

The Identity of the Lost Sheep

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Luke 15:1-7

Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them. And he spake this parable unto them, saying, What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.

Preaching from a parable is fraught with peril. The reason is that there is much tendency to read way too much into the parable and put too much emphasis upon the lesser details of the story. Many good men have been carried away by seeing some specific suggestion in each description of the parable and thereby missing the truth that the parable is teaching or reinforcing. For example, in the parable of the Good Samaritan some have read into the details of that story some unbelievable lessons. Here are a few of the interpretations given.

“A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho” represents Adam. Jerusalem is the heavenly city of peace, from whose blessedness Adam fell. Jericho means the moon, and signifies our mortality. Thieves are the devil and his angels, who stripped Adam of his immortality, and beat him, by persuading him to sin; and left him half-dead, because in so far as man can understand and know God, he lives, but in so far as he is wasted and oppressed by sin, he is dead; he is therefore called half-dead. The priest and Levite who saw him and passed by, signify the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament, which could profit nothing for salvation. Samaritan means guardian, and therefore the Lord Himself is represented by this name. The binding of the wounds is the restraint of sin. The injured man being set upon the beast is belief in the incarnation of Christ. The inn is the Church, where travelers on their way to the heavenly country are refreshed.

These allegorical interpretations miss the meaning of the parable entirely. Jesus was simply answering the question, “Who is my neighbor?” And the answer was anyone with whom we come in contact, even an enemy.

Parables are stories designed to teach one main truth or to illustrate a point. Very seldom do they have multiple lessons or truths to teach. It is dangerous and will lead to misinterpretation if we affix to each detail some significant meaning as in the case of the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The same is true of our parable today. Our Lord wants to teach one major truth so He uses a parable, a story about a shepherd and his flock. In verses one and two we have recorded the incidents that lead our Lord to tell this parable and two successive parables. In verse one of Luke fifteen we read,

Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him.

The amiable character of our Lord attracted all kinds of men to Him. He was not pretentious nor did He act in such a “holier-than-thou” way even though He was holier-than-all. He spoke as “one having authority, and not as the scribes.” Therefore, the people “heard him gladly.” Jesus did not put on the air of unapproachableness as did the religious leaders. He gave the sinners and the down-and-outers hope of redemption. And as a consequence they “drew near unto Him.” Dear sinner friend, do not think that you cannot draw near to Christ because of your sins. It is for sinners that He came into this world. As He put it, “I have come to seek and to save that which is lost.” You must approach God through Christ if you are ever to be clean from your sin. The beloved Paul the apostle said, “This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief” (1 Timothy 1:15). Perhaps you know no other sinner worse than you. You would say of yourself that you are the chief of sinners. Well, then you too may come to Christ for He said He came to save sinners, and if you are the chief of sinners, you most definitely qualify as a sinner, therefore, come!

In verse two, Jesus’ reception of sinners greatly bothered the religious leaders.

And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.

Have you ever noticed how that some religious people are whiners? They are not happy and complain when God is moving and doing a work of grace. God replaces their old wineskins with new skins and new wine, and, instead of rejoicing in the revival and blessing, they are trying to figure out a way to shut it down. Hypocrites! And such were these men who were vocalizing their contempt for both Jesus and the sinner.

As a result of their complaining, Jesus defends His actions with a parable or a story. Verse three says,

And he spake this parable unto them, saying,

It is clear that the parable He told about the shepherd and his sheep is in answer to the religious snobbery of the Pharisees and scribes. It is this fact that makes the purpose of the parable quite plain and undeniably clear. The purpose of the parable is to demonstrate Christ’s purpose of seeking and saving that which is lost. The message of the parable is not about a Christian backsliding and Christ bringing the backslider back into the fold. Yet, so many interpret this passage in this fashion. Sermons have been masterfully crafted and delivered, preaching to the backslider using this text. But this is an egregious error not only in interpretation but in doctrine.

By preaching that this is referring to the backslider you remove all impetus and responsibility for the erring Christian to repent of his sins and return to God.

For you see, in the parable it is Christ who seeks the lost sheep and not the lost sheep seeking to return. The lost sheep cannot return; he does not know his way back; he is in mortal danger and needs to be rescued. But if the lost sheep is not a representation of the unconverted but rather a Christian who has wandered from church, then in essence we can tell the backslider to do nothing but wait for Christ to come and bring him back. But this is not about a wayward Christian, and to make the parable suggest this is to give men false comfort and a motive to keep in their sin until the Good Shepherd appears. This is one of the reasons I think we have so many unsaved people in our churches. We tell them they are saved but backslidden. We remove the mortal danger of sin and being in sin. We have created this theological “no-man’s land” where they can indefinitely remain in sin and worldly but still be Christian. There is such an apathy today concerning righteousness and the pursuit of holiness, and no wonder when you use passages of Scripture like this one as a defense of backsliding, as a proof of the possibility of backsliding. Proving the possibility of backsliding does nothing but fortify and strengthen the erring one.

