

GOD AND THE UNTHINKING

by Ray C. Stedman

I would like to speak to you this morning as members of a persecuted minority. You know that professing Christians were once the majority in our country. Not too long ago more people were attending church than not. But no longer. Church attendance and interest are diminishing with the passing of this decade. Of course, true Christians never were the majority. They never have been, and never will be -- i.e., until the Lord returns -- and they never need to be. The character of Christian life is not that God wins his battles by majority vote. He wins them by the quality of life that is manifested. But we are very much aware that we are living today in an increasingly pagan world. Increasingly we are sensing and feeling how much more a minority Bible believing and trusting Christians are becoming in this day.

I think there is a tendency in all of us to write off this present world and age as hopeless. All these immoral, rebellious, shallow, superficial moderns who are around us everywhere today -- how disgusted God must be with these people.

Well, if that is how we feel, we are very, very wrong! We very much need correction by the message of the parable now before us. It is the first of three which we might call "the parables of the lost things." They are found in Luke 15 -- one of the most familiar passages in the New Testament. We get the setting in which our Lord told them in the opening words of the chapter:

"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'

"So he told them this parable:" {Luke 15:1-3 RSV}

The occasion, you notice, is the offense taken by the Pharisees at the crowd which was attracted to Jesus. They were, says Luke, tax collectors and sinners. That does not sound so terrible to us, though some of us may feel that the reaction of these Pharisees toward the tax collectors was somewhat justified. We are still suffering from April 15th, and, perhaps, feel that this hard-hearted, rigid lot ought to be treated with some contempt. But we ought to remember that tax collectors today are somewhat different from tax collectors then. They were not official servants of the government, like tax collectors today, but hired private entrepreneurs who made their money by overcharging and extortion. They had gained the reputation, quite deserved, of being venal -- exploiters, amassers of slush funds, and also spies for the Roman government. You can imagine how this kind was rejected by those around them. Today we would call them "loan sharks and finks." The sinners here were a motley group of various outcasts from society -- prostitutes, irreligious people who did not frequent the Jewish temple, thieves, gamblers, etc. Our terms today for this group would be "hippies and radicals."

So, here is a crowd of loan sharks and finks, hippies and radicals, all gathered around Jesus, listening to him. And the Pharisees objected. They did not object, particularly, to the fact that these people were listening to Jesus. What really bothered them was that some of this crowd were inviting Jesus home to dinner, and he was accepting! And so, with hands raised in horror, these Pharisees and scribes were saying, "This man receives these people and eats with them!"

We need to understand the viewpoint of these Pharisees somewhat sympathetically. There was much about Jesus that appealed to them. After all, they could see that he, like they, believed strongly in the existence of a supernatural kingdom, a spiritual kingdom over which God ruled in sovereign power and authority. He believed in the supernatural activity of God in the affairs of men and this warmed their hearts. And he, like they, honored the authority of the Word of God. Jesus never said one disparaging word or gave any hint that would weaken the authority of the Scriptures -- the Old Testament. The Pharisees gloried in the fact that they

upheld the authority of the Word. They took it literally. They believed it. So they were attracted to Jesus on this basis also. Because they had these views in common, they expected him to join their club and to hold their attitude toward the outcasts from society.

But when Jesus saw their attitude of rejection toward these who were gathering around him, he told them these three parables. Each of these stories is about something lost. There are the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost sons. (Not son; sons. Both of them were lost.) And each of them reveals the heart of God, his attitude, and the activity that he undertakes on behalf of the lost. Each of them will help us to see men as God sees them, and to understand the reasons why they are lost.

With that as our introduction, let us look at the first of the stories our Lord told:

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 wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." {Luke 15:3-7 RSV}

There are a number of clues in this story that will help us to interpret it. It may be somewhat difficult for us, who are city dwellers accustomed to a metropolitan area, to relate to this story from an agricultural-pastoral region. Some of us are rather remote from this, although, as I have reminded you in the past, I come from Monta-a-a-na and I know a good deal about sheep -- lost and otherwise.

The first thing to grasp is the significance of the fact that our Lord chose a sheep and not a pig, cow, or dog. It was a lost sheep.

There is something unusual about sheep. Unlike other animals they do not often deliberately run away. A dog who wants to be free, given a chance, will leave, just like that. A pig or cow will do the same. But sheep do not. They only wander away. They do not mean to. They just drift away without realizing it. Thus Jesus has deliberately chosen an animal which represents people who are lost, but who never intended to be lost. They never meant to be, and they don't know how it happened. In complete sincerity of purpose they suddenly find themselves lost, and they do not know how it came about.

You can watch a sheep get himself lost. He is with the flock at first. Then he sees some grass a few paces away that interests him so he goes over to it. Then he sees some more in another few steps and moves to that. Then he finds more a little beyond. He is concerned only about the immediate, and, little by little, he is drawn away without realizing it. Suddenly he looks around for the flock, and finds they are nowhere in sight. He begins to bleat and run around, but he does not know in which direction to go, nor how to hide -- so he panics, he runs in circles. Every shepherd knows that a sheep in that condition is utterly helpless. Any wild animal, any hostile force, can take him easily.

