

Luke 15:3-7

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/luke/luke-15/luke-153-7/>

Jesus told three parables in response to the Pharisees and scribes grumbling at how He mingles with sinners. This first parable is called “The Parable of the Lost Sheep.”

It is about a shepherd that leaves ninety-nine of his sheep in the pasture in search of the one that is lost, and the joy he feels upon finding it. Jesus then tells His adversaries that there is more joy in heaven when one sinner repents over ninety-nine righteous people who don’t need to repent.

The parallel gospel accounts for this parable and teaching are found in Matthew 18:11-14.

In response to the Pharisees’ slanders against Jesus’s familiarity with tax collectors and sinners (Luke 15:1-2), Jesus *told them* three parables.

1. “The Parable of the Lost Sheep” (Luke 15:3-7)
2. “The Parable of the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10)
3. “The Parable of the Prodigal Son” (Luke 15:11-32)

The first *parable He told them* was, “The Parable of the Lost Sheep.”

He began with a rhetorical question: What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?

The expected answer to His rhetorical question was: “None.” There is no *man among them* who would not go and *leave the ninety-nine sheep* in search of *the one which is lost*. They all would search for *the lone lost sheep*.

Shepherding was a common occupation in the agricultural ancient world. And this was particularly the case throughout the history of Israel. Some of the Jews’ greatest ancestors were shepherds: Abraham (Genesis 13:2); Israel (also called Jacob) (Genesis 48:15); Moses (Exodus 3:1); and King David (1 Samuel 16:11). Shepherds took care of *sheep* by protecting them from wild animals, and by moving *them* from *pasture* to *pasture* where there was food and water for *them*. Shepherds made a profit by selling *the sheep’s* wool to make clothing, blankets, and other goods.

In this short *parable*, the shepherd had a flock of one *hundred sheep*. He led his flock to a *pasture* where the sheep were safe and had plenty of grass to eat and water to drink. As he counted his flock, *he* noticed that there are only *ninety-nine*. *One of his sheep* is missing and *lost*. Naturally, because the flock is safe and provided for, the shepherd leaves them in the open *pasture* and goes after *the one* which is *lost*. *He* likely retraced his path while searching for *his lost sheep until he finds it*.

Jesus then described what the shepherd does *when he has found the lost sheep: He lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing*. In other words, *he* brings *it* back, and *he* is giddy with joy over recovering it. The shepherd's *rejoicing* is a natural response.

Jesus ends the short *parable* by describing what the shepherd does *when he returns home*.

And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!'

The shepherd throws a party to celebrate *with his friends and neighbors*. *He* invites them to celebrate and *rejoice with him*. *He* wishes to share his happiness with them. And *his* happiness came from having *found his one sheep which was lost* and gone, but now has been recovered.

Jesus then *told* the Pharisees and scribes the point of His short *parable*.

I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

Jesus, who was from *heaven*, assured them that the shepherd's *rejoicing* was comparable to the response *in heaven when one sinner repents*. In addition to making an immediate point to His audience, this discloses some fascinating details about heaven, including:

- *Heaven* is acutely aware of what is taking place on earth.
- *Heaven* has celebrations.
- *Repentance* is considered as a great cause of celebration *in heaven*.

The Sheep as Israel and The Shepherd as Jesus

Within the confines of Jesus's *parable*, the *sheep* represent members of the nation/family that is Israel. The *sheep* are Israelites (Jews who are members of God's chosen people) and/or possibly faithful Jews who hope in the promise of God's Messiah. And the *man* who goes looking for them is the shepherd. Jesus does not explicitly claim to be the shepherd in this version of the parable. But this is easily inferred from the context in which the parable is told. Jesus has been literally going around Judea and Galilee inviting sinners to *repentance*, just as the shepherd went in search of his *lost sheep*.

Furthermore, in Matthew's version of the parable, Jesus does explicitly claim to be the Shepherd when He identifies Himself as the Son of Man:

"For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost"
(Matthew 18:11).