Let me explain what I mean by first showing you that none of the apostles defined or defended a concept of backsliding in the New Testament. That is not to say they did not refer to a Christian digressing rather than progressing but they viewed such periods of decline much differently than we do. More about this in just a moment. But first let us state again that the New Testament does not define backsliding. You do not find a verse of Scripture that says if you are in a state of disobedience for one year, 5 years or 10 years you are a backslider. That is why you always hear the question, “How long can one be in sin without crossing the line and completely falling away?” You hear this question because the New Testament does not define a time span. In fact the word “backslider” is never used in the New Testament. It is an Old Testament word that explained the apostasy of Israel. The word “backslider” is only found once in the Old Testament in Proverbs 14:14, “The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways: and a good man shall be satisfied from himself.” The word “backsliding” in the Authorized Version is used in only two books in the Old Testament, Jeremiah and Hosea. It is used 12 times between the two books with the majority of usage in Jeremiah where he used it nine times. An example is found in the Jeremiah 8:5, “Why [then] is this people of Jerusalem slidden back by a perpetual backsliding? they hold fast deceit, they refuse to return.”

It is important for our understanding of backsliding how the Hebrew word is defined. The Hebrew word for backsliding is *hbwvm* (mesh-oo-baw). It comes from a root word that means “to return.” In other words it is the idea of apostasy or completely turning away from the Lord and going back to the life you lived prior to coming to the Lord. It is not used to mean a temporary period of disobedience but a complete and total rejection of God. The comparable New Testament word is “to apostatize.”

The difference between temporary periods of declension and apostasy is vast. For example, let’s say you are climbing a mountain and you lose your footing and fall. You didn’t lose any ground, you

just fell to the ground below you. This we would call a temporary fall because you get back up and proceed. But let us say you fell and rolled all the way down the side of the mountain and you died so that you do not get back up and proceed. You have fallen and you have returned to where you started and you never climb again. This would be the same as apostatizing. It is a complete and final rejection of Christ. This is what it means to be backslidden. Therefore I ask you, does the New Testament teach that a Christian will end in this state of returning to his sin and never recovering from the fall back into sin? No, and again I say No!

The apostles never hinted or gave the impression that they believed that a Christian could stay in period of declension or disobedience. In fact they said the very opposite. The Apostle John in his first epistle chapter one and verse six,

If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth (1 John 1:6).

A Christian cannot live in darkness. He has been rescued out of the dark kingdom of Satan and put into the kingdom of light. He cannot go back to the darkness because he is no longer suitable to live there. He has been given a nature, a nature that loves the light and hates darkness. Therefore, the Apostle John says that if a man says he is a Christian and walks in darkness then he is a liar and he does not live in truth. This is very important to the apostle so that he repeats himself and gives no credence to the idea that a Christian can remain in a disobedient state,

And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him (1 John 2:3-4).

Again in the third chapter of the same epistle he speaks clearly and cannot be misunderstood. He says,

Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him (1 John 3:6).

A. T. Robertson, the Southern Baptist Greek scholar who men of many denominations turn to, to understand the language of the text, states that the words “sinneth not” are linear present which means John is saying that the person that keeps on abiding in Christ does not keep on abiding in sin. Robertson goes ahead and comments on “whosoever sinneth hath not seen him” means “does not keep on sinning.” The Greek scholar says that John is talking about a person who professes to be a Christian but “lives a life of sin, not mere occasional acts of sin.” He concludes his comments on this verse with this statement. “The habit of sin is proof that one has not the vision or the knowledge of Christ.”

Therefore, as for the Apostle John, he did not give credence to the idea of a Christian being in a period of continual disobedience. This inspired writer would argue against a Christian becoming backslidden. But John does not stand alone for the Apostle Paul did not give any hope to this so-called idea of backsliding. Paul in his epistle to the Romans says,

Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with [him], that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin For he that is dead is freed from sin. (Romans 6:6-7).

Paul's understanding of salvation was that the Christian was dead to sin and therefore could not ever again come under its reign and control. In the eighth chapter he continues to show God's intention in saving the sinner is to bring him into Christlikeness.

