

"The found sheep and coin"  
Luke 15:1-10  
9/16/07  
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Introduction

As you listen to these two parables, don't focus on what is lost. Listen instead for what it has to say about your relationship to God, and your relationships to other people. And ask yourself if your relationships are based on merit or on mercy.

Movement 1

The Pharisees and scribes murmured. "Why is Jesus hanging out with tax collectors and other sinners." It is easy for us to judge others, isn't it. We tell ourselves we are not like them, and that makes us feel better, doesn't it.

The Pharisees considered themselves right with God. After all, they kept all of the 10 commandments, didn't they? They pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps, and those tax collectors and other sinners could do the same. It is their fault that they are not right with God. It is their fault that the Pharisees and scribes judge them.

We all like top ten lists. So here goes the Pharisees' top ten list of laws:

#10) Thou shalt not covet. You know, thou shalt not want something that belongs to someone else. I am sure the Pharisees never coveted their neighbor's Lexus, house, or job promotion.

#9) Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. I think this is not just a commandment about telling falsehood. I think it is also a commandment about gossiping. About pointing out the flaws in others. I am sure the Pharisees never told other people that Rabbi Bob should not just read his sermons, or that sister Gloria and sister Suzie were just Rabbi Bob's puppets.

#8) Thou shalt not steal. This was the sin of the tax collectors. I am sure the Pharisees never cheated on their income taxes or tried to see two movies for the price of one.

#7) Thou shalt not commit adultery. I am sure the Pharisees never had fantasies.

#6) Thou shalt not kill. This is also a commandment about hating. About treating others like they are not worthy. I don't know about this. It seemed the Pharisees wanted Jesus crucified.

#5) Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother. I am sure the Pharisees always obeyed their parents when they were children, and never begrudged visiting their parents in law when they were adults.

#4) Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. I am sure the Pharisees never played golf or slept in on rainy Sabbath mornings.

#3) Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain. I am sure the Pharisees never said, "Dog gone it!"

#2) Thou shalt not make an idol. I am sure the Pharisees never created something in which they were overwhelmingly proud.

#1) And God's idea of the number 1 cause of brokenness, and how to prevent it? The first commandment is, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." The Old Testament acknowledges that we do have other things in our lives which are important. But the Pharisees seem to have forgotten the first commandment. Because the Pharisees seem to put the law before relationship with God and other people.

#### Movement 2

Christian theologians tell us that there are three uses of the law, of the 10 commandments. The first use of the law is that they are a gift from God to us. They tell us how to get the most out of our relationship with God and with each other. The second use of the law is that they point out our inability to comply with God's expectations, because we break them, especially the first commandment, every single day. Everybody, except of course, for the Pharisees. The Pharisees knew the first two uses of the law, but they thought of themselves as holier than others. Holier than thou. You see, they were very religious, but not very spiritual.

Brevard Haynes, a lung specialist I know and a former scoutmaster, took the boys on a camping trip a few years ago. He was leading worship on this campout. When it was time for the message, he gave a nonverbal one. He was an expert archer. He had previously set up a target deep in the woods 50 yards away. He took out his bow, strung it, and reached for an arrow in his quiver behind his back. He pulled back on his arrow against the bow string, and sent it sailing. Deep into the woods. Into the center of the target. He did this again, again, and again. But the 10<sup>th</sup> arrow not only did not hit the center of the target, it did not even touch the target. It went sailing into the woods behind. This non-verbal message reminds me that none of us can always hit the mark. Sometimes we are wide of our goal.

Sometimes our sheep, our coins, our children, or our neighbors wander off the mark. And the Pharisees want us to write them off. To demonize them. To distance ourselves from them. To say, for example, she has Asberger's syndrome, and that is why she cannot sit still, why she has trouble relating to other people, why she has explosive outbursts and sometimes cannot hear or remember what is said. Why she herself, the one with Asberger's syndrome, demonizes other people. But Jesus proposes an alternative response to those who wander off. An alternative response to someone with Asberger's syndrome, or someone who cannot hit the mark with their arrow. Today Jesus teaches us the third use of the law. That God's relationship with us is based on mercy and forgiveness, not on merit and failure. Mercy and forgiveness, not merit and failure.

#### Movement 3

It is a big universe in which to be lost. And we do get lost - we get mixed up and turned around. We despair, we make mistakes, we do evil to each other. We deserve the wrath of God. That is what the Pharisees who criticized Jesus maintained. But Jesus understood God more. He knew God as a Shepherd in search of the one lost sheep. He knew God as a woman searching in the dark, in the crevasses, for that valuable coin.

Jesus teaches us today a message upon what we should base our relationships. For the Pharisees, the relationships with God and with each other should be based only on merit. An objective, quantifiable measurement. A divine report card. Keeping a list and checking it twice. But Jesus models for us that it is not the 99 sheep who behave, or the 9 pieces of silver that do not wander away, but the 1 errant sheep and the 1 errant piece of silver for which we rejoice when that sheep or piece of silver returns to the fold. And Jesus tells us that the sheep and the piece of silver do not return on their own. God runs out to find them. God lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and searches carefully until God finds them. Jesus wants us to do likewise. Jesus tells us today to run out and find the ones with whom we have a broken relationship.

One of my patients a few years ago had AIDs. He was not like most of us, because of the way in which he got AIDS. He was very hard to identify with. But one of the things a mentor told me helped me deal with him. My mentor told me to always dig for gold. He told me to keep digging until I found something in him with which I could identify. To find some redeeming quality. And it worked. He told me to go digging for a redeeming quality, and I found it.

Winston Churchill, in the middle of World War II, when it looked like Nazi Germany was going to win the war, told the British people to, "never, never, never, never, never, never, never give up." Jesus tells us today, to never, never, never, never, never, never, give up on other people. And to celebrate relationships based on mercy, not on merit.

#### Conclusion

When I was a child, I used to like reading Peanuts cartoons in the Sunday paper. I remember one a few years ago. Lucy comes up to her brother Charlie Brown and does something that is very unusual for her. She says--I love you. But Charlie Brown keeps responding by saying: no you don't. And each time Lucy answers a little louder: yes I do, I really love you. But Charles Brown has been rejected so many times he keeps saying: it can't be true. So in the last square, Lucy has reached the limit of her patience and she screams out in a loud voice: Hey stupid, I love you.

I wonder if God has to do that with us sometimes. I mean, what does it take to get through. Does he have to yell out: Hey blockhead, I love you. Can't you see that God will literally turn this world upside down in his search for one human soul. Maybe you fell like God has been turning your world upside down a little bit lately. Well, that's love at work. And the supreme sign of that love is the gift of Jesus.

I think that Jesus is telling us today, that when we find someone with whom we disagree, that we should not demonize them. That we should keep take our flashlight and keep looking until we find at least one redeeming quality. That we should love that person up. Not demonize him or her. Love them up. Mercy, not merit.