

[Read vv. 6,9,22-24, 32]

All Scripture is useful, and all Scripture is true, but this passage stands out like one of the highest peaks in a majestic mountain range. This is the most famous parable that Jesus ever told, and for good reason. The God revealed in this parable is so good and so glorious, so beautiful and so loving, that we can't do anything but *worship* in response.

Luke 15 doesn't contain three separate parables; it is one three-part parable. And while there are so many rich themes to explore, the parable is not about how prodigal the son is, or how prodigal the father's grace is. It is not primarily about *seeking* the lost, or even about *finding* the lost. This parable rebukes the bad shepherds of Israel, the scribes and Pharisees, by contrasting their lazy grumbling with the joy of Jesus as He feasts with repentant sinners. But even more than a *rebuke*, this parable of the lost sheep/coin/son is an *invitation* to share in the Finders' joy, that joy you get when you recover something valuable that you had lost.

So as we listen to Jesus, remember this: Jesus did not come primarily for your obedience or your service. He came *so that you could share in His joy*. When you draw near to Jesus, you are drawing near to everlasting joy. When you follow Jesus, *everything*, obedience, service, *even death*, ends up in joyful celebration. Who has a gospel like we have? And who has a god like our God? And why would you settle for anything less than heavenly joy?

Here's the charge against Jesus, from v.2: "This man receives sinners and eats with them." It's ironic, because at this moment, Jesus is actually sharing a meal with a ruler of the Pharisees. If Jesus *refused* to eat with sinners, He wouldn't be eating with Pharisees. And so in response to that blind hypocrisy, Jesus tells the parable.

This is the foundation of Jesus' problem with the scribes and Pharisees: why is it that they don't share in this Finder's joy? Because *they haven't even gone looking* for the sheep or the coin, much less found anything! Even worse: not only do they not *share* the joy of seeking and finding, they *condemn* it when they see it in Jesus! And it's easy to see why: the actions of one good shepherd make the laziness of the bad shepherds glaringly obvious. These bad shepherds are fine with letting sheep get lost. But Jesus would rather *die* than let one of His sheep be lost! Is it any wonder that the sheep flock to Jesus? The Pharisees are so jealous that instead of *imitating* the good shepherd, they *attack* the good shepherd.

Several scholars¹ have pointed out that the imagery of the first scene of the parable has a long history for Israel. 1) Israelites have always been shepherds, 2) God chose a shepherd to be their king, 3) That shepherd-king gave us one of the most beautiful psalms, Psalm 23, in which he

1 Bailey, Leithart: <http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/leithart/2004/01/bailey-on-the-prodigal-son>

says “The Lord is my shepherd.”, and 4) God views the leaders of his people as shepherds, and in Ezekiel 34 and Jeremiah 23, He strongly rebukes Israel's leaders using this same analogy, specifically, when he points out in Ezekiel 34:4 that Israel's shepherds did not *seek the lost* or bring back the straying.

Let me say a little bit about Psalm 23: When David celebrates the work of the Lord as His shepherd, we all memorized it as: “He restores my soul.” Which is a fine translation, unless it leads you to think that it is talking about “refreshing” my soul, connecting this restoration only with the green pastures and still waters, instead of also and even *primarily* with the rod and the staff that God uses to keep us on the paths of righteousness. The word “restore” is the Hebrew word usually translated “repent”, used here as a cause: “He causes my soul to repent.”

This should bring two things to mind: **first**, God's rebuke of David through the prophet Nathan, who disguised his rebuke as a parable about sheep. That's one of the big moments in which God restored David's soul. **Second**, now you should think about Luke 15 with Psalm 23 in the background. Psalm 23 says that a good shepherd causes his sheep to repent, and leads him through the valley of the shadow of death into feasting, just like Luke 15. Look at 15:32: “It is fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead and is now alive; he was lost, and is found.” And notice this, too: what is it that follows David? Goodness and *mercy*! If you miss the *straying* and *repenting* early on in Psalm 23, then you won't understand the *mercy* at the end. And realize this: what David *celebrates* about the Lord his Shepherd is what the Pharisees *can't stand* about Jesus the Good Shepherd.

