

PDF version of the lesson notes.

I. Introduction

- Last week's lesson included the 14th chapter of Luke, but we didn't quite make it to that part of the reading. In chapter 14, Jesus contends with the Pharisees over issues like healing on the Sabbath during a meal with Pharisees and the chapter deals specifically with table fellowship and who gets to eat at the feast in the Kingdom of God. Chapter 15 strikes me as a distinct literary unity from 14, but we do see a thematic continuation in terms of meals and table fellowship and their importance in the gospel of Luke. This is a theme that runs through Luke (lesson 10), and we will examine it further today.
- Chapter 15 of Luke contains three parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son (is the "compassionate father" a better name for that parable?). All of these parables are well known, particularly the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the prodigal son. Furthermore, we have covered or discussed the parable of the lost sheep already this year in lesson 14 (Matthew 18:10–14). However, the setting or the backdrop for the parable of the lost sheep is very different in Luke than in Matthew. Therefore, it may have a very different point in Luke than in Matthew.

II. The In Crowd

- Read Luke 15:1–2:
 - (1) Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him.
 - (2) And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.
- The word, publicans is a translation of the Greek *telonai* and modern translations, such as the NRSV or NIV, translate *telonai* as tax–collector but it may be more accurate to think of them as toll collectors.[1] There are two types of tax–collectors mentioned in the gospels: chief tax–collectors (like Zacchaeus, see Luke 19:2) and their employees (which are the one mentioned in these verses). These employees were probably not rich, and tax or toll collection was probably the only job they could get.[2] Maybe the most important reason why they were despised and grouped with sinners is that they worked (or at least sub–contracted) for Rome.
- Jesus' association with sinners and tax collectors is a pretty common theme in the gospel of Luke. Also, this theme is often coupled with Jesus' willingness to eat or dine with the sinners and tax collectors. In general, where and who Jesus eats with is important in the gospel of Luke. As I have mentioned before (see Lesson 10 notes), the table fellowship scene or symposium scene was a Greek literary genre[3] and Luke may emphasize these

dining events because the scene would have been a familiar setting for his original readers. However, this is not a table fellowship scene; it only mentions meals as part of the Pharisees incredulous observation that Jesus "welcomes sinners and eats with them."

- *Why are the Pharisees and scribes (law experts) so bothered by Jesus' association with sinners? Is the fact that Jesus "welcomed" or "received" sinners an important textual clue?*
- *Why are the Pharisees particularly upset with Jesus' indiscriminate table fellowship? Why would eating with people or groups that have rejected the covenant (at least in the Pharisees' view) be a big deal and particularly worth mentioning?*
- Clearly, the Pharisees believed that associating with sinners and tax-collectors somehow damages or reflects poorly on a person. Why did the Pharisees believe this was such a big deal? I *do* think the fact that Jesus "welcomed" the sinner an important textual clue. It implies more than tolerance. It implies warm association and care. Second, eating is a religious act because of the law of Moses, and since the sinners are covenant breakers and the tax-collectors have rejected Israel by working for Rome it is like eating with unclean gentiles (does this concern get hinted at in three parables told by Jesus? the prodigal son?). Purity clearly matters, and Jesus seems not to be concerned about this issue, and is really welcoming them into the community (The Kingdom of God).

III. Lost Sheep

- In the next 5 verses Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep. Notice how different the backdrop is for the telling of the parable in Luke compared to Matthew. In Matthew, the parable is told as part of a larger discourse on discipleship. It is told in the context of warning disciples ("the little ones" in that chapter) that they must not cause other disciples to stumble. In Luke, we see that the backdrop is the complaint by the Pharisees that Jesus welcomes sinners and tax-collectors and an implicit charge that he makes himself unclean or dishonorable by such actions. Thus, the telling of the parable in Luke may potentially have a very different meaning.
- Read Luke 15:3–7

(3) And he spake this parable unto them, saying, (4) 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? (5) And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. (6) 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. (7) 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.

