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In the three parables in Luke chapter 15, we see pictures of four types of backsliders – a lost sheep, a lost younger son, a lost elder son and a lost coin – and also of the Triune God.

The lost sheep is a picture of a believer who went astray accidentally or through carelessness. The shepherd is a picture of Jesus, the Son of God. The prodigal son is a picture of a believer who went away in rebellion against God and the church. The father is a picture of God the Father. He does not go seeking for such a one as in the first case. He waits until the son reaches the level of the pigs and comes back on his own. The older son is a picture of those who are lost in legalism and self-righteousness and pride.

The woman who seeks for the lost coin is a picture of a church filled with the Holy Spirit. She lit a lamp and swept the house (Luke 15:8) and searched carefully until she found it. When she lost the coin, she was a careless church which was what caused some to backslide (the coin being lost). Then she lit a lamp (she was filled with the Holy Spirit) and began to seek and she found the lost backslidden ones and brought them into the fold. There are many believers who have no burden at all for the lost and for backsliders. They are only interested in themselves. Such believers are completely out of touch with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. A prayer that I have prayed for many years is this (and I have encouraged all the elders in our churches to pray this too), “Lord, if there is anyone in this area seeking for a godly life, please bring him in touch with us, or bring us in touch with him. And if You don’t do either of these, tell us what is wrong with us, so that we can set it right, so that we can be in tune with You and find the lost.” I would encourage you to pray that prayer.

The type of fold we bring a lost sheep into is also very important. If the fold contains 99 sheep who are full of sicknesses and who are biting and tearing each other apart, then that lost sheep is better off in the wilderness than inside such a fold. So we need not only a ministry that goes after the lost sheep, but also a ministry that keeps the 99 sheep healthy and peaceful. Jesus said: “There is more joy in heaven over one sinner that repents (that’s the lost sheep) than the 99 righteous persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7). What a wonderful church (fold) this is, which has 99 righteous people who don’t need to repent of anything! How is that? It is because they are judging themselves and repenting every day. This has been my own habit for many years. As a result, I have discovered some un-Christlikeness in my life almost every day in the past few years – and repented of it and cleansed myself from it. If you are like that, you won’t have time to find fault with other people – because you will be so busy cleaning yourself. Then you can build a church of people – who need no repentance – where the lost sheep can come and be healed. And so in our churches we must preach repentance constantly. Gradually, over a period of time, we will have a church, where people have learned to judge themselves, and not judge other people.

When the shepherd lost a sheep, the loss was the shepherd’s. When the woman lost the coin, the loss was the woman’s. And in the case of the lost son, the loss was the Father’s. In all these parables, Jesus was teaching that it was God who lost something when man sinned. Our work in the church is to bring back to God what He has lost.

One thing that the lost son knew was that his father loved him. That was why he decided to come home. How did the father know that his son was returning that day? Because he was looking out of the window every day to see if his son was returning. And one day, he saw him – and he ran to welcome him. The older son, however, did not share the passion of his father’s heart. He worked hard for his father and always obeyed him (Luke 15:28-29). But he had no passion for the lost. He had no fellowship with the heart of his father. Never once did he tell his father, “Let me go and look for my younger brother and find him”.

There are two types of Christian workers and elders. One is like the father in this story, full of love and compassion. The other is like the elder brother, hard and rigid and professional. Each of us can make a choice which of the two we are going to be like. In that story, at the beginning, the elder son is inside the house and the younger son outside. But when the story ends, the younger son is inside and the elder son outside. Many who are first now will be last in God’s kingdom. Many Christians will be outside the kingdom, because they had no fellowship with the heart of the Father. Every brother and sister in the church must be a servant of the Lord and must share fellowship with the Father’s heart for those who are lost.