

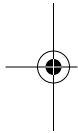
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Rejoice with Me

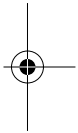
LUKE 15:1-10



Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, "this man receives sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable. (Verses 1-2)



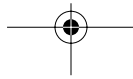
Violent storms arise quickly on the Sea of Galilee. Even seasoned sailors such as Peter and John were sometimes caught in them. Luke 15 begins with rumblings more ominous than thunder over the lake. The religious establishment felt threatened by the innovator in their midst. When he told these stories, Jesus was himself on the way to Jerusalem, where the storm would break on him in an attempt to eliminate the threat he posed to the ruling elite.¹

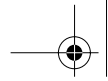


The three deceptively simple stories in Luke 15 build toward a tense climax in the confrontation between the father and the older son at the end of the parable of the prodigal son.² What will the older son do with the plea for reconciliation offered to him at great cost? When the conflict of the drama reaches this unbearable pitch, the curtain falls without a conclusion. All of this is evident only when we keep in mind the audience and the issue that brought the Pharisees to Jesus with their grumbling.

¹Luke 9:51 reads: "When the days drew near for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." There follows a large block of teaching material that has been called "The Travel Document." Luke 15 is well into the middle of this material. Thus these parables must be understood in the light of the fact that Christ has already set his face to go to Jerusalem.

²Luke 15 has long been considered a unit by many scholars. We will proceed with this as a basic assumption.





The audience to whom Jesus spoke was composed of Pharisees and scribes, the “righteous” of the community. Their complaint was that “this man receives sinners and eats with them.” Three parties were involved: the religious (the Pharisees), the irreligious (sinners) and Jesus. All three of these parties (the “found,” the “lost” and Jesus) appear in each of the three parables. Yet there is a noticeable progression to the accounts. The first story deals with animals. The second is about lifeless coins. But in the third story people walk on the stage and begin talking.

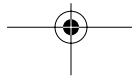
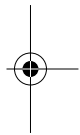
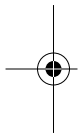
During the time of Jesus, tax collectors were naturally seen as “sinners.” When any ethnic community is forcibly incorporated into someone else’s empire, tax correctors are inevitable despised intensely. But the Roman Empire presented a special problem. It collected taxes through “tax farmers.” An individual would buy from the rulers the right to collect taxes in a certain area. That person was then able for the most part to set his own rates and exact whatever he could. He was bound by contract to deliver a certain sum to the authorities. The rest was his. These “tax farmers” were often Gentiles. In Palestine local people were then hired to do the actual collecting of the money.³ Obviously, with unscrupulous men involved, there was a great deal of graft.

The practice still persists at one point in modern Egyptian village life where a local citizen contracts from the government the right to tax the use of the village riverbank crossing on the Nile. He then hires men to collect a premium from every person who crosses the river. The going rate is whatever the traffic will bear. Graft and favoritism become the rule when unscrupulous men seize control of the village crossing point. The last years of the Turkish Empire saw the same ancient system at work, and once again widespread abuse was common.

Furthermore, Palestine in the first century was occupied by imperialists. It is difficult for anyone who has never lived in an occupied country to fully appreciate the hatred generated toward the “collaborator.” (Modern African and Asian nationalisms give us many parallels.) In modern Arab politics the bitterest of all insults is “agent of the imperialists.”

When a colony approaches the ignition point of revolt, it hates any “collaborator” with ferocious intensity. Suddenly the collaborators’ compromises with national honor become unendurable. In Jesus’ day nationalistic

³John R. Donahue, “Tax Collector,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:337-38.





forces in Judea and Galilee were gathering strength. The smoldering of revolt would burst into flame within a few years. Any cooperation with Rome and its tax collectors was surely looked on as a betrayal of race and religion.

In the Gospels the title of tax collector is usually linked with *sinners* or with *adulterers* and quite naturally with *Gentiles*.⁴ The most common identification is with *sinners*. In the mouth of a Pharisee *sinners* meant the “unclean,” the “breakers of the Law” and those of low moral character generally. In short, anyone they condemned. Luke uses *sinner* thirteen times and generally means by it people of low moral character. Here he is quoting the Pharisees, and thus the added flavor of “traitor” and “unclean” are probably intended.

... were all drawing near to hear him.

