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GOD'S LOST AND FOUND

Luke 15:1-10

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August 8, 1999

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Luke Lesson 71

God's Lost and Found Luke 15:1-10

Once upon a time there were two families who lived next door to each other. The families were quite different. The first family were Christians. They took good care of their house and lawn. They never used tobacco, alcohol, or drugs. They never cursed or fought loudly with one another. The kids were never in trouble with the law. And they all went to church every Sunday.

The second family had nothing to do with God. Their house and lawn were a mess. They smoked and drank to excess and used marijuana to "mellow out." They cursed and fought loudly with one another. The kids were always getting in trouble with the law. They never went to church.

One day the teenage daughter from the first family told her father, "You know, Dad, I think there's trouble next door. Their kids told some of my friends at school that their dad and mom are going to get a divorce."

"All right!" Dad shouted excitedly, as his favorite team on the game he was watching threw a touchdown pass. After the extra point was kicked he mumbled, "Divorce, huh? Too bad!"

The daughter went into the kitchen where her mother was preparing dinner and repeated the news. Her mother nodded her head knowingly. "That's what they get for not going to church and for living like they do. Let that be a lesson to you, in case you ever get the notion you don't want to go to church! I sure hope we get some decent neighbors in there after they're gone!"

And, behold, the second family split up and moved away. And the new neighbors were decent people who kept up the house and yard, never smoked or drank or used drugs. They never cursed or fought loudly. Their kids were honor students. The new family even went to church occasionally. And the first family lived happily ever after, never bothered by their neighbors again.

It's just a story, of course. I hope that none of you identify yourselves with that first family because even though they are

Christians, they are not much like the Lord Jesus Christ. This family avoided their lost neighbors and rejoiced when they finally moved away. But Jesus socialized with lost sinners and rejoiced when they came to repentance.

Luke 14 ends with Jesus saying, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Luke 15 begins with the notice that all the tax-gatherers and sinners were coming near Him *to listen* to Him. They had ears to hear what the Savior was teaching. But the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." What a great word of hope that is for sinners! If the thought of standing before the holy God who knows everything you have ever thought, said, or done frightens you, because you know that your sin is great, don't run! Rather, do what these sinners in Jesus' day did: Draw near to Him and listen to Him. He will receive you.

Jesus owns up to the Pharisees' charge and defends Himself by telling three parables that all make the same point, although with different emphases:

God goes to great effort to seek lost sinners and
He greatly rejoices when they come to repentance.

If that is what our God is like, then that is what we, as His people, should be like. Today we will look at the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. Next week we will study the parable of the lost (or prodigal) son.

1. Sinners are lost until God finds them.

The biblical description of those who do not know Jesus Christ is not "unsaved," but *lost*. It's an empty, hopeless word when used in reference to things or to animals, but it's an especially bleak word when it is used in reference to people. We once lost Christa at Disneyland when she was about seven years old. We felt a wave of horror sweep over us, followed by about ten minutes of frantic searching that seemed much longer. When we finally found her, we were so thankful and relieved. We didn't even mind losing our place in line for the Dumbo ride! When a close family member is lost, you cannot be at rest until he or she is found.

Whether the person knows it or not, the Bible describes every person who does not know Jesus Christ as being lost. In what is perhaps the saddest verse in the Bible, Paul describes the former

condition of his Gentile readers: "You were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12).

Jesus first tells the parable of the lost sheep. A lost sheep in the Judean wilderness was doomed. It had no protection and it would be only a short time before the coyotes or other predators would attack and kill it. A lost dog might eventually find its way home, but a lost sheep is unable to do so. As such, it is a picture of a lost sinner. The sinner may not even know that he is lost and headed for destruction, but that is the truth. Even if he becomes aware of his condition, there is nothing he can do about it. Jesus said that no one can come to Him unless the Father draws him (John 6:44, 65). Paul says that "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:4). Unbelievers are lost and helpless, prey for the enemy unless God intervenes. But, thank God, He has intervened! Jesus shows us that ...

2. God goes to great effort to seek lost sinners.

The shepherd leaves his 99 other sheep and goes after the lost one, searching until He finds it. The woman who lost her coin sets aside all her other work and diligently searches until she finds it. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, who described His mission as "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). Note four things:

A. God takes the initiative in seeking sinners.

Both the shepherd and the woman realized the problem and took the initiative to deal with it. They both began searching for the lost item. The lost sheep and the lost coin were passive in the process. The only reason they were found is that the shepherd and the woman initiated a diligent search for them.

Scripture is clear that if we are saved, it is because the Lord took the initiative; we did not. That initiative springs out of His great love and compassion. As the apostle Paul states, "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world." "In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will" (Eph. 1:4, 5). "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet

sinner, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). If salvation had been left up to us, we would still be in our sins. But, thank God, He lovingly took the initiative. He launched the search. He sent Christ to die for our sins while we were wandering from the fold.

