

## **The Lord`s Parables Part (5) - The Parable of the Lost Sheep**

One of the things about Jesus which disturbed the then leaders of the Jews, was His willingness to receive and to sit with poor people, tax gatherers, and sinners even, whom they despised. And on several occasions they brought this up in accusation against Him. A quality of the Lord which, to us, speaks eloquently of His Messiahship; to them only denied it. And they wasted no time questioning Him, or questioning His disciples, about it.

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew`s house, many tax collectors and `sinners` came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked His disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and `sinners`. On hearing this Jesus said, `It is not the healthy that need a physician, but the sick. But go and learn what this means, `I desire mercy not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9, 10-13).

Relatively early on as this must have been in His ministry, the scribes and Pharisees were by no means content to leave it at that. On another occasion it was objected that He allowed a woman; a sinner, to wash His feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. "When the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is, that she is a sinner." (Luke 7-39) And though we cannot go into it here this thought of the Pharisee elicited a gently spoken but very effective and telling response from the Lord.

Point of contention, and often brought up against the Lord as it must have been (see Matthew 11, 19), there is at least one other place in the gospels where it is dwelt upon, and where the Lord's answer to the accusation; in the form of a parable (indeed, it is a series of parables) is given at length. And it is the parable of the lost sheep, which is what I would like to talk about now.

At the beginning of the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel we read how it was that "all the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around to hear Him". But the Pharisees and teachers of the law murmured, "This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them." Here He was, yet again, having dealings with these people who weren't worth troubling over.

And Jesus spoke this parable to them, saying, "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety nine in the open country, and go after the lost sheep, until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders, and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says 'Rejoice with me, I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety nine who do not need to repent."

It would have to have been a very foolish, dumb, kind of person who did not see what the Lord was getting at in this Parable or appreciate the point involved. Lost as many people might seem to be, and in the eyes of the teachers and Pharisees, these tax collectors and poor people and sinners were certainly 'lost', yet they are as much the love and care and concern of the Lord as anyone else. Written off as they had been by the leaders of the Jews, yet this was not the attitude of the Lord. And rather than condemning Him for associating with them; for seeking them out and offering them the hope of salvation, if they would repent; the scribes and the Pharisees should be rejoicing, as a shepherd rejoices when he finds a sheep that has been lost.

As we have earlier seen in this series of talks, all of the Parables were, in the first place, directed towards particular situations and attitudes which were at the forefront when they were spoken. Each was in its own way relevant to some circumstance which had arisen.

The parable of the Great Supper, for example, was intended by the Lord to awaken in the Jews an awareness of their uncaring rejection of what He stood for and of the opportunity He held out to them. They were being like people who indifferently spurned an invitation to a banquet and found other things to do instead. And, as we have seen with regard to this parable of the lost sheep, it is the thinking and attitudes of the teachers and the pharisees which is also rebuked here.

Effective as the parable was in this regard, and will always continue to be whenever this kind of thinking raises its head or attempts to enter into things, yet at the same time it has been at the centre of a misunderstanding which continues to this day.

Many people have come to think of the Lord's ministry as a ministry to the 'lost' that the purpose of His Coming on earth was to reach out to a certain group of people; that this is where His main, if not His only, concern lay. With a particular group of people. And there are places which, on the surface, give the impression that this was so. Indeed, so strong has been this impression and so influenced by it as people have been that it has led to the mistranslation of certain of the Lord's words in some of the more modern translations of the Bible. In Matthew's Gospel, and in connection with this same parable of the lost sheep, the Revised Standard Version, for example reads, "For the Son of man is come to save the lost", as if it were a certain group of people. But this is not what the Lord said or how His words should read. There is no question but that He loved and cared for the poor and the despised and the sinful. But it would be wrong to limit His work on earth as solely being connected with them. And He did not speak of His mission in this way. As the Authorised, or King James version of the Bible has it His words were, "For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost." Not people as such, but in fact certain qualities which had been lost where all people were concerned.

I stress this point both because it is important and because without it, that is, without an understanding of the fact that it was certain qualities with all people which the Lord came to save, or comes to save, we are unable to appreciate, or in any way to enter into, the deeper truths and teachings which the parable contains. On the surface, the parable seems to speak only of people; people who are 'lost' and who are 'found' again; people who sin, who are 'lost' to the Lord and yet who by repentance are 'recovered' to Him.

However at a deeper and more interior level, and as the Lord indicated in His words about it (His words about saving 'that which was lost') it speaks of a particular quality which all people had lost and which He came on earth to restore.

The one hundred sheep of the parable represent, or correspond to, all the good and charitable, all the heaven inspired and trusting affections within a person. Sheep and lambs are symbols in the Bible of these things. As for the one which was lost, this means one's affection for the Lord; one's willingness to trust Him and to be led and directed by Him, an affection which people as a whole had lost by the time the Lord came on earth and which it was His purpose to restore. This is the quality which, a moment ago, we were talking about. And this is what the Lord was referring to when He said that, as the Son of man, He had come "to save that which was lost".

At the time the Lord came on earth, people everywhere had lost their trust in God; their willingness to believe in Him, and to be led and directed by Him. And this is what is meant by the lost sheep of the parable. This is what the Lord came to recover. And He did this by teaching a new concept of God, of who He is and what He is like. He talked about God in terms of care and love and forgiveness and made Him intelligible to people once again. What had been lost to people was recovered. And wilderness and spiritual desert in which the human race had been, with trust in God restored to them, they could, if they so wished, be led forth from it.

As it was with the human race as a whole, which lost its willingness to believe in God, to trust in Him, to be led by Him, so it is also with each of us as individuals. We all go through phases when we lose out trust in God and are unwilling to be led by Him. Refusing to look to Him and to be guided by Him in our thinking and our behaviour we look to ourselves and attempt to set our own standards of thought and action. With us, as well, a sheep becomes lost, a quality disappears from our lives, and the Lord's objective, in His work with us, is to recover and to restore it. As He came on earth to mankind in general, so He comes to us, individually, to seek and to save "that which was lost". He is ever watching over us, and, like a shepherd, protects and guards, as far as He is able, every good quality and every good affection within us. And when one is lost He goes out after it, hoping to be able to bring it back again .

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