

The Parables of the Lost.

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CRITICISM, unfavourable to the divisions in the Bible, called Chapters, is very widely spread, and by no means of modern date. It is universally recognized, as is evidenced by our Revised Lectionary and our Revised Version, that these divisions, so far from being a help to the Bible student, are in many instances a positive hindrance, and break both narrative and argument. But scarcely ever is a complaint uttered against the *titles* to the Parables—titles which are intended to express briefly the subject of the Parables, but which often are quite misleading. Only once, for instance, does Archbishop Trench, in his standard work on the Parables, find fault with their Biblical titles, and that solitary instance is the Parable of “the Rich Glutton and Lazarus the Beggar.” The object of this paper is to show, that with regard to one particular group of Parables, at any rate, the accepted titles not only obscure the sense and teaching of each separate Parable, but also destroy the connection which He, Who spake as never man spake, was most careful to make. The Parables to which we refer are those contained in St. Luke xv. and xvi., but which really form one group, and should have been contained in one chapter, like the corresponding seven in St. Matthew xiii., illustrating the inner characteristics of the Kingdom of Heaven, as the former group illustrate rather its outer activities. Our contention is that there is one leading idea common to all these five Parables in St. Luke, and that that idea is “loss.” This, indeed, is recognized by the common title of the first—the Lost Sheep, but is quite ignored in the remaining four. The Piece of Silver conveys no leading thought at all. Likewise the Rich Glutton and Lazarus the Beggar. On the other hand, prodigality and injustice in the third and fourth are details of by no means primary importance, and are not the sins chiefly condemned in

these Parables respectively. We propose, therefore, to substitute the following titles : (1) The Lost Sheep ; (2) the Lost Silver ; (3) the Lost Son ; (4) the Lost Situation ; (5) the Lost Soul. Nor can it be justly urged against this proposal that it sacrifices for unity of idea the variety of teaching which the ordinary titles emphasize and preserve. Our Blessed Lord is not merely repeating the same truth, with the object of impressing it upon us, "lest we forget." That, indeed, would be perfectly justifiable in a teacher, but it is not the case here. He Who came to seek and to save that which was lost shows various ways in which loss may occur ; how that which is lost may be recovered ; and how, in some cases, loss is irrecoverable.

But what *is* loss ? We must clear our way before we can proceed. In one sense it may be said that nothing can be lost ;¹ nothing can vanish utterly and absolutely from the sight, reach, and knowledge of God. That which has once had an existence must be somewhere, and therefore the utmost which can be said is that "loss" is change of place. And this may help us to a right apprehension of what Christ meant when He spoke, for instance, of a lost sheep. Dirt has been defined as "matter in the wrong place" ; and so a thing may be said to be lost when it is in the wrong place, with the additional suspense that we do not know where that place is, and the additional anxiety lest that which is lost is in distress. This suspense and anxiety are intensified in proportion to the love we bear for the lost. Hence a double motive constrains us to set forth to seek and to save : we want to get rid of our own pain, and we want to rid that which was lost of its pain. To find the lost is to restore it to its original state. When God finds that which was lost, He brings it out of a position which is foreign and dangerous to itself. It was not made for that position. It pains Him Who made it, Who has done so much for it, and Who knows supremely its true value, and loves it still with a yearning, burning love. To others, perhaps, the thing lost is not worth the trouble of searching for it, but not to Him Who is the Creator and Pre-

¹ Cf. "In Memoriam," liv.

server of all mankind. It is related that a diamond merchant of Hatton Garden, London, was crossing the street with a precious diamond in his hand, when a passer-by unconsciously and accidentally jerked it out of his hand into the gutter. Marking the place with his eye, the merchant hastened to his office, and returned quickly with some clerks, armed with brooms and buckets and shovels. Very carefully they began to collect the mud into the buckets. People were astonished, and some voted him to be mad; and others asked, "Why all this trouble? It is only mud." "Yes," answered the owner of the diamond, "but it's precious mud."

