

Lost and Found (Part 1)

It is terrible to be lost, but wonderful to be found.

*For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.
Luke 19:10*

Many commentators interpret this verse as meaning Jesus came to give eternal life to those are eternally condemned. The New Testament sometimes speaks of unsaved persons as being lost. *2 Cor. 4:3, If our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost.*

However, the word *lost* is not predominantly used in the Scriptures of those who are unsaved, and the first century Jews would not have understood it as referring to those who are eternally lost. The preponderance of times the word *lost* is used in the New Testament, it is used of saved people who are floundering in sin. They have wandered away from the Lord, and in that sense, they are lost. How then can they be saved? By being delivered from their sinful self-destruction.

A saved person who is living in carnality is temporally lost to some degree and needs to be found. Incidentally, in those instances where the word *lost* is used to refer to carnal, but saved people, the word *saved* is used in many of those cases to refer to their repentance and return to the Lord. In that sense, they are *found*.

Yes, Jesus also came to earth with a burden to see eternally lost people get saved from sin and receive eternal life. That is the emphasis of John's Gospel. But that is not how Jesus uses the terms *saved*, *lost*, and *found* in the Synoptic Gospels. The first two years of His preaching ministry were mainly focused on convincing the Israelite nation to repent and turn back to the Lord, for they were like lost and wandering sheep, needing to be rescued from national destruction.

Two Types of Sinners

In seeking and saving the lost, Jesus repeatedly encountered two groups of people in Israel that were polar opposites in one respect, but very much alike in another. The first group, comprised of scribes and Pharisees, were the self-righteous fundamentalists of Jesus' day. They were more focused on the letter of the law than the spirit of the law (see Matt. 5:21-6:18), fully expecting their keeping of lists and standards to make them spiritual. Priding themselves in strict observance of the law, they condescended to those who had "lower standards:"

God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican (Matt. 18:11).

Instead of comparing themselves to God and seeing how far they were from Him in fellowship, they compared themselves to “sinners” and felt good about their spiritual condition. They were self-righteous, yet carnal, nonetheless.

At the other end of the spectrum were the publicans (tax collectors that defrauded citizens) and harlots (promiscuous women). Needless to say, for every promiscuous woman, there was at least one promiscuous man, so this was not limited to women. The publicans and harlots represented the carnal element of the nation, those who were living licentiously. For those who insist these seedier elements of society had to be eternally lost, consider the present day church of Jesus Christ, which is plagued by many who are saved, yet living in fornication or adultery. Indeed, in 1 Cor. 6 Paul had to warn the Corinthian believers not to use their bodily members – which were now Christ’s – as the members of a harlot. He was dealing with the sin of fornication in the church.

Jesus treats both groups – scribes and Pharisees, on the one end, and publicans and harlots, on the other – as “sinners,” but He never calls into question their eternal standing with God. Yet he deems them both lost and in need of repentance.

Doesn’t the use of the word *lost* imply they were eternally lost and in need of eternal life? No, that is an assumption that has been made by many, but it is not consistent with the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus refers to both groups as if eternally saved, but in need of restored fellowship with God. That can be clearly demonstrated from several parables.

Parable of the Two Sons

But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not:but afterward he repented, and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not. Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him. Matthew 21:28-32

Notice the vineyard owner has two sons. Sonship is evidence of an eternally secure relationship with God. Furthermore, both sons are asked to work in the Father’s vineyard; again, evidence of right positional standing with God. Unbelievers have no connection with the Father’s vineyard.

The first son initially refuses to work in his father’s vineyard, but he later repents and goes. According to the interpretation given by Jesus, this son represents the publicans and harlots who are not right with God at first, but later repent at John’s preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom and submit

to the baptism of repentance. The other son agrees to work for his father, but then never does. This latter son epitomizes the self-righteous religious leaders who claim to be doing the will of God, but whose self-righteous hearts are not right with Him.

Imagine how infuriated the Pharisees become when Jesus tells them the publicans and harlots will go into the kingdom of God before them, the religious leaders! Why will this happen? Because the sinners have believed the message of John and repented of their lifestyle. Of course, the Pharisees are sinners too, but they can't see it and so do not repent.

