

**Lost But Never Forgotten: God's joyful pursuit of sinners**  
Luke 15:1-10

*"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost"*

**Introduction:** Have you ever had one of those mornings where you woke up late, were in a hurry to get off to work, and couldn't find your keys? I mean, anywhere. Frantic, you look through the normal places: pockets, drawers, and couch cushions. Then you look in the unusual places: kids rooms, under the couch, in the car. Then you look again, and again, and again in the same spots until you remember you left them in your wife's purse the night before! Relief sets in as you realize the day can now go on. Or you had your flash drive on your key ring with all of your notes and presentations, and somehow between work and home it fell off, prompting you to retrace steps 10 times, going over the path with a fine tooth comb, dreading the fact that you haven't backed up your files, preparing to redo the hours of work that you've already done, until you realize it fell between the door and seat of your car, moving you to whip, nay nay, and dab all at once in front of complete strangers. Or you are shopping at the grocery store, at the mall, or walking down main street at Disneyland and horror of horrors, you can't find your 4 year old. You just turned for a second, and then they are gone. After the initial terror, you begin to look everywhere, asking, begging anyone who might have seen where they would have gone. You look up and realize your son/daughter is simply looking in the window of a shop, or lingered in the toy aisle. A mixture of relief and happiness floods in as you realize they are not gone, no longer lost, and safe and sound (as you tie them to the stroller).

In each of these examples, the expression of joy when finding something of value was immediate and effusive, responding to the securing of what had been lost. These are similar to the response of God when He displays His redemptive nature in saving sinners. We often (and rightly) focus on God's love, His grace and mercy, even His justice and wrath when we dwell on His attributes in worship, but we often miss the fact that He is a **joyful God**, whose overflow of joy is the foundation for our own.

**Strength and joy** are in His place (1 Chron. 16:27), in His presence is fullness of joy (Psalm 16:11), and He rejoices in doing good to His people, with all His heart and all His soul (Jeremiah 32:40-41). He rejoiced when He brought His people out of Egypt (Psalm 105:43), and His joy is our strength (Neh. 8:10). Because of this, He places **His joy in us that our joy may be full** (John 15:11), His **joy** fulfills (John 17:13), and it was for joy that Christ endured the cross and despised the shame of it (Hebrews. 12:2).

*Why does this matter?* God offers salvation from sin, but He also offers joy in the midst of pain, sorrow, and trial. The entry gate for both salvation and joy are the same: *by faith in Jesus Christ alone, who not only makes us acceptable to God, but fills us full with the joy of the Lord, so that we no longer live in hopelessness and despondency because we no longer trust ourselves for ultimate answers or satisfaction.* And it is this same God that takes pleasure in and finds joy when a lost sinner repents. Saving sinners is not a secondary action or tertiary agenda item for God. It is a means of rejoicing with angels, a party in heaven, and a God who savors His saving grace. This morning we want to know and understand this God, what He rejoices in, so that we can rejoice in the same thing, and understand the nature of our own heart that disallows us from rejoicing with Him.

As we jump back into Luke, we pick up in the middle of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem which started in Luke 9:51 and will culminate in His entrance into the city in 19:28. During this journey, He taught many parables, but these **3 in Luke 15** form the high point of His teaching, falling in the middle of the 10 chapters. We will cover two this morning (lost sheep and lost coin), and then the lost son, popularly known as the prodigal son. Each express God's heart in salvation, and reveal the depravity of our own.

**The Heart of Self-Righteousness Revealed** (and confronted)

**Luke 15:1-2** Now the **tax collectors** and **sinners** were all drawing near to hear him.<sup>2</sup> And the **Pharisees** and the scribes **grumbled**, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

**A self righteous heart murmur** (Pharisee's view toward others)

The parable opens with a crowd drawing in around Jesus, and a layer who were observing what was going on. The ones who were moving in closer and closer were identified as **tax collectors** specifically and **sinners** generally. We have met these groups before in Luke. These were the marginalized in Jewish culture, those recognized as outsiders. Since the Pharisees and scribes not only controlled the synagogues and worship, they also dictated social standings among the people. These were **supposed to be** tasked with lovingly leading, caring for, and guiding this very group. Yet as this group of losers drew further up and further in to Jesus, instead of welcoming them, they began to **murmur, to grumble, and complain under their breath**, the kind that is on the snide side; loud enough to be heard, but not loud enough to be discussed. "The audacity of this Rabbi! He not only lets sinners into his company, He has the gall to EAT with them!