Now, what do we learn from the second scene, the lost coin? It seems that Jesus is catching the Pharisees both ways: if you have a hundred sheep, you are pretty wealthy, and you could stand to lose one. But God doesn't think that way! Even if you think one sheep is insignificant, you ought to leave the 99 and go look for it.

But here's the thing: God's people are *not* insignificant! Imagine that you *aren't* rich; all you have is ten silver coins. You ought to value God's people more than you do! Jesus could have said, “What woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one, doesn't look for it?” So why does He say instead that the woman a) lights a lamp, b) sweeps the house, and c) seeks *diligently*? Contrast that with the Pharisees: when they lose a coin (remember, we are talking about God's people – when one of them becomes a tax collector or a sinner, it's like losing a coin) when the Pharisees lose a coin, do they *light a lamp*, or do they say, “Aw, it's dark. I guess I can't find it.” Do they *start sweeping*, moving furniture, and turning the house inside out, or do they sort of glance at the floor and give up? Do they *seek diligently*, or do they make a half-hearted effort or even no effort at all? Because they don't value even the little they have, they don't search for it.

But the deeper problem is that since they don't *value* these people, these coins, they don't get any *joy* from them, either. The point of these first two scenes is in the refrain of verses 6 and 9: "Rejoice with me, for I have found what was lost!" Even though these stories deliver a powerful rebuke to the failures of the one who ought to be shepherding God's people and keeping Israel's house in order, Jesus' main concern is that they are missing out on God's joy.

And now we come to the third and greatest scene of this parable. There was a man who had two sons, and the youngest son had this attitude: "Gimme, and I'll go." I want what you *have*, but I don't want *you*. This selfish attitude is actually a self-destructive attitude, and so we see this son go off and destroy himself.

But when he found himself drooling over pig food, he *came to himself*, came to his senses. When you sin, you are *out of your mind*, and repentance seems insane. But when God turns you back, you see that it was *sin* that was crazy, and repentance is the only thing that makes sense.

And notice that in this part of the parable, it isn't the *action of the father seeking him* that draws him back, but the father's *character*. This isn't Jesus changing the story, though. He's just highlighting a different aspect. He's showing that the problem wasn't simply that the Pharisees *didn't seek* the lost; even if they had, their *attitude* towards the lost would have made sure it didn't work. Who would you rather have come and rebuke you: Jesus, or a Pharisee? Why? It's because even if they said the exact same words, you know that Jesus loves you, and the Pharisees don't. The tax collectors and sinners know that the Pharisees hate them, but they draw near to Jesus because they can tell that He loves them.

And so the son remembers the truth about his father – "My father takes care of everyone, even the servants!" And he regrets ever leaving such a father, and shows us an amazing example of what heartfelt repentance looks like. **First**, true repentance doesn't wait to be caught or confronted. True repentance takes the first step: "I will arise and go to my father." **Second**, true repentance openly acknowledges sin as sin: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you." **Third**, true repentance makes no excuses or demands, and accepts due consequences: "I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."

Many of you know the pain of receiving *defective* repentance: you've had to go confront someone who has sinned against you, and you've got to be the one to initiate a painful conversation. You've had to argue and wrangle and pin them down before they acknowledge that what they did was sinful. You've had to deal with counter-accusations, blame-shifting, and a thousand excuses. They burden you with demands to be treated like a son, instead of coming in humility like a servant. They make you feel like the bad guy for not removing all the consequences. They tell you that you're a Pharisee just because you expect real repentance!

But that isn't repentance – that's manipulation. That's *more sin*. They are still in a far country, still wasting their inheritance, even while they claim that they've come home.

How different is the repentance offered by the prodigal son! He comes in deep sorrow, with real brokenness and humility. He confesses his sin openly, without prompting or prodding. He makes no demands, and is ready to be a servant forever, if only he can be close to the father again! That is what it looks like when God restores your soul.

