

## About Sinners

In seminary one of the first things emphasized to us when we began to work with scripture was that we had to determine the lens that we used to view the text; in other words, where we ourselves were in the text before we could attempt to draw a meaning from the text. You see any time you read something, not just scripture, but pretty much anything you read, you bring into it your own viewpoint, your personal life experiences, and these things become a part of what you understand about what you are reading. I think that is why it is very important as we consider these two parables of Jesus which Luke places together here that we also take note that Luke is very careful to give us some additional details about the audience to whom Jesus is speaking—and makes sure that we know that it is a mixed audience. We already know Jesus and the disciples are on their way to Jerusalem. That and the purpose of that journey has been the focus of the last several chapters. In chapter 14 we are told large crowds are traveling with Jesus; some seeking to join the group of disciples. Jesus warns them discipleship to him involves a cost, a giving up of something. Now Luke's narrative further defines the crowd with Jesus by two statements: Luke 15:1—"Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him." Luke 15:2—"And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" We usually view these two groups as those who either seek something from Jesus or seek to discredit or destroy him. Of course, what the Pharisees and scribes are not seeing is that when Jesus ate with them, he was welcoming and eating with sinners then also. And that is the interesting thing about sinners—they are always so easy to spot in the crowd—but not so easy to see in the mirror. Because Jesus' response to the grumbling of the Pharisees and the scribes is to tell them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?" You see, this parable seems more a question directed to the audience—to the ones in the audience grumbling—than a parable about a theoretical shepherd. "Which one of you?" Jesus asks. Then Jesus continues, "When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." What Luke is describing is a presentation that Jesus' expectation is that those grumbling Pharisees and scribes would have affirmed the decision to look for the lost sheep. The parable spares us any indication of a shepherd's practical considerations about what would happen to the ninety-nine in the hilly Judean wilderness with its myriad predators which would have made them vulnerable. The odds of the shepherd finding a lost sheep would have been small; there would have been little hope of finding it alive. Against all odds to the contrary, the shepherd discovers the sheep and restores it to the flock. The second story is about a single lost coin; one of ten silver coins. In the story of the lost sheep, the sheep may have strayed. In the story of the lost coin, the woman probably misplaced it. Having lost one of her coins, she searches her house carefully until she finds it, and then like the shepherd, she calls together her friends and neighbors for a celebration. Here again, Jesus makes a comment about the joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. The reference to sinners and to repentance in both of these

parables is interesting for two reasons. While you might call the sheep a sinner for straying from the flock, a coin getting misplaced is not exactly committing a sin. In neither of these parables did either the sheep or the coin repent—yet both the shepherd and the woman called together their friends and neighbors to rejoice with them. In their joy and in their celebration, you might wonder whether they spent more than they gained in the recovery of the recovery in the lost sheep and coin. These parables about the lost are most often used to describe God’s initiative in reaching out and seeking those who turn away. And this traditional interpretation is certainly valid. For scripture tells us again and again that it is always God who reaches out long before we recognize and turn back toward the one who can redeem us. However, each time we come to scripture, because what we have been given is a living word, sometimes we see that there is more than we realized. The parable hasn’t changed since the last reading, but the question for me became, not who did the shepherd or the woman represent—but who was I in the crowd? Perhaps, the message was not about God who seeks to find and redeem the lost—the sinners, but about the sinners in the crowd. Verse 14 describes some members of the crowd as tax collectors and sinners. Tax collectors were fellow Judeans who were in the employ of the Roman government to collect the taxes that Rome imposed. They often were corrupt but were considered traitors and were despised. Who else was included in this general group of “sinners” could have been prostitutes, or any unfortunate declared “unclean” by the standards of religious purity since the description probably comes from those Pharisees and scribes in the crowd. The Pharisees and scribes were the leaders of the religious community. We often only view them as the opponents of Jesus, but they were the upholders of the moral and religious standards of the day—religious institutions and traditions. Those are the two groups introduced in the context of today’s text. So, in total the audience has three groups: disciples of Jesus, tax collectors and sinners, Pharisees and scribes. Where am I? Honestly, I find myself in each of those groups. I seek to be a disciple, but like those present then, there are times when I am not up to the task and fail to remain by his side. I am also like the writer of the letter to Timothy, aware that I am a sinner. Unlike that writer, I don’t believe I am the chief of sinners. Perhaps, I should because in that I indulge myself in finding others that I can see as sinners and thus avoid looking at my own sin. Then there is that third group, the Pharisees and scribes—those folks who represent the religious community upholding the religious traditions. Because of the opposition to Jesus which they represent in scripture, this is the hardest group to address. In the parable, this group does not recognize that they too are sinners. Like the sheep and the coin, they do not repent. Jesus’ message is that he welcomes them also. Repentance is not necessary for God to come seeking. Unfortunately, belonging to a religious institution does not mean that the institution or its leaders has always gotten it right. As John Calvin said during the Reformation, the mind of man is a maker of idols—we can make idols of anything—including our institutions. The Pharisees and scribes of Jesus’ day had for various reasons made the Law their idol instead of the God who had given it to them. Thus when the God became Man and came among them they did not recognize him. That is the thing about sin and sinners. It is always easier to see the sin and sinner in the other—it is not so easy to see the sin and sinner in the one who looks and thinks like you or who you see in the mirror. But good news from these parables is that Jesus tells us he welcomes sinners—even those who

recognize their sin easily and those who do not—and that there is joy and celebration over each one who repents. The seeking and welcome are always available to us. Thanks be to God.