

To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as we prepare to hear from Luke 15:1-10.

1. What was the Pharisees' opinion of sinners and tax collectors compared to their view of themselves?
2. Why did the sinners come to Jesus?
3. What lesson can we learn from Jesus associating with sinners?
4. Does heaven rejoice when a sinner is told the good news?
5. How does heaven respond when a sinner rejects the gospel?
6. Is anything of value accomplished if you tell the good news to a person and the person rejects it?

LOST AND FOUND Luke 15:1-10

If you are a parent, it is possible that you have been struck with panic when you suddenly realized that your little child, who was by your side a second ago, has disappeared. I remember that happening while shopping in a store. Suddenly I realized that my son was no longer standing by my side. That he was playing a game by hiding among the hanging cloths did not make me laugh. In no uncertain terms I helped him understand that a lost child is not a funny situation. I get the same kind of sick feeling whenever I hear a news report of a toddler who has wandered off into the woods.

Is that how God feels about us? Do you ever feel lost and wish that your loving Heavenly Father would come searching for you? Do you ever say with David, *"I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant, for I do not forget your commandments."* (Psalm 119:176)?

Being lost is the natural condition for us from the moment we are born. We are born estranged from God because of natural sin. And we stay lost from God as we wander further and further into sin. That was God's assessment of His chosen people Israel. The citizens of His chosen nation forsook Him. Jeremiah described them like this: *My people have been lost sheep. Their shepherds have led them astray, turning them away on the mountains. From mountain to hill they have gone. They have forgotten their fold* (Jeremiah 50:6).

God's plan was that the prophets, priests, and religious leaders would seek the lost and challenge them to come back to a right relationship with God. They did not. God accused them through Ezekiel, *"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"* (Ezekiel 34:4).

Finally God sent the beloved Son to find these sheep and bring them back. He explained that *"the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost"* (Luke 19:10). He began seeking for *"the lost sheep of the house of Israel"* (Matthew 10:6). That is the foundation for the three stories Jesus told according to Luke fifteen. Here we find a story about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. We will consider the first two stories together, and study the third story about the prodigal son separately.

In these stories, Jesus revealed His love for and compassion for people who were not only lost, but lost on purpose—intentionally, aggressively lost. Many of the lost sheep of the house of Israel wanted to be away from God and tried to maintain separation from God's Son who came to find them. But like the shepherd who sought his sheep, the woman who sought her coin, and the father who watched for his son, Jesus longed to find lost sinners and bring them into the Father's embrace. He still does.

These stories uncover the heart of our Savior who paid the phenomenal price to cover sins so that restitution with our Creator

God is possible. These stories reveal the compassion of our Savior who submitted to torture in order to bring me, the lost sheep, the lost coin, the prodigal son, into right possession by my Heavenly Father. And they are stories about you also. Has Jesus found you? If not, cry out a little louder for Him to come to you and save you from your lostness.

The Setting.

The continuing story about the Good News of salvation reveals how sinners gathered around Jesus. This was not an odd situation in Jesus' ministry, even though it was a crowd of notorious sinners. They were *the tax collectors and sinners (v.1a)*. We know from Scripture and Jewish history that tax collectors were famous as cheaters. They worked for the hated Roman government. After collecting what Rome required, the people were fair game for any amount the collectors could squeeze out of them.

The term *sinners* was a general term used to describe the irreligious riffraff, or at least that is how the Pharisees saw them. These people didn't even try to keep the law. You wouldn't find sinners like this in the synagogue on the Sabbath wanting to learn about God!

According to William Barclay, "the Pharisees 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. . . . A Pharisee was forbidden to be the guest of any such man or to have him as his guest. He was forbidden, so far as it was possible, to have any business dealings with him. . . . The strict Jews did not say, "There will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents," but said, "There will be joy in heaven over one sinner who is obliterated before God." (*The New Daily Study Bible*, "Luke," Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001, 236-37).

Okay, in the eyes of the religious folks, these tax collectors and sinners were not the cream of the Jewish society. But the important thing is that the sinners desired to hear Jesus. Luke wrote that they *were all drawing near to hear him (v.1b)*. They seemed to know they

were lost. Or at least they seemed to understand that Jesus came from God and was searching for them.

This, as well as other accounts, pictures sinners coming to Christ as if they were irresistibly drawn to Him. We know that people were drawn to Christ by the miraculous signs by which Jesus proved His divine authority, and which He intended to arrest the attention of the people. They were drawn by the truth Jesus proclaimed that proved His divine authority to teach on a level the official teachers could not begin to achieve. They were drawn by His love, compassion, and mercy. Luke recorded more examples of Jesus' mercy than the other Gospel writers. The sinners were drawn by a hope that this Teacher of truth was concerned to remove the burden of sin from their backs.