Moreover, In John's gospel, Jesus also says, "I am the Good Shepherd" (John 10:11) when He describes Himself, His mission, and the sheep as members of His eternal family (John 10:1-30).

And then there are the passages of Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34. These are Jewish scriptures that describe the Lord and the Messiah as a Shepherd. Jesus alludes to both scriptures in this *parable*. And these allusions would likely have been prominent in the minds of the Pharisees and scribes when they heard it—especially Ezekiel 34 in which God declares that He will search for His *sheep* as a shepherd seeks them out.

Ezekiel's prophetic shepherd metaphor began with a rebuke of Israel's leaders (Ezekiel 34:1-10). The Pharisees and scribes who were experts in Gods' scriptures would have instantly recognized that Jesus was speaking against them as much as He was identifying Himself as God's Messiah sent to find and gather the *lost sheep* of Israel.

Next in Ezekiel, the Lord declares that He will personally seek out His scattered *sheep*:

“For thus says the Lord God, ‘Behold, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day.’”

(Ezekiel 34:11-12)

The Lord God then continues the metaphor in Ezekiel:

“‘I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them to their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the streams, and in all the inhabited places of the land. I will feed them in a good pasture, and their grazing ground will be on the mountain heights of Israel. There they will lie down on good grazing ground and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest,’ declares the Lord God.”

(Ezekiel 34:13-15)

Then the Lord summarizes the Shepherd metaphor of Ezekiel by describing the judgment,

“I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick; but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with judgment.”

(Ezekiel 34:11-16)

It seems likely that Jesus, the Messiah, is leaning on these images in His parable. If so, Jesus would also subtly be laying claim to being Israel's Messiah, as He is the Lord personally searching for *His lost sheep*, as predicted by Ezekiel.

The Lost Sheep

The *sheep* as a whole represent Israelites, therefore the *one lost sheep* is a member of Israel. The *sheep* is *lost*, not because it does not belong to that flock or is not a part of Israel; it is *lost* because it is separated from the group it belongs to. The *lost sheep* is separated from and missing the blessings of being in the presence of the Shepherd and community with the flock. This is similar to how the *sinners and tax collectors* have broken relationship to God through their

disobedience and are living out of fellowship with their religious community because of their sin. The *lost sheep* is isolated somewhere along the road, away from the cool streams and grass of the green *pasture*, just as the sinner is lost along the way and is not enjoying the blessings of living in harmony with God and His family.

The *lost sheep* is a *sinner* who lives in broken fellowship with God. The prophet Isaiah describes sinful Israel this way:

“All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way.”
(Isaiah 53:6a)

The Apostle Peter uses this image to refer to believing Jews who have returned to Jesus, who is their Shepherd (2 Peter 2:25).

The finding of the *lost sheep* represents the restoration of that separated individual back into fellowship and community with the flock to which it always belonged. This restoration comes when the individual *repents*. The words for *repent* and *repentance* are respectively forms of the Greek words, “metanoeo” and “metanoia.” They literally describe a change of perspective or a changed mind.

The *parable* describes a *sinner* who belongs in the fold of Israel but who lives in a state of broken fellowship with God and his flock through disobedience. They are outside the good graces of the community. But the Good Shepherd comes looking for *them*. Jesus’s teachings resonate in the hearts of these outcast sinners. His gospel invites *them* to join *Him*. He calls them to change their perspective and follow *Him*. They *repent* and are reunited to the Shepherd and restored to His flock where they can flourish in His pastures.

When one sinner repents on earth, heaven rejoices. Heaven probably celebrates *more* than a shepherd *rejoices* over the return of a *lost sheep* because a restored Israelite or believer is far *more* precious to God than a *sheep* is to a shepherd.

However, the comparison Jesus draws here is between *one sinner who repents* and *ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance*. And Jesus says, *there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents*.

He could mean three things by this comparison between *the one penitent sinner* and *the ninety-nine righteous sheep*.

1. It’s possible Jesus could be saying that *heaven* prefers a repentant *sinner* over consistent obedience.

This interpretation is the most straightforward but may appear problematic because it does not neatly fit with the Bible’s overarching message of how much God rewards faithfulness.

