

## Who are the Ninety-Nine, Who Need No Repentance?

We must distinguish Jesus' parables from allegories. In an allegory, we expect a correspondence between every detail in the earthly story and the spiritual meaning. At the same time, the parables in Luke 15 about the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal (or lost) son must be read in their context. This was no mere incidental detail.

The same Gospel message runs through each of the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the first part of the parable of the prodigal son. God searches for one of His own who becomes lost. He is concerned about the lost, searches diligently for the lost, and rejoices when the lost is found or returns. The prodigal son is given the best robe, a ring for his finger, something equivalent to the right to sign cheques, and the fattest calf is killed for him.

Each of the three parables expresses the joy of the Father when the lost is found. We do not usually think of God as rejoicing. Jesus expresses it in indirect ways. "There will be more joy in heaven" really means: "God will rejoice more." "There is joy in the presence of the angels .of God" really means that God rejoices.

The parable of the prodigal son should really be called "the parable of the loving father." In an oriental village, an old man like this would have been the subject of common gossip. It was a disgrace to have to sell up family property at short notice, but the father knew that he had already lost his son, and that all he had left was the difficult course of patient waiting. We could imagine how the people of the village must have shaken their heads as the old man kept looking up the street in the direction from which his son might come back. In oriental countries, it is considered undignified for an old man to run, even to get out of a shower of rain. When the father saw his younger son coming back, although he had no claims he could possibly make on his father, the old man ran, fell on his neck, and kissed him. He did not even allow him to say all of his little prepared speech, about being a hired servant. He was fully restored as a son with a joyous feast. There was no hint of concern in the father about what the neighbours might think. His son had been dead, and was alive again. He had been lost, and was found. That is what God is like. What Jesus wanted from the scribes and Pharisees was that they could find it in themselves to rejoice when sinners were received back by God. So, can we share God's joy?

This Gospel in all its reassuring sweetness is one thing, but Jesus was doing more than revealing what God is like. He was defending His Gospel of free forgiveness, and attacking the meanness of spirit in His enemies, who criticised Him for being the Friend of sinners and eating with them. The second half of the parable about the prodigal son, the part about the elder brother, is a picture of his opponents' attitude. They, too, believed that God received sinners, but only if they repented first, and proved the sincerity of their repentance. Jesus ate with people who had a bad reputation even before they repented, and His loving reception of them led them to a change of heart, as it did with Zacchaeus. The elder brother showed no hint of a change in his attitude. He did not call the prodigal son, his "brother", but "This son of yours." He would no go in to share his father's joy, in spite of his father's entreaties. His attitude was like that of Jonah, who wanted to witness the Lord's destruction of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, Israel's enemy. He resented the Lord for being merciful and relenting on His threats to destroy. Similarly, the reason for Jesus' three parables was that the Pharisees and the scribes had been grumbling and saying, "This Man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

It is important to realise that Jesus here uses the language that His opponents used. They made a list of people who had disreputable occupations. Not only prostitutes and tax-collectors were on the list, but also bakers (because they worked indoors with women), tanners (because they repeatedly touched carcasses, which made them ceremonially unclean), shepherds (who often helped themselves to milk, meat, skins, and wool, and pastured sheep where they had no right to pasture them), to name a few. Their term for such disreputable people was "sinners." Because they took pride in faithful observance of the Law of Moses, they called themselves "the righteous." Because they had always seen themselves as zealous adherents of the Law, they saw no need to repent. The scribes and Pharisees had not acknowledged John the Baptist, who called on people to repent and receive baptism, because Jews baptised only converts to Judaism. Receiving baptism would imply that nothing that they had had been doing had any spiritual value, and that they had to begin again, like uncircumcised proselytes. They were like Nicodemus, when he came to Jesus by night, thinking it was impossible that a person had to be born again, as though all his former devotion to God had been worth nothing.

Jesus presented the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son, who had spent everything, and found himself in skid row, feeding pigs, in an occupation that an orthodox Jew would consider a disgrace, as pictures of the tax collectors and other sinners were coming to Himself to hear Him. The "ninety-nine righteous people who did not need to repent" represented the scribes and Pharisees who criticised Jesus for welcoming prostitutes

and other sinners and eating with them.

The ninety-nine here are similar to the chief priests and Pharisees who heard Jesus' parables about the two sons and the wicked tenants (Mt 21). Jesus had aimed those two parables at them. "Truly, I say to you, tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you teaching you the way of righteousness, but you did not believe him; the tax collectors and prostitutes believed him. But even when you had seen that, you did not later change your minds and believe him." They saw no need to change their minds, or repent.

The lesson for us, too, is not to let spirituality get in the way of our relationship with God. Paul expressed this central truth of the Gospel when he said that God justifies the ungodly. Self-righteousness continues to be a trap for people who think of themselves as members of a church in good standing, and look down on others. Jesus' parable of the Pharisee praying in the temple while the tax collector was also there was a similar criticism of people who thought that they had no need or repentance. It was usual for Jews to begin a prayer with "Blessed art You, O Lord." The Pharisee began similarly, with "God I thank you", but in the rest of the "prayer" he was boasting about how righteous he was. He was sure that he had not blotted his copybook, and convinced that he was serving God loyally, even going beyond God's requirements. God asked Israelites to "afflict their souls" only once each year, on the Day of Atonement. He fasted twice a week! God asked for a tenth of corn, wine, and oil. He even contributed a tenth of the herbs in his vegetable patch!

The tax collector knew that in the temple area it was possible for atonement to be made for sin, and that it was possible for God to be merciful. His prayer was more than, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." It was an unusual form of words, "God, be propitiated to me, the sinner!" He did not, like the Pharisee, compare himself with others. In his sight, he was the sinner. When Jesus said that the tax collector, rather than the other, went home justified, He was making the same criticism of His opponents as He made in Luke 15. They thought they were the ninety-nine, who had never been lost, and had no need of repentance. That was why they were like the elder brother, who showed no hint of any change in his attitude to his sinful brother. He was judgmental. He blamed his father for failing to give him proper recognition: "Look, all these years I have been working like a slave for you and have never disobeyed a command of yours, and yet you have never given me a little goat to celebrate with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours has come back, who has squandered your property with prostitutes, you have killed the fattened calf for him." When a person presents his goodness before God like an account for payment, he presents his resignation from the kingdom of God.