

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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## THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP

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### Luke 15:1-7

God is not a God of the few, a God of the wise, or a God only of those who think they are spiritual. He is a God who will go to great lengths to search for the sinner – any sinner. That is what Jesus wanted to communicate in the parable of the lost sheep. Let's read that story.

*Luke 15:1. Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him.*

*2 And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, "This Man receives sinners and eats with them."*

*3 So He spoke this parable to them, saying:*

*4 "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?*

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

*6 "And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!'*

*7 "I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.*

### Sinners drawing near to Jesus

The setting of this parable involves a crowd. It says here that multitudes of tax-collectors and sinners drew near to Jesus. What are tax-collectors and sinners? Tax-collectors were Jews who worked for the Roman government in collecting Rome's taxes from their countrymen. They often charged more than was required, keeping the difference for themselves. For that reason, they were regarded as traitors and so were outcasts from the Jewish society.

What about the sinners? It is important to understand that the term 'sinners' does not refer only to immoral people like murderers and robbers. In the Bible, it has a much wider application. The term can refer to those who followed occupations that the religious leaders considered as incompatible with their interpretation of the law. The Pharisees and the scribes, as time went on, began to make rules and classified various groups of people as sinners. For example, donkey drivers and tanners were called sinners. They were regarded as such because they had a lot of contact with the non-Jews, the Gentiles. When you regularly do business with foreigners, you would be seen as a sinner, as unclean. The shepherds were another group of people who came to be regarded as sinners because their work often involved a significant amount of dishonesty. It was not uncommon for a shepherd to take his sheep to graze on private lands without seeking permission.

A Jew was not to have any contact with such people, and especially not table fellowship. That is why the Pharisees, you notice in v. 2, are grumbling. They are complaining about Jesus' association.

Sitting down and having a meal with a person shows a certain amount of identification and welcome. If Jesus was eating with such ‘bad’ people, then He was guilty by association. He was supposed to be a rabbi, a teacher of God’s word. How could He mix with this group of social outcasts?

The Pharisees would not even go near such people. They felt that in order to keep themselves pure, they should not associate with this kind of people. They preferred to retreat into their holy facade and spend energy on their own attempts at righteousness, always being careful to stay ‘clean’ according to OT law.

### **A holiness that conquers**

By contrast, Jesus was not afraid of being ‘contaminated’ (if we can use that term). He showed complete disregard for the Pharisees’ sanctions against association with certain types of people. He came to offer salvation, to show that God loves the sinners, and He didn’t want anything to stand in the way of His ministry. Notice that He didn’t worry about the accusations. He had come to bring the Good News and He intended to fulfill His mission regardless of their effect on His reputation.

It is certainly true that there is wisdom in choosing carefully who we associate with. It is never a good idea for example to hang out with gamblers. A teenager whose friends are druggies stands a good chance of becoming one. Parents normally don’t let their children have any contact with street gangs. We separate them from the wrong crowd so that they don’t become one of them. But this is not what we are talking about here. We are talking about the mission of spreading the gospel. *Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature* (Mark 16:15). And that mission can scarcely be done if we avoid the disreputable people. In this respect, the church should not care only for the ‘clean’ people. The church should be an oasis in the desert for sinners of all notorious types. We need to go towards them, to be among them, and in that sense to associate with them, in order to point them to God.

The Pharisees’ reaction to Jesus’ association reflects OT injunctions against associating with the godless. The problem was that they extended it beyond the biblical intent. Jesus does not accept their separatist mentality nor their concept of defilement. In fact, when I look at Jesus moving among the crowds, I see a kind of holiness that does not get defiled. It actually makes the person who touches Him holy. It is a holiness that conquers, that overcomes.

Remember the woman with a bleeding problem in Luke 8. She had a flow of blood, which she endured for twelve years. That condition made her continuously unclean. Imagine her life! It was impossible to live normally with others since to touch her would make one unclean. Seeking healing, she touched the Lord Jesus. Now, did Jesus become unclean? No. The exact opposite happened. When she touched Him, she was immediately healed. Power came out of Jesus and made her clean. You remember how Jesus said, ‘Power has gone out of Me. Who touched Me?’ And Peter said, ‘What do you mean? Look at the crowd. Everybody is touching You.’ ‘No, I am not talking about that,’ Jesus said. ‘Somebody has drawn power out of Me.’ And the woman confessed. ‘I was the one who touched You and was healed.’ Jesus’ holiness is a powerful holiness. It is a holiness that makes others holy, clean.