For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate [to be] conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified (Romans 8:29-30).

Paul in verse thirty-five of the eighth chapter proves that nothing can keep God from doing this work of making the Christian look like His dear Son.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? [shall] tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 37 Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. 38 For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, 39 Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:35; 37-39).

No, my dear friends, a true Christian cannot finally and totally fall away from Christ, and the reason being is that God keeps the believer safe within the fold. This is the promise of our Lord.

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: 28 And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any [man] pluck them out of my hand. 29 My Father, which gave [them] me, is greater than all; and no [man] is able to pluck [them] out of my Father's hand (John 10:27-29).

This is the guarantee of our Lord that not one of His sheep is able to leave the fold of His security. If the sheep could wander off or be ravaged by predators then the responsibility would lay at the feet of the Good Shepherd. The sheep do not save themselves nor do they keep themselves. The work of salvation originates and is initiated by God Himself. This is according to the words of the Apostle Peter in I Peter 1:5. He says that Christians "are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." Again our Lord stated that His duty as the Shepherd of God's sheep is to keep the sheep safe from thieves and beasts.

The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have [it] more abundantly. 11 I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. 12 But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. 13 The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep.

I 4 I am the good shepherd, and know my [sheep], and am known of mine. As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep (John 10:10-15).

We cannot derive from the Bible the idea that a Christian can indefinitely leave the Good Shepherd. To do so is to say that the Shepherd could not keep His flock safe. It is to say that the Shepherd was careless to let a sheep wander from the flock. To say this is to say the Good Shepherd is not good but derelict in His care for the sheep.

There is no New Testament teaching or defining or defending the doctrine of Christian backsliding. The apostles would never have asked the question we do such as, "How far can a man go into sin before he is considered an apostate, a reprobate and unconverted?" Their question is "How can a man profess Christ and live in such an ungodly manner? And why would he want to?" They had a completely different mindset than Christendom today.

The Bible does affirm that a believer may fall and that his fall may be quite hard. We see Peter's betrayal of Christ and the disciples' forsaking their beloved Master. We see Christians straying from obedience but not from the sheepfold of God. We hear the severe warnings of Scripture. We hear them pronounce destruction to anyone who forsakes Christ. These texts would give one the idea, if interpreted without the multitude of passages we have already discussed, that a Christian could backslide which means apostatize. But Scripture cannot contradict itself. The plain and clear passages which we have already mentioned must help understand any passage which is not as clear, such as Hebrews 6:4-6.

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame (Hebrews 6:4-6).

We already know that John, Paul and our Lord Jesus have stated that such would not happen to the true Christian. In the ninth verse of Hebrews six, the writer states that he is sure that this is not going to occur to those he is writing. He says,

But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak (Hebrews 6:9).

How then should we understand these verses? Well, they are a warning to the Christian. If and when the believer falls into sin, he will be warned by these and other similar passages of impending danger, and if he is really a Christian, he will repent and be restored. In fact, these warning passages can keep a believer from falling into sin. He is not to assume he is above sin and therefore when temptation comes such warnings can help him flee the temptation. These types of passages only prove our case that the Good Shepherd will guard His flock and keep every one of His lambs within His ever-watchful care. He gives us such warnings to stir us up to a holy vigilance over our own souls. For you see the Bible does not teach that your security

as a believer is automatic. It is not like an automatic pilot. The moment the sinner is saved God does not flip a switch that makes it impossible for you to fall away from Him. This is not the Bible's portrayal of the security of the believer. Oh no, the security of the believer is an act of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ's constant care over you. God must exert His power and grace to preserve you. It is not an instantaneous proposition. Listen to Peter's description of our security,

Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Peter 1:5).

Jude tells us the same thing in the twenty-fourth verse,

Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present [you] faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy (Jude 1:24).

If it was an automatic pilot kind of security or God did something within us the moment we were converted that made it impossible for us to finally and totally fall away, why did our Lord pray that God the Father would keep us from doing the very selfsame thing?

And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are (John 17:11).

Therefore, the sheep that goes astray in our parable cannot be a backslidden Christian for the Lord Himself is watching over us at all times and exerts His power to keep us with the fold of His safety.

Let me give you the contextual evidences that the lost sheep is not a Christian but a sinner. First, as we have already stated to you that the occasion of the parable was the complaining of the religious leaders against our Lord for receiving sinners. Please remember, that a parable has most often just one major truth in which it tries to convey. Jesus is defending His actions in receiving sinners and therefore He tells a story of a lost sheep. This lost sheep represents the sinner whom Christ has come to rescue from sin. To reach sinners He must go to them, and this is the point of the parable. So the very occasion for the parable tells us what the parable means.

