

The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, and The Lost Son

For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.

—Jesus Christ

The disciples of Jesus are excited about the prospect of the establishment of the Kingdom from Heaven. Just recently, Peter has confessed to Jesus in the presence of the other disciples: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16). Jesus tells them that He will build His church on men’s confession that He is the Christ, and He then gives Peter a great honor: the key of the Kingdom from Heaven (Mt 16:17-20). After this, three disciples see Jesus transfigured and talking with Moses and Elijah. Greatly anticipating the Kingdom from Heaven, the disciples start to jockey for prominent positions in His court, so they ask Jesus, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom from heaven?” (Mt 18:1). This question and its answer provide the context for Jesus’ “Lost Parables.”

Jesus calls for a small child to come, then He answers:

Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom from heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom from heaven. Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me (Mt 18:3-5; cf. Mk 10:14-15; Lk 18:16-17).

Jesus' answer includes three responses, all of which are related to this demonstration by the child. First, He declares a prerequisite for entering the Kingdom from Heaven. Second, He answers the question of how to become great in His kingdom. Third, He offers a reward to those who receive a "little child" in His name. What Jesus is saying in this passage concerning a little child does not mean what most think it means, because the demonstration itself is a parable (the child is a symbol).

Many misinterpret Jesus' responses. Some erroneously think that the phrase "be converted and become as a little child" means that when someone believes the gospel he must have "simple" faith, qualifying that this type of faith exhibits the same state of mind as that of a small child.¹ A second error suggests that whoever becomes as humble as a little child will become great in Christ's kingdom. Another misinterpretation concludes that believers should show extra kindness to small children, because when they do so they are showing kindness to Jesus. However true (or not) these things might otherwise be, Jesus is not teaching these things in this parable.

When Jesus declares that "conversion" is a prerequisite to greatness, He is not teaching about "conversion" in the sense of someone receiving Jesus as the Christ, nor is He saying that some aspect of childlikeness is required for someone to become a child of God (justification by faith). To interpret this passage correctly, one must first consider Jesus' audience: He is talking to His disciples, who are already believers, already believing and proclaiming that He is the Christ (e.g., Mt 16:16).

¹ One example of the misinterpretation given above is taught by Charles G. Finney (1792-1875). Speaking on this passage in Matthew, Finney proposes that "The Child-like Spirit is an Essential Condition for Entering Heaven." He says that when someone is converted, a childlike "state of mind is indispensable to salvation." Finney lists the simple characteristics common to children which he considers essential conditions for justification by faith: being transparent, being humble (meaning being "known as he is"), being willing to confide in others, being affectionate, being willing to walk by faith, and being candid ("The Child-like Spirit is an Essential Condition for Entering Heaven," May 26, 1852; available at https://www.gospeltruth.net/1852OE/520526_child_like_spirit.htm, accessed on Feb 28, 2018).

Furthermore, the specific question being considered is how His disciples might attain a great position in His kingdom; such positions are certainly not available to unbelievers, since they are not children of God.

The correct interpretation comes from Jesus' demonstration and the words He chooses to explain it. Surprisingly, the child is only an actor in the demonstration, and the illustration which is the focus of this parable is the action of the child: when Jesus calls the child, the child obeys and comes to Him. To be clear, the childlike action of obedience is the demonstration. To emphasize the action of obedience, Jesus describes the child using the Greek word *paidion* (the diminutive form of its root *pais*). This word can mean "little children," but it can convey ideas other than just "offspring."

The Greek word *pais* can describe children² or servants,³ because servants are somewhat like children in that servants are expected to listen to instructions and then obey. In fact, when describing children, *pais* specifically refers to a child during the time in life when he is being trained (reared). The New Testament uses the Greek word *paideia* (a form of *pais*) to denote the time of training and education of a child ("nurture," Eph 6:4; "instruction," 2Ti 3:16; "discipline," Heb 12:5, 7, 8, 11). The foundation of a child's education is learning to listen to instructions and then obey them; of course, this ability is also essential to be a good servant, and in this context, a good disciple. Therefore, Jesus' demonstration in this parable is to teach that a disciple who wants to be great in the Kingdom from Heaven must learn to be obedient.

