

The Mind of Christ . . .

A MIND OF FORGIVENESS

By Mike & Shelley Brown, H. M. Motsinger, Ed.D., L.P.C.
Edited & Arranged by Buck Griffith

I. Introduction

Luke 15 contains the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. They are perhaps the best known parables in the entire Bible. In this lesson we will look at them in a different way from what you may have considered before. Themes that are common to all three include the following . . .

- Separation
- The value of one
- Rejoicing in the found

II. The Value of One and Rejoicing in the Found

To understand these parables it is helpful to know to whom Jesus was talking. Several kinds of people surrounded Him as he taught – tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes and thieves. But perhaps He was directing His comments to the Pharisees and Scribes who were standing over to one side. These religious leaders were criticizing Jesus for associating with those who were unacceptable in their society.

A. The Lost Sheep Parable: The Shepherd Searches for and Finds the Lost Sheep

The people in Jesus' time and culture understood shepherding. They understood that it was a shepherd's responsibility to leave 99 sheep safe in the field to go looking for one lost sheep and to keep looking until it was found. When the sheep is found, the shepherd does not beat it or curse it for running away or angrily shove it back to the sheep fold. Instead, he lays it lovingly on his shoulders and joyfully returns it to the flock. The shepherd is so happy about finding the lost sheep that he can't wait to get back to his community to tell his good news to friends and neighbors. He wants them to share his great joy. Notice that he also claims *ownership* of the lost sheep. He does not say, "I have found a lost sheep." He says, "I have found my sheep." For the shepherd, the process of restoring the lost sheep involved going out, searching, finding, being happy (not resentful or punitive), protecting (carrying it on his shoulders all the way home) and being so full of rejoicing that he was compelled to share his good news with others. Jesus draws the comparison back to the Pharisees and Scribes by saying, "Do you know that in Heaven there will be more rejoicing over one sinner that repents than over 99 people such as you who need no repentance? See all those sinners standing over there? You have criticized me for eating with them. But don't you understand that God in Heaven is going to rejoice more over one of those coming back to Him than over

one of you who feels he has no need of salvation?" With these statements, Jesus lays the foundation for what He will share in the fourth story. He gives them a mental picture of Heaven as a place where there is great rejoicing over the repentance of one sinner.

B. The Lost Coin Parable: The Woman Searches for and Finds the Lost Coin

Many of the elements in this parable are also found in the parable of the lost sheep:

Something is lost.

Someone diligently searches for it.

The searcher rejoices in finding what was lost.

The finder shares with others the joy of restoring the lost.

But there are also some differences in these two parables: The sheep and the coin became lost for different reasons.

1. We don't know how the sheep got lost.

Perhaps the sheep *drifted away gradually* without knowing it was getting farther and farther from the flock. It may have put its nose to the grass and munched along little by little. Maybe it realized it was lost much later when the grassy area led to a rocky one. It may have gotten stuck in some brambles and started bleating, enabling the shepherd to find it by hearing its cries. No matter how it became lost, it is unlikely that it could have found its way back without help. When we apply this lesson to ourselves or to others who have drifted away from God, perhaps we can realize that sometimes we "put our noses to the grindstone" and become so near sighted that all we see is work, family, recreation, etc. Perhaps it is only when we come to "rocky ground" or "get stuck in brambles" that we finally remember to look to God. By then we may have wandered far away without realizing it.

2. How did the coin become lost?

Although we do not know exactly how the coin came to be lost, we do know that the situation was different in several ways from that of the sheep:

- a. The coin did not know it was lost. It was incapable of knowing its state.
- b. Its being lost was not its own fault.
- c. It could not possibly find its own way back home.

With these two parables, Jesus is preparing the religious leaders to realize the importance of going out to look for lost souls. This has a direct application for us today. Too many times churches hang up a sign and expect people to come. But can we expect people who don't even know they are lost (like the coin) to look for *us*? Many do not have a concept of being lost. They might ask, "Lost from what?" They may accurately think that they have been abused or discriminated against and have never had a fair chance. But they may not appreciate being lost in a spiritual sense. What Jesus means by "lost" is *alienation from God with no way to return*. It is not that they cannot find themselves – they cannot find GOD! The woman and the shepherd looked *diligently* for the coin and the lost sheep. Do we expect to make just one effort and give up? Perhaps our reasoning has been, "I went out there and visited with you once. I tried to reach you but you wouldn't answer the phone or come to the door. You wouldn't return my calls. I visited you but you wouldn't do anything. So, I have done all I could." There are two main ideas in these parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin:

- **The importance of one.**

- **The need for someone to search diligently for the one who is lost.**

Jesus seems to be telling the religious leaders that there are two groups they should be seeking: the ones who have drifted away and the ones who don't even know they are lost. By *seeking*, Jesus means going out and actively looking for them. And when they are found, there is rejoicing (not only on earth but in Heaven, Luke 15:8). Once when H. M. Motsinger was preaching in a small congregation, a member told him, "Once there was a woman who drifted away from this church and became a prostitute. Later she repented and came forward to be restored." H. M. asked the member what she said to the woman? She replied, "I went down there to her and I put my finger in her face and said, 'It's about time you got your life straight! If you need any help, let me know.' Then I left her alone." This is the way "repenters" are sometimes treated, and it is totally against what God wants.

