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## THE GREAT PARABLE OF GRACE.

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“And He spake this parable unto them” (Lk. 15:3).

This parable embraces, in my judgment, the whole of the subsequent parts of this chapter. There is nothing said about any other parable. No such phrase as recurs in the cluster of parables of Matthew 13, “Another parable put He forth unto them”. I suggest that we have here one parable consisting of two illustrations and a story. It is divided into two parts, neither of which is independent of the other, or can well stand or be understood thoroughly by itself.

And He spake it to *them*, *i. e.*, to the Scribes and Pharisees, who were murmuring. Not to the sinners as they were technically called, not to the obviously lost people, the publicans and prodigals. It was *about them*, but it was *to* the “righteous”, the church leaders of that time; the theologians and ecclesiastics, for their warning and enlightenment. It would have saved much misunderstanding if preachers and others had realized the unity and indivisibility of this parable; that it contains in its unity the philosophy of recovery or salvation; the two sides of it which dovetail the one into the other. They would have expected less from what has been called the

parable of the prodigal son, but which would be more correctly described as the story of the two sons and their father.

\*There have been preachers, as Dr. Dale reminds us, who have expected that story to teach all the necessary truth on the vital matter of sin and redemption. They have said, "There is nothing about atonement in the story of the prodigal son. Where, then, is the need of atonement?" This wretched youth who has debauched his character and dragged his father's name in the mire is freely forgiven and royally received and there is nothing said about satisfying the law or justice. Therefore there is no need of any satisfaction of the eternal law of righteousness. But there is nothing said about any Holy Spirit in the story, and it were as reasonable to ask, "Where, therefore, is the need of the Holy Spirit?" There are certain people who need to be reminded that you cannot get everything into a parable. That it never exhausts but only illustrates a great truth or doctrine. It lights up some phase of it only, and to insist upon its being an exhaustive statement is to make it untrue; while here I contend we have only a part of a parable.

Two things should be emphatically stated. (1) Our Lord never taught the doctrine of unconditional forgiveness of sins. Here is one condition often lost sight of. "If ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Mt. 6:15), *i. e.*, you must forgive in order to be forgiveable. You can never be right with God while you are wilfully wrong with men. "If thou bring thy gift to the altar and there remember that thy brother hath ought against thee: leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way, first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift" (Mt. 5:23).

(2) If we are to understand the teaching of Christ concerning this great and vital matter of the forgiveness

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\*Epistle of James, p. 160ff.

of sin, we must take the whole of His teaching. We must take into account such sayings as "The Son of man came . . . . to give His life a ransom for many", and, "This is my blood . . . shed for many for the remission of sins".

For my own part, I am profoundly thankful that there is far more in the New Testament and even in this chapter on this great subject. For example, no one goes out from the home to seek this wild-headed and determined youth. He is left to himself to almost the last weary and bitter mile of his journey home, and no one can say that that is an adequate representation of God's attitude toward wandering and wilful men. Taking the story as a human story, we may say that it might well have happened that the prodigal had gone too far and had been too far gone to have ever reached home. He might have persisted in the far country where was nobody to help him. He might have dropped dead from exhaustion on his way home. There are people in the world who are too far gone morally and spiritually to get back. They are moral paralytics. All their will-power is destroyed. They are helpless in the grip of some vice. They need to be lifted like a coin, or carried like a sheep; and they are provided for in the first part of "this parable" which is a parable of grace and in the former part of which there is more and richer gospel than in the latter part. It is a parable of the lost and the found and the subsequent joy. Look at the great words in it.

I. The word *lost*. A great biblical word, never to be lost sight of by the theologian or the preacher. It comes from the same root as the word *perishing*. It described the condition of the poor creatures who were being drawn to the side of Christ who had kindled the light of hope in their dark and reckless hearts. But it covers and describes the condition of innumerable people today. They are lost—not they *will be*; *they are*. What is it to be lost? To miss the end of existence. It does not need that a man

be vicious to ensure that. Vicious men are lost—but so are men who live aimless and useless and selfish lives. They are lost to God and high virtue and the highest service of their fellows.