This is the picture our Lord gives us of certain people who are intent only on the present experience. They are living just for the moment. They do not intend to get lost; they do not intend to waste their lives. They do not intend to wander off into something dangerous and destructive. But, little by little, concentrating only on the present, they wander away. Eventually they wake up to realize that they are lost, that life is suddenly empty, that their hearts are burdened and heavy with guilt -- and they do not know how it happened. They are not happy to be lost; they hate it. They long to belong. They may have wanted all along to be part of what God is doing, so they do not know how they got this way. They are exactly typified by this sheep.

There are millions like this today. Some are poor and obscure. Some are intent on simply making a living, on feeding themselves. That is all that concerns them. They live to eat and eat to live. Such a person has been described this way:

Into this world,

To eat and to sleep
And to know no reason
Why he was born,
Save to consume the corn,
Devour the cattle, flock, and fish,
And leave behind an empty dish.

Some are rich and prominent.

All over this country, and all over the world today, I see people suffering from what someone has aptly termed "destination sickness," i.e., the sickness of those who have already arrived at their destination, who have all that they set out to get in life. They have all they want; but they discover that they do not want anything they have. They have an empty life. That is destination sickness.

Our Lord is talking here about people who did not mean to be empty and hollow and heartsick, but who find that they are, and do not know how it happened.

This is the reason for much of the use of drugs by young people today. Not all who are using drugs are rebels. Not all of them are trying to protest something. They are simply drifting along with the crowd, or are intent upon some immediate experience. Sometimes they are kids who have grown up in homes devoid of love, and whose parents lead hollow lives -- this is a frequent pattern among drug users today. They will try anything because they want something, that is all, and they do not know where it is leading them.

A second key to this parable is the shepherd's response. He left the ninety and nine in the wilderness, Jesus said, and went after the one. That is most significant. It pictures the activity of God, as expressed in the person of the Lord Jesus himself. He left something to come and find us. As Paul states it so wonderfully in the letter to the Philippians, he did not count the fact that he was equal with God a thing to be held on to, but instead emptied himself, took upon himself the form of a servant, and was found in the likeness of men {cf, Phil 2:6-7}. He left, and he came. You can see how beautifully this is fulfilled in our Lord's own ministry.

Take his dealings with Matthew, for example. Remember that Matthew was a tax collector. He belonged to this crowd of extortionists who made their living by overcharging taxpayers, ruthlessly taking the last dime from poor people. He was one of the untouchables of his generation. He had full pockets, but an empty heart. But one day there stood before him a man whom he had seen and heard speaking, this man from Galilee, this stranger from Nazareth. Suddenly the man turned and looked at him, sitting there behind his table, with all his money around him. Those eyes looked into his eyes, and Matthew heard him speaking to him. He could not believe it -- that this man, who was obviously a prophet, should speak to him, an untouchable tax collector! To his astonishment he heard Jesus say, "Follow me," {Matt 9:9}. And Matthew just left all the money, stood up, and followed him. What he did next has always interested me. He came to Jesus and said, "Master, I have made a feast in my house for all my friends. Would you come?" And Jesus went. He went because there were gathered all the tax collectors that Matthew knew, ready to listen to him as he reached out to find these untouchables who were lost in the midst of plenty.

Our Lord intends that this should typify and describe those who are moved with compassion to meet the needs of the lost of this kind today. It is necessary, he says, to leave the ninety and nine, and to go out. You can never get this kind to come to church. They do not even know that there is anything worth coming to church for. And, of course, too often there is not. You must leave the safe place, the secure place, the comfortable place, and go out to find them. They are responsive, they are ready to be found, they do not resist when you find them. But this kind will never come to you.

That is why, from time to time, God lays his hand upon young people of this congregation and sends them out, out beyond the seas to people in other lands who are like the sheep in this story, who have drifted away, stumbled along, and found themselves lost. Some may even be savages in remote tribes, obscure people, forgotten people. The appeal of the Lord is, if you are going to reach this kind, that you be willing to leave something. You cannot merely stay in the comfortable place. Leave the ninety and nine, and go out to the campuses, to the beer halls and the cocktail parties, to the lonely offices and the servicemen's centers --

wherever this kind gather in their loneliness and lostness, trying to find something to satisfy the emptiness, to deaden the pain of an empty heart -- and there you will find them.

When you find them, says the Lord, lay them on your shoulders, as he did. What does that mean? It means help them, undertake for them, assume some care of them, share your strength with them. That is what this shepherd did. When he found the lost one he laid it on his shoulders and carried it, and went home rejoicing.

Some months ago I received a letter from a friend whom I had met last summer at a conference in the state of Washington. He told me of an unusual character whom he had met in the course of his work as a doctor. This person had been a member of the Norwegian Resistance to the Nazi occupation of Norway. He was a tough character. He had lived the rigorous, ruthless life of an underground commando. He was in this country trying to organize a program to challenge young people to get involved in wilderness survival training, to toughen them. But his own life was empty, his own heart hollow. In an attempt to satisfy it he had begun to drink and had become an alcoholic. Yet he was such a colorful character that he drew attention wherever he went. My friend sent me some newspaper clippings about him, described him to me, and said that he was moving to a town across San Francisco Bay from here. He asked me if I could do anything about reaching him.