Besides the word for servants and children, Jesus also uses the Greek word *strephō*, which, unfortunately, is here translated "converted," but in most occurrences in the New Testament is translated "to turn (about/around)."⁴ Jesus is not telling His

² Cf. Mt 2:16; 17:18; Lk 2:43; 8:51, 54; 9:42; Jn 4:51; Ac 20:12.

³ Cf. Mt 8:6, 8, 13; 12:18; 14:2; 21:15; Lk 1:54, 69; 7:7; 12:45; 15:26; Ac 3:13, 26; 4:25, 27, 30.

⁴ Cf. Mt 5:39; 7:6; 16:23; Lk 7:9, 44; 9:55; 10:23; 14:25; 22:61; 23:28; Jn 1:38; 20:14, 16; Ac 7:39, 42; 13:46; Rev 11:6.

disciples that they must be “converted” to become believers of the gospel (they already are believers); instead, He is telling them that to be great in the Kingdom from Heaven they must “turn around.” The word *strephō* in this context describes a necessary change, a 180-degree turn; in other words, it conveys an idea similar to “repentance” (see discussion in “The Importance of Repentance”). Jesus began His ministry preaching that the Jews need to “change their thinking,” and now He is telling His disciples to “change their direction.” After changing their thinking about His kingdom, if the disciples desire to become great in His kingdom, they must change their direction (“turn around”): they must become obedient servants, just like the child who obeyed.

Jesus’ demonstration of a little child’s obedience answered the question of how disciples can become great in the Kingdom from Heaven and provides the context for the three “Lost” parables. In summary, Jesus’ disciples need to change direction; those who become humble⁵ servants, obeying Him “like this child,” will be “the greatest in the kingdom from heaven.” Furthermore, anyone who receives one of Jesus’ least servants (“little ones”) in His name will be rewarded the same as if he had shown hospitality to Christ Himself. Unfortunately, some followers of Jesus Christ will disobey and become “lost” (worthless) to Him. Even so, a theme of Jesus’ “lost” parables is that God is joyful whenever His children “(re)turn” to Him.

“The Lost Sheep”

Jesus’ comparison of little children to obedient disciples serves as an introduction to His parable of “The Lost Sheep.” Transitioning into His parable, Jesus warns that it would be better to cut off a limb (a part of one’s body) than to cause “one of these little ones [God’s children/servants]” to stumble (Mt 18:6-9). Furthermore, no one should “despise one of these little ones [God’s children/servants] because their angels always see the face of My Father in heaven” (Mt 18:10). Remember that

⁵ Remember Jesus’ example of washing the disciples’ feet (Jn 13:2-17).

angels are “ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation” (Heb 1:14). Jesus concludes His introduction by stating one of the purposes of His earthly ministry: “For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost” (Mt 18:11).

What does Jesus mean when He describes something as “lost” and how is being “lost” related to His warning not to cause one of his servants to stumble? The Greek word *apollymi*, occasionally translated “lost” in the New Testament, describes what is “ruined, destroyed or rendered useless, worthless, or lost (e.g., someone’s limb or life).” In the context of Jesus’ warnings which introduce the parable, it seems that “causing a little one to stumble” is generally the same as “causing one to be lost.”

Jesus directs His disciples to think about a stray sheep:

If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost (Mt 18:12-14; cf. Lk 15:4-7).