All of these were expressions of God's grace that were drawing them to Christ. But most of all, the sinners were drawn to Christ by the Holy Spirit's compelling. I wonder if, as they gathered around Jesus, the sinners feel guilt, remorse, shame because of their sins? Did they long to be free from the slavemaster who bound them so tightly? Did they desire to know fellowship with their Creator, to be free from the curse that accompanies sin? Do you, have you, experienced these compulsions? We sinners are the very people who ought to, need to, must resort to Jesus. He came to earth and died for people like the tax collectors, the sinners, and horrible sinners like us.

When the "Jesus watcher" saw the sinners gathering around Jesus, they (being worse sinners) grumbled about Jesus. Luke reported how the ever-present secret sinners were there. He named them again: *And the Pharisees and the scribes (v.2a)*. The scribes were the self-appointed interpreters of God's law. They were the writers of new and voluminous laws that were required for the keeping of God's law. They were the self-appointed protectors of Old Testament Scriptures (at least as they saw it). They were the teachers of God's law plus the law of man's additions.

Then there were the ever-present Pharisees who watched Jesus in order to accuse Him. In review, we know that they were a religious sect, a sub-culture in Judaism. They prided themselves in being the most pious of Jews. They fancied themselves to be the prime example of law-keepers who enjoyed God's favor. Jesus exposed them as

hypocrites which made them furious. Most scribes held to the Pharisee sect as opposed to being Sadducees.

Well, those men, who pretended to be holy but were actually secret sinners, were complaining. They *grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them"* (v.2b). The Gospel record reveals how Jesus often uncovered the secret sins of the scribes and Pharisees. Nevertheless, being hypocrites like they were, they could no doubt quote Scripture to prove in their minds that Jesus was the real sinner. No doubt they could quote, *Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night (Psalm 1:1-2). And, Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous (Psalm 1:5).*

Jesus certainly was not measuring up with their standard of avoiding sinners and especially of avoiding tax collectors. And so they kept on grumbling. Literally, the Greek word means that they were "grumbling thoroughly." All the time they were around Jesus, day after day, they kept on grumbling. They were always expressing discontent vehemently. They responded like that because they did not experience the Father's grace through the Holy Spirit's drawing them to Christ.

And being devoid of God's special grace, those very religious people could not understand Jesus' teaching when He said things like, *"Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners"* (Matthew 9:13). They did not grasp what Jesus meant when He taught, *"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners"* (Mark 2:17). So they falsely accused Jesus saying, *"The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'"* (Luke 7:34).

Only the recipients of God's grace can understand the amazing reality that *God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8)*. Oh, but what good news that God the Son, who paid the penalty for our sin through His own death, *receives sinners*. Christ came to welcome, accept, invite sinners to Himself. This statement is the key to understanding these

two stories as well as the next story, the prodigal son. In the larger context, that includes the parable of the lost son, Jesus rebuked the religious hypocrites for not understanding His desire to find and save the lost.

Two Stories.

The first story Jesus told was about one lost sheep found. In this story, Jesus described the shepherd's heart to the scribes and Pharisees who needed to have that kind of heart. *So he told them this parable: "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?"* (vv.3-4).

As usual, this was a parable the people would understand. Shepherds had a long history among God's chosen people. Abraham, the father of the nation, had been a wealthy shepherd. Isaac and Jacob and sons continued the family business. David was the beloved shepherd, singer, king of Israel. But by the time of Jesus, shepherds were among the lower caste of society. They were despised as lowlife and generally considered to be thieves and liars. The scribes and Pharisees would have steered clear of them because they were always ceremonially unclean.

Nevertheless, this story would have made sense even to the religious leaders. Here was a shepherd with a large flock. One hundred sheep would have been considered a very substantial flock. In Jesus' day, the flocks were typically owned by wealthy businessmen who hired shepherds to care for them. In fact, it is probable that this flock was a combination of smaller flocks.

Whatever the details might have been, Jesus told how a shepherd went out to find a lost sheep. At some point, a shepherd realized that one sheep for which he was responsible was lost. This could happen easily. Rather than just live with the loss, the shepherd went out to find the sheep, leaving the ninety-nine with the other shepherds. The scribes and Pharisees, being lovers of money, would understand the shepherd's desire to find the lost sheep.

What Jesus emphasized to the religious hypocrites was the shepherd's response. Having found the lost sheep, the shepherd rejoiced. *"And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders,*

rejoicing” (v.5). According to Jesus’ story, the shepherd found the sheep, put it on his shoulders and took it home. Maybe he put it on his shoulders because it was injured. More likely this was easier than trying to drag a stubborn sheep with a rope.

