

What to Do When You Feel Lost

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?

“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and seek diligently until she finds it?” (Luke 15:4, 8)

Most of us know – or think we know – the parable of the lost son, “the prodigal son” who took his inheritance and went off to a far country and wasted it on what various translations call loose, reckless or even riotous living. We take great comfort in the knowledge that the Lord, like the father of this prodigal son, is always ready to forgive us of our sins – so much so that like the young man in the story, even when we are still “a long way off” He will see us and have compassion on us, and welcome us back to His household. Indeed, we know that He will give us of His very best, and that His joy at our homecoming will be shared with all who love Him and who serve in His house.

It is a very encouraging story, and yet... we often overlook the crucial point: before the father could receive his son back into his house it was necessary for the son to acknowledge his need, recognize the evils of his life, admit to them, repent of them, and actually go back to his father. THEN, we read, “when he was still a great way off,” his father saw him and had compassion....”

In the story it is obvious that the father never stopped loving his son, and he must have felt tremendous grief over the loss – and waste – while the son was gone. But he did not pursue him or force him to come home. *Nor did he welcome him home in the disorderly period of his life.* But His love turned to compassion and support when he saw that the young man had turned around and was headed in the right direction – still a long way off, but headed in the right direction.

So it is that the Lord not only teaches about His compassion, He also teaches about His gift of free will. But most of all *He teaches us what to do when WE are lost*, namely, to acknowledge our need, recognize the evils of our lives, admit them, repent of them, and actually come back to Him – to the Lord, and specifically to the *love* of the Lord (represented by the father) which gives us the encouragement we need to honor His Word.

But now let’s remember that this is just one of a series of THREE parables that teach us what to do when we experience some loss in our spiritual lives. In fact it is the last in the series, and focusses on the external conduct of our lives, whereas the others deal first with our affections and then with our thoughts. So let’s look in more detail at this important sequence.

The first parable is about a lost sheep, or rather, about any man who having a hundred sheep loses one of them and then leaves the other ninety-nine in the wilderness while he goes to find it. “And,” we read, “when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulder, rejoicing,” calling his friends and neighbors to celebrate with him.

Note that this story features a man, while the next one features a woman. This is important, since a man in the Word represents the rational or intellectual part of the mind, the understanding that is so necessary to guide the affections of charity or good will in our lives, which would be lost without it. But the sheep in the story represent those innocent affections that are nurtured and protected by the understanding when things are right with us. And the LOST sheep represents some innocent affection that goes astray and is therefore at risk of destruction – either as the victim of some wild passion or through lack of adequate support and guidance.

An example of a lost sheep in our lives might be the innocent willingness to believe whatever people say. It's a very sweet, tender affection, but without the guidance of the understanding it can be tragically abused. Another example might be the simple affection for the stories of the Word: without any real understanding of what they mean this love is subject to the vicious attack of the first major literary, historical or scientific criticism that comes along. Yet another example might be a person's tender faith in the Lord: involving as it does the simple confidence that the Lord will provide what is best for us, without a knowledge of the laws of order and the spiritual reasons why the Lord permits bad things to happen, this faith – which is an affection for the truth – may be utterly lost in the event of some natural disaster, crime or sickness that destroys life or makes it seem unbearable. "Where is the Lord in THIS," we may say, or "How could He allow such things!" And as that feeling of confidence gets separated from the other affections in our spiritual lives it sort of fades away, like a sheep that wanders off, head down, seeing only what is right in front of it, becoming easy prey for predators of all kinds.

Which leads me to one last example – the affection we may have for another person, whether a friend a colleague, or a married partner. When this leaves us, when we don't feel that affection any more, while it's true that ALL is not lost (there are ninety-nine other sheep still in the flock – other affections for other people) we certainly experience a feeling of loss and, like the shepherd whose flock is diminished, we may feel sadly diminished because of it. Of course we could just say, "forget it," and move on, but the responsible shepherd, which in this case might be our conscience, will instead focus on that affection and "go after it" until he finds it, leaving the rest – our other loves and interests – in the wilderness until he returns. And when he has found it, he will lay it on his shoulder, rejoicing, and invite his friends and neighbors to celebrate with him.