Jesus welcomed sinners! This was the issue for the Pharisees. He neither bought their favor nor joined with them in ethical compromises. Sinners knew where he stood but were nevertheless “drawn” to him.

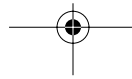
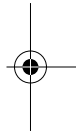
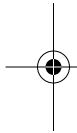
And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying,

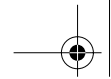
Murmur is the same word used in the Greek Old Testament for the repeated “murmuring” of the people against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness (Exodus 15:24; 16:2, 7-8; 17:3; Numbers 14:2; 16:11). It appears only twice in the New Testament, here and in Luke 19:7. Both times it is in the mouth of Pharisees complaining against Jesus. The word has a special prefix (*dia*) that gives it an added edge. It is either “murmuring among themselves” or “murmuring through the crowd.” We get the clear picture of an undercurrent of discontented complaining about Jesus’ actions. These rumblings eventually crescendo in the events of the Passion.

“This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

Receive in Greek also has a special prefix. The word *dechomai* means “to receive.” But in this verse we have *prosdechomai*, which means “to welcome into fellowship.” The first word would mean a willingness to sit down and talk with a person. The second means accepting him or her as a friend. It is

⁴For *sinners* see Mt 9:10-11; 11:19; Mk 2:15; Lk 5:30; 7:34. For *adulterers* see Mt 21:31-32; Lk 18:11. For *Gentiles* see Mt 18:17.





easy in any age to have long and continued dealings with a person and still never accept that person fully into fellowship. Paul uses this *prosdchomai* for welcoming a person as a sister or brother in the Lord (Romans 16:2; Philippians 2:29). The word appears in the sayings of Jesus, where Mark states, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me" (Mark 9:37).

The crowning blow was that Jesus ate with them. In the eyes of his opponents Jesus was defiled by such contact. But there was more! To eat with another person in the Mideast is a sacramental act signifying acceptance on a very deep level. Many times over the decades I have stayed to partake of a meal in a village because of this reality. I neither want nor need the food offered and could ill afford the time. By eating with a person, however, I was accepting that person on a basic and very fundamental level. If the guest is a religious teacher or leader, the villagers believe the guest imparts a semi-physical "blessing" by mere presence. All of this interchange was taking place between Jesus and classes of people carefully ostracized by the "righteous."

The big fight between Peter and Paul was over the question of eating. Paul tells his side of the story in Galatians 2:11-12. The issue was that Peter sat and ate with uncircumcised Gentile Christians and then withdrew from them! Friendship was one thing. To eat with a meal with that friend was something else.

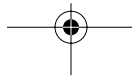
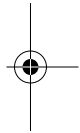
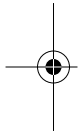
So he told them this parable. (Verse 3)

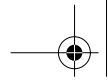
Luke introduces three stories with a singular. The three stories of Luke 15 are a single unit and were most likely composed as a unit by Jesus himself. In Luke 5:36-39 and Luke 6:39-41 similar units appear.

Them clearly refers to the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus was not talking to a general audience but rather to a very specific group of people who were upset because he welcomed outcasts into full fellowship with himself.

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? (Verse 4)

This verse is a startling response to the complaint of the Pharisees. The Pharisees began as a lay movement, and they were expected to work for a





living in some secular profession. One could not accept money for teaching the law. Thus Paul was a tentmaker and Jesus a carpenter, and thereby addressing Pharisees as “working men” was not a problem. But shepherds were considered unclean by the rabbis, who referred to such people as “people of the land” and avoided them.⁵ Clearly Jesus did not consider shepherds as an unclean profession.

A hundred sheep represented considerable wealth. The phrase “having a hundred sheep” can refer to ownership. It can also mean responsibility for a hundred sheep. In either case a scholar such as a Pharisee would hire a shepherd. Shepherds in the Middle East are poor men, clothed in simple dress, who wander in privation over the countryside. No educated man would spend his days tramping over the wilderness for any purpose. Pharisees no doubt expected Jesus to say something like this: “Which of you, owning a hundred sheep, if you received a report that one was lost, would not send a servant to the shepherd responsible and threaten him with dismissal if he didn’t find the sheep?”