The shepherd rejoiced simply because he found the lost sheep and rescued it. We are not told whether the sheep rejoiced to be found. We do know that Christ is far more willing to save sinners than sinners are willing to be saved. Arriving at home, the shepherd shared his joy. *“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.’”* (v.6). The thrust of the story is that the shepherd made a sacrifice to find one lost sheep and rejoiced greatly over the rescue. He invited others to rejoice because of the rescue.

So what was the point Jesus wanted to drive home to the religious people and to us? *“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”* (v.7). In this story, the religious, self-righteous people represent the ninety-nine “unlost” sheep. People like that in our world are quite sure they are okay. They have no compassion for those who are truly lost.

There are plenty of these religious, uncaring, uncompassionate people. They wonder why the sinners of our society are not as wise and intelligent as they are. They think that they heard the good news of salvation, weighed the odds between heaven and hell, and made the right choice. In fact, they are unable to stop and consider that they were hopelessly lost in sin, with no means or desire to go to the “Good Shepherd’s” home. Therefore, compassion for people lost in sin is not one of their traits. And because they were not found in their lost, sinful estate by Jesus, they cannot experience joy in the true salvation of repentant sinners.

The second story Jesus told was about one lost coin found. At the outset of the story we are confronted with the woman’s diligence to find what she lost. *“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?”* (v.8).

Again Jesus was speaking to the pompous scribes and Pharisees (*“What man of you. . .”* v.4). If they might have been offended to be

equated with shepherds, being compared to a woman would be even worse for them. In Jesus’ day, women might have been esteemed lower than shepherds in some ways. Even in Jewish thinking, women were often considered to be just so much property, whose main purpose was continuing the family line. And a woman alone in that culture was most vulnerable to abuse. Think, for example, of the woman who pled with the unjust judge, which we will see in Luke 18.

It was a culture in which shepherds and women were despised, and yet God likened Himself to a shepherd and a woman. Consider the favorite Psalm 23 where David concluded (through inspiration) that the Lord is my shepherd. And in verse five of that psalm, David said that the Lord prepared a table before him. That was considered women’s work. These comparisons remind us that the requirement for salvation is complete humility. We have to acknowledge our spiritual poverty in order to be saved.

This is the story of a poor woman who lost a valuable coin. She owned ten *drachma* (equivalent to the Roman *denarius*) which was valued as a day’s wage for a common laborer. A day’s wage in a society that often used money only in emergencies was a valuable loss. Bartering for food and services was more common than handing over money. In fact, the lack of mentioning a husband might indicate that the woman was a widow. Also, it is possible that this was her emergency fund, the dowry given by her father at her marriage. We are not told how she lost the money, just that she lost it.

Jesus told how the woman lit a lamp to search the floor of the dark house. It would have been a dark house because normally there would have been one door and few, if any, windows. So the woman lit the wick on her little clay lamp that probably didn’t provide a lot of light any way. Failing to find the coin, the woman swept the dirt floor which led to her discovering the valuable coin.

Again, Jesus emphasized that woman’s response of joy. *“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’”* (v.9). She was so delighted that she called her friends and neighbors to rejoice with her. It was not that she threw a party, which would have cost money. Rather, the whole point of rejoicing was because she found the lost coin.

What did Jesus intend for the story to mean to the self-righteous, religious people? What did He intend for it to mean to you and me? *“Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (v.10)*. The finding of one sinner who repents causes such rejoicing among angels. Why? Redemption is God’s work for God’s glory. Whatever brings glory to God makes angels happy. When God rejoices, angels rejoice. When you and I understood how our sins offended God, and confessed our sins, and repented of our sins, and embraced the sacrifice of Christ as the payment for our sins, heaven burst forth with shouting and rejoicing.

God’s plan is all about seeking out lost sinners and showing them their need of the Savior. God rejoices when He enlightens sinners to their need and they receive His gift of salvation. What kind of person would not rejoice with God at the salvation of sinners? It might be a person who is spiritually blind and dead and has no clue about God’s plan of salvation. Or a person who is spiritually proud, having a head knowledge about salvation but never having been born again, would not see a reason to rejoice when God finds a sinner – a person who has no idea of what it means to be freed from the penalty of sin through Jesus Christ’s sacrifice. In extreme cases, the person who is not born again might even claim to look forward to God casting sinners into the lake of fire, not realizing that is their own fate. God is seeking out people like that to save them from the penalty of their sins. God is still searching for people, sinners, like you and me, to take us home to salvation. That is cause for rejoicing. If something causes God to rejoice, it certainly ought to cause His people to rejoice.