Some may question how the word *sinners* could be used for saints. But are there not sinning saints? The word *sinners* in this context simply means they are carnal sons of God. It is important to take note that both groups – the scribes/Pharisees and publicans/harlots – are expected to be in the kingdom, but the repentant publicans and harlots will go before (i.e., precede) the unrepentant Pharisees, signifying a greater status for the repentant. As a result of bringing forth the fruits of repentance, the righteousness of the publicans and harlots exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. The publicans and harlots, now revived, will be great in the millennial kingdom, while the scribes and Pharisees will be least (Matt. 5:19-20).

We read of these two groups of sinners in another passage of Scripture.

Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them. Luke 15:1-2

Once again, Jesus encounters the two polar groups of sinners in Israel. Jesus is accused by the self-righteous sinners (scribes and Pharisees) of eating with the vice-sinners (i.e., those guilty of vices, the publicans and sinners). Nevertheless, both are eternally secure believers, as will be clearly demonstrated in the following parables.

Parable of the Lost Sheep

What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance. Luke 15:4-7

In the parable, the shepherd owns all one hundred sheep! This clearly pictures their standing before God as eternally secure. One becomes lost by wandering. That cannot mean unsaved, for salvation cannot be lost. In the

metaphor, the sheep (incidentally, it's not a goat) is an Israelite who wanders away from God through sinning. The shepherd, Jesus Christ, goes after the lost sheep, because He came to seek and to save that which was lost. *Lost*, in this context, cannot mean eternally condemned. *Lost* here means eternally saved, but not right with God.

Jesus did not come to call the righteous Israelites to repentance; he came to call sinning Israelites to repentance. Righteous Israelites, in context, are not merely those who are eternally saved, but those who are right with God. In v. 7, they are called *just persons that need no repentance*. Some like to say the word *just* refers to positional righteousness, that is, justification. It does in some other contexts of Scripture, but not here.

The word *just* can also refer to practical righteousness, that is, progressive sanctification. For instance, in Matt. 1:19 Joseph, after learning of Mary's pregnancy, determines to put her away privately (in other words, he will not divorce her publicly), because he is a *just* man. That doesn't mean he is saved, justified. Rather, it means he is a good, righteous man who acts uprightly in his everyday living.

When Pilate washes his hands to demonstrate his innocence in the matter of judging Jesus, he says, "I am innocent of the blood of this just person." Pilate is obviously not saying Jesus is eternally justified in the eyes of God. He is saying Jesus is innocent, upright. Thus, context helps to determine how the word *just* is being used. In the parable, it seems there is joy in heaven whenever Christians get right with God, in this context, Jews repenting and turning back to Jehovah. Indubitably, there is also joy in heaven when eternally lost people become eternally saved, but that's not the point here.

Parable of the Lost Coin

Either what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it? And when she hath found it, she calleth her friends and her neighbours together, saying, Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece which I had lost. Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth. Luke 15:8-10

The woman owns all ten coins, just as the shepherd owns all the sheep. The fact that one sheep or one coin becomes lost, does not mean the owner forfeits ownership. It simply means the thing owned is temporarily lost and needs to be found. In both cases, though, notice the aggressiveness with which the owners go after what belongs to them. Jesus, out of a heart of love, goes after His sheep that are wandering, whether first century Israelites or twenty-first century Christians.

Why are angels joyful about Christians getting right with God? The answer is marvelous. One day Satan and his host of angels will be deposed by Christ,

and Jesus will rule in His kingdom, along with those saints who have lived uprightly. The same heavenlies, including earth, that are today ruled by Satan and his minions will one day be ruled by faithful saints, with Christ as the ultimate ruler. God's holy angels are eager to see Satan deposed and righteousness ruling in heaven and earth. Unrepentant saints are counterproductive to that goal, because they are not becoming qualified to rule and reign the heavens on behalf of Jesus Christ. When saints are not living for God, they are not preparing themselves for their ultimate purpose of glorifying God by ruling over heaven and earth. Angels are, therefore, joyful when saints get right with God and stay right with God.