A. Shepherds and Sailors

- I think people today tend to view shepherds (particular shepherds in biblical references) as noble, loving, and caring. That's probably deserved (I don't know any shepherds), but it is very possible that Jesus' original audience and the original readers of Luke didn't feel that way. Social anthropologists have suggested the following:

While shepherds could be romanticized (as was king David), they were usually ranked with ass drivers, tanners, sailors, butchers, camel drivers, and other despised occupations. Being away from home at night, they were unable to protect their woman, hence considered dishonorable. In addition, they were often considered thieves because they grazed their flocks on other people's property.[4]

- *Is the despised status of shepherds important here? Why would Jesus use a story about shepherds if they are despised or if people look down on them?*

B. Shepherd, Shepherds, and Unrealistic Elements

- Scholars suggest that a flock of 100 hundred sheep would likely be cared for by an extended family and not a single individual.[5] *Why doesn't the text mention that fact? How does the focus on a single shepherd affect our understanding and reaction to the story? Should we read the story implicitly understanding that there are family members watching the 99 sheep that are not lost?*
- I think there are a couple of possibilities:
 1. I wonder if the setting is intentionally unrealistic. Lot's of parables have unrealistic elements, such as a mustard seed growing into a great tree instead of a bush. The unrealistic setting let's us focus on the parables most important point. If the shepherd is alone watching all 100 sheep, then looking for one lost sheep seems very foolish. I wonder if this might be part of the point? Reading the pericope this way emphasizes God's mercy; He is so merciful that it can appear foolish to outside observers. A single person taking care of 100 sheep may be for hyperbolic effect, and points us to other hyperbolic elements that emphasize mercy and grace.
 2. We should implicitly understand that an extended family is taking care of the 99 non-lost sheep. Thus the shepherd never abandoned or endangered any of his flock.
- *Which possibility do you like? Do you think there are any clues in the rest of the parable that help us decide which interpretation is better? Do the respective possibilities potentially change the focus or emphasis of the parable?*
 1. Well, I guess I am predisposed to like the first option that the setting is intentionally unrealistic because it serves as a device to emphasize God's love and mercy and helps us, the reader, focus on that most important point. God is so

merciful it can appear as foolishness to outside observers such as the Pharisees and scribes. Such a view seems consistent with the earlier pharisaic commentary.

2. On the other hand, Jesus starts the parable by saying, "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?" (NRSV). That seems to suggest that it obvious that the shepherd should and would go after the lost sheep. I suspect it wouldn't be obvious to the Pharisees and others in the original audience unless they assumed their was an extended family watching the 99 non-lost sheep or at the very least that the other 99 were safe. Unless, the "obviousness of the pursuit" is mean to be ironic. I guess, the short answer is I really don't know.

C. Finding the Sheep

- *In verse 4, the shepherd is very active in tracking down the lost sheep? Is this an important detail? What does it emphasize? How is it related to the original charge that Jesus welcomed and dined with sinners?*
- It strikes me as a beautiful image. Jesus, doesn't just passively let sinner's dine with him (to mix metaphors). He seeks out the sinners zealously.
- The Matthew and Luke versions start off the same but their endings are a bit different. Luke's telling of the parable focuses on the aftermath of finding the lost sheep:

(5) And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. (6) 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. (7) 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.

The version in Matthew doesn't. It's ending is less descriptive and ends with an allusion and restating of the warning against causing fellow disciples to stumble (the little ones):

(13) And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray. (14) Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.

- *Why the differences between the two accounts? What theme or themes does the difference in the Luke version emphasize? Could it have something to do with the differences in the primary immediate audiences (disciples versus Pharisees and scribes)?*
- *Luke's version really emphasizes the joy of the occasion. The joy of forgiveness and returning or accepting the covenant. It almost seems like its meant to be over the top or*

super dramatic. Is this evidence for my hypothesis about the parable being intentionally unrealistic?

D. The Just

- The conclusion of the parable seems theologically troubling:

(7) 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.

Should I increase my sinning or intentionally sin because ultimately it will produce more joy? It reminds me of Paul's observation,

(1) What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? (2) By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? [Romans 6:1–2, NRSV]

- *What do you make of verse 7? How do you make sense of it theologically? How should we interpret it or reconcile it?*

- Once again, let's consider a couple of possibilities?

1. Maybe, the statement is meant to be hyperbolic. It is designed to shock us and the original audience. The Savior wants us to understand and reflect on the great worth that God assigns to his lost sheep and to finding his lost sheep. Maybe, it is meant to shock us out of complacency. However, because it is hyperbolic we shouldn't worry about theological implications; they are not the point. Notice, how jarring an image this is when we take it back to the sheep.
2. Maybe, the statement is meant to be ironic. Is there really anything like a just person who has no need of repentance? Maybe the designation of "just persons" is an ironic designation of the Pharisees and the Scribes. Earlier, in Luke 7 we saw that a reference to publicans and sinners is used almost as a type or a designation for people who have accepted the baptism of Luke 7:29–30:

(29) And all the people that heard him, and the publicans, justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John. (30) But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized of him.