*Why were these leaders of the people, those commissioned to spiritually guide the people, so miffed at Jesus dining habit?*

**William Barclay** explains part of the reason this way:

"The Pharisee's gave to people who did not keep the law a general classification. They called them *the People of the Land*; and there was a complete barrier between the Pharisees and the People of the Land. The Pharisaic regulations laid it down, 'When a man is one of the PoL, entrust no money to him, take no testimony from him, trust him with no secret, do not appoint him guardian of an orphan, do not make him the custodian of charitable funds, do not accompany him on a journey.' A Pharisee was forbidden to be the guest of any such person or to have him as his guest. He was even forbidden, so far as it was possible, to have any business dealings with him. It was the deliberate Pharisaic aim to avoid every contact with the people who did not observe the petty details of the law...the strict Jews said, not 'There will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents,' but 'There will be joy in heaven over one sinner who is obliterated before God.'"<sup>1</sup>

These leaders were upside down, desiring to be righteous before God and seeing those non-conforming to their standards as lost causes, godless, and defiling to them. They ran away from those who needed them most. *But how could this happen? How could people committed to the Scriptures miss the importance of loving and reaching people?* The answer is found in Luke, something we have seen before and something Jesus says in the parable: *self righteousness*.

**A self-righteous self examination** (Pharisee's view toward themselves)

**Luke 15:7** 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 5:29-32** And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them.<sup>30</sup> And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"<sup>31</sup> And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."<sup>32</sup> **I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.**"

<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 236-37

<sup>2</sup> Kent Hughes, *Luke*, vol. 2, p. 137.

Jesus consistently called out the heart and façade behind the thinly veiled motivations of the Pharisees. When the Pharisees looked at themselves they saw health, wisdom, and truth. They created a system that they could control, mandate, and assess, and they always came out on top, with everyone else scrambling to try to keep up. Remember, **self-righteousness always thinks the best of oneself**, gazing through a lens of comparison and drawing a bulls-eye wherever one lands. Because it compares and always places self on top, it is easy to **become condescending**, looking down on others, making different compartments for sin (some being ‘worse’ than others), and convincing oneself that you are **inherently better** than someone else. Self-righteousness is attained by **works**, so not only does it believe its better, but believed they work harder than anyone else, further distancing them from others. In this parable, Jesus responded to this complaint with a story of a shepherd, which is EXACTLY what they should have been. In fact, it harkens back to **Ezekiel 34**, where God indicts the pre-exilic leadership of Israel that led to the downfall of the nation. Listen to how God dealt with this in OT prophecy:

**Ezekiel 34:1-5** The word of the LORD came to me: <sup>2</sup> "Son of man, **prophecy against the shepherds of Israel**; prophesy, and say to them, even to the **shepherds**, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, **shepherds** of Israel who have been **feeding yourselves!** Should not **shepherds** feed the sheep? <sup>3</sup> You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you **do not feed the sheep.** <sup>4</sup> The **weak** you have not strengthened, the **sick** you have not healed, the **injured** you have not bound up, **the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.** <sup>5</sup> So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts.

The current leadership emulated their forefathers. They were so wrapped up in themselves, in their own work and wellbeing that they totally and utterly failed, causing the “sheep to be scattered”. However, in the midst of this downfall, God Himself promised to step in:

**Ezekiel 34:11-12** "For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, **I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out.** <sup>12</sup> As a **shepherd seeks out his flock** when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, **and I will rescue them** from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

God promised to intervene, to shepherd His flock, to accomplish what human instruments could not do. Notice that He promised to be a shepherd, and with that came the ability and desire to seek after the wandering flock, to gather in those who were scattered, and to rescue those who had been lost. He would accomplish this through a specific means, a particular Shepherd, a personal Savior:

**Ezekiel 34:20** "Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: Behold, **I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep.** <sup>21</sup> Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, <sup>22</sup> **I will rescue my flock;** they shall no longer be a prey. **And I will judge between sheep and sheep.** <sup>23</sup> **And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them:** he shall feed them and be their shepherd. <sup>24</sup> And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken.