Like Matthew, Luke records Jesus’ parable of a lost sheep (and includes two more parables of things which are lost). In both accounts, a shepherd has one hundred sheep and one of his sheep becomes lost. In Matthew, a sheep goes astray (wanders off the path) and becomes lost, but Luke gives the perspective of a shepherd having lost one of his sheep. The shepherd leaves his other ninety-nine sheep and seeks his lost sheep until he finds it. In Luke, the shepherd finds the lost sheep and carries it home on his shoulders, then celebrates with his friends and neighbors: “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost” (Lk 15:5-6). In Matthew, the shepherd’s rejoicing over the “lost” sheep being found is greater than over the ninety-nine sheep who were never “lost,” whereas in Luke, the rejoicing in Heaven over one sinner who “repents” is greater than the rejoicing over ninety-nine who do not need to “repent” (Mt 18:3; Lk 15:7). Matthew concludes with Jesus stating: “it is not

the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost” (Mt 18:14).⁶

An important question must be answered in order to properly interpret the parable: does the “lost sheep” represent a believer or an unbeliever? If the sheep that becomes lost represents an unbeliever, then what is the status of the other ninety-nine sheep who have not yet become lost? In fact, are not all the sheep already the shepherd’s sheep, whether lost or not?

Remember, when the Jewish leaders ask Jesus if He is the Christ, He answers: “But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me” (Jn 10:26-27).⁷ According to Jesus, those who believe that He is the Christ are His sheep, but those who do not believe are not His sheep. Thus, the parable is not about gaining a new sheep (a new believer); the lost sheep represents a believer who has gone astray (has become lost) and then is found.

The shepherd owns one hundred sheep and loses one of them, because it has gone astray. These two expressions, “the sheep goes astray” and “the shepherd loses a sheep,” are equivalent in that they describe the same event from different perspectives. The reason why the sheep (believer) goes astray is immaterial to the lesson of the parable—the point is that one has gone astray and now is lost.

What does it mean when a believer has gone “astray” or becomes “lost”? John provides an answer in his first epistle: when a believer goes “astray,” he is out of fellowship with God. A main theme of his epistle is that a believer should remain in fellowship with God so that his joy will be filled full when Christ returns (1Jn 1:3-4). Early in this epistle, John explains

⁶ “This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day” (Jn 6:39).

⁷ The following verse seems to indicate that Jesus’ sheep cannot be “lost” (“perish”): “And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand” (Jn 10:28). However, the conjunction (*kai*), here translated “neither” to connect these two phrases, should in this case be translated “that is” because it explains the specific way His sheep will never be lost: “that is, no one shall snatch them out of My hand.”

that a believer is out of fellowship with God when he walks in darkness and that a believer can even lead himself “astray” (1Jn 1:6-8). Please note that some might translate the Greek word *planaō* in 1 John 1:8 as “deceive,” but to be consistent, it should be translated “go/lead astray,” just as this word is translated in “The Lost Sheep” (Mt 18:12-13).

If going “astray” means that a believer (sheep) is out of fellowship, then this certainly helps to clarify what Jesus means when He says, “It is not the will of the Father that any of these little ones should be lost” (Mt 18:14). This also clarifies Jesus’ warning against causing a little one to stumble, which results in a disciple losing fellowship with God the Father. In this parable, Jesus is teaching that God desires that all of His children (sheep) would stay in fellowship with Him, and that there is rejoicing in Heaven whenever a “lost” believer repents and returns to fellowship with God the Father (Lk 15:7).⁸

“The Lost Coin”

Luke records all three “lost” parables: “The Lost Sheep,” “The Lost Coin,” and “The Lost Son” (15:4-7; 15:8-10; and 15:11-32, respectively). The parable of “The Lost Coin” presents the same lesson as “The Lost Sheep” from a woman’s perspective. In some countries, coins have a hole in the center, and sometimes a woman will make a necklace out of her savings. In this case, it seems the woman’s necklace breaks, scattering the coins about the house, and one of the coins seems to disappear completely. (Even today, something similar seems to happen when a repairman or backyard mechanic takes apart a machine and a screw or a nut seems to disappear.) The woman has lost her coin, her treasure; something valuable, which she has worked to obtain, is now missing.

Notice how this treasure is already her possession (similar to the sheep which the shepherd owned before it became lost). The

⁸ After the parable, Jesus discusses the importance of maintaining fellowship with one’s brother (Mt 18:15-17). The same principle is taught in His first commandment (Unity, Mt 5:21-26).

woman lights a lamp and sweeps every inch of her house, searching diligently, not stopping until she finds her treasure. After finding her coin, she calls her friends and neighbors (like the shepherd did) and tells them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece that was lost!” (Lk 15:9). Notice that while her coin was lost (missing) it had not lost its value, but, because of its separation from her, it had become useless to her.