Publicans are only mentioned in these two verses but then publicans are explicitly linked with "sinners" just a few verses later (verses 34–35). Also, in these same verses, the Pharisee's charge that Jesus is a friend to both groups. This nicely fits with the use of publican and sinner in our present pericope. They were lost, but now they are found. The Pharisees in Luke 7:29–30 reject the baptism of John

because they believe they don't need it (they believe that they are just?). This irony is fully revealed in the story of the woman who was a sinner (Luke 7:38–50) that immediately follows the acceptance of John's baptism by sinners and publicans (tax-collectors). In that story the Pharisees are revealed as anything but just as they unjustly fail to recognize their own sin and unjustly judge the woman's actions.

- *Which hypothesis or interpretative possibility do you prefer? Which one do think is most supported by the text?*

1. I am pretty sympathetic to the second hypothesis, but I also worry about it. There does seem to be some support for it. Chapter 7 uses the designation of sinner ironically and judgment by the Pharisees is cast in a clearly ironic light. Thus, Luke, emphasizes that the Pharisees aren't just but the judge the publicans as unjust. In this pericope the Pharisees are once again unjust in the first couple of verses and I am inclined to think that use of "just men" in the parable is not coincidental. *Do you think this idea fits with either of the two parables that follow? Particularly, the parable of the prodigal son?*

2. On the other hand, I am not ready to throw out the first hypothesis because I do tend to see some exaggerated elements in the parable. I wonder if reading it ironically ruins the focus of the hyperbolic description of the joy of finding the sheep?

- *Finally, does the Matthean account of the parable help us decide which hypothesis is more likely?*
- The language in Matthew's version is not as explicit, but it is pretty similar (Matthew 18:13): "(13) And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray." That seems to capture the same idea. However, the setting is completely different because Jesus is specifically speaking to the members of the Christian community: his disciples. This commonality across disparate settings pushes me towards a hypothesis of shocking or jarring hyperbole. On the other hand, maybe the Savior, in Matthean account, is also emphasizing the degree to which the community or fellow believers are responsible for causing a fellow disciple to stumble. Thus, the Matthean account could also express an ironic condemnation (of believers that cause others to stumble).

IV. The Lost Coin

- Read Luke 15:8–10

(8) Either what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it? (9) And when she hath found it, she calleth her friends and her neighbours together, saying, Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece

which I had lost. (10) Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.

- The pieces of silver or coins mentioned here are Greek drachmas. Like a Roman denarius[6], one Greek drachma was approximately equal to the wage of a poorly paid laborer.[7]
- *Are there exaggerated or unrealistic elements in the parable? Are they important? Do they make it more likely that exaggerated elements are an important part of the parable of the lost sheep?*
- The search doesn't seem exaggerated to me. Unless you were very wealthy, one drachma is a non-trivial amount of money since it represents the daily wage of an agricultural worker. However, having a party with her friends and neighbors does seem like an exaggerated element.
- *In both parables the joy of finding is shared with the community. Why? How or why is this an important detail of the parable? How or why is this an important part of the message Jesus is trying to teach the Pharisees and scribes and Luke is trying to teach his reader?*
- We actually see this in all three parables. I definitely think it is important. It certainly emphasizes the communal role in the joy of a lost person, coin, or sheep. The return of a person to the covenant or discipleship is a joyous occasion for all that our part of the community or kingdom of God. *However, I keep thinking that there may be more to it than that. What do you think?*
- *Both parables end with statements about repentance, but how can these parables be about repentance if they are about lost sheep and coins? Why is repentance mentioned at all? Isn't the focus of the parable on the initiative of the shepherd and woman respectively?*
- *Why doesn't the Savior say that the one coin was more valuable than the 9 coins that were not lost (or something like that)? Does that help us understand verse 7 better or does it provide support for one of the interpretative possibilities I suggested? Why do you think the conclusion for this parable is slightly different than the conclusion for the parable of the lost sheep?*
- *What other elements are repeated or shared by the parables? Are the similarities and differences important?*

Endnotes

1. Barton, John, and John Muddiman (Editors), 2001, *Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 947.

2. Malina, Bruce J., and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, 2003, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Fortress Press, 415–416.
3. Smith, Daniel, 1987, Table Fellowship as a Literary Motif in the Gospel of Luke, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 613–638.
4. Malina, Bruce J., and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, 2003, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Fortress Press, 232.
5. Malina, Bruce J., and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, 2003, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Fortress Press, 288.
6. Barton, John, and John Muddiman (Editors), 2001, *Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 947.
7. Coogan, Michael D. (Editor), 2001, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Oxford University Press, 127.