In attempting to ascertain the relationship of the "Parables of the Lost" to each other, the first thing which strikes us is the principle of proportion. In the Parable of the Lost Sheep the proportion is that of ninety-nine to one; in the Parable of the Lost Silver, nine to one; and in the Parable of the Lost Son, one to one; when we come to the next, that of the Lost Situation, the steward does not lose one situation and gain another, but secures, or at least manœuvres to secure, a substitute, a make-shift dependency upon the problematic favour of others. It is one to x . But in the last, the Parable of the Lost Soul, even this compromise is excluded. There is no alternative open, even at a sacrifice. There is no second chance, in the minutest degree. There is no crisis to negotiate. The proportion is one to nothing.

Again, as this principle of proportion is seen in the "losing," so also in the "finding." The attempts at the recovery of the lost are in an ascending scale of toil and trouble. The sheep is lost and is found. The simple fact is stated. There is a suggestion of perseverance in the *πορεύεται ἔως*, but it is not dwelt upon. But to find the lost silver, the woman lights a candle and sweeps the house and searches diligently. Clearly the search was a long and laborious one, begun in the inconvenient hours of darkness, and involving shifting of furniture. In the third, the lost son returns from a far country, and that after some years—as we may infer from the fact that the father

had given up hope of ever seeing him alive. But in this case, there is no "seeking." The son works out his own "salvation with fear and trembling," although at the same time the father's love was "working in him." Now, for the first time, that which was lost contributes to its own recovery, yet cannot be said to be wholly responsible for it; for the remembrance of what his¹ father is and has, and the reflection upon what the son is and has *not*—the contrast between the two leads him to make the resolution to "arise and go." In the fourth Parable, that of the Lost Situation, the lord of the steward is at first personally unaware of the loss he has suffered; others call his attention to it. We may conclude, therefore, that the "wasting of goods" had been going on for many years, more than in the case of the prodigal son. And when the discovery is made, when the steward comes to himself, not voluntarily as in the previous parable, but by compulsion, by detection, and impending dismissal, he ponders long in discovering some means of escape. All his knowledge of business, all his knowledge of human nature he brings to bear upon his position, so that he may save himself—*i. e.*, make the best of it—*φρονίμως ἐποίησεν*. He goes to work cleverly, brainily. His recovery depends partly upon his own resourcefulness and partly upon his master's goods. But what he does, when once his course of action is decided upon, must be done "quickly," and that which is done quickly must be done secretly; for the lord would not consent to a *further* wasting of his goods. The steward's plan must be expeditious and private, all demanding the exercise of a shrewd and careful mind, but involving great anxiety lest some slip or some *διάβολος* should expose the measure which *ὁ οἰκονόμος τῆς ἀδικίας* was taking to save the situation. In the last Parable of the five, the Lost Soul, the effort at recovery is desperate, frantic; Dives is content, if only he can be relieved of the torment of the flame by a minute drop of water falling upon his tongue from the finger-tip of an ulcerous beggar. And when he is told

¹ No commentator appears to have noticed the pathetic and tender affection expressed in the *ἐαυτοῦ* (not simply *αὐτοῦ*) in v. 20.

that even this is impossible, he abandons not his efforts for alleviation, for while the "physical" δδύνη must remain, the mental would be relieved if he could be assured that his brothers would not share his doom. Hence, he pleads that Lazarus might warn them, and if not Lazarus, then τῖς ἀπὸ νεκρῶν, "anyone from the dead."

Conversely, if the *effort* at recovery is in an ascending order, the *success* of the efforts at recovery is in a descending order. In the first two Parables in the series the success is complete: the sheep is brought back to the flock, the silver replaced in the purse. In the third, the Lost Son does not aspire to be restored to the *status quo ante*, nor was it possible to regain that "portion of goods" which he had already squandered. Unworthy to be included again in the family circle, as the sheep in the flock, or coin in the purse,¹ the returned prodigal would be more than content if he were privileged to be numbered amongst the lowest grade of menials, yet still in the father's service. If he secured even an occasional engagement, it would be solely on his merits as a worker, and not on his relationship as a son. All that he asks for is that he shall be treated as a stranger within the gates, and as such take his chance of getting sufficient employment to keep him in food and clothing, so long as it was in his *father's* service. The father, indeed, showered upon him the riches of his grace, but the elder brother refused to acknowledge him as a brother. Thus the unity, peace and concord of the family were only partial, and the recovery of the position as one of that family was incomplete. In the fourth Parable the unjust steward entertains from the beginning no hope whatever that he will recover his position. "My lord taketh away from me the stewardship." There is no prospect of his being retained in the service of that lord, even in a lower office. His dismissal is absolute. What his foresight aims at, and, we may assume, ultimately obtains, is a substitute; not another situation where fair work would secure fair wages, as in the previous Parable, but