There are several important components to this promise. **1)** There would be a judgment between sheep, meaning not all the sheep will be saved (see Matthew 25:31-46 for similar language that Jesus used). This meant that not all who were part of Israel would be saved. **2)** There would be a future Shepherd given, who was David, or the Son of David, Jesus who would be the Good Shepherd to His sheep, both those in the fold (Jews) and those not of the fold (Gentiles) – John 10:16). **3)** That God’s desire through Christ is to seek and save those who were lost, helpless, and needy. This leads to the

main point that Jesus made in the parable, describing to the crowd and indicting the Pharisees that any self-righteous exclusion of sinners misses the heart of God.

### The Heart Behind God's Joy Displayed

**Luke 15:3-4** So he told them this parable: <sup>4</sup> "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?"

**Luke 15:8** "Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it?"

### Lost sinners have high value to God

Each of the three stories aims at the same theme and teaching, but bring different nuances. **The first** was a story of a shepherd who was tending 100 sheep. No major details are given, and many have been offered as background. This was either a moderately wealthy man who had capacity to have a large flock, or this was a hired man tending to a number of combined flocks. It is not clear if this man was working alone or in tandem (who did he leave the 99 with?). What is clear is the **heart of the shepherd**. This might have been a write-off for the shepherd, where losing 1% of your overall product does not dent your bottom line, but not so with this shepherd. He left his flock to seek, go after, and search for the lost sheep. It is clear that a sheep left on its own, in the elements, among wild animals, lost, and exposed is still a stupid animal, and death would have been imminent. The shepherd searched, and when he found the helpless one, hoisted it over his shoulder (sometimes up to 100 pounds), and rather than being frustrated, ticked, or put out by the foolish lamb running away, instead **rejoiced all the way home**.

In the second story that follows the same format, a woman lost 1 of 10 silver coins. This coin was most likely either a *drachma* (a Roman denarius), which represented a day's wage for the average worker, or possibly part of this woman's dowry, given to her as a wedding gift by her father and providing security for her future. We are not given any details as to **how** she lost it, but like any item this small and precious, she lit the lamp inside the dark house and scoured every corner, nook and cranny until she found it.

- **Both the sheep and the coin had high value to the owner** - Some could say one sheep was insignificant, or she could find a 9 coin husband, but neither a smelly, dumb sheep nor an inadament object like a coin were missed. **God values those that the world does not**. The seemingly insignificant, too far gone, or those who have nothing to offer are the ones God delights in saving (see 1 Cor. 1:20-31 for a list).
- **Each owner gladly sought until the valuable object was found** - Not only did each owner look without complaint, they searched *relentlessly* until they found what was theirs. This is the pursuit of God through Jesus of us. Believers who were once lost are precious gifts given by God to the Son, and He has moved heaven and earth to bring us to Himself, and He **WILL NOT LET US GO**, because He laid down His life for the life of His sheep (John 10:11, 14, 17-18, 28-30). This is the heart of God, who gave us Jesus who came to seek and save that which was lost, deceived, wandered, and miserable (Luke 19:10). It is His heart to save that causes His reaction of rejoicing.

### When lost are found, rejoicing erupts

**Luke 15:5** And when he **has found it**, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. <sup>6</sup> And when he comes home, he calls together his **friends and his neighbors**, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my

sheep that was lost.' <sup>7</sup> 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 15:9** And when **she has found it**, she calls together her **friends and neighbors**, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' <sup>10</sup> Just so, I tell you, there is **joy before the angels of God** over one sinner who **repents**."

In the first story, the shepherd finds the lost, frightened, and ignorant sheep and slings him over his shoulder. First, he rejoices Himself. The one that He cares for, the one that he loves is found, and more than a sense of relief, joy erupts from his emotions. But he does not simply stay in the moment, he bypasses the rest of the flock in the field and brings the lamb home to **rejoice with friends and neighbors**. This was a direct picture of what goes on **in heaven** when a sinner repents. This is not only over the salvation of an undeserving sinner, but praise of the amazing grace of God, poured out lavishly on sinful man through the death of the Good Shepherd.