As the coin is treasured by the woman, God’s people are His special treasure (Ex 19:5-6; 1Pe 2:9). When a believer is “lost” and not in fellowship with God, He still treasures him. Moreover, the “lost” believer does not lose his salvation (being a child of God) and will never be sent to the Lake of Fire. Once again, Jesus’ lesson is that whenever one of God’s children repents and returns to fellowship with the Father, God rejoices: “Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner^[9] who repents” (Lk 15:10).

“The Lost Son”

Jesus concludes this discussion with a third “lost” parable, “The Lost Son,” which traditionally has been called “The Prodigal¹⁰ Son.” This parable follows a storyline similar to the previous two parables but includes more details. The parable begins, “A certain man had two sons” (Lk 15:11). Similar to the previous two parables, the man already has two sons (just as the shepherd has one hundred sheep and the woman has ten coins). These are not parables about gaining a new possession but of losing something one already has.

The sons are “mature sons” (*huios*) who are expecting an inheritance. The younger of the two sons does not want to wait any longer for his portion (one-third) of his father’s estate, so he asks that the property be divided immediately. The father is willing to give him his rightful share and makes the necessary

⁹ When a believer is described as a “sinner,” it means that he is transgressing (disobeying) God’s Law.

¹⁰ The word “prodigal” describes being reckless and wasteful with money or resources.

arrangements to do so. The younger son liquidates all of his new assets and begins to travel, wandering about in far countries. Soon the younger son has lost his inheritance by wasting it on reckless living.

Now comes the crisis: a severe famine devastates the land and food becomes scarce. The younger son has been reduced to poverty and no one will give him anything to eat. He finds a job feeding swine (an unclean animal); at least the swine share their meals with him. In this desperate state, the younger son comes to his senses and realizes that his father's servants are better off than he is: "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!" (Lk 15:17). He makes plans to return to his father's house and rehearses his apology: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants" (Lk 15:18-19).

As the younger son returns to his former home, his father is watching and sees him coming. Having compassion for his son, the father runs to meet him, then hugs and kisses him. The younger son confesses his sin: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son" (Lk 15:21). His father interrupts and tells the servants: "Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Lk 15:22-24). The father calls for a celebration, having reunited and restored fellowship with his son.

As a post script to the main story, the elder son appears on the scene and becomes "angry" (the Greek word means "provoked") and refuses to participate in the celebration. The father comes out to reason with him, but the elder son complains: "Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has

devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him” (Lk 15:29-30).

The father answers, “Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found” (Lk 15:31-32).

The interpretation of this parable is similar to that of the previous two; this parable likewise illustrates the rejoicing of God the Father when a child who was lost, that is, out of fellowship with Him, repents and returns to Him. Before leaving home, the younger son had lived a life obedient to his father; he had an inheritance coming and the father had no reason to withhold it from him. What possesses the younger son to change his ways and become reckless is not revealed in the parable.

The younger son represents a disciple who, in the past, has been obedient to the heavenly Father and has earned rewards. At some point in the disciple’s life, he changes and begins to live recklessly; in doing so, he starts to lose his rewards, until at last all of them are lost. In Ezekiel, God warns the righteous man that if he turns away from righteousness and begins to live lawlessly, then God will not remember all the righteousness which previously he has done (Eze 18:24). It is possible for a righteous disciple who becomes unfaithful to lose many or all of his rewards (1Co 3:11-15) which “[he] worked for” (2Jn 8).

In the parable, the younger son loses his inheritance, then realizes his mistake and desires to return to his father’s house. This son represents a disciple who has gone astray and is losing, or even has lost, his rewards. After losing his inheritance, he realizes his mistake and desires to restore fellowship with God the Father. In the parable, the son confesses his sin to his father; likewise, any believer who has gone astray from God the Father can make a similar confession of sin and God will forgive him so that fellowship is renewed (1Jn 1:9).

