

One Lost Sheep Over Ninety-Nine

A Meditation on Luke 15

By Han Gil Lee

In Canadian Reformed Churches, it seems that sitting with your family is a very important thing during the worship service.

Sitting together can signify so many things. I remember when I was sitting in a pew one Sunday and I discovered something very interesting about CanRC culture. One day, a young man was sitting in church together with a girl. People around me started to raise their eyebrows. It seemed like they were suspecting that there was some kind of romantic relationship between the two. And of course, as a foreigner, I was confused. How can you make that kind of speculation based on two people sitting together? But when the church service started people saw the two people sharing the Book of Praise together. And that was the moment that people thought, "That's it! There is no need to dispute. They have to get married!" And then I realized that it's a CanRC culture thing. And it is a beautiful culture. I realized that sitting together and sharing a Book of Praise was not just a source a mere speculation, but signs that confirm that they're in a relationship. No wonder people were raising their eyebrows.

In Luke 15, there were also some people raising their eyebrows. Their reasons for doing so were not as positive as CanRC members watching that new couple. For those raising their eyebrows in Luke 15:1 were grumbling "*Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the*

Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

The Pharisees and scribes raised their eyebrows when they saw that Jesus was with tax collectors and sinners. And they grumbled. We might wonder why they were grumbling.

Verse 1 starts with the tax collectors and sinners all drawing near to hear Jesus.

The tax collectors were the last people that you would want to associate with at that time. Because Israel was under control of the Roman Empire, they had to pay taxes to Rome. Tax collectors were considered parasites. It is hard for us to imagine that kind of social tendency because we're living in a different time and place. Perhaps you can consider the tax collectors like those who collaborated with the Nazis during the WWII. They were considered to be traitors by their countrymen.

The Pharisees not only had patriotic reasons, but also religious reasons to discriminate against the tax collectors and sinners so vigorously. The Pharisees thought that the Messiah would come for those who are ceremonially clean. In order to be clean, they had to work hard. They had to fast, pray and keep all the religious obligations. In the Pharisees' minds, the Messiah was not for the tax collectors because they were unclean by their nature. The tax collectors kept company with the Gentiles who were unclean.

In verse 2, we hear the complaints continue. *“And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’”*

Notice the word *“receives.”* It was not like Jesus happened to drop by a group of tax collectors and somehow happened to eat with them, but rather he was receiving them actively. When tax collectors and sinners saw Jesus Christ, the true good shepherd, they knew that Jesus was the one whom they should follow. When they met Jesus, they felt like they belonged to the covenant and actually were being cherished.

The Pharisees, because they had to work on their salvation through religious ceremonies, thought that those marginalized people who did not do the same as they did, did not belong to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus, on the other hand, because he offered salvation not based on our merit, welcomed anyone who repented. Jesus said in Luke 5, *“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick,”* and so the tax collectors and sinners came to Jesus because they needed Jesus.

Let’s imagine that someone from outside of the church, someone we think of as *“unclean”* comes through the front door of our church during the Sunday worship service. He smells, he appears to be homeless. But he came to a Canadian Reformed Church, because he knows that Jesus will receive him. What would be your reaction? Are you going to raise your eyebrows, negatively? He’s not wearing a Sunday suit. He doesn’t know how to sing from the Genevan Psalter. He walks along the aisle and wants to sit right beside you. Are you willing to sit with

him? Are you willing to share your Book of Praise with him? Are you willing to invite him for coffee?

Jesus starts the parable with a rhetorical question. *“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?”*

The words *“what man of you”* indicate the proper obligation of the shepherd. The NIV translates this as *“Suppose one of you, having a hundred sheep.”* In other words, everyone thinks that looking for a lost sheep is the right thing to do. In fact, looking for one lost sheep is a very normal thing to do. You see? Jesus is applying this story to everyone listening, even us. If you lost a dog, cat, or your housemate, would you not go out to find him?

Some may ask a question *“What about the other 99 sheep?”* The text seems to say that the shepherd left the ninety-nine in the open country. And he continues to look for the lost one until he finds it. Isn’t the shepherd an evil shepherd if he abandoned the ninety-nine? What if there is a bear? What if a wolf? What about those poor ninety-nine sheep?

But we shouldn’t think the shepherd abandoned the whole flock by themselves.

It is likely that the culture at that time required more than one shepherd to watch such a large flock—100 sheep! Therefore, we shouldn’t think that the shepherd abandoned whole flock for the sake of one.

Moreover, the word *“leave”* does not have the meaning of abandon. It is translated as *“leave”* in a sense that when a husband dies, he leaves behind

his wife. It also can be translated as “separate.” We find this word in Matt 19:5, *“For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife.”* Men leave their parents when they get married. It doesn’t mean a man should abandon his parents and not care about them at all. The word “leave” should be understood simply as the opposite of “cleave,” as “to separate.” So the shepherd did not abandon the flock. Actually, the one who does not go out to find the lost one, that one is the evil shepherd.

And here is a great comfort for us. Jesus Christ, our shepherd, persistently looks for the lost one. The key is that he is looking for the lost one, even if it requires him to leave the ninety-nine.

In verse 5, the shepherd puts the lost sheep on his shoulders. The shepherd comes home; he calls together not only his friends, but also his neighbors. He says “rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” That is the response of our Good Shepherd Jesus Christ when he found each one of you sitting here. And that will be the response of our Good Shepherd when he finds the lost one.

And of course, this explains why Jesus was receiving and eating with the sinners. We can draw near to him not because we’re worthy, but because Jesus paid the ransom for our transgressions. Isaiah 53 tells us *“we all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”*

Both groups of Jesus’ listeners heard the same story. Both groups know that it is right for the shepherd to go out for the one lost sheep. But the parable creates two different reactions in these groups.

One group, the tax collectors and sinners are comforted. They are comforted because they find that Jesus is their true shepherd who cares about them.

The other group (the Pharisees) probably felt a great shame in their heart because they well knew of Ezekiel 34. Ezekiel 34 had a warning against the leaders of Israel who didn’t care about the helpless. They didn’t care; rather, they slaughtered the fat ones. The leaders did not feed them. They did not strengthen the weak. They did not heal the sick. They did not bind up the injured. They didn’t go out to look for the lost. The flock was scattered. And nobody was going out to seek them.

Jesus said in verse 7 *“I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”*

The parable is very simple yet very profound.

This parable is a strong call to repentance and faith. If you repent from sin, no matter what that sin is, you’ll be welcomed, and you will join the great feast with our Saviour Jesus Christ. Even the Pharisees were welcomed. They only had to repent. The Pharisees were the ones who really needed to repent.

But whether the Pharisees repented after they heard the parable, we do not know. We don’t know whether the Pharisees welcomed the tax collectors and sinners after they heard the parable. Luke does not tell us the end, how the Pharisees reacted. This is the first in a series of three parables about “losing” things (lost sheep, lost coin, lost son). Like the parable of the lost sheep, so at the end of the

parable of the prodigal son, the story ends suddenly. We don't know how the first son reacted to his father's rebuke after the last verse of chapter 15. That kind of sudden ending is also a call to repentance or call to action.

Having heard the parable, what do you think you need to do?

Now, the parable is told to us. And the ending is also open to us as well. How would you like to write your ending? With repentance? Brothers and sisters, remember that we are in the flock merely by God's grace.



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