

LUKE 15.1-7: GOD'S ABSURD PASSION FOR THE LOST

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An absurd parable

Has it ever struck you how absurd some of the parables are?

Take the parable of the lost sheep: for there it's not just the lost sheep that is silly, but so too the shepherd.

Listen again to the story: "**Suppose one of you has a 100 sheep and loses one of them – what do you do? You leave the other 99 sheep in the pasture and go looking for the one that got lost until you find it**" (v4). Do you? Is that the action of a sensible shepherd? Surely not! That is the last thing you do. For if a shepherd were to leave the 99 to their own devices while he ran off after the 100th sheep, doesn't he run the very real risk of losing, if not the 99, then a good number of the 99.

Not surprisingly some interpreters of this parable have suggested that there must have been two shepherds – one went off in search of the lost sheep, while the other stood guard over the 99; alternatively, it has been suggested that before running after the lost sheep, the shepherd put the 99 away in a sheepfold or a cave, before going off after the lost sheep.

In the words of the old Gospel song: "*There were ninety and nine safely laid in the shelter of the fold, but one was out on the hills, far away from the Gates of Gold*"

But there is no reference to another shepherd – nor to a sheepfold.

The parable as it stands suggests that the shepherd left the 99.

Why? Why risk the 99 for the sake of just this one?

The so-called Gospel of Thomas, discovered in 1945, and probably composed in the mid 2nd century, suggests that there was something special about the lost sheep.

For there the writer tells us that it was "*the largest*" sheep which went astray.

But, according to Luke's Gospel, there was nothing special about this sheep.

It was just another sheep. Although clearly its loss would have meant something, it wouldn't have been a devastating loss. After all, it was quite a large flock – there were still 99 others left.

But no, the shepherd in the parable wasn't willing to lose even one sheep.

With the result that he was prepared to risk everything for the sake of finding that sheep.

And then what does he do when he finds the sheep? He throws a party.

In the words of Jesus, "**Then you call your friends & neighbours together and say to them, 'I am so happy I found my lost sheep. Let us celebrate!'**" (v6).

Here again, the shepherd appears to go over the top.

Any ordinary shepherd would have experienced just a quiet feeling of relief at having recovered his lost sheep. But not this shepherd.

He throws the mother of all parties as if he had recovered 99, rather than just one.

Indeed, the party might have been more expensive than the lost sheep – for a good deal of wine will have flowed, and maybe even a fatted calf killed.

The more you think about it, the more you realise it is actually quite an absurd parable. But then, Jesus had a point to make – and sometimes you have to be absurdly extreme to make the point.

‘Sensible’ critics

With this absurd parable in mind, let’s turn to the context in which this parable was first told. And as we do so, I think you’ll agree with me that in some ways Jesus’ critics were quite sensible. To them it was not just the parable of Jesus which was absurd, but his behaviour too.

“One day when many tax collectors and other outcasts came to listen to Jesus, the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law started grumbling, ‘This man welcomes outcasts and even eats with them!’. So Jesus told them this parable...” (vv1-3).

Our difficulty is that today when we read these words, we immediately want to side with Jesus. We know that the Pharisees & the teachers of the law were the ‘bad guys’. But wait a minute. Can’t you see that the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law had actually quite a sensible point of view? Indeed, they were but reflecting the clear teaching of Scripture that God’s people have to be careful about the company they keep:

- Prov 1.10,15: **“When sinners tempt you, my son, don’t give in.... Don’t go with people like that my son. Stay away from them”**
- Psalm 1.1: **“Happy are those... who do not follow the example of sinners or join those who have no use for God”**

The same kind of thinking is found in 2 Cor 6.14-18, where Paul warns the Corinthian Christians from associating with evil people: Paul quotes from Is 52.11 where the Lord says: **“You must leave them”**.

There is sense in that point of view. Many of us say the same sort of thing to our teenage children. *‘Stay away from that lot – they’ll only drag you down’*. Quite sensibly, we don’t want our children to associate with bad company.

The Pharisees too were only being sensible. It made sense for God’s people not to have anything to do with **“tax collectors and outcasts”**. For neither group of people had any morals:

- **“tax collectors”** were always on the fiddle, they were always feathering their nests at other people’s expense;
- the **“outcasts”**, literally the **“sinners”**, included the ‘ladies of the night’, prostitutes who were more than happy to sell their bodies for a little bit of cash.

Jesus understandably confused if not enraged many God-fearing people of his day.

“This man welcomes outcasts and even eats with them” (v2).

Notice the little word **“even”**. In the first century to eat with a person was to accept a person. For religious people like the Pharisees the idea of having table-fellowship with patently immoral people was down-right absurd. It did not make sense

So, what do we learn from this incident?

1. GOD IS ABSURDLY PASSIONATE ABOUT THE LOST

Jesus responded to his critics with a story about a shepherd.

In ancient times rulers and kings were often likened to a shepherd.

Not surprisingly in the Bible God is likened to a shepherd too: e.g.

- Isaiah said that God “**will take care of his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs together and carry them in his arms; he will gently lead their mothers**” (40.11).
- Ezekiel contrasted God with the false shepherds of his day: he has God saying, “**I, the Sovereign Lord, tell you that I myself will look for my sheep and take care of them in the same way as shepherd take care of their sheep that were scattered and are brought together again... I will look for those that are lost, bring back those that wander off, bandage those that are hurt, heal those that are sick...**” (Ezek 34.11-16)

Yes, the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law would have undoubtedly have seen an allusion to God as Jesus spoke of a shepherd caring for his sheep.