C. **The Lost Son Parable: A Father Does Not Search for His Lost Son**

According to tradition, the oldest son in a family inherited two shares of the family's estate while the other sons inherited one share each. Another tradition was that the younger sons, upon reaching a certain age, could request their part of the estate. This parable, often called the Prodigal Son, is actually about a man who had *two* sons. The younger son comes of age, asks for his inheritance (in this case, one-third of the estate), and leaves home. It is likely that the father did not have enough cash reserve to equal a third of the value of the estate and may have had to sell some of his property or livestock in order to raise it. Whatever hardship was endured, the father did what it took to provide his younger son with his rightful inheritance. The money was due the son and was his to do with as he decided. This younger son left and went to a far country where he spent his money foolishly and lived immorally. He thought he had friends among his partying buddies but when his money was gone, so were his "friends". He was hungry and had no money so, he got a job feeding hogs. To a Jew this was very humiliating because Jews did not eat pork and considered hogs unclean. He was so hungry that he would have eaten the food given to the pigs, but no one would even give him that. The only thing the son had to eat was the leftovers from the hogs. It is at this lowest point that he comes to himself and realizes what he has become. This leads him to feel he would be better off as one of his father's servants. He thinks, "In my father's house they have plenty to eat and food left over and here I am starving with hunger and eating with hogs!" He *decides* to return to his father and beg for mercy, asking only to be a hired servant.

Let's consider for a moment this element of *deciding*. The sheep did not *decide* to leave or decide to find its way back. It just wandered away and ended up being injured and lost. Someone had to go after it because it didn't know its way back. It only knew that something was wrong and was afraid. The coin certainly did not *decide* to become lost or *decide* to be restored. It was completely unaware. Someone also had to go after it. The sheep and the coin did not have a mind to repent. Notice that someone went to look for the sheep and the coin, but the father did not go looking for the son. This is because the son did not just become lost, he *decided* to leave. The father knew it would be useless to drag the son back if he didn't want to come. He didn't go after him because he knew his son had to make up his own mind. But the father did wait anxiously and earnestly, scanning the horizon daily and praying that his son would return. As the son made the long journey home, he rehearsed a repentance speech over and over. "Father, I have sinned against Heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Please, make me one of your hired servants." Then one day, as the father was scanning the horizon, he saw a figure coming closer and closer. Finally, he recognized the familiar form and walk. The father *ran* to meet his son while he was still a considerable distance from the house. He was so overjoyed to see him that he

didn't even let him get through his prepared speech. They embraced tearfully as the father shouted to his astonished servants, "Bring the robe, bring the ring, bring the sandals for his feet, prepare the meat for a party . . . for this my son was lost but now he is found!"

Often in literature writers tell familiar stories but change the endings. This was a familiar story to the people of that day but Jesus gave them a surprise ending. An explanation of the traditional story, the one with which they were familiar, follows . . .

The first part of the story is the same. There is a man with two sons and the younger one asks for his inheritance, receives it, and then goes off to a far country and squanders it in immoral living. He runs out of money and friends and ends up in a hog pen eating the hogs' leftovers. Finally he comes to himself and decides to return to his father's house and ask to be considered as a hired servant. But here is how the traditional story, the one Jesus' listeners were familiar with, continued.

The son made it back to his father's house and knocked on the door. When a servant opened the door, the son told him that he was the younger son and to please tell his father that he has come home. The servant makes him wait at the door while he goes to tell the father about the ragged and wasted man at the door. Upon hearing that this man claims to be his son, the father tells the servant, "That man couldn't possibly be my son. If you look through this window out back, you will see my only son who is working on our land. I did have another son but he demanded his inheritance. We gave it to him under great stress and it almost caused us bankruptcy to provide him his one-third at that time. He took it and we heard he wasted it. As far as we are concerned, he is dead. You go back and tell that impostor, whoever he is, that I have only one son. If he is not gone within ten minutes, we will turn the dogs loose on him."