### **Whatever touches the altar shall become holy**

You know, there is one thing in the OT that makes holy that which touches it. Do you know what that is? It is the altar of sacrifice.

*Exodus 29:37. For seven days you shall make atonement for the altar and consecrate it; then the altar shall be most holy, and **whatever touches the altar shall be holy.***

Anyone who touches the altar of sacrifice becomes holy. In fact, all the utensils made in connection with the altar, even the offerings on the altar made you holy if you come into contact with them. In other words, you cannot pollute the altar of sacrifice.

When we come to the NT, we see that Jesus had the same effect on people. As He moved among the sinners, He transformed them into saints. They could not make Him a sinner. They could not pollute Him because He Himself is the true altar of each believer. We read in Hebrews 13:10 that *we have an altar (Christ) from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat.*

Now a Christian is someone who has become a sacrifice for God and therefore has come into contact with the altar. That's what Paul teaches in Romans 12:1. *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.* Having come in contact with the altar, the believer becomes holy. He has a holiness that causes others to be holy. He has the power of God, the Holy Spirit, who is able to overcome ungodliness. That's what it means to be a living sacrifice. You are empowered by a cleansing holiness and when you go out there, among the sinners, you can transform people who come in touch with you. This is very different from the separatist thinking of the Pharisees.

## **One is missing**

So these Pharisees and scribes were murmuring. And in answer to their protest, Jesus told them a parable. Let's look at the story.

The Lord Jesus tells us about a shepherd who was taking care of one hundred sheep which, by the standards of that time, was a medium size flock. It appears that he was looking after the flock himself. One hundred sheep is not too many but it is too much for one person to see at a glance whether any is missing. You have to count them one by one to make sure that you still have all one hundred of them. Usually the counting was done at the end of the day, before the shepherd put them up for the night. In the story, he discovers that one is missing. What is he going to do?

Jesus used the shepherd's concern for each sheep to ask the question, *What man of you ... does not leave ... and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?* The answer was pretty obvious. Of course any caring shepherd would do so!

It may seem foolish for the shepherd to leave ninety-nine sheep to go search for just one. Isn't there a disproportionate investment of effort and concern directed toward that one sheep? But the shepherd knew that the ninety-nine were safe, whereas the lost sheep was in danger. We need not suppose that he left the ninety-nine wandering free in the open pasture for any length of time. He may have driven them into some enclosure or asked someone to keep an eye on them. But such details are outside the concern of the parable. What the parable emphasizes is that the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine and gives himself to looking for the one lost sheep. Although it might seem insignificant (only one in a hundred), the missing sheep is his priority. So the point is that the lost sheep receives very special attention over those that are safe.

## **The loving kindness of God**

Notice these beautiful words in v. 4. The shepherd searches and searches until he finds the animal. He does not give up. He looks everywhere, into every hole, behind every bush. He is not willing to give up until he finds it. I think of those wonderful words concerning the love of Jesus for His disciples in John, that *having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end* (John 13:1). His love holds on to us. He goes on, searching and searching until He finds us. Such is the pursuing love of God.

This leads me to a picture in Isaiah 65:2 and quoted by Paul in Romans 10:21. *All day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and contrary people.* It is not just for one day. It is ‘all day long.’ Like the shepherd, God is the one who is seeking, reaching out continually to His people with a plea that Israel return to Him. That picture really touches my heart – the loving kindness of God.

And this is what the parable of the lost sheep tells us. It speaks to us about God’s loving kindness. It tells us that even though we are lost, even though we strayed away, God still yearns for us. His heart goes out for us. He still looks for us insistently until there is no other way left.

God has stretched out his hands to Israel. If only the Hebrew nation had returned to Him! God would have pardoned them. In fact, He would have abundantly pardoned them. That’s the expression we find in Isaiah 55.7. *Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.* The loving kindness of God is here expressed in terms of an ‘abundant pardon.’ But God does not pardon unconditionally because He does not turn a blind eye to sins. Look at this verse again. *Let the wicked forsake his way.* It is only when the wicked turns from his evil ways that God can abundantly pardon.