But what would have amazed them would have been the passion of this shepherd for the sheep that was lost – a passion that was so great that the shepherd was prepared to risk the 99 for the sake of the one lost sheep.

God’s passion for us is absurdly inclusive.

He loves not only the righteous, but also the unrighteous.

He loves not only the respectable who have never really strayed away – but also the rebels, those who have thumbed their nose at God and wandered away.

The Good News is that although we maybe lost, we are never lost from the love of God. God is passionately concerned for each one of us, whatever we may have done.

The story is told of an evangelistic service held in a city centre church at which the preacher was speaking about the love of God – the sermon was beautifully crafted, but devoid of passion. A woman who had drifted in from the street & was clearly troubled in mind, became impatient with this dry academic discourse – she leant over the gallery & shouted out: “*Mister, your rope’s not long enough to save folks like me*”.

But the good news is that God’s rope is long enough to save us all. For God in his great love has sent his Son to seek & to save the lost. It may sound absurd, but it is true

Yes, God has come to us in Jesus – Jesus, who as the Good Shepherd goes in search of the lost sheep, and who once he finds the silly sheep, puts it over his shoulder & takes it home, and then throws a party. Its sounds absurd, but it is true.

2. OUR PASSION FOR OTHERS SHOULD BE EQUALLY ABSURD

We in turn should be equally passionate for the lost – as God gave his all for us, so we too should give our all to others.

Many years ago William Temple, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, said, the church is the only institution which exists primarily for the benefit of its non-members.

Think about it: Central Baptist Church exists primarily not to meet the needs of its members, but rather to meet the needs of those who never darken its doors.

- Think about that in terms of the church budget: to what extent does our church budget actually reflect that commitment to people beyond the church.
- Think about that in use of your ministers' time: if your ministers are to be true shepherds of the flock, then first & foremost God would not have us be chaplains to the 99, but evangelists to the one.
- Think about in terms of how you respond to newcomers to the church. In the light of this parable we should be more concerned about speaking to newcomers than speaking to our friends. Are we?
- Think about this parable in terms of how much effort you go to, to invite friends & neighbours to church: for this parable is not about allowing people to join us, but rather being pro-active and going out and inviting people to come and be part of God's family.

Two weeks ago I spoke about inviting people to our Harvest services on Sunday morning 28 September – which also happens to fall on 'Back to Church Sunday'. A great opportunity to invite back to church friends who for one reason or another have given up on church – have perhaps given up on this church.

I also spoke about our new *new autumn Alpha course*, which starts with an introductory supper on Mon 6 Oct, and then keeps going every Monday evening until Mon 15 Dec

I guess that some of you probably get a little fed up with my constant encouraging you to invite friends and neighbours to Alpha and to special services, and just let my prodding pass over your heads. But the fact is that God is passionate about the lost – and he wants us to be equally passionate about the lost.

Our love for the lost should be as absurdly passionate as God's!

3. GOD WANTS US TO RESPOND TO HIS PASSIONATE LOVE

Although the thrust of the parable is on God's amazing love for the lost, we should not lose sight of the fact that God's love demands a response.

For although God loves the sinner with an amazing passion, he does not love the sin. So Jesus ends the parable with the words: **“In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine respectable people who do not need to repent”**

Yes, God loves us – but before we can entrust ourselves to the love of God, we need to repent, i.e. to **“turn away from our sins”**; we need to cease living life for ourselves, and to begin to live life for God.

Just as the prodigal son had to come to his senses and turn back home – so each one of us needs to come to our senses and turn back to God.

At first sight, however, the words of Jesus here appear to be strange.

For while he talks about the one sinner who repents, he also talks about the 99 who do not need to repent. Is that really true? Surely the whole teaching of the Bible underlines the fact that we are all sinners and all need to repent?

The answer is yes and no.

Yes we are all sinners – even the most respectable of us are sinners.

So Sunday by Sunday we come to confess our sins & ask for God's forgiveness.

The Lord's Prayer with its petition "**forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us**" is not just for beginners, it is for us all, at whatever stage we have reached in the Christian life.

But there is a difference between the life-changing, radical re-orientation which happens at conversion, and the ongoing need for Christians to re-set their compasses in order to follow Christ more nearly.

Jesus in the parable is speaking of the lost sheep, the rebel who has yet to respond to God's love.

As I look around me this morning, I see a mixed congregation.

Yes, most of you have already responded to God's love – most of you belong to the 99 sheep in the pasture.

But, if I am not mistaken, there are some here who have yet to respond in penitence and faith to God's amazing love.

It may be that there is something in your past, or indeed your present, which causes you to wonder whether God can really love you – whether God can love you sufficiently to forgive you.

The Good News is that God loves you passionately – indeed, the more outside the Kingdom you are, the more he loves you.

And what's more, when we do repent, when we do turn back to God, there is always forgiveness. As God said through the prophet Isaiah: "**though your sins are scarlet, they may become white as snow**". (1.16)

What's more, after the pain of repentance comes the party.

"I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 respectable people who do not need to repent".

There is nothing God loves more than when the lost are found.

Alas, many of the Jews of Jesus' day got it wrong. The rabbis had a saying: "*There is joy before God when those who provoke Him perish from the world*".

But no, God does not rejoice in the destruction of sinners, but in the salvation of sinners. Nothing gives God greater joy than welcoming the sinner home

God's passion for the lost is indeed truly amazing!