I remembered a man whom I had known for a number of years who lived over there. He is an earnest, compassionate man, always reaching out to try to help those who are lost. I put all the information in an envelope and sent it to him. For weeks I heard nothing, but just two weeks ago he was here in this congregation. He told me what happened. He said that he had gone out after this man, and they had become friends. He found that, despite all the rough exterior, there was a very hungry heart underneath. And, in the course of events, he led him to the Lord Jesus. The man became a Christian and was delivered from his alcoholism. He was restored to his wife. And we have been invited to supply counselors for the camp that he is establishing up in the Sierra. He wants only Christian young men and women to work with him there. What an example of this kind of ministry -- of reaching out to those who are lost.

A third key in this parable is the emphasis on the rejoicing over the recovery of the lost. Our Lord says,

"And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." {Luke 15:6-7 RSV}

This reveals the value that God sets on lost men and women. They are not worthless in his sight. They are not written off, nor neglected. They are made in his image. That is the declaration of Scripture. Therefore they are of unspeakable value to God. They bear his own mark, marred, defiled, and ruined as that image may be, and he longs to find them and reach them and restore them. Notice the remarkable way our Lord expresses God's joy, here:

"Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." {Luke 15:7 RSV}

For years I accepted the usual interpretation of that last phrase. It is that our Lord was referring to these Pharisees as the ninety and nine -- these righteous persons who thought that they did not need any repentance -- who actually did, but did not know it. But the more I have studied this parable, the less I feel that is correct. Jesus deliberately says that these ninety-nine are people who do not need any repentance. He did not say that they merely thought they didn't; they actually don't! Well, if ninety-nine people do not need repentance, why do they not? It must be because they have already repented. There is only one way to be righteous and that is to have repented, to have turned to the One who alone can give us righteousness. Righteousness is the gift of God. We know that from Scripture. No man can earn it, no man can buy it, no man can achieve it. There is no religious formula you can go through that will make it available to you. It is a gift given only to those who have repented and have cast themselves upon the grace of God.

So here are ninety-nine people who have done that. Now, does God not have joy over them? Of course he does. He rejoices greatly. He takes great delight in those who are his. You only have to read the Scriptures to

see how God's concern is for his own, how he loves them, nourishes them, is tender toward them. As a Father he pities them and trains them, disciplines them and works with them, and rejoices over them. Yes, Jesus is not deprecating the joy that God has for these; he is simply saying that if God rejoices over those who are already his that still doesn't compare with how he feels when one of these lost people repents and turns to him. You cannot imagine the joy that breaks out in heaven when that happens! God is so desirous of setting men free from the things that blast and ruin them, disfigure and destroy them that, when he can accomplish it by the great work he has performed, heaven just erupts into cheering, and they shoot off fireworks and have a tremendous celebration! That is how much God is concerned about the lost, and that is what our Lord wants us to see.

If we Christians can live on the face of this planet and can look at a world as lost as this world is -- with its millions around us whose hearts are empty, hollow, and bleeding, and who did not mean to get lost anymore than we had meant to before we were found -- and not feel some of the same compassion as the God who longs to reach them, then there is something wrong with us. But if we enter into God's compassion, then our hearts will begin to burn with a hunger to do something for these poor, lost people whom Jesus described as being like sheep without a shepherd, wandering in the wilderness of life with no guide nor guideline, simply existing, with no destiny except death at last. The wonderful thing is that when you are concerned, and involve yourself in the great enterprise of God to find this kind of people, then you do find them. God will lead you to one, and your own heart can share something of the joy of God over their repentance.

In the course of my experience as a pastor, I have seen it happen many times:

Many of you have told me, with your face literally radiating glory, about an experience you have had with your neighbor or friend or co-worker. You have been able to lead them to Christ. You have found them lost and have led them to him. You have rejoiced over it.

Recently my daughter, Sheila, came home and she was radiant. As she walked into the house she said, "Oh, Dad, the most exciting thing happened!" She told me of how she had been driving home from the Young Life Camp at Woodleaf, and had brought with her a girl who had not known the Lord. As they were driving along they were talking about him, and the girl suddenly said to her, "Sheila, pull over to the side of the road, will you? I want to receive the Lord." And she led her to Christ. That girl is here with her this morning. And I sensed and shared with my daughter the joy in heaven among the angels and in the heart of God, and in all those who see life as it really is, when one lost person turns to Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Thank you, our heavenly Father, for this glimpse into your own heart, for the knowledge of your concern for those who are drifting and aimless, who have no goals in life. There may be some among us here this morning who have been brought by those who have found them.

We pray that they may now, by faith, lay hold of this blessed Redeemer, this Shepherd, and let him lift them up and hold them to himself, lay them on his shoulder, and bring them home with rejoicing. We ask in his name, Amen.

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