The second story is similar in progression. As the woman finds her lost coin, she too gathers here neighbors and friends to rejoice with her over the finding of what was lost. The different nuance of this story is the fact that the angels join the chorus. Angels have longed to look and see the good news of salvation come into fruition (1 Pet. 1:12), and when its experienced, they erupt in praise. St Bernard of Clairvaux said of this passage, "**The tears of the repentant form the wine of angels**"<sup>2</sup>  
*What do we take away from this?*

- **Joy in salvation is that we are known individually** - Notice that the rejoicing was not over salvation in general, or over the whole of the Church of nation, but was over an individual who was lost. Just like we would rejoice greatly if **our child** was found, God loves, chose, and calls us individually to Himself. He went to the cross to satisfy God's wrath, but Jesus went to the cross with His own in mind (Eph. 5:25). You are not just a face in the crowd. You and I were loved individually and intimately by a Savior willing to die for us. When any individual turns to Christ, heaven, the angels, our Savior and God rejoice at the sight, a celebration that will go on into eternity.
- **Repentance is the means by which God brings home the lost** - Notice in both stories that both the sheep and the coin represent a sinner, and when they repent, they are found. Repentance is a gift of God, a gift of faith that comes from His costly grace, that allows ones eyes to be open and condition to be realized. God's pursuit of a sinner and His gift of grace are the means of salvation and the foundation for joy. When God grants repentance, one realizes their lost condition, understands that God loves them, and is willing to be carried by the Shepherd, knowing they can only go home on the Shepherds shoulders. This is why we rejoice not at decisions for Christ, but when He grants repentance, a turning from sin to serve a Savior and wait for His return (1 Thess. 1:10). God rejoices at granting repentance because He gets the glory, and refuses to rejoice over the 99 because they are self-righteous, not recognizing their desperate need for God's work alone for salvation. We rejoice at the same thing.

### **Our Heart Challenged**

This leaves us with the take-away from this story. On one side we see the Pharisees who were so wrapped up in their own goodness, their pseudo righteousness, and their own work that they could only condescend toward others, seeing repentant sinners as not measuring up, which meant they not only

<sup>2</sup> Kent Hughes, Luke, vol. 2, p. 137.

missed out on joy, they were shut out of the Kingdom. On the other side we see what brings God joy, that He is a relentless Savior God who redeems that which was lost and in bondage, bringing back those individuals whom He loved who make up His Kingdom. *So what are we to walk away with? What do we need to evaluate and learn?*

- **The Grace Test** - This is the "anti-self-righteousness" test. When we encounter those who are deceived, lost, and sinful, how do we view them? It is easy to see people outside as "those who don't get it", when we view ourselves as those who do. We can operate in fear toward those God has called and will save. This is especially true when others have chosen to live differently, disagree, or think they are ok with God when they are bound by their sin. So here is the test: *do we view ourselves as products of grace alone, knowing we too were once lost, and but by His grace we would be equal or worse than anyone that is lost today?* That does not mean we lessen the standards of the gospel or neglect repentance as the key entry gate, but has everything to do with how we approach and love others.
- **The Joy Test** - What brings you joy? What do you live for? So much of what brings us happiness or what we look forward to are **products of our own work, things we have set out to accomplish on our own**. When these come into fruition we rejoice and give credit to God, but is that ultimate? When we understand what brings God joy we begin to set that as our standard as well. When a sinner repents it is something **miraculous**, an act that only God can make happen, one of those things that is bigger than any of us. We all want to be a part of something greater than ourselves, willing to die for something eternal. We celebrate then, in the ways God does. We rejoice when a sinner repents at the point of salvation, and when a believer repents from their sin. *What brings you real joy? Do you rejoice with the angels?* This is why we sing, *"Come thou fount of every blessing, tune by heart to sing thy grace."* We need God to tune our heart when it clangs in the dissonance of self-righteousness.
- **The Mess Test** - The point of the story is that God saves sinners. *"If God is in the business of saving sinners, we need to expect that church will be full of sinners ----those who are still wandering and those who have only just been found. If our churches reflect God's heart for the lost, they will be full of people with problems, full of people showing the consequences of a lifetime of wandering. And this means that may not be a safe and easy place. It may not be a place full of people who have it all together. It may be messy. It should be messy. Thank God if it is messy."*<sup>3</sup> Is this our hope? Is this our goal? Is this what we long for?

#### Questions to Discuss:

1. How do we avoid self-righteousness in the pursuit of holiness, knowing that self-righteousness is by nature blinding and self-justifying?
2. How do we cultivate the heart of God toward the lost?
3. What types of sinners are hard for us to love and not look down on?
4. Why do we tend to rejoice in things besides repenting sinners?

<sup>3</sup> Tim Challies, "Is your church messy enough?", September 15, 2016, [challies.com](http://challies.com)