¹ Or, on the necklace. It has been suggested that the lost piece of silver belonged to the necklace which the bridegroom of the peasant class gave to his betrothed, who would be as distressed at the loss of any part of it as an affianced girl of an engagement ring.

a dependency bestowed by one dishonourable person upon another. Only one stage lower than this can be conceived, and that is where even a substitute is impossible. This stage is reached in the last Parable. Dives has not wasted another's goods—father's or master's—he has wasted his own, inasmuch as “we lose what on ourselves we spend.” He has wasted his life, and from the first instant in that other life the recovery of the lost is *per se* irretrievable. There is no passing the impassable gulf, no mitigation of the torment. And any messenger from that other world to this would be profitless to those who refuse to profit by what they already have.

Again, it is interesting to observe that in this group of Parables there is a gradual rise in the social scale. The first two are on much the same level. The shepherd with a hundred sheep, and the woman with ten pieces of silver, to whom respectively the loss of one is a matter of much concern, are poor working people. We reach a higher social circle in the third Parable—a prosperous farmer of broad acres, with many “hands,” regular and occasional, and wealthy enough to provide festivities on a large scale at short notice. Not, however, until we reach the fourth Parable do we leave the working classes and reach the aristocracy. Here we have mention of a lord, whose estates are sufficiently extensive to necessitate the employment of a steward, and whose tenants contract enormous debts. But in the final parable we move in the very highest circle of opulence. Our Lord's description of Dives' manner of living obviously applies to one who had no business worries, but who commanded unlimited wealth, which he expended upon his purple and fine linen and daily sumptuous fare.

Further, we may inquire what effect these gains and losses had upon the principal persons concerned? At one end joy, at the other woe. The heart of the shepherd and of the woman overflows with joy, and they hasten to share it with their friends and neighbours. Therefore it extends beyond the house. The rejoicing at the return of the prodigal is confined to the household, but is not universal. The elder brother churlishly refuses

to take any part in it, and the joy of the father is in consequence interrupted. He must needs withdraw from the scene of gladness for the finding of one son in order to appease the anger of another. The dismissed steward has no ground for rejoicing. Here there is nothing but cold deliberate scheming. The crisis in his affairs leaves no room or time for the indulgence of feelings, whether sad or glad. But in the last the voice of joy has utterly ceased, to be replaced by the agonized cries of a soul in torment, intensified, in the impression they leave, by the contrasted *παράκλησις* of Lazarus ; while in the background, so to speak, of the picture is the suspense as to the doom of the five brethren.

Finally, we must notice what is, perhaps, the most important feature of all in this group of Parables—viz., the gradation of responsibility. The great Shepherd of the sheep, He Who came to seek and to save that which was lost, places in the forefront the duty of the Church with regard to *Foreign Missions*. The sphere of the search is unlimited ; the shepherd knows not where he may find the lost sheep, and when found he bears it home very gently and carefully. The second Parable deals with *Home Missions*. The coin has “lapsed” from its fellows, but it is still in the house somewhere, fallen into some corner or cranny of that house, hidden by the darkness and dust therein, and sought for and found by means which the house itself provided. This Parable deals with those who have been made “members of Christ, children of God, and inheritors of the Kingdom of Heaven,” but who, through neglect of parents and others responsible for their spiritual welfare, have fallen from grace. Such “lapsed” ones are to be pitied, not blamed ; the fault lies with others, not with them. “Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which *I* had lost.” There is no true Home Mission without a Heart Mission. In these two Parables, the briefest of the five, we are presented abruptly with the mere fact of the lost condition. But in the next the process of *getting* “lost” is dwelt upon. As we have already seen, responsibility is emphasized. The younger son has come to “years of discretion,” to that age when the father gives him the “portion of goods that falleth to him”—viz., freewill, the age when a man may right-