Second, in verse seven the Lord declares the identity of the sheep. He calls him a sinner.

I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance (Luke 15:7).

But someone may protest and say that the wandering person is called a sheep and that he already belonged to the Master. In other words, he already is a part of the flock of God. Very well, that may be your objection, but it ignores the event and reason why the Lord told the parable. He is justifying His association with sinners, not Christians. This is the reason the Pharisees and scribes were

protesting. Their argument was if He is the Christ then He should leave the sinners alone and not defile Himself. He should associate with them, the religious leaders, and the undefiled. But Christ rebukes them in this parable and tells them His mission to come into the world is to seek and to save that which is lost. That did not mean the Pharisees were not sinners but that they did not see their need of salvation, and therefore He could do nothing for them until they did.

Also the fact that the lost person is represented as a sheep already belonging to the flock is not a problem to understand. It was a common Old Testament understanding that every person born was likened to a sheep that has gone astray. The prophet Isaiah says so much.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6).

We are just that. Every human being belongs to God whether he or she believes in Christ or not. We are the product of His workmanship, His creation. Simply because a man rebels against God does not make him belong to God any less. Even Peter says this, writing to Christians in his first epistle.

For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls (1 Peter 2:25).

But our Lord is saying more than being a person makes you belong to God. He uses the word “sheep” as He has on other occasions. Our Lord used this word to denote those whom God had chosen to save even before He made the world. There is no getting around this fact that God elected out of the human race those whom He would redeem through the sacrifice of His Son. These souls are called the sheep of God. They are called this even before they are saved. Once again turn to the Gospel of John and the tenth chapter.

I am the good shepherd, and know my [sheep], and am known of mine. As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep. And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd (John 10:14-16).

There are other sheep that our Lord knows are already His though they are not converted yet. Most of them had not even been born, which includes you and me. But nonetheless He calls us His sheep. But to the Pharisees and scribes He says in verse twenty-six,

But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me (John 10:26-27).

The sheep of Christ are known by Him and they are known as those who follow Him. They do not go back into the world and there live. And although they do sometimes stray, they never stray outside of the sheepfold of God’s protection.

If this was a parable about a Christian wandering far away from God so that Christ went to go find him, then the outcome of the story would be much different. There would not have been the rejoicing or the making merry that we see in this parable. Oh no, there would have been a much different ending. The procedure that a shepherd in those days used to deal with such a sheep was to take one of the legs of the animal and break it. If a young lamb had this wandering tendency, the shepherd had to protect the lamb from itself and therefore out of love for the lamb, he broke one of its legs. Of course it could not then wander away but neither could it keep up with the rest of the flock, so the shepherd would carry the Lamb wherever they would go. He would personally feed and water the lamb until the leg was healed. But during those many weeks of healing the lamb had become so accustomed to the shepherd and like a pet had become quite attached to its Master that it would thereafter always follow the shepherd wherever he would go.

This is exactly what God's Word says about the believer—that when the Christian falls into sin God does not heave him up on His shoulders and make rather merry. No, it says that “whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth” (Hebrews 12:6). He in essence breaks our leg and then tends to us so that once we are healed we do not want to leave His side nor His kind presence.

And so finally I say to us all, let us take no refuge in a lie. It is a lie to say that a man can be a Christian but live in sin continually. God has so changed the nature of the Christian that it is not in his or her nature to live in the world and be happy. The Christian can no more find satisfaction in sin than the sinner can find satisfaction in holiness. Do you profess to be a Christian and do you have hope that when you die you will be in heaven, yet you live in continual disobedience to God? Have you said to yourself, “I am a Christian, but I'm just backslidden”? Have you heard yourself say these words to someone else? Perhaps you have stated it thus, “I know I am saved, but I'm just not dedicated. I'm not where I should be.” I say to you, my friend, that the Scriptures do not create for you a refuge, a place called “backslidden” where you can maintain your profession of faith and have hope of eternal life. The devil has fabricated this place, but it is nothing more than a mirage. And as a mirage there will be a day when it will end and you will see reality. You will see the reality of the lie. You will know in that day that what you thought was water, was nothing more than hot sand. And what you mistook for the cool shade of a tree was nothing more than the foreboding clouds of God's judgment. Repent and be converted. You are not safe in the fold of the Good Shepherd. For the sheep do always follow Him who laid down His life for them. Amen.