The father welcomes the wayward son into his house: he gives him new clothes and a ring and provides him a feast. The heavenly Father will do the same with a disobedient child who returns to Him: He will joyfully welcome the repentant into His

house, clothe him in a white robe, and feed him. This “house” ultimately depicts God’s everlasting house, the New Jerusalem on the New Earth where faithful disciples will live with God the Father and wear white robes, feasting and fellowshiping with Him forever (Rev 3:4; 6:11; 7:9, 14; 19:8, 14; 22:1-5; cf. Mt 22:11-13).

In the parable, the elder son is upset by his father’s ready forgiveness of the younger son’s offenses. Some try to find a correspondence between this son’s unhappiness and the unhappiness of some faithful believers when they stand before Christ’s Bema Seat. Finding such correspondence is not necessary because a parable is meant to be a familiar story, and in this parable the elder son is used as a foil to the younger son to emphasize the stark difference between the elder’s enduring inheritance and the younger’s lost inheritance. Although the younger son has lost all of his inheritance, because he repents and returns to his father, he is allowed to live in his father’s house and have fellowship with him. On the other hand, the elder son has remained in fellowship with his father and, accordingly, inherits his father’s possessions.

Notice the Father tells the elder son, “for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found” (Lk 15:32); this does not mean that the son was literally dead, but that he was out of fellowship with his father and not living with him in his house. Here Jesus uses the ideas of life and death (death essentially means “separation”; e.g., separation of a human spirit from its body) to emphasize the biblical principle of “*covenant* life and *covenant* death.” The essential concept of this principle is that, while out of fellowship with God because of disobedience to His Covenant, God’s covenant people experience “*covenant* death,” but while in fellowship with God, they experience “*covenant* life” (Deu 30:15-20). The principle of “*covenant* life and *covenant* death” is illustrated by examples throughout the Old Testament (e.g., the first and second generations of Israelites, Naomi and her family in the book of Ruth, the Israelites being scattered among the nations, and the Jews being sent to Babylon). This parable provides another

illustration of this principle: when the son leaves his father's house and loses fellowship with him he experiences "*covenant death*," but when he returns to his father's house and reestablishes fellowship (his covenant relationship) with his father, he regains his "*covenant life*" (becomes "alive again").

The parable's comparison of the lost inheritance of the younger son with the enduring inheritance of the elder son illustrates some important distinctions between disciples in the Kingdom from Heaven—some will be great and others will be least (Mt 5:19). Disciples who have remained faithful and in fellowship with their Father will enjoy rewards and have an enduring inheritance; on the other hand, disciples can be unfaithful, even to the point of losing their inheritance (and some will be left outside, Mt 5:20; 7:21-23). Nevertheless, if the unfaithful repent, they can come back to fellowship with Him and live with Him in His kingdom; however, the inheritance the unfaithful have lost will not be recovered (cf. 1Co 3:11-15).

Jesus teaches the parables about the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the lost son to demonstrate that it is not God's will that any believer should go astray and be out of fellowship with Him.¹¹ The parables also reveal how He rejoices when an errant child returns to fellowship with Him (Mt 18:14). Additionally, an important point taught in the parable of "The Lost Son" is that a disciple can lose his inheritance if he goes astray, doing his own will instead of doing the Father's will. Even then, after losing some or all of his inheritance, if a wayward disciple repents, he can regain his fellowship with the Father.

¹¹ Jesus presents Zacchaeus as an example of saving a sheep who was "lost." After Zacchaeus comes to see Jesus, he joyfully receives Him into his house. When others complain that Zacchaeus is a sinner, he calls Jesus "Lord," and confesses: "Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold" (Lk 19:8). Jesus responds to him: "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Lk 19:9-10). Zacchaeus is a "son of Abraham" (a believer, cf. Rom 4:11-12), and when he confesses his sin and restores those against whom he has sinned, he is a "lost" sheep who is saved (restored), because he is no longer wandering astray, out of fellowship with God the Father.