

GOD AND THE NEGLECTED

by Ray C. Stedman

The parables of our Lord are remarkable stories which he so wonderfully told on many different occasions. They intrigue and challenge us for they always have an element of mystery about them; they constitute a delightful, tantalizing challenge to us to discover the hidden truth that he has incorporated in them. We are studying the series of parables recorded in the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel. These are parables of lost things and they grew out of an incident when the Lord was surrounded by a crowd made up of loan sharks, hippies, and radicals. Of course, the Scriptures do not call them that. There they are referred to as tax collectors and sinners. But these are the modern equivalents. They were listening eagerly to what he had to say. They even invited him home to dinner and he accepted.

But the Pharisees and the scribes objected very strenuously to our Lord's fellowshiping with these people; in their self-righteous egotism, they criticized him severely for it. They murmured against him, saying that he was demeaning himself by eating with tax collectors and sinners. To answer this charge our Lord gave three parables. Each of them is a picture primarily intended to illustrate the joy in the heart of God when someone who was lost is found.

In the process of telling these stories our Lord reveals the four kinds of lostness that prevail among men. Last week we looked together at the parable of the lost sheep. There we learned that men can be lost because of unthinking ignorance. They become preoccupied with life, drifting away without intending to do so. There is no rebellion, no intent to be lost, but they simply wake up to find that life has moved them away from where they ought to be, and so they find themselves lost.

Today we have the parable of the lost coin, the second in this series, found in Verses 8-10:

"Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." {Luke 15:8-10 RSV}

There are three very revealing movements in this little story:

The first is the circumstance of the lost coin. The coin referred to here is a small silver piece worth, in our money, about 16 cents. The lady had ten of these, so the total value of her wealth was \$1.60. That is not very much, but it was more than simply some money to this woman because it had great sentimental value. We learn from those who have studied the customs of ancient days that this was part of her dowry.

When a woman married she took money that she had accumulated throughout her life and sewed it into a headdress which she wore on her wedding day. She used ten silver coins -- which is why our Lord picked this number to illustrate the story. Therefore these ten coins were of tremendous significance to her as a woman. They symbolized her dowry. They represented not just the value of the money, but all that she had to contribute to the marriage. This headdress was of such value to the women of that time that, by law, it was impossible for it to be taken from them -- even to pay a debt.

I have often thought that these Eastern customs of marriage were much more sensible than ours. We can see Western degeneracy in the fact that now the father of the bride must pay all the costs of a wedding. It was much better in the East where the women needed to contribute only this little bit. The bridegroom paid everything else. As the father of four daughters I should like very much to reintroduce these customs into our modern scene!

The point of the illustration that the Lord is giving here is that something was lost -- but lost at home. The value of the story of the lost sheep is that, though the sheep did not mean to, it had wandered away and the shepherd had to leave the ninety and nine to go out and find it. Similarly, the value of this illustration is that the coin was lost at home where you would not expect to find lost things. This coin did not wander off. It was in the place of apparent safety. Nevertheless it was lost -- probably through carelessness or neglect, although nothing is said about the cause. It may have been by some accident. The woman is unaware that the coin is lost until suddenly she discovers that it is gone. When she wakes up to realize that the coin is missing she is stirred to a flurry of activity to recover it because it is of extreme value to her. That is the story, and our Lord intended it to hit with impact on those who heard.

It has meaning to us today only as we apply it to our own situation. It forces upon us the question, "Do I have something lost at home?" Perhaps better, "Is someone lost?" -- because our Lord is not talking about things but is illustrating the value of lost persons. Is someone lost in your home -- a child, perhaps, that you have taken for granted is a Christian, but, as he grows up, something makes you realize that he is not? You may wake up to realize that these whom you have taken for granted to be safe and sound in your home are not; they are lost.

There are millions like this today in Christian homes -- many even in this congregation. We have raised them in our Christian homes. We have taught them the Scriptures as best we knew how. We have helped them to memorize Scripture. We have taught them how to know the Lord, and how to walk with him. But, as they grow up, if we are honest, observant, and sensitive as parents, there may come a time when, in the absence of any positive evidence to the contrary, we must face the realization that these children are not really saved, are not Christians, are not born again. They are lost -- and lost at home.

This is a frequent occurrence because we parents tend to put too much trust in externals. I have long ago learned not to trust the fact that a child has made any sort of public profession of becoming a Christian as evidence that he has actually become a real Christian. Many people have held evangelistic meetings for them, and children have raised their hands, and confessed faith in Christ. The parents have naively assumed that these children have really become Christians. But we need to understand that we cannot impose adult standards of commitment upon children, because they are born imitators. You can have a meeting with five hundred children you gather right off the streets. If you have presented something interesting and fascinating, and they have been caught up in the flow of the program, you may make an appeal to them at the end of it, and they will do whatever you ask. But that does not mean they have actually been changed. To assume so is the mistake many Christian parents make.