What a packed verse! Presumably the other sheep are alright, since no smart shepherd would risk even greater loss to save just one of his flock. But the force of the passage is in the joy of recovery and the restoration of what was lost. This, the Writings tell us, is the joy of the angels in heaven when one sinner repents – or on a personal level, when we repent of one sin that causes the loss of any genuine affection. For the joy of heaven is in the affection itself, and when it is restored the joy of life is restored. And by the way, it is not necessary to be fully reconciled in a relationship with someone in order to have this affection restored. The point is that our affection must be found, our own states of innocence and tenderness must be restored so that we ourselves can be healed and whole, no matter what the other person may do. Is this easy? No! Can we do it? Yes! – with the Lord's help and guidance.

Moving on now to the second parable, as noted it is the story of a woman, which involves the affectional aspect of our lives as distinct from the rational or intellectual part. But remember, her concern was about the money she had, specifically the coin, or drachma, that she had lost, and

this represents the wealth of truth or the acknowledgment of truth that is ours to have or to lose. Therefore the woman is said specifically to represent *the affection for truth* (AE 675:10). What, then, is the Lord teaching us to do when we experience the loss of truth, or of some awareness or acknowledgment of truth?

In the parable the woman does three things: she lights a lamp, she sweeps the house, and she searches diligently until she finds it. Then she also calls her friends and neighbors saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin – the drachma – that I lost!”

So again let’s go to examples: you’ve always known that it’s wrong to tell a lie or take the Lord’s name in vain. Those are truths that you have grown up with along with others about murder, false witness, adultery and so on. You’ve also known that you should love others and do good to them as the Lord loves you and does good to you. *But now you’re not so sure.* It’s really difficult to be completely honest in business and in personal relationships; a certain amount of exaggeration – or withholding – is expected! You work with people all day long who take the Lord’s name in vain, and they don’t seem to be bad people, really. You can save a lot of money, which could be very “useful,” by cutting corners here and there, or not reporting things exactly as they are. (You need it more than “they” do, anyway, right?) Yesterday you found yourself saying hurtful things about somebody who annoyed you, and this morning, already this morning you have had some doubts about the importance of the third commandment. So it goes.

But the purpose of the parable is not to make us feel bad! It is to help us feel better. So if in our affection for the truth we have indeed acquired some knowledge of it, but now feel ourselves losing it, not caring, not remembering, not really acknowledging it in our lives, we are perhaps like that woman who lost one of her ten coins. And just as the Lord described what she would do to find them so He teaches us what we must do to regain our faith.

First, He says, light a lamp. It may be that we don’t really understand the truths that we have known, or it may be that we just don’t know how they apply in certain situations. There is a sense of confusion and loss, in effect a spiritual darkness. But the lamp of which the Lord speaks is the general doctrine or teaching that is drawn from the Word – from the study and comparison of many passages and stories in the Word – that can then shine light on individual passages and on the events of life, giving them clear meaning in their spiritual context. It is in fact the light of heaven, giving the perspective that allows us to see our way around the stumbling blocks of literal reading in the Scriptures and the merely natural, worldly life.

So how can you light a lamp? Simple! Read the doctrines and let the light of revelation shine on your life! Find out what is right and wrong, true and false, wise and foolish, clean and unclean, so that you can see where you are, or in terms of the parable, where to look for the missing coin, the missing information, the truth that you need to feel fulfilled. Just remember, the lamp doesn’t do any good gathering dust on the shelf. You light it when you take it down and touch the flame of your affection to it, then it springs to life, “giving light to all who are in the house.”

Next, having lit the lamp, sweep the house. What metaphor could be plainer than this? You know, the reason we don’t see the truth, or in this case, don’t acknowledge a particular truth, often has as much to do with the way we’re living as anything else. We all know, in a sense, that

regular exercise will make us feel better. And yet in another sense we don't really know this at all if we don't have a program of regular exercise. Again, many people say that they know a program of regular reading in the Word and the Writings will improve their lives, and yet they don't do it, so they don't really have any idea how this might affect them. Similar things could be said about all sorts of spiritual habits – like positive rather than negative thinking, praise rather than criticism, control of passion rather than the passion to control, and so on. It would not be hard to go through the ten commandments, one by one, as if they were the very coins in the parable, and see which one is missing in our lives, bearing in mind that the conscious disobedience of any one commandment in effect constitutes a disregard for them all. What then?