What are the contents of the term?

(a) *It implies value.* You kick a loose pebble in the street, you do not say that is lost, but if you see a gold watch or a purse of money lying in the road you say at once, "It is lost". So you conclude that wherever man may be, however low he may have sunk, he is of value, of value unspeakable in the sight of God.

(b) *An owner.* If you see this purse of money or piece of jewelry lying in the road you say some one has lost it. Though you pick it up, it is not yours. If the owner saw it on your person he would say, "That is *mine*", and if you were honorable you would instantly restore it. Wherever man is, in whatsoever condition, he is God's property. Lost property he may be, but God's property still, and his rightful Owner claims him.

Now, how do men get lost according to the teaching of this parable? There is the way of the sheep and the way of the coin and the way of the lost son, and they differ.

(1) The sheep is lost unintentionally on its own part. It is allured away from its companions and the protection and guidance of the shepherd by toothsome morsels of pasture; not by malice aforethought. And there are people who are lost thus.

"Evil is wrought through want of thought  
As well as want of heart."

People are tricked and fooled and led into wrong. "My people have gone into captivity unawares." There is a half-apologetic note in the confession, "All we, like sheep, have gone astray". The root trouble with many people is not a vicious bent but a vacant and aimless mind.

"Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider."

(2) How is the coin lost? Through no fault of its own. Through careless guardianship. The woman ought never

to have lost it. Is there nothing in that for the people to whom this parable was spoken and to us? Was it not partly their fault that so many people were lost to religion and morality? "When He saw the multitude He was moved with compassion because He saw them . . . as sheep not having a shepherd."

Are not some people lost because they are not properly parented? It is small wonder that some people are lost. They are brought up badly, loosely. Nothing is done to make religion attractive to them. It is not in their homes. Little or no interest is taken in their companionships or books or amusements. They are allowed to roam the streets at will. They are told nothing about the mysterious functions of their bodies. They are left to find out physiological facts from undesirable and tainted sources. They are flung out into life with passions raw and undisciplined. What would have become of some of us if we had had no wise Christian training, no parental restraint and stimulus, no one to keep us from tasting the maddening wine of self-indulgence? Is not the crying need of the day a Christian parentage, a Christian home, and especially a wise Christian motherhood? And is not the Church at fault? How is it that 75 to 80 per cent of the scholars of our Sunday Schools in England are lost to the Church? Is there not faulty guardianship somewhere? Surely, it ought not to be beyond the consecrated will of the Church to weave a net whose meshes shall be fine enough to keep a great many more of our young people than we do keep. And this keeping, this prevention of loss and drifting is one of the most urgent problems of the Church.

(3) Then how is the boy lost? Surely, the case differs here. There is no one to blame but himself unless indeed it be that the elder brother is somewhat ill to live with.

There is presumably love and care and wise guidance in the home and they are all wilfully and determinedly thrown over and scorned. He is no straw carried by the

current, but one who goes against the current and flings himself upon a course of profligacy. There are varying degrees of responsibility and guilt on the part of those who are lost: but there are some among them who must bear all the guilt themselves. Everything that could be done has been done for them and they have trampled upon it all and broken through every fence of restraint and love. They are mysteries of iniquity, the black sheep of the flock on whose behalf prayer and labor seem to be in vain.

Doubtless among those who may be described as lost you may find people who correspond to each of these types.

II. Now consider the other great word, *found*. Also thank God a New Testament term describing a fact or a process which belongs *peculiarly* to the New Testament. There is no philosophy which provides for the recovery and the rehabilitating of those who have been lost or damaged as the New Testament does.

Its significant message contained in this chapter and elsewhere in explicit statements and stirring examples is that whether a man be lost inadvertently, through mere drifting, or through the neglect of others, or through his own wilful and determined act he may be recovered. Of course, he may not. If we cling to the illustrations of this parable we should be compelled to say that there is many a sheep lost on the uplands of Judæa or, for that matter, on the Welsh mountains who is not recovered. Its bleaching bones are there to demonstrate the pathetic fact that it was finally lost. Many a coin is lost which is never recovered by the owner. Many a lad goes wrong and drops out of sight as if he had dropped into the sea and is never heard of again by those who love him best and many another is pleaded with and appealed to in vain.