B. God undertakes the personal cost of the search.

In the case of the shepherd, he had to take whatever time it took to search for his lost sheep. He had to expose himself to the dangers of the wilderness and the weather. The same lions or wolves that were stalking his sheep might stalk him as well. He had to go without sleep because the longer the sheep remained lost, the greater the risk of its being destroyed. I remember a picture my grandmother used to have on her wall of Jesus as the shepherd, reaching over a precipice and rescuing a lamb caught in a bush, ready to fall to its death. It showed the effort and danger that the shepherd went to in order to rescue his lost sheep.

In the case of the woman and her coin, everything was set aside until she found that coin. Her shopping would have to wait. Her meal preparation was postponed. She didn't go to the well to draw water and chat with her neighbors. She didn't go to the stream to wash her laundry. Her one consuming focus was on looking for that lost coin, no matter how much effort it took.

I can identify with this woman. Whenever I lose something, even if it's not of great value, it drives me crazy until I find it. Sometimes in the office, I misplace an illustration or article that I need for reference in a sermon. Sometimes I have spent hours trying to track it down, even after I've decided not to use it! I can't do other things when something is lost! But the point is, the shepherd and the woman did whatever it took, however costly, to find the missing sheep or coin.

But in the case of our salvation, the cost was much greater: God did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all (Rom. 8:32). Jesus did not selfishly cling to the glory and beauty and comfort of heaven, but He laid aside His rights and came to this earth, not as the mighty King to judge sinners, but as the lowly servant to give His life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). He willingly endured the abuse of arrogant men whom He could have

zapped off the face of the earth in order to secure the salvation of His sheep.

C. God pursues lost sinners until He finds them.

The shepherd relentlessly searched until at last he found his sheep. The woman did not give up until she found that missing coin. In the same way, the Good Shepherd goes after every sheep whom His Father has given to Him, that none will be lost (John 17:2, 6, 9), but that all will be brought safely into His fold. As in the poem, "The Hound of Heaven," He keeps after the straying sinner until He rescues him and brings him home.

If you are saved, you know that it is not because you sought after God, but because God sought after you and kept seeking until He rescued you from your sin. The late Bible teacher, Harry Ironside, told of a new convert who gave his testimony at a church service. With a smile on his face and joy in his heart, the man related how he had been delivered from a life of sin. He gave the Lord all the glory, saying nothing about anything that he had done.

The person in charge of the meeting was a legalistic man who did not understand the fact that salvation is totally by God's grace, apart from human merit or works. So he responded to the young man's comments by saying, "You seem to indicate that God did everything when He saved you. Didn't you do your part before God did His?" The new Christian jumped to his feet and said, "Oh, yes, I did. For more than 30 years I ran away from God as fast as my sins could carry me. That was *my part*. But God took out after me and ran me down. That was *His part*." Ironside commented, "It was well put and tells a story that every redeemed sinner understands." (In "Our Daily Bread.")

D. When God finds lost sinners, He keeps them safely.

When the shepherd found the lost sheep, he didn't get out his whip and drive it back to the fold. He put it securely on his shoulders and carried it home. I am not especially fond of artist's pictures of Jesus, but I do like the one that shows the smiling shepherd with a lamb on his shoulders. He's holding it by its legs, so that it will not get lost again. As Jesus said concerning His sheep, "I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:28).

Spurgeon pokes fun at the view that those whom the Savior has rescued can ever be lost again. He says that those who hold this view need to go up to heaven and set the angels straight on this matter. They need to tell them not to rejoice until the sinner dies and goes to heaven, because they may be rejoicing too soon. What if he repents but later falls away and is lost? The angels shouldn't be so fast on their joy! (Charles Spurgeon, *Twelve Sermons on the Prodigal Son* [Baker], pp. 46-47.)

No, the glad fact is, you are not secure in your salvation because of your grip on the Good Shepherd, but rather because of His grip on you. He chose you as His own before time began. He sent His Son to secure your redemption by His blood. He sent the Holy Spirit to pursue you with the good news that Christ died for your sins. He sought after you until He found you and rescued you from your hopeless condition. Do you think that now He will let you go back into your sins and be lost again? Impossible! If the Good Shepherd has saved you, He will keep you from falling.

Before I move on to the final point, I want to apply this point, that God goes to great effort to seek lost sinners. *If He so seeks lost sinners, should not we?* If our Lord came from heaven to seek and to save the lost, shouldn't we be praying often, "Lord, use me to be Your instrument in seeking lost people with Your good news"? Rather than avoiding sinners, we should be pursuing them, not to run with them in their sins, but to rescue them from this evil world. Ask God to burden your heart with the lost and to give you opportunities to pursue them with the gospel.

Thus we've seen that sinners are lost until God finds them and that He goes to great effort to seek and save them.

3. God rejoices greatly when lost sinners come to repentance.

There is a marked contrast in this text between the *grumbling* of the Pharisees and scribes and the *great joy* in heaven and on earth when the lost are found. Note verse 5, "rejoicing"; verse 6, "rejoice"; verse 7, "joy"; verse 9, "rejoice"; verse 10, "joy." Heaven is already filled with joy, but when a sinner gets saved, they throw a party, just as the father of the prodigal son did! As he tells his older son, "We *had* to be merry and rejoice, for this brother of

yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found" (15:32). Note two things:

- A. God's joy is over sinners who repent, not over the righteous who need no repentance.