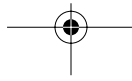
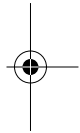
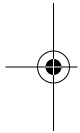
Then also the story Jesus tells is best understood as a reshaping of Psalm 23, with himself at its center. This possibility turns this first parable into an amazing introduction to this trilogy of three stories. Jesus claims to be the divine presence among the people searching for the lost and thus fulfilling the promises of Psalm 23, Jeremiah 13:1-8 and Ezekiel 34:1-31.⁶

Jesus continues by saying, “If *he* has lost one of them.” Arabic translations in the past have turned this into a passive to read “If one of them is lost,” because at both ends of the Mediterranean *the speaker never blames himself*. In Arabic and in Spanish a person doesn’t say “I missed the train,” but rather “The train left me.” Neither does someone say “I dropped the dish,” but rather “The dish fell from my hand.” Not “I lost my pen,” but rather “The pen went from me.” It took more than a thousand years for Arabic translators to overcome this common style of speech and give the reader the non-idiomatic phrase “If he has lost one of them,” awkward though it is. As we will note, the shepherd, when addressing his friends, fell into this traditional style of speaking when he states, “The sheep which was lost.”

Jesus broke the common speech patterns of the day by placing respon-

⁵Shepherds appear on the lists of “proscribed trades.” See Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), pp. 302-12.

⁶See Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jacob and the Prodigal* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 65-85.





sibility on the shepherd, saying “If *he* has lost one of them.” This departure from traditional idiom is important. Jesus is saying to his audience, “You lost your sheep. I went after it and brought it home. Now you have the gall to come to me complaining! Don’t you realize that I am making up for your mistakes?”

The ninety-nine sheep were left in the wilderness, perhaps with an under-shepherd and quite likely in a cave.⁷ Yet was it wise to leave the ninety-nine and wander away searching for the one? Christian missionaries have debated this point with communist dialecticians in China. Does the lost individual matter or are “the people” alone important? Indeed, it is the shepherd’s willingness to go after the one that gives the ninety-nine their real security. If the one is sacrificed in the name of the larger good of the group, then each individual in the group is insecure, knowing that he or she too is of little value. If lost, he or she will be left to die. When the shepherd pays a high price to find the one, he thereby offers the profoundest security to the many.

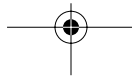
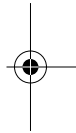
We do not know how long he searched. But any Lebanese or Palestinian peasant can tell you that it may take a day or more of climbing over rugged wilderness to find a lost sheep.⁸ When money—our money—is lost, we will pay a high price to recover it. Lost people are often judged to be of less value.

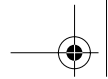
And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.

After finding the lost sheep the shepherd’s hardest job was still before him because he had yet to carry the heavy beast back to the flock. Frankly, I am proud to have carried myself over those isolated rugged hills. Unsuspecting tourists who wander bravely off across that marginal land, camera in hand, are often taken out on stretchers. The shepherd takes up his heavy burden “rejoicing” and accepts this backbreaking task happily. It would be natural for the shepherd to secretly hope to find the animal dead or devoured by a lion. Then, like Amos, he could gather a few scraps of hide and bone as proof that he neither stole nor sold the beast (Amos 3:12). When the lost is found, *the task of restoration has barely begun*. This theme disappears in the second story only to reappear with all of its glorious fullness in

⁷Eric F. F. Bishop, *Jesus of Palestine: The Local Background to the Gospel Documents* (London: Lutterworth, 1955), p. 166.

⁸I have discussed this matter with many of them. After two days the animal is presumed to be stolen or killed and eaten by wild animals.





the third story. It is a crucial theme within which lies the cross.

He laid it on his shoulders. The Middle Eastern shepherd has always carried a sheep over his two shoulders with its stomach against the back of his neck and all four feet tied together in front of his face. This gives him full control of the animal and still leaves one hand free for climbing. The early church often represent Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Such statues and paintings always depict the shepherd with a sheep around his neck. The Coptic section of the Greco-Roman museum in Alexandria, Egypt, has a moving, life-size marble statue of the Good Shepherd in just such a pose. The Rockefeller Museum just north of Old Jerusalem has a similar statue, and in each case the sheep is large and the shepherd smiling. A fresco in a Christian church excavated at Dura-Europos, which was destroyed by the Persians A.D. 256, has the same scene, and the sheep is larger than the shepherd. In all of these early Eastern artistic presentations of the Good Shepherd, the price paid is emphasized by the extraordinary size of the sheep. Clearly Christ's passion is foreshadowed in this text and in these representations of it.