This is because the scripture greatly elevates the quality of enduring faithfulness, which we know is important to God (2 Timothy 12-23; Hebrews 10:35-36; James 1:2-4; 2 Peter 5-8). We are told that those who endure and live faithfully will gain unimaginable treasure and reward (1 Corinthians 2:9; 2 Corinthians 4:16-17).

It therefore seems likely that with this interpretation, *heaven* is rejoicing because of the return of a *sinner* because they too will now get to participate in the celebration that is to come. Those who are *righteous* have a celebration ahead of them, but it is not now. *The lost sheep* returning to the fold is the cause of the current celebration.

2. Another possible meaning for this comparison could be that there is not typically a ratio of *ninety-nine righteous sheep* for every *sinner*.

“There is none righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10). Everyone, including the most faithful believers, is perpetually *the proverbial lost sheep* and in need of being rescued from *one sin* or another (1 John 1:8-10). If this is the case, Jesus may be teaching that consistent *repentance* is a necessary practice for constant faithfulness. To be *righteous* requires a habit of *repentance*. And every separate act of *repentance* is a cause for *rejoicing in heaven*.

3. A third possible meaning is that *heaven* prefers *one* repentant *sinner* over *ninety-nine self-righteous* sinners who believe they have *no need* for *repentance*.

Whether this is what Jesus meant or not, this statement is Biblically sound (1 Samuel 15:22; 1 Peter 5:5b). But for this interpretation to work we must read into Jesus’s comment that He was referring to self-righteousness and not true righteousness. The context allows this third interpretation as a possibility, but does not insist on it being His intent.

These three interpretations are not mutually exclusive. It is possible that any combination of them could have been intended by Jesus.

This *parable*’s depictions of *repentance* all compliment the Apostle John’s teaching in 1 John 1 about confession, which discusses being in the light/having fellowship, and making our joy complete. In 1 John 1:7-9, Jesus is the active agent covering sin, and restoring fellowship, like the Shepherd and the flock in the *pasture*.

- 1 John 1:8 mirrors the notion that everyone has sin:

“If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.”
(1 John 1:8)

- 1 John 1:7 tells us that when we are walking in the light, Jesus covers the sins of which we are unaware:

“But if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.”
(1 John 1:7)

- 1 John 1:9 tells us that if we confess/repent of our sins, Jesus will restore us to fellowship, that our joy might be made complete (1 John 1:4):

"But if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin."
(1 John 1:9)

The Pharisees and scribes are also members of Israel's flock. They too should be *rejoicing* every time *one sinner repents* and is restored to harmony with God. But instead of rejoicing that *repentance* is occurring among the tax collectors and sinners, they were grumbling (Luke 15:2).

Because the Pharisees and scribes said they had no sin, they were deceiving themselves and the truth was not in them (1 John 1:7). They were calling Jesus a liar and His word was not in them (1 John 1:10).

But if they confessed their sins, Jesus is faithful and righteous to forgive them and to cleanse them from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9) and restore them to the light, fellowship, and joy of being with the Shepherd and His flock.

One final point of importance about this parable. This parable initially concerned the lost sheep of Israel. It was spoken in a Jewish context in an age when the Messiah was offering the kingdom to His Jewish people. They ultimately rejected it. And God then ushered in the age of the Gentiles.

In the New Testament era, we may apply this parable to pertain to the Messiah's kingdom, which is currently not of this world (John 8:36). We can apply the image of the lost sheep to represent any believer who is not following Jesus for one reason or another. God is always searching, trying to bring them back into fellowship with Him. When an unfaithful believer, who is a member of God's family, *repents* of his ways, and is brought back into harmony with Christ—*heaven rejoices*. It is inferred that this speaks of one who is a part of Israel, who are God's chosen people (Deuteronomy 7:7-8).

Jesus then proceeded to reiterate these points to the Pharisees in a second *parable*: "The Parable of the Lost Coin" (Luke 15:8-10).

Biblical Text

³ So He told them this parable, saying, ⁴ What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' ⁷ I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.