I frequently meet children who have come through this system and have grown up into adults. Their parents have assumed, because they were obedient to attend Sunday school and to go with them to church, that they had become Christians. But actually they never made an inner commitment of the heart, and the children have grown up without a real knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

One of our Sunday school teachers was saying to me just this morning that he had been asking his class some questions about the Bible. As long as they concerned mere information the students were all responsive. But when he began to probe their inner lives and their inner reaction and response to the person of Christ, he found that they had hardly anything to say. They did not know anything. There was no genuine experience of the reality of the Lord Jesus.

I do not know how many times I have heard someone say, "When I was a kid my folks made me go to Sunday school, and I went all my life. I won all the medals and prizes for attendance. But, as soon as I got out on my own, I quit and I've never gone back. It never meant anything to me."

That is the situation our Lord is describing here. One is lost, and lost at home.

The second movement of our story takes us immediately into the efforts of this woman to find what was lost. She launched upon a remarkable campaign. When she realized that this valuable coin was lost, she went into action. Her activity in this story reveals the heart concern of God for people who are lost like this. God's heart moves out to them. Also revealed is the process of recovering such lost people. I am sure every parent will be interested in what follows.

This woman did three things which are extremely important:

First, she lit a lamp. That is what to do before anything else. She realized that she was working in darkness. She needed more light in this search. I think you see how clear the symbolism is. If we are going to find those lost at home, we are going to need the light of the Scriptures. We need to understand how God works, and how children operate. There is only one source in the world where we can get that information accurately, and in a trustworthy way, and that is from the Scriptures. So we need to light the lamp of Scripture when we realize that our children do not know Jesus Christ.

This woman felt she needed light, as we must feel the need of learning more of reality. I am sure you know how this feels. There is not a parent here who has not felt his ignorance in confronting this kind of situation, and sensed how little he understands children. How much we need to understand what a child thinks, how he thinks, and how to approach him about God.

There is no book greater than the Bible to consult for that. The New Testament and the Old alike are full of passages that deal with the problem of reaching children. Nothing is more important in this connection than the book of Proverbs. Proverbs is the record of the talks of a father with his son, and of how a father begins early in the life of his son to lay the foundation that will lead that boy to the fullness of manhood, in an experience of trust in the living God. There are books and passages in the New Testament also that deal with how to approach a child, and, furthermore, how to recognize true life.

The problem is that there are many parents who do not understand how to recognize the signs of a genuine impartation of life in Jesus Christ. They have taken the word of a child, or the expression of his experience, as the ground of salvation. I have known parents, and mothers particularly, who were so confused about this that even when their children had grown up and obviously had left the path of any possible testimony of Christian faith -- had flung their faith overboard and openly displayed indifference and unconcern for the things of God -- these parents had come to me and said, "I know he's a Christian, because when he was five years old he received the Lord Jesus." But that is fooling yourself. That is no sign at all.

The Scriptures tell us that if the Spirit of God is at work in the heart, there will be evidence of it. As John tells us in his first letter, "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren," {1 Jn 3:14 RSV}. Love awakening for other Christians is one sign. Paul says, "Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity," {2 Tim 2:19b KJV}. A desire to turn from that which is obviously evil is another sign. There are other indications of the fruit of the Spirit throughout the Scriptures. These are what we must learn if we are going to evaluate our children rightly.

Not only that, but we must also learn how to strengthen and nurture the life that is already there, so that it grows as the child grows and moves into adulthood, so that it begins to blossom and flower and to produce Christian character and a Christian life.

Second, this woman swept the house. In those days it was customary to spread straw on the floor. Usually the floors were earthen and, in order to have something soft underfoot, straw was spread. A coin falling down in it would naturally be difficult to find. So the woman took a broom and swept up all the straw and thus made it much more possible to find it.

What does this symbolize to us? You can see clearly that it indicates a need to lay bare the circumstances of the family, to open up and to be transparent and honest within the family circle. There is a need to admit fault -- to admit both the possibility of failure and its actual occurrence on the part of parents toward children, if it is true. There is a need to let your children see that you are not perfect, and are not claiming to be perfect, as parents. You must admit, as freely as you expect them to admit, the mistakes that you make and the errors that you have fallen into. This is what makes possible the finding of lost ones.

I know that is not easy to do. Something about being adults appeals to our pride, and we love to preserve an air of infallibility with regard to our children. When they are little, they think that we hung the moon in place. They think that mother and dad know all the answers, that there is nothing hidden from them, that they know

everything. But as they grow up we have to dispossess them of that delusion. To continue it is easy because we enjoy that feeling. We feel great that our children think we are so tremendous. But nothing is more dangerous than to let them grow up continuing to believe that we think that of ourselves. Parents need to unburden themselves and admit their problems.

I must confess to you that there is nothing more difficult in a pastor's household than for the pastor to admit that he is wrong. He has not only his whole family thinking that he knows everything, but half the church does, too. And for him to have to say to his children, "I'm sorry, I made a mistake," is a hard thing to do. But I have had to do it, and I hope you will do it, too, because nothing will contribute more in a household to laying the groundwork of reality in the Christian faith, than to have the parents open up and be honest and transparent in their problems with their youngsters.