Sweep the house. Clean up your act! Your spiritual house is your mind, and you will not find the knowledge, the insight, or the wisdom it takes truly to enjoy life until you put that house in order by getting rid of the dust and dirt of old, bad habits and dead-end, worldly thoughts. In the words of John the Baptist, “REPENT, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”

Finally, “seek diligently” until you find the missing piece. Put your heart as well as your mind to the task and you'll be surprised how the Lord leads you – not necessarily where you thought you should go, but where you *need* to go in fulfilment of His promise. For as He said in another place, “Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you, for everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.”

There are, of course, many more things that could be said about these three parables, especially the parable of the prodigal son. But for now let's just remember how the three stories work together with their promise of new-found spiritual life and what we can do to obtain or restore that life for ourselves when it is lost and when we therefore feel lost. First, when we notice any positive, heavenly affection slipping away (one sheep out of our hundred), let's resolve to work on that, and get it back, doing whatever it takes to restore the integrity of our emotional life, letting the Lord as our Shepherd lead us through the valley of the shadow of death if necessary until we come out the other end, feeling whole again.

Then, when we discover we are missing some important truth, some key knowledge or concept in our spiritual lives, let's make a point of going to the Word and doctrine for instruction! The lost coin is the lost awareness or acknowledgment of truth. But if we light the lamp of doctrine and look carefully into the dark corners of our hearts and minds we can take responsibility and act. Then, sweeping the house clean, we can regain the full integrity of a wise, intelligent life.

Finally, when we realize that we have taken our Father's inheritance and wasted it on loose, reckless or even riotous living, and when we have begun to feel the consequences of that life, with the deep emptiness, longing and spiritual degradation that are in it, for goodness' sake let's come to our senses and turn our lives around! It's not that hard! Humiliating, yes; embarrassing, maybe, but not that hard. Then, having regained our lost affection, having our lost acknowledgement of truth restored, all that remains is to address the fundamental issues of *actually living well*.

And this we certainly can do with the Lord's help, for in His infinite love and wisdom He both cares for and provides for us in every aspect of spiritual loss that we may experience – from day to day and from year to year. As it says in Luke's gospel, He both receives and eats with sinners

– not to aid or facilitate their sin but to redeem and restore those who, being in some sin are lost, and who are suffering because of that loss. Indeed, we know that the Lord endures real grief and sadness about all the spiritual disappointment in our lives, and He is both ready and eager to help us the moment we turn to Him. So He teaches us what to do, and in these parables He encourages us to take the steps that will allow Him to walk with us and show us the real joys of life, such joys, in fact, that we will want to invite our friends and neighbors to celebrate with us!

Amen.

Lessons: Luke 15:1-24
Children's talk on Recovering from Loss

Psalm 27:4-14
Apocalypse Explained # 675:10

Two Prayers for this Service

1.

Lord, You know us inside and out: You know our weaknesses and our strengths, and You know exactly how to provide for us. We are the ones who don't know. We are the ones who are unclear. So help us, we pray, to pay attention to Your word, to listen well, and to do the things that You teach.

Lead us and guide us by whatever means are necessary out of our self-centeredness, and into a heartfelt focus on the needs and concerns of others, that we may be instruments in Your hands to support and comfort them on their way to heaven. So You will save us **all** from confusion and strife, and bless Your church with heavenly peace. Amen

2.

Heavenly Father, keep us, we pray, from going astray. Keep us, if possible, from losing our faith in You! Guide and direct our steps so that we maintain an orderly life that is receptive of the blessings You offer every day.

Lord, we believe! Help our unbelief. Help us to know Your Word and understand how it applies in our lives, especially when we feel anxious, uncertain or lost in terms of what we need to do. Help us to receive Your love and to be truly loving, to understand and to be understanding, to forgive as You forgive, and to walk in the paths of mercy and truth for Your sake and the glory of Your kingdom, one day at a time – forever. Amen.