This story was told by wealthy fathers to their sons in order to keep them from asking for their inheritance. They did not want their sons to cause the family financial hardship or bankruptcy, and they also wanted to keep them from spending money foolishly. *But did Jesus ever shake them up when he changed the ending!* Imagine the listeners' response when, instead of disowning and sending the son away, Jesus told the story of his being welcomed like a returning warrior. Whatever extravagance the father could think up, no matter what the trouble or expense, he was willing to do it to celebrate his son's home-coming. Here is a story, not of a harsh, vindictive father, but of a loving, giving and forgiving one. We believe the people to whom Jesus was talking not only had a punitive image of an earthly father, but also a punitive image of God. Jesus used this powerful surprise ending to help them realize that God is a loving God. God is sorrowful when we turn away from Him and longs to be united with us. He does not force us to come back, but waits with open arms and a celebration when we return.

Bill and Gloria Gaither have written, "Welcome Back Home," a song about the reconciliation of a son and his parents. It beautifully expresses the longing and love of the father . . .

Welcome Back Home

[Spoken before music begins]

Dear Son,

Can you hear what I'm writing to you? Although we've not heard from you since that morning you left the house, there's not a day we have not watched for you, waited for you, walked by the emptiness of your room.

[Music begins]

How I long for you to somehow know, wherever you are,

That you're loved and, yes, forgiven, before you even ask.
I know that the road you have taken will bring you pain.
How can I let you know how we hurt with you?
I know the way you've chosen will leave you lonely and afraid.
In the night, when you have only the empty silence for company,
After those who have used you are all gone away,
Well, you know that you are not alone.
Can you feel how our arms ache to hold you?
How our eyes watch the horizon every evening,
And search the mist of every dawn, for the glimpse of you returning,
And though I can't send you this letter, it's written on the wind.
It's etched in every sunset, it's whispered by the grasses of the field.
No matter how far away you go, you are our son,
And nothing you do, no distance, no choice,
Will make us stop loving you.

Silence hid the anger as he took his promised pay.
And he would show them that he could make it on his own.
But seething with resentment, he turned and walked away.
Without a backward glance at what he's known,
Hurt was in the silence, as he watched him fade from view;
This son who'd bro't him laughter, joy and tears.
Thus began the waiting, the years without a word;
The praying that someday he'd reappear.

*My son, I love you, you are forgiven.
You still belong here, won't you come home?
The family's waiting to celebrate with you.
You are forgiven, won't you come home?*

A figure in the distance, is enriched against the sky.
A house black-silhouetted, on the hill;
And a father's steps, suspended, O could this be his son?
The son walks resolutely thro' the chill.
The distance now is shortened, 'tween the father and the son;
The jolt of recognition slows their pace.
The paralyzing question hangs silent in the air.

Then a father holds his son in sweet embrace.
*My son, I love you, you are forgiven.
You still belong here, welcome back home!
The family's waiting to celebrate with you.
All is forgiven. All is forgiven.
Welcome back home. Welcome back home!*

Copyright 1987 by Gaither Music Company (ASCAP) and Century Oak/Richwood Music (BMI)

III. Conclusion

It grieves God when even one of us turns away from Him, but He still loves us and longs for our return. He will not force us to come back, but waits for us to decide. Once we *decide* to come back, He rushes to us with open arms and prepares a celebration. Those of us who have repented and have been welcomed back home, feel compelled to seek the lost – both those who have wandered away from God and those who don't even know they are lost.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Name _____ Date _____

Address _____

1. Who does Jesus seem to be talking to in these 3 parables?
(a) Tax collectors (b) Thieves
(c) Pharisees and Scribes (d) None of these
2. Which of the following is *not* part of restoring a lost sheep?
(a) Seeking (b) Caring
(c) Protecting (d) Beating
3. Jesus wants religious leaders to understand the value of going out to look for lost
(a) souls (b) dollars
(c) Bibles (d) hymnals
4. A main idea of the first 2 parables is
(a) the importance of one (b) the need to search diligently for one lost soul
(c) rejoicing over finding just one (d) all of these
5. In the parable of the farmer and his two sons, we learn *not* to be hard and
(a) soft (b) vindictive
(c) wishy-washy (d) none of these
6. The younger boy decided to come home and only ask
(a) for his old room (b) for his favorite burro
(c) to be a hired servant (d) for a non-cable connection.
7. The younger brother first confessed that he had sinned against
(a) heaven (b) hell
(c) Rome (d) Ghenna
8. The father of the younger son responded with
(a) anger (b) vindictiveness
(c) love and mercy (d) none of these
9. Jesus told these parables to show people that God is
(a) hard (b) unforgiving
(c) easily hoodwinked (d) loving and forgiving
10. The older son
(a) was perfect (b) had his problems too
(c) died (d) all of these