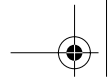
In the West the Good Shepherd is depicted in innumerable stained-glass windows. He usually has a young lamb in the crook of his arm. This may be adequate for the picture of Yahweh in Isaiah 40:11. It has little to do with the Good Shepherd of Luke 15, which tells of the price the shepherd pays to save his lost sheep.

*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." (Verse 6)*

The shepherd returns to the village and rejoices *with the community*. This is understandable in light of the fact that, as noted, the flock is quite possibly partly owned by those same "friends and neighbors." In village society the houses on a narrow village street are usually occupied by one family clan. Such a village clan may include ten to twenty families. Each household will own a few sheep, which produce the wool for their winter clothing. The entire alley together may have a hundred sheep, and naturally they are all concerned for the welfare of the flock. The loss of a sheep from the flock is a matter of concern for the entire community.⁹ The extended family and com-

⁹Bishop, *Jesus of Palestine*, p. 166. My own experience confirms Bishop's views.





munity sustain the loss and then rejoice together when the lost is found. Even so, the lost person is a loss to the entire family of God. When an individual is lost, the community should mourn, and the “shepherd” who returns, restoring that person, should receive a joyous hero’s welcome from his “friends.”¹⁰

The Pharisees, as religious leaders, were indeed the “shepherds of Israel.” Thus it is easy to see that in this parable Jesus is holding them responsible for any “sheep” (read: person) that is lost from the community. In the parable the shepherd does four things:

1. He accepts responsibility for the loss.
2. He searches without counting the cost.
3. He rejoices in the burden of restoration.
4. He rejoices with the community at the success of restoration.

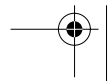
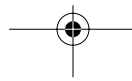
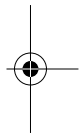
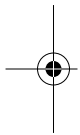
Jesus here sets a high standard for the church in any age.

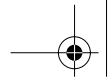
*Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over
one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons
who need no repentance. (Verse 7)*

Jesus’ subtle humor is evident in this verse. The “righteous” who “need no repentance” do not exist. Naturally, heaven’s joy over them will be minimal. As the parable concludes, the ninety-nine sheep are still in the wilderness! How can the village community rejoice over sheep that are not yet home? The Pharisees should have remembered Isaiah’s words, “All we like sheep have gone astray” (Isaiah 53:6), and the words of the preacher in Ecclesiastes who wrote, “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins” (Ecclesiastes 7:20).

But more important is the fact that the lost sheep is clearly symbolic of a repentant sinner. This comes as a complete surprise. How can this sheep represent “repentance”? Quite simple, Jesus is defining repentance as “acceptance of being found.” The sheep is discovered to be missing. The shepherd pays the price to search for, find and restore the lost sheep. Terrified

¹⁰The word *friends* is a key word. The Pharisees formed into “clubs” in the villages. These clubs were called *Khaburim* (Friends). Jesus is saying “You are the ‘Friends,’ and you should rejoice with me when I find a lost sheep, just as the friends of the shepherd in my parable rejoice with him.”





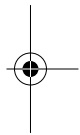
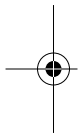
and alone, the sheep is overjoyed to be found and in the process becomes a symbol for repentance. Repentance is not a work which earns our rescue. Rather, the sinner accepts being found.

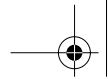
One form of oriental logic is to build up a series of similar illustrations to make a point (see Amos 3:3-8; 1 Corinthians 9:7-12). So here there are three parables on the same topic. Some dramatic elements remain constant through all three, others develop and still others shift in emphasis. For example, the first and the third stories stop but don't close. All three parables have the same three symbolic references. Clearly the lost sheep symbolizes sinners in their need, and the Good Shepherd is a symbol for Jesus. The ninety-nine represent the audience. But in this first story the ninety-nine are left "in the wilderness." How could the shepherd enjoy a party with his friends when the ninety-nine remained unaccounted for? He is expected to deposit the one lost sheep and return at once to the wilderness to bring home the rest of the flock. This huge hole in the first story is finally closed in the third story, as we will see. This brings us to the second parable.

