what the big deal was. But for my wife and me, things went from the most torturous moment to the most joyous.

Introduction

To get a running start at this parable we read of Jesus being scrutinized by the religious leaders of His day for healing on Sabbath (14:1-6). This was followed by an event to which He was invited where he told the Parable of the Ambitious Guest (14:7-11) addressing ministers are more concerned with moving up ecclesiastical ladder than with humbly serving God. This was followed by the Parable of the Ambitious Host (14:12-14) addressing good deeds done for reciprocation rather than the joy of the reward of the resurrection. Then Jesus gave the Parable of the Great Banquet (14:15-24) where those same false shepherds are informed of their impending exclusion from the Kingdom of God.

Jesus then taught on the Cost of Discipleship (14:25-35), not that one must be sinless to be saved but must be willing to forsake false gods. A man cannot have two masters. After this many tax collectors and sinners drew near to Christ, which drew the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes (15:1-2). This became the impetus for the Parable of the Lost Sheep (15:3-7) where a good shepherd will leave the ninety-nine and go after the one that is lost.

The parable before us this morning is similar yet distinct to the Parable of the Lost Sheep. The sheep is animate and was lost (the emphasis perhaps in its wandering off). We might empathize with the fear and confusion of the sheep. But a coin is inanimate. The focus in this parable is not the experience of the coin but of the woman. In other words, the parable is not chronicling the experience of my children (who didn't even know they were lost) but of my wife and me.

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

Who are the Coins?

Who is everyone in this parable? Who's the woman, the lost coin, the lamp, the broom and how does one search? Who is finding whom? As is often the case with parables, people can over analyze. It's been speculated that the woman is the Holy Spirit since Christ is the Good Shepherd in the Parable of the Lost Sheep and Father is represented in the next parable of the Prodigal Son. Perhaps, but it seem highly speculative.

The light is said to be the gospel, the sweeping and searching the sending out of preachers, etc. This may all be theologically accurate but,

again, these are guesses. We recognize nonetheless that faith comes by hearing the word (Romans 10:17); that is through the **“message preached”** that God finds lost souls. And there is little doubt that the lost coin represents those lost souls—the very sinners who were **“drawing near”** to Christ (15:1).

And though the immediate context would lead us to recognize the lost coins to be **“the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24)**, Jesus did not hesitate to extol the faith of the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21-28 a non-Israelite). There is no doubt that Jesus recognized the ultimate universal nature of His kingdom:

And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd (John 10:16).

...and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad (John 11:52).

A Desperate Search

All this to say that to this very day, the world is full of lost coins and God is about the business of finding them. What really seems to be emphasized in this parable is the juxtaposition between the heart of the clergy and the heart of God. The scribes and Pharisees are grumbling because sinners are following Jesus and Jesus is expressing this as the very heart of God’s redemptive purpose.

The parable opens with a desperate woman making a desperate search. She lights a lamp, sweeps the house and seeks diligently. And she is not going to give us **“until she finds it.”** The same phrase is used in the Parable of the Lost Sheep. The Good Shepherd is going to go after that sheep **“until he finds it” (Luke 15:4).**

And in light of the Parable of the Great Banquet (where **“those men”** will not taste the banquet [Luke 14:24]) I don’t think it’s a stretch to suggest that Jesus has just about had it with professing believers who have a divided heart, with no concern for the souls of their fellow men, and are just getting in the way. If my illustration regarding my own children applies at all, there is very much a ‘help me find them or get out of the way or I’ll run you over’ temperament to this scene.

And in the same way we wept with joy over finding our children, the woman rejoices and calls others to rejoice with her.

And when she has found *it*, she calls *her* friends and neighbors together, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I lost (Luke 15:9)!

I can’t state with certainty to what extent this applies to us. Clearly Jesus is addressing people who don’t care about the souls of others. But God is calling us to rejoice with Him when a lost coin is found. Jesus then opens the veil to the joy experienced in a heavenly setting—a setting devoid of sin.

Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:10).

Heavenly Joy

It is not the joy (so much) of the angels but “**joy in the presence of the angels of God.**” It is the joy of the woman—that is the joy of God, the angels being in God’s presence. I am concerned at times at the things that make me, my family, my church, my culture joyous. It is a monumental testimony to the depravity of man that we suffer from a deplorable lack of ability to rejoice in the things that are precious to God.

Notice the language of joy and intimacy that God expresses toward His people:

For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you (Isaiah 62:5).

My people are bent on turning away from me, and though they call out to the Most High, he shall not raise them up at all. ⁸How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender (Hosea 11:7, 8).

The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing (Zephaniah 3:17).

Sovereignty

However we understand the sovereignty God, it must not be so mechanical as to exclude these expressions of pleasure (and sometime displeasure) He uses to convey to us that which is a delight to Him or an affront to Him.

The Scriptures certainly teach of a God who ordains whatsoever comes to pass (Isaiah 46:9-11), but they also teach of a God who reacts to the events of humanity the way a father reacts to the obedience or rebellion of his own children. This would include the pleasure of seeing his children in obedience and the grief of seeing his children on a wayward path.

Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel (Ezekiel 33:11)?

Some might ask, “If God ordains all things, how is it He has no pleasure in something He has ordained?” In human terms the passage is quite simple: like a father who doesn’t enjoy spanking his child or a righteous judge who takes no pleasure in the just decision to pronounce the death penalty, God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. The passage says what it says. There is no Hebrew trickery to avoid it. We must recognize there is an unsearchable-ness¹ to the judgments of God and His ways are past finding out (Romans 11:33)

However we understand the sovereignty of God, it should not be as a stoic, unconcerned decision-maker. Any understanding of the sovereignty of God that diminishes human culpability—the need to pray, love, work, sweep, seek and engage in all the efforts associated with the glory of God, the love of God and the love of our neighbor—is a misunderstanding of the sovereignty of God.

¹ The word “unsearchable” used by Paul pertains to being impossible to understand on the basis of careful examination; unfathomable, impossible to comprehend. It does not imply that God is irrational or operating with an entirely otherly form of thinking. That we can’t comprehend some things doesn’t mean we can’t comprehend anything. It simply means that the “secret things belong to the Lord” (Dt. 29:29).

There is joy in heaven over sinners who repent and I don't think it is a stretch to say that a lack of love and concern for the lost coins by which we are surrounded is a sin in the eyes of God. And I'm not saying our church is this way so I hope this doesn't sound overly accusatory—but let this land where it will—I would not want to be part of a church that isn't making a sweeping effort to find lost coins.

How God Searches

Though the parable teaches God as the one searching, the means by which God searches certainly includes human agency. The Apostle Paul provides an example of the all-out sweeping effort made by one who had great love and concern for the lost:

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. ²⁰ To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. ²¹ To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. ²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

I recently had the opportunity to address a congregation in search of a pastor. I asked them what they were looking for in a pastor and we spoke of what they were willing to provide as a congregation. In the interview of one candidate they asked what he would do in order to grow the church and win converts. He had one answer—preach. Though it is certain that word and sacraments are the heart of the sweeping effort to find lost coins, viewing preaching as the sole effort hardly comports with the words of Paul that we read above.

Among some there is almost a mystical dimension of finding lost coins; a sort of build it and they will come.² Prepare and write a good sermon and people will magically show up. But in the New Testament we

² This is a reference of a movie "Field of Dreams" where a man is called to build a baseball field in his corn field. If he faithfully builds the field, players will magically show up.

see Jesus sending His followers out (Luke 10:1) and Paul making journey after journey (Acts).

The Antiseptic Church

Christians enjoy the comfort of their church and well they should. In an ever-increasing apostate culture, the church is a shelter—a sort of sanctuary from the pollutions by which we are surrounded. But in an effort to maintain purity, we can be tempted to ignore those dirty coins, become so antiseptic that we forget our call and lose our salt and are in danger of becoming worthless (Luke 14:34, 35).

While visiting New Zealand during a track tour in the late 1970s I became friends with a group of lifeguards. At the time all the lifeguards were volunteers, which is notable since the Tasman Sea is very dangerous and rescues happened with regularity. But these young people enjoyed being lifeguards. They enjoyed each other. They enjoyed the camaraderie. They enjoyed celebrating with each other and were quite good at it. But what made their joy unique and exceptional was the fact that they knew they were saving people. If ever they lost that dynamic; if through neglect or carelessness people started drowning, the lifeguard station would become just enough worthless, inwardly focused, party house. Heaven forbid the church become and inwardly focused party house.

Repentance

Finally the joy is over “one sinner who repents.”³ Repentance is not a simple prayer or some isolated religious experience (although it may include that). Repentance is a changing of the mind regarding all things—who God is, who I am, what sin is, who is to be trusted for salvation, who is to be trusted for wisdom and guidance. The person who truly repents is the person, as Jesus instructed earlier, is the person who forsakes all (Luke 14:33) and trusts in Christ alone for the salvation of his soul and law by which his life is governed. It is that complete transformation, that establishment of an entirely new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), that brings about the heavenly joy.

³ But how does he say that the *repentance* of one ungodly man yields greater joy than the perseverance of many *righteous* men to *angels*, whose highest delight is in a continued and uninterrupted course of righteousness? I reply, though it would be more agreeable to the wishes of *angels* (as it is also more desirable) that men should always remain in perfect integrity, yet as in the deliverance of a sinner, who had been already devoted to destruction, and had been cut off as a rotten member from the body, the mercy of God shines more brightly, he attributes to *angels*, after the manner of men, a *greater joy* arising out of an unexpected good.³

Questions for Study

1. What is the context to this parable? Explain the environment by which Jesus was surrounded (page 2).
2. Who is who/ what in this parable (page 3)?
3. What seems to be the emphasis of the parable (page 3)?
4. What is the heavenly reaction to one sinner who repents? How should that affect us (page 4)?
5. Explain various misunderstandings surrounding the sovereignty of God (pages 5, 6).
6. How does God search for lost coins (pages 6, 7)?
7. How does church avoid becoming worthless salt (pages 7, 8)?
8. What is repentance (page 8)?