

Exegetical Brief: Luke 15:7

Who Are the Ninety-Nine?

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This is the lectionary's year for the Gospel according to St. Luke. Chapter Fifteen is the heart of the account -- "the gospel within the Gospel," some say. It is fitting then that this year we make two separate visits to Luke 15. Back in Lent the parable of the lost son (Lk 15:1-3, 11-32) warmed our hearts with a poignant illustration of the Father's unconditional love. On Pentecost 17 (September 26, 2004) we return to the same chapter. Twin parables about a single sheep and a single coin highlight the Lord's compelling concern for the individual sinner.

At the top of the chapter Luke gets our attention with a periphrastic imperfect (Ἦσαν... ἐγγίζοντες), telling us that the tax collectors and "sinners" were in the habit of approaching Jesus. Much to the chagrin of the Pharisees and scribes the Savior not only welcomed them; he even ate with them. Hearing persistent grumbling (διεγόγγυζον, another imperfect) from the religious leaders, Jesus told them a parable about the fellow who tends a hundred sheep. If the shepherd loses (ἀπολέσας) one of them, Jesus said, "does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep (τὸ ἀπολωλός) until he finds (εὔρη) it?" (vv 4-5) And when he finds (εὔρων) it, he puts it on his shoulders rejoicing (χαίρων), then goes home and calls together his friends and neighbors and says to them, "Rejoice with me (Συγχαίρητέ μοι), because I've found (εὔρον) my sheep, the one that was lost (τὸ ἀπολωλός)." (vv 5-6)

The exegete cannot help but notice the repetition of three words in the parable. The preacher cannot help but keep these key words in the forefront of his sermon. The Pharisees and scribes were grumbling that Jesus spent so much time in the company of sinners. Each of those sinners was lost, a sheep straying from the flock and heading for death. But "the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Lk 19:10); he came to find each one and restore it to safety. Whenever he accomplishes his mission, it gives him such joy that he wants to share it with others. In typical fashion Jesus stated the parable's tertium with a οὕτως clause: "In the same way there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent" (v 10, NIV). Very simply the Lord announced that he carefully seeks after each lost sinner until he finds him and joyfully brings him home. He rejoices over the repentant -- every single one -- and so do his friends!

But what about the rest of the shepherd's flock? Who are the ninety-nine? Johannes Ylvisaker in his commentary on the Gospels states that "Bible students have been in a quandary regarding the ninety and nine just persons which need no repentance" and that "thus far no accord has been reached" (p. 492). I suppose one solution would be to try to ignore this much-debated phrase. After all, this parable focuses on a shepherd's carefully seeking and joyfully finding the one lost sheep. Its twin parable (Lk 15:8-10) focuses on a woman's carefully seeking and joyfully finding the one lost coin and makes no mention of the nine coins she never lost in the first place.

Yet why did Jesus finish the first parable with his words about the ninety-nine? Rather than ignoring them, we could consider interpreting these words in view of the Pharisees and scribes who complained, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Was Jesus describing them as he closed out the parable of the lost sheep? Was he speaking ironically about the fact that in their own minds they were righteous and thus felt they had no need for repentance? Two arguments are presented in favor of this interpretation:

- a) The original Greek can be understood along these lines. The particle ἢ occasionally is used in a comparison that excludes what follows. Cf. BDAG:2,b,γ (p.433). So here we might translate, "In the same way there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents *rather than* over ninety-nine righteous persons who have no need for repentance."

b) δίκαιος, the adjective describing those who have no need to repent, can perhaps be taken in the ironic sense. Some will cite Jesus' words after the calling of Levi as another example of this. The Pharisees asked, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" Jesus' response: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous (δικαίους) but sinners to repentance" (Lk 5:30-32). Some understand these words as a jab at Pharisees who only *thought* they were righteous and saw no reason to heed Jesus' call to repentance.

So "who are the ninety-nine?" While the previous points are worth considering, the question's most compelling answer is driven by the plain sense of the adjective δίκαιος and by the most common use of the particle ἢ.

It seems best simply to conclude that the "ninety-nine righteous persons who have no need for repentance" are sheep who have not wandered from the flock. They have been listening to their shepherd's voice all along. These ninety-nine represent the saints who are righteous (δίκαιοι) before God by faith in his promises, who show their blessed status by following his guidance along "the paths of righteousness" (Ps 23). They are always pleasing to their heavenly Shepherd. When a wandering sheep is rescued and brought home, it stands to reason that there is more excitement over that individual than over those who did not stray in the first place. That's only natural. We would see a similar reaction on the part of the mother happy with all six of her children who nevertheless experiences intense joy over one child's unexpected recovery from serious illness. This interpretation fits the events of the parable. So the most common translation of the particle ἢ can stand in this context: "... *more than* over ninety-nine righteous persons who have no need for repentance."

Taking the word δίκαιος in the ironic sense is an interpretation loaded with problems. If the ninety-nine are those who merely *think* of themselves as righteous when in fact they are not, are they not in mortal danger? Certainly the shepherd could not leave such sheep untended in the first place. Certainly he could not invite his friends to celebrate the finding of one sheep when his entire remaining flock is terribly at risk. The joy of the parable quickly evaporates when the interpreter takes the ninety-nine sheep as lost and condemned hypocrites.

There appears to be one more reason to see these ninety-nine as the truly righteous. Go to the end of Luke 15 and examine the extension to the parable of the lost son. The older brother's complaint sounds much like the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes. He does not want to associate with his lost-and-found little brother or with the father who welcomed him home. He lists his achievements: "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders" (v.19). He bemoans that fact that there was no celebration of his faithful work. But there appears to be no hypocrisy behind his comments, nor does his father reprimand him for failure to repent of his self-righteous attitude. The father points to the good father-son relationship they have always had. "You are always with me," the father says, "and everything I have is yours" (v.31). More than anything, the father wants his older son to share in his joy that the lost has been found, just as Jesus wanted the Pharisees and scribes to share his joy over every single sinner who repents.

The malady addressed in the parable of the lost sheep is not self-righteousness or hypocrisy. It is the failure to see that each lost sinner is precious to Jesus. That failure is pretty common among us, is it not? So the preacher will use this parable as Jesus did -- first to show that Christ and Christians spare no effort as they seek out every single lost sheep. Our listeners have neighbors and family members, relatives and good friends who have strayed from the faith. What comfort that Jesus works hard in response to our prayers and through the law and gospel we proclaim to bring them back to the fold! To be sure, this shepherding is hard work. Yet it may lead to a joy even more intense than our joy over those who have remained in the faith. You see, from time to time we will join the Good Shepherd in celebrating a successful death-to-life rescue mission. Heaven's angels will rejoice over that one precious sinner who repents, and so will we.

God bless your preaching!