"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." (Verses 8-10)

Jesus is still talking about money. Whenever money is involved, people's reactions are often visceral and uncomplicated by hypocrisy. But the most striking fact of this parable is its very existence. If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, then Jesus is also the Good Woman. Clearly this is what he intends his listeners to conclude. Jesus who had both men and women as disciples wanted his message to resonate deep within the hearts of all his listeners. Hence this pair of stories. So, what is the cultural setting of the parable of the lost coin?

Middle Eastern peasant women occasionally carry their worldly wealth in gold or silver coins fastened to a chain around their necks. This jewelry is referred to as "the women's bank." Literally millions of dollars are tied up in this kind of capital. If divorced or widowed, this wealth will help sustain her.





When her husband gives her a gift, it may be another pierced coin or medallion. Some commentators have suggested this custom as a background for the parable.

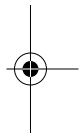
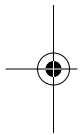
But there is a more probable alternative. Peasant women carry any cash held for daily expenses in a tightly knotted rag. The drachma mentioned in this story is a Greek coin weighing 4.3 grams of silver.¹¹ It was a day's wages for a laborer. Perhaps these ten coins were given to the wife to provide for the family for a week or two. She tied them up in her little rag but the knot worked loose and a coin fell out. Having failed to be more careful, she was filled with shame and remorse for not tying her rag more tightly. The village homes of the early centuries around the sea of Galilee often had floors made of either a lime plaster or of smooth uncut stones from the sea of Galilee. Cracks naturally developed in such floors and coins often fell into those cracks, becoming a delight for modern archeologists who find them. Windows in peasant homes of the period were small slits placed about seven feet up the wall from the floor. The building stone around the sea of Galilee is a very black basalt, which would have added to the darkness of the home. Even in broad daylight the woman naturally needed a lamp to find a coin.

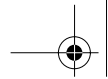
Part of what drove her frantic search was the realization that she had lost the coin in the house. She knows this to be the case because that day she had not been out.

The lost sinners Jesus was receiving were in the house of Israel, not in a far country. They were a part of the "wealth" of the nation and could be found. If Jesus' critics would seek diligently they too could find the lost.

The woman is even more responsible for the loss of her coin than the shepherd was for the lost sheep. The shepherd could be excused. After all, he had one hundred sheep. The sheep, to a certain extent, have a will of their own and the wilderness was vast. But the peasant woman can blame no one but herself. All through her search she mutters repeatedly, *How stupid of me! Why didn't I secure the coin on its chain more firmly?* Or as I prefer, *Why didn't I tie my cloth more tightly?* Her remorse and desperation stem from this sense of undeniable responsibility, and her joy, like the shepherd's, cries out to be shared.

¹¹By Luke's day this coin was out of circulation, having been replaced by the denarius. Luke records the archaic word used in the original telling. This is not Luke's story. He is merely faithfully reporting a story of Jesus.





The woman openly accepts responsibility for having lost her coin (unlike the shepherd). To his friends, the shepherd spoke of “my sheep which was lost.” By contrast the woman openly tells her friends, “I have found the coin which I had lost.”

The story provides a brief, intimate glance of village life. The genders of the words used tell us that the shepherd had a party only for men, and the woman had a celebration solely for women. Following the mores of the culture, it would be quite improper for either of them to mix socially with members of the opposite sex. Also village life is delightfully full of simple joys. A woman finding a lost coin is a big event that merits a party. She could relate how she lost the coin, when she discovered her loss, where she searched and how she felt when she finally saw it glinting there in the soft light of the oil lamp. The finding of a lost tax collector should have stimulated similar joyous excitement.

The listener or reader is now expected to ponder this pair of stories. As noted, all three major players are on stage, but they are mute. Neither sheep nor coins can talk. At this point we are in the midst of a double progression. In the first story the lost is *one in a hundred*. In the second story it is *one in ten*, and in the parable of the prodigal son it is *one in two*. The second progression is in regard to the availability of the place where the lost article can be found. The lost sheep is in the wide wilderness; the coin is confined to the house. But the sons are lost as they fall out of the circle of a father’s love.

The actors and the people they represent is found in figure 1.

Actors in the Drama	The Lost Sheep	The Lost Coin	The Lost Son
Jesus	the shepherd	the woman	the father
irreligious sinners	lost sheep	lost coin	the prodigal
Pharisees	ninety-nine	the nine	the older son

Figure 1. Three parables of Luke 15

This brings us to the third story, which is the climax of the three.