fully claim to exercise his reason, and when he ought not to "make his judgment blind." In this third Parable, then, we *specialize* in Home Missions, and consider their more difficult problems—*e.g.*, how to deal with the Esaus and Jacobs of the Christian Church, the headstrong and the sanctimonious.

So regarded, the Parable covers a far larger ground than is usually understood. The expression ζῶν ἀσώτως means prodigality, extravagance. In that far-off country the younger son became one of the Smart Set. But there is no evidence to support the accusation of impurity made against him by his Pharisee brother. The A.V. and R.V. "riotous" gives a wrong impression. We have nothing to show that he was "rowdy." Moreover, he never succumbed to the temptation to adopt dishonourable means of getting a living. When extravagance and famine left him penniless, he got work—inconceivably offensive to a Jew, it is true, but honest work nevertheless. And he never begged, except for work, which, indeed, was *grudgingly* given him (ἐκολλήθη). His great mistake was that he supposed that "life" was to be found in the use of his endowments apart from his father. The word "οὐσία," ἄπ. λεγ. in the New Testament (as in the LXX.), demands special notice in this connection. He wasted—dissipated—his very being, all that constituted his being a son (*cf.* its later signification in the Arian controversy). His merit was that he realized and confessed this utter bankruptcy (εἰς ἑαυτὸν ἐλθὼν . . . οὐκέτι εἰμι ἄξιος κληθῆναι υἱός). Accordingly, in the following Parable, our blessed Lord teaches us that we are but stewards, and points how and why we are to use that which is entrusted to us. Here we have no foolish, pleasure-loving youth, but a shrewd and capable man of business, who, when he has come to the state reached by the prodigal, but by a different road—not thoughtlessly, but by deliberate fraud—does not confess his wrongdoing and throw himself upon the mercy of his master, but seeks by further dishonesty to save himself. This is a more difficult cast of mind for the Church to deal with than the previous one. The standpoint is that, if we use what God entrusts to us as faithful stewards, it redounds to God's glory and our advantage. Misuse

it, and both suffer loss. Courage, foresight, decision, energy, gratitude, are property common to the children of this world and the children of light. How to get them sanctified for the Master's use is the complex problem herein presented to the Church in her Home Missions. They are *natural* virtues, and therefore tainted; they are "the mammon of unrighteousness," which only loses its character when devoted to God and our neighbour. By doing our duty to them we best serve our own interests, here and hereafter. This is law—the law of Divine justice—a *quid pro quo*, a justice which rewards little with much, but still looks for that little. In the last Parable, therefore, we have that Divine justice presented to us in the hereafter, because it cannot be presented to us clearly and fully here. In this we see exhibited the great law of final retribution, which to every man of foresight must obviously prevail. Encompassed with a wall of wealth, within which he lived a life of refined selfishness,¹ Dives suffered no pains and penalties here. The state that he kept up was at his own expense and within his means. His clogged and corroded conscience did not give him a moment's uneasiness. If his heart did not move him to help Lazarus, whose needs were obvious, there was no law either of nature or of man that could compel him. Religion was outwardly observed by him; but there was only the form of godliness, without its power. Thus the series closes with the awe-inspiring revelation that those who have most refinement and culture and the highest worldly advantages *may* be farthest from eternal happiness.

And thus the circle of love is completed. "Love is the fulfilment of the law"—love for the bodies as for the souls of others. No one is too far off, no one is too insignificant, to benefit by it. We cannot withhold it without grave peril to ourselves; we cannot excuse ourselves with the plea that we have nothing to bestow. For—

"Seas have their surges, and so have shallow springs,
And love is love, in beggars as in kings."

¹ There is nothing to show that he was a "glutton," as the chapter heading in the A.V. calls him.