

After doing significant study, I am basing a good share of the information in this trilogy on Bailey's work
Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15 by Kenneth E. Bailey, Concordia Publishing, 1992

Luke 15:1-2

The community at Qumran lived in isolation from the common folk

But not the Pharisees—they lived in the village among the common people

Therefore meals were a problem as there were purity laws to follow

Purity rules and food restrictions set the Pharisees apart from the common people

Pharisees had decided that they could keep the rules and live with the people

Meaning that they had to be very careful about what they ate and with whom

On the other hand, for Jesus, table fellowship with sinners was an expression of God's love

The Pharisees blamed Jesus for this table fellowship with sinners and his acceptance of them

For Jesus this was the basis of his work on this earth

For the Pharisees, it was bad enough his table fellowship with sinners—but worse was the tax collectors

Tax collectors were not just the "ignorant" people—they were religiously defiled by the Gentiles

Tax collectors were part of the oppressive foreign regime that stole from the people

The Pharisees' hatred of the tax collector was both religious and political

For both the Pharisees and Jesus, table fellowship was key to their identity

Naturally conflict arose between them

The Pharisees grumble and Jesus tells a parable—3 parables actually, but we'll just look at the first one

Kenneth Bailey notes that Jesus does not reply in the following respectable manner...

Gentlemen, I see that you are upset over my welcome of sinners into table fellowship. This is perfectly reasonable, and I can sympathize with the way you feel. Ostracizing such types is critical for ceremonial purity. But please understand that for me such invitations are only the exception, not the rule. Furthermore, I insist on welcoming only "repentant" sinners, and they are always "cleaned up" before I let them in. I do not do this often, and it is always in private away from the eyes of other sinners so as to prevent misunderstandings. You will recall, I am sure, that the God of our tradition is a God of mercy as well as a God of judgment and we are merely trying to reflect that mercy in our dealings with these unfortunate types.

Instead Jesus parable could be summarized as...

Gentlemen, you accuse me of reclining to eat with the sinners and tax collectors! Your information is correct. This is exactly what I do. And not only do I "let them in"—I go out into the streets and shower them with affection, urging them to come in and eat with me!

But let's read it in parable form... Luke 15:4-7

Jesus addresses the Pharisees as if they are shepherds—"Which one of **you**, having a hundred sheep..."

Shepherds were an undesirable trade—considered thieves and liars

Interesting that the shepherd is a symbol of God, i.e. in Psalm 23

But by the time of Jesus in the New Testament there was a different attitude toward them

Shepherds drove their sheep on to the property of others and were not to be trusted

To address Pharisees as shepherds would be offensive to the Pharisees—Why????

First—it is a rejection of the "apartheid" society in which some people are shunned and outcast
Second—Jesus places blame for the lost sheep on the shepherd/Pharisees

The structure of language and life in the Middle East is that no one blames themselves
Not "I lost my sheep" but "the sheep went from me"
Not "I missed the train" but "the train left me"
Not "I broke the dish" but "the dish fell from my hand"
Etc.

The language in the parable is bold and deliberate—*"losing one of them..."*
The shepherd is blamed for losing the sheep

Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees...

You are the shepherds of Israel. You have lost your sheep. I pay the price to go after them and bring them back and now you come complaining to me because I have compensated for your mistakes! This is outrageous!

But neither are the sheep innocent

Sheep by nature wander off and follow the grass as they focus on eating
Without care of the shepherd, the sheep will all wander off

It is the shepherd's responsibility to keep track of them and keep them together

If the sheep is lost due to an "unavoidable accident" the shepherd is not to blame

An attack by one wolf or 2 dogs—the shepherd should be able to handle

But an attack by a lion, bear, leopard, or serpent are unavoidable accidents

If the shepherd takes the sheep to a dangerous place, it is the shepherd's fault

A shepherd would naturally give a "credible" story to others upon returning
there were no witnesses or only that of a loyal assistant

Therefore proof that shepherds can't be trusted to tell the truth

In this case, the shepherd determines to find the lost sheep

The 99 are left in the wilderness

Strange because that wouldn't happen—maybe another shepherd but nothing notes that
Maybe he took the 99 to safety first or to the care of another shepherd

The omission seems deliberate—the 99 are left in the wilderness and nothing more is said
Their fate remains a mystery

The shepherd goes in search of the lost sheep—in terrain that is rugged and difficult

When a sheep is lost—it is terrified and will sit down while shaking and bleating

When found it is so nervous that it won't stand or walk nor will it respond to the shepherd's call

Therefore the shepherd must carry it on his shoulders—sheep can weigh up to 70 pounds

The shepherd carries the sheep over rugged terrain, which is difficult

The effort of finding, rescuing and carrying the sheep is difficult, demanding strength, courage

The shepherd pays a price to carry the sheep back to the village—likely some distance away

Otherwise the sheep will die

The shepherd goes after the sheep because he loves the sheep but also pride in not losing sheep

Same with God—who will pursue us at all cost

God pursues us because God loves us and takes pride in not losing us

When the shepherd returns to the village with the sheep on his shoulder, he calls his friends to celebrate

If it was just love that motivated him, the shepherd would pet the sheep and love on it

But he calls for a celebration in honor of preserving his reputation—a community event

Rejoice with me—hear the story of how I saved the sheep—the party is in his honor

At such a festive party, there will always be food and drink
The return of the shepherd with the sheep is cause for a community celebration
But the Pharisees see it as a time for complaint
In the parable Jesus is saying that just as the shepherds celebrate in community
You should celebrate when I bring in a lost tax collector

Jesus is under attack for having welcomed and eaten with tax collectors and sinners
Instead of defending his actions, Jesus tells a story
And boldly affirms that he not only welcomes sinners but he searches the wilderness
And finding sinners and tax collectors, he brings them home at great cost
Again, Jesus is persistent in going to those who were marginalized

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. Luke 15:7

Again, by implication, Jesus is asking the Pharisees why they can't rejoice at their repentance

Who repents? Where in the story is there repentance?

Story is of a lost sheep found and restored by the shepherd
Jesus redefines repentance in the context of story
For Jesus, repentance means "acceptance of being found"
The sheep, shaking and bleating, is delighted to be found

Repentance is not something the sheep or a person does—an action or effort
There is no compensation offered, no confession, no request for forgiveness
And no resolve to never sin again
Repentance is like a sheep who does nothing but get lost
The shepherd finds the sheep and carries it home
This costly action is what defines repentance

The church has actually hearkened back to the Pharisees view of repentance
We expect that it comes with having confessed, asked forgiveness, resolve against sin
Radical picture of repentance in that it is Jesus that finds us when we are lost
At those times we are so scared and confused we can do nothing
Even our panic, fear, or stern resolve to be ok—blocks out Jesus' voice to us
Jesus persists anyway in looking for us until we are found—all of us
No matter how great our offense
Our only task is that we allow Jesus to pick us up and carry us

I am grateful that as a church we are more like Jesus than the Pharisees
All are welcome and grace both covers all and pursues us until we are all found