

[Spirituality](#)

[Pencil Preaching](#)



by Pat Marrin

[View Author Profile](#)

patrickjmarrin@gmail.com.

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

November 4, 2020

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)



“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2).

Phil 3:3-8a; Luke 15:1-10.

The question, “What’s wrong with this picture?” has become a popular quotable in journalism columns and for picture puzzles containing multiple errors. It could also be applied to some of Jesus’ most compelling parables.

Jesus was being criticized by religious leaders for associating with tax collectors and sinners, people shunned as lawbreakers and social outcasts contaminated by their professions and lifestyles. Even more, he was eating with them, sharing from the common dish as a guest at their tables and within their intimate circles. He was rendered ritually unclean and certainly did not have God’s approval.

Jesus tells two parables to describe God’s mercy for sinners. Jesus is not just socializing; he is reaching out to people who are lost and in need of healing so they can find their way back to God. But each story also shows how extravagant God’s love is and how this compares with the limited logic of human compassion.

The parable of the shepherd who leaves 99 sheep in the wilderness to go after one lost sheep is posed as a question: “Which of you wouldn’t do this?” If the audience had actual shepherds or owners of flocks, the answer would be, “None of us.” The practical shepherd would have cut his losses and brought the rest of the flock home. What is one sheep compared to the whole flock? Yet, Jesus plunges with joy into the triumph of the shepherd returning home with the lost sheep on his shoulders and summoning his neighbors to celebrate with him.

From a human standpoint, the picture is all wrong. But in God’s eyes, there is more joy in that one lost sheep than in all the rest that did not need to be found. This was the point of the story and why Jesus was so focused on sinners instead of devoting his ministry to congratulating the good people for being good.

The same love is seen in the story of the woman sweeping out her house to find one lost coin from the 10 she owned, then having a party to reveal to all her neighbors her extravagant love for her lost coin. Such is God’s love for the one that is lost. There is more joy in heaven over this triumph of mercy than for all the coins not lost.

Jesus' critics certainly saw the point of the parables, but they also must have felt the contrast between their own smallness of heart and narrowness of mind and Jesus' joyful description of God's love for all his children, including sinners. Why were they criticizing Jesus for doing what they, as God's representatives, should also have been doing? Why were they not loving shepherds to God's people? For all their official status and knowledge of the Scriptures, why did they know so little of divine mercy?

What was wrong with this picture?

Advertisement