There are different views on what Jesus means in verse 7, but two are most likely. Spurgeon takes the 99 righteous persons who need no repentance to refer to those who have already been justified by grace through faith (*Twelve Sermons*, p. 27; Charles Simeon takes the same view, *Expository Outlines of the Whole Bible* [Zondervan], 12:537). Thus they are not at present in need of repentance. He uses the illustration of a family with seven children, where one is deathly ill, but then recovers. The family rejoices more over the recovery of that one child than over the health of the other six.

I prefer, however, another view. In the three parables, the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son all represent the lost tax gatherers and sinners who were coming to hear Jesus and getting saved. The 99 sheep, the nine coins that were not lost, and the older brother who never strayed all represent the Pharisees and scribes. They are not in the fold or household of faith, but in the household of Israel, made up both of those who are saved and those who are not. It is not that they did not need repentance for themselves, but rather that they *thought* that they were good enough not to need repentance. Thus Jesus was using irony to show them their self-righteous pride, especially in the case of the older brother who could not bring himself to rejoice at his brother's repentance. He is a mirror of the Pharisees!

We saw the same thing back in Luke 5:32, when the Pharisees grumbled because Jesus and His disciples ate with the sinners at Levi's house. Jesus replied, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." The Lord hates pride, and so the Pharisees were just as sinful as the more outwardly notorious sinners whom they despised. But they were blind toward their own hypocrisy and pride. Jesus also confronts them in 16:15, when He says, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts." Jesus hits the same thing in 18:9, with the parable of the Pharisee and the publican going to the temple to pray. He told it because the Pharisees "trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt." Thus the

“righteous” are the self-righteous who need to repent just as much as the tax gatherers and sinners, but who are blind to their need.

Repentance means turning to God from our sins. Such repentance is God’s gift, not a work of man (Acts 11:18), and is inextricably bound up with saving faith. You cannot have one without the other. When a person savingly believes in Christ, he turns from his sins and trusts in God’s mercy. A person who says, “I believe in Jesus,” but who does not repent of his sins, has not truly believed in Jesus unto salvation.

When a sinner turns from his sins to God, all heaven rejoices because God gets the glory. When a self-righteous person continues in his self-righteousness, he gets the glory and God is not pleased.

B. God’s joy is shared by the angels in heaven.

Peter tells us that the angels long to look into the matters of our salvation (1 Pet. 1:12). The angels revel in the glory of God and God is glorified in His sovereign grace, secured by the death of Christ and revealed to undeserving sinners by the Holy Spirit. The angels also rejoice because they know the terrors of hell that would overtake lost sinners, were it not for God’s redeeming grace. They know the joys of God’s glorious presence in heaven, where those rescued by the Good Shepherd will spend eternity. Not one whom the Father has chosen and given to the Son will be lost, or else Satan and his evil forces would rejoice and the angels in heaven would mourn. But the angels rejoice when a sinner repents because that sinner will now spend eternity glorifying God and His grace in heaven.

Again, let me briefly apply this. *If God so rejoices when sinners repent, should not we?* The things that make us happy reflect our values or what we consider important. Do we rejoice when our stocks go up and we make a huge profit? Do we rejoice when we get a new car? But when we hear of a sinner getting saved, we say, “That’s nice.” God greatly rejoices when a sinner repents; so should we.

Conclusion

These parables show God’s concern and compassion for sinners, but not for sinners en masse, but for individual sinners. The shepherd goes after one sheep. The woman hunts diligently for a

single coin. The Good Shepherd knows His sheep by name (John 10:3). He calls them individually to come to Himself. He cares about every lost sinner who needs repentance. He cares for you.

On a cold night in England many years ago, a group of children slipped into a church to get warm. The preacher was speaking on Luke 15:2, which in the King James Version reads, "This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them."

Afterwards, one of the children, a girl of 8, went up to the pastor and said, "Pardon me, sir, but I didn't know that my name was in the Bible." He asked, "What is your name?" "Edith, sir." "No," he said, "Edith is not in the Bible." "Yes, it is," she replied. "I heard you say, 'This man receiveth sinners, and Edith with them.'" (In "Our Daily Bread.")

Even though that girl misunderstood the text, she had applied the truth personally to her own heart. If you know that there are sins in your heart that need God's merciful forgiveness, put your name in there. "This man receives sinners, and [Steve] with them." If you will join the tax gatherers and sinners and draw near to Jesus and listen to Him, you will know the joy of singing, "I once was lost, but now I'm found!"

Discussion Questions

1. Where's the balance between "bad company corrupts good morals" (1 Cor. 15:33) and spending time with sinners?
2. Should all Christians be seeking to spend time with the lost, or just those with the gift of evangelism?
3. Jesus maintained His holiness and yet sinners seemed comfortable in His presence. How can we do the same?
4. Some argue that you can have saving faith without repentance. How would you refute this biblically?

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