But here is the blessed possibility which the Church of Christ should nourish and act upon, viz., the salvability of everybody, for his salvation is the desire of God. He may be found and recovered. How? Well, the two sides of the great business are set forth in this parable.

(1) First there is the solicitude and activity of the loser. The sheep farmer and the woman *both seek*. That is why I said there is a richer gospel in the two illustrations than in the story. God does not wait at home. He does not stand by the deserted post waiting for the faithless man to return. He goes after His own. Here is the wealth of the gospel. "The Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost." The eager search which indicates that the lost man is not left to himself but that God is after His precious property comes first in this parable. It is the very heart of the gospel and the heart of its hope. "God commended His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." God seeking man and rejoicing when He finds him. All Heaven filled with joy when the search is successful is the first great picture of this parable.

(2) But that is not the whole. It can never be the whole when man the person free of will is concerned. So that other side, the necessary and complementary part, is *the activity of the lost*.

Nobody goes after the prodigal. There is no one like old Daniel Peggoty, the royal hearted fisherman in *David Copperfield*, who fares forth from Yarmouth to seek for "Little Em'ly", his poor lost lamb, more sinned against than sinning, traveling in "furin' parts", peering into the faces of women in the London streets, giving the orders that the light is to be kept burning in the old boat home and the pillow kept ready for her weary head and there is to be no reproach, but only loving welcome if she should come. Both the sheep farmer and the woman say, "I have found". With the father the verb is in the passive voice, "My son is found", while the woman seems to admit some measure of culpability as she exclaims, "I have found the piece which I had lost". What does it mean? Perhaps in part that the greater a man's responsibility for getting lost, the greater his responsibility for his own recovery. But surely this man will not be found

and saved merely because God is seeking. There must be some movement on his own part. 'Man must seek God. That is the complementary necessity. Let us clearly understand again that a parable only illustrates. It never exhausts. When everything has been said, we know that a man is much more and better than a sheep or a coin as he is much more than growing corn or potter's clay. It would have saved theologians much wrangling if they had remembered that and also that God in His relation to man is much more than a potter.

I can say a great thing when I can say with psalmist, "The Lord is my Shepherd". But I can say a far greater thing when I can say, "God is my Father", for the child of the shepherd is infinitely more precious to him than the whole flock of sheep can be.

And I have a responsibility which can only be expressed in terms of humanity. No man will be saved and returned simply because God has found him. He must find God. He must say, "Yes" to God in Christ. He must consent to be carried and helped. Nay, he must walk on his own feet some part of the way. Just as there is no irresistible power to prevent a man from flinging away the priceless jewel of the love of God, as this boy flung away the jewel of his home, so there is no irresistible grace compelling a man willy nilly to right ways.

"He giveth day, thou hast thy choice  
To walk in darkness still."

It is all put into that exquisite picture of the last book of the Bible, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. *If* any man hear my voice and open the door"—not otherwise. I do not burglariously enter. You must do your part.

If a man will go into the far country he must be willing to come back again and to leave it behind—and it may be a long and bitter way back. It is not an easy thing to be saved either to God or man.

"From sin *through suffering* unto thee we pass." Let



people who are paltering with truth or purity or honor remember that. The prodigal would be tormented at times with memories of wasted days and treasures and he would likely carry the marks of his profligacy to his dying day. The wounds may be healed through the immeasurable love and grace of God, but the scars may be left. No one can read this parable without the feeling that it is a sad and bitter, and it may be, a hopelessly tragic thing to be lost, and there is no reason why any man should be lost, and no one can read it without the assurance that there is no lost soul but may be recovered and restored through the abounding grace of God, who never reproaches the penitent soul, but rejoices as over a recovered treasure! For this is the longing of the divine heart and thus it is satisfied.