

THE LOST SHEEP & THE LOST COIN

Interpreting the Parables of Jesus by Craig Blomberg¹

REVIEW: Did you have any additional thoughts about the the Prodigal Son parable or did you experience/apply any of the three main teaching points during the last week?

SIMPLE 3-POINT PARABLES

I. The three main characters and their correlating identities

<u>The Lost Sheep (Lk 15:4-7)</u>	<u>Who they represent</u>	<u>The Lost Coin (Lk 15:8-10)</u>
Shepherd (authority figure)	→ God	← Woman (authority figure)
Lost Sheep	→ Tax collectors and sinners	← Lost Coin
99 Sheep	→ Pharisees/teachers of the law	← 9 Coins

II. Things to consider about the parable

- The parables of the lost sheep and lost coin involve animals and inanimate objects as main “characters.” They each use groups of characters (the ninety-nine and the nine) as collective units to fill the role of one of the subordinates. The lost sheep and lost coin are also much shorter and less detailed, and each is introduced with a rhetorical question beginning with, “what man (or woman) of you ... [would not do such-and-such]?”

This question regularly anticipates a negative answer. In other words, the question introduces a situation that requires so clear-cut a response that the audience would be forced to acknowledge, “of course, no one would not do that”—that is, “everyone would do it.” And the logic progresses from the lesser to the greater; if sinful humans almost always conduct certain affairs in a particularly reasonable or ethical way, how much more must God behave in comparable fashion.

- Interestingly, although the biblical shepherd was a cherished image of care for God’s people, first-century shepherds were generally despised by the average Jew, due to their reputation for lawlessness and dishonesty (cf. b. Sanh. 25b).⁵³ Jesus thus places his audience in a bind; the Pharisees naturally would have tried to identify with the authority figure in each case but would have balked when that figure turned out to be a shepherd or a woman!⁵⁴
- Hints emerge that the figures in the parables are meant to point beyond the level of a simple, realistic story of first-century Palestine. If this were a purely historical narrative, one would expect to hear that the shepherd with enough means to have a flock of one hundred sheep would have safeguarded the ninety-nine left behind in the wilderness, and one would not expect him to rejoice quite so extravagantly or to carry the sheep on his shoulders when no reason was given for why it should not walk. The silver coin that the woman lost was a δραχμή (*drak-mae*), roughly equivalent to a denarius or a day’s wage. If the ten coins represented the woman’s savings, of course she would be concerned to recover one-tenth of it, but maybe not always to let all her friends and neighbors in on the presence of her “stash.”⁵⁶ The poorer she was, the more valuable even one of the coins would have been and the more greatly she would have rejoiced. But perhaps she would have done so more discreetly so that word would not pass to some potential thief.

¹ Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, Second Edition. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2012). **Almost all of this study is taken directly from Blomberg while small portions are italicized to identify a synthesis of his book or a question generated for the purpose of this study.**

- Each of these problems, of course, can be countered. Shepherds traveled in groups, so presumably this shepherd's associates would watch his flocks while he was away from them. Sheep can become too frightened to walk on their own.⁵⁷ Women (or men!) who recover lost money could have celebrated lavishly with trusted neighbors despite the potential dangers, especially in the group-over-individual mentality of the ancient Mediterranean world. But the parables never explicitly state any of this, and the cumulative effect of the various details suggests at least some distinctive emphasis on the value placed on what was lost and on the joy of its recovery, even more at the spiritual level of the accounts than at the material level.⁵⁸
- A controversial issue with **Luke 15:7**. *Are the Pharisees and scribes to be understood as righteous or is this a sarcastic statement actually meaning "self-righteous?"* In Luke's Gospel, the "righteous" often refers to those who are already right with God, the pious in Israel expectantly awaiting their salvation (cf., e.g., Lk 1:6; 2:25; 23:50). The word does not refer to people who are sinless but to those who place their hope in God. So Jesus here more likely had a wider group of Jews in view than just those whom he elsewhere denounces as hypocrites. And he addressed the particular issue of Luke 15:1–2, not by directly challenging his critics' claim to be part of the people of God, but by seeking to woo them more gently back to a right attitude toward their fellow Jews.⁷⁰ This fits well with the understandable but misguided complaints of the prodigal's older brother in Luke 15:25–32, where the father's reaction is remarkably restrained and solicitous.⁷¹ Direct rebukes would occur elsewhere and more consistently as Jesus' ministry neared its end.

III. Three main characters and three main points

1. Just as the shepherd and woman go out of their way to search diligently for their lost possessions, so **God** takes the initiative to go to great lengths to seek and to save lost sinners.
2. Just as the discovery of the **lost sheep** and **coin** elicit great joy, so the **salvation** of lost men and women is a cause for cosmic celebration.

QUESTION: *Is it wrong for God to show temporary preference for the lost who have been found over those already found?*

3. Just as the safety of the **ninety-nine sheep** and **nine coins** affords no excuse for not searching for what is lost, those who profess to be God's people can never be satisfied that their numbers are sufficiently great so as to stop trying to save more.

This triadic interpretation is more concisely summed up by the concluding refrains of Luke 15:7 and 10, which contrast (a) the joy in heaven over (b) one sinner who repents with that for (c) those who need no repentance.

IV. Contemporary Application

QUESTION: How should we at Redeemer celebrate the baptism of a new believer, keeping in mind Luke 15:6, 9, and 23?

V. Personal Application

1. *How might you apply any of the three main points to yourself or your own life?*
2. *How might you apply it to the life of a brother or sister who is struggling in their walk with Christ?*
3. *How might you apply it to the life of an unbeliever, bringing God's perspective to their life (a form of evangelism that explains God or outright evangelism calling them to turn to God)?*

Looking Ahead: Another Simple 3-Point Parable (The Two Debtors - Luke 7:41-43)