### **The sinner who repents**

This brings us to the matter of repentance in this parable. In the last verse of the story (v. 7), we read these words of Jesus. *I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.* Some people might find that this conclusion does not fit well the parable since it refers to the ‘sinner who repents’ and the parable does not refer to the sheep ‘repenting’. That is a good observation. Here we see the difference between a sheep and a person. You may go and pick up the sheep and carry it home. A sheep that is lost is so frightened that it will not walk. It just lies down on the ground, totally helpless. But if we conclude from that picture that God can find a lost sinner without any moral change, we have missed Jesus’ point. Bringing the lost sheep back means being brought back from sin to righteousness, and that necessarily entails repentance.

The sheep cannot repent. But we must repent before Jesus can carry us home in the heavenly places. We must not think that He will save us regardless of our repentance. So the sheep that is found represents a repenting sinner. The lost sheep is found only when repentance is brought about, not before.

Christians are accustomed to thinking of the ‘lost’ as those who have never been in the flock at all. In Matthew 18:12-14, there is a parable very similar to that of Luke 15 in which the ‘lost’ are not the unbelievers but the erring members of the church, the Christians who are slipping away. Just as in the parable in Luke where Jesus speaks of ‘rejoicing in heaven over repentant sinners,’ so in Matthew Jesus says, *So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.*

Who are ‘these little ones’ that the Father does not want to lose? In the gospel of Matthew, the disciples asked Jesus the question, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom?’ In response, the Lord put a child among them and said, ‘Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.’ He followed this statement with the warning not to lead ‘these little ones who believe in Me’ to sin (Matthew 18:6). In this context, Jesus told the parable of the lost sheep and applied it to the little ones. ‘In the same way, your heavenly Father is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.’ By placing a child among the disciples, Jesus gave the expression ‘little ones’ a spiritual meaning. They are Jesus’ disciples who, in the eyes of the world, appear vulnerable, weak and insignificant. They are the poor in spirit, the meek, those who have childlike spirit.

So Matthew's version of the shepherd story deals with believers who wandered off, not with lost non-Christians. And God's outreaching love extends also to these lost little ones. His love for each person is so great that He seeks out the lost one with insistence and rejoices when he is found. The fact that the same shepherd image can apply to both situations reveals that such distinction – seeking the lost Christians and seeking the lost unbelievers – is unnecessary when we talk about God's concern for people.

## Lost and found

How does a sheep stray and get lost? Just before this passage in Matthew, Jesus speaks about the danger of falling into temptation. *Woe to the world for temptations to sin*, Jesus says in Matthew 18:7. The sheep is attracted by something out 'in the wilderness,' away from the flock. What the sheep sees out there seems very appealing. It tempts and seduces him. So he goes after it and eventually gets lost.

In Mark 12:24, Jesus said to the Sadducees, *Is it not for this cause that you err, that you know not the Scriptures, nor the power of God?* The word 'err' in Greek (*planao*) is the same as the verb 'has gone astray' (*planao*) in Matthew 18:12. Here we see that a person can go astray for two reasons: (1) he does not know the Scriptures; (2) he does not trust the power of God. So first, the sheep can stray when he is aimless, not paying attention to what is going on – he doesn't know the Scriptures. He aimlessly wanders off, not knowing that he is losing his way. He is already lost when he discovers that he has lost his way. And secondly, the sheep can stray because he does not trust the shepherd – he does not trust in God's power. He does not have a strong conviction that the shepherd will care for him and see that there is satisfying food. He goes astray in search of greener pasture and better food. God seeks these people. He wants to bring them back to the flock. He is in search of people who will turn back to Him.

Here it is very important to understand the meaning of repentance. What does repentance mean in the Bible? Being sorry for one's sins is not the basic meaning of repentance. It does involve grief but it is not the primary idea of repentance. The Greek word for repentance is made up of two words: *meta* (to change) et *noia* (the mind). There is a change of mind with regard to sin. Repentance involves both a fundamental change of mind about sin and a change of heart attitude toward sin. The change is so deep that it leads a person to turn from evil ways and live in a whole new way, in a righteous way. Paul writes in 2Corinthians 5:17 that *if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away ... all things have become new*. You have a whole new attitude towards life. The way you look at things is new. The way you think is new. The way you behave is totally different. There is a complete transformation of your being. In the words of Psalm 45:7, you become a person who 'loves righteousness and hates wickedness.'

The parable of the lost sheep pictures God's heart for sinners and His search for them. He has not abandoned them, but wishes for them to be drawn to Him. He is looking for people who will turn to Him in true repentance. We can actually sum up this parable in one sentence in the words of Romans 2:4. 'Do you not know that the kindness of God is meant to lead you to repentance?'