The third thing this woman did was to search diligently. She lit a lamp; she swept the house; and she searched diligently. That means she thought about ways of finding this coin. She gave herself to this task. She did not just look around a little in her spare time; she stopped everything and she swept the house out. Foot by foot she went over the floor, searching for this lost coin -- it was that valuable to her.

The symbolism and the application in our own lives again is quite clear. Parent after parent has told me, "If I only realized how important it was to have given some time to my children when they were growing up. But I was caught up in the business of making money. I thought it was so important to get ahead. I thought it was essential to have all the nice things that the neighbors had. I was so intent on making enough money to buy a new car, or another television set, or to get a cabin in the mountains. Now I realize that if I had only given some time to my children how much more valuable that would have been!" And so the analogy here, our Lord teaches, is to someone who immediately stops everything and takes the time to know and to love his children, until they open up, until a response is obtained, until there are communication channels open, and it is thus possible to reach and to find that which was lost.

I do not have to dwell upon this. I know you are hearing it from many sides today. But this lack of proper attention is the reason why so many of our young people are drifting away. So many of them have no confidence in the older generation because they feel that adults do not know them. Parents are caught up in their own affairs while their children run around the streets without any supervision, without their parents knowing or caring where they have been or what they are doing. I see this in my own neighborhood and everywhere I go. But this must not be true among Christians. For, if we have a concern for our children and desire to see them one with God, we must realize the great possibility that they can be lost right at home.

The third movement of the story brings us at last to finding and rejoicing:

"And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." {Luke 15:9-10 RSV}

Speaking as a father I can tell you that there is nothing more satisfying than to find your children growing up into solid, trustworthy, Christian maturity. There is nothing that warms the heart more than to see the evidences of faith, the warmth of Christian love, and depth of Christian commitment in the heart of one of your own children. Remember what John writes in his third letter, saying what every father can echo: "No greater joy can I have than this, to hear that my children follow the truth," {3 Jn 1:4 RSV}. That is joy. The poet, Edgar A. Guest, said:

If I don't help my boy to grow up right, I'll call myself a failure no matter how much money I make or how big a reputation I get. I have a number of tasks to do all of which I should like to do well. To be a failure in any one of them would be disappointing. Yet I could bear that without whimpering if I were sure I had not failed my boy. Not so much of me in the bank, and more of me and my best in the lad -- that's what I should like to have to show at the end of my career. For me to succeed as a father, he must succeed. Unless my boy comes to manhood fit for the respect of his fellow men, I shall have been a failure. The glory of our handiwork lies not in ourselves, but in our children.

So our Lord described the joy that was in the heart of this woman when she found this coin which was lost.

She called all her neighbors and friends to share with her this overwhelming joy. And you know, despite all the problems that may come in the raising of children, despite the battles, the failures, the tears, the heartaches -- if, as you see them coming to manhood and womanhood, they have struck deep roots down into the depths of Christian truth, and have come to understand and to know the Lord Jesus as a living, vital factor in their life, and have begun, somewhat feebly perhaps, but have begun at least, to rest upon his forgiving grace and to understand his overwhelming love, to understand how to walk with him and to draw strength from him, and to encounter the battles and the difficulties of life with the courage and strength which he alone can impart, then it does not make any difference what all the difficulties, problems, and heartaches were. Your own heart will be filled with this kind of joy as you see them entering life committed, concerned, growing, settled in faith, solid and secure.

And Jesus said that joy is shared in heaven, as well. The angels glory before God, he said. There is a celebration in heaven when one of these who are lost at home opens up his or her heart and finds a living Lord. He likens it to the celebration that was held when the lost sheep was found. It is a superlative expression. They shoot off cannons, they ring bells, they swing from the chandeliers. It is a great time of unrestrained joy before God over a lost one that is returned.

What a revelation of the heart of God this is! How God longs to see those who are lost recovered, whether they have wandered away, or whether they are lost at home where it had seemed that they had been in a place of safety. Yet all of us know of instance after instance of those who have been raised in Christian homes, but who have been lost all the time.

God help us to face this with the realism of the whole picture of our Lord's parable, that we might stop and take the steps that are necessary to find these that are lost at home, before it is too late.

Prayer

Our Father, we pray that our own hearts may be filled with the joy that is described in this parable, as we look forward to the time when our children move into adulthood and take on the responsibilities of Christian adults. We pray that you will help us to be realistic and honest about them. We realize that for a child to find Christ is the easiest possible thing, when the approach is right. As you yourself have said, Lord Jesus, except that we become like a little child, no one of us can come into the kingdom of heaven. And if our lives and our approach are right, all of these children can find you, for that is not difficult for a child. We ask you that you will lay this on our hearts, and teach us to be good parents. And for those of us who have children who are now entering adulthood, we pray that we may be tender and responsive, ready to admit our mistakes and our failures, and ready not to blame the children but to help them in every way that we can. In these days of pressures and problems we pray, Lord, for the wisdom to lead them aright. In Christ's name, Amen.

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