And that *real repentance* is met with real forgiveness, real mercy, and real grace. Verses 20 and 22 are some of the most beautiful words in the whole Bible: “while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” That's what your Father in heaven is like. That's how ready He is to receive your repentance. The son tries to stammer out his apology, but before he even finishes, the father reinstates him as a son. It wouldn't be right for a son to demand or even ask for such a restoration, but it isn't wrong for a father to give it. Instead of having the son join the servants, the father tells the servants to honor the son, to deck him out in clothing that signifies his place in the family. *Servants* don't wear rings and shoes, but *sons* do.

And then the father turns reconciliation into a celebration. There's no stern lecture or self-righteous tut-tutting. There is no shaming, no guilt, no condemnation. “Kill the fatted calf! Let's celebrate! Rejoice with me, for I have found my son who was lost!” The sinner has drawn near to the Father, and the Father has received him and starts to eat him, and there is great joy.

This is what forgiveness feels like. If you are a Christian, then this is what God has done for you. When you came to your senses and repented of your sins, God began to rejoice over you like this father. Even if you can't pinpoint a moment when you first repented, if you have ever really repented, then this is the kind of joyful, overflowing, abundant forgiveness that is yours in Christ Jesus. There is no joy in heaven or on earth that compares to having God rejoice over you.

But then, in response to that joy, Jesus puts the scribes and Pharisees into the parable for the first time. Before, they were the unspoken opposite of the shepherd and the housewife, but now they enter the story as the older brother. And once again, we see that the primary point of the parable is not about seeking or finding or even repenting, but about *how you respond to the joyful mercy of God shown to sinners*.

The response of the older brother is horrible: he is angry, and refuses to share in the father's joy. He looks mercy and love in the face, and starts to *grumble*. And *here* is where we see the father seeking the lost, in vs. 28. This parable has always been about the older brother. The father *comes out* and *entreats* him, inviting him to the feast.

And this is how he responds to the father's love: "Look, I've been your servant for many years, and you never gave me anything so I could go be with friends." The younger son would be happy just to be a servant; the older son thinks being a son is just as bad as being a servant. And this is what happens when you think that obedience is the main point of being a son of God, instead of enjoying God. You don't value the relationship, and you turn obedience into a commodity to be exchanged for blessings.

Do you remember the attitude of the younger son? "Gimme, and I'll go." This is the exact same attitude, hidden under a mask of outward obedience. The younger son was at least honest enough to make it clear that that's what he wanted, but the older son tried to use obedience as a bribe to get the exact same thing. He doesn't want to feast with the father, he wants to go be with his friends. "Gimme, and I'll go."

And then he accuses the father of being just like the prodigal son: "This son of yours" (not "my brother") ate up your property with prostitutes, and now you're eating up your own property with sinners, too! Yep, he's your son alright! You both waste your blessings on sinners!"

If he came to his senses, he would see how silly this is: "Why waste mercy on sinners?" That's what mercy is *for*! As Jesus says in another place, "Why send a doctor for healthy people?"

But what the father says here to the older son is devastating: "Son, you are always with me." The father isn't using the son to get something out of him. His joy is found in the relationship itself. He delights to be with the son, but the son can't wait to get something from his father so he can go off and be with his friends.

The father also says: "all that is mine is yours." The son had said, "Here's my slavery: you never *gave* me anything so I could *go*." The father says, "I gave you everything, and I never wanted you to go." The greatest gift that the father gives is himself - "You are always with me." And along with that, he graciously gives everything else. The father says, in effect: "I gave both of you my very life. Neither of you wanted it; you both chose death instead. Your brother chose a quick death, and you chose a slow one. But it was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found."

Jesus ends the story right there, without a response from the older brother. He doesn't tell the Pharisees and scribes how the story ends, because it isn't over. His invitation to them remained open, just like it had towards the younger brother in spite of his sin. They too can choose life. They too can join the feast. The father is waiting, seeking, entreating, fattening another calf, ready to rejoice over them, too.

Jesus' invitation stands for you, too: Draw near, and rejoice! Learn from each character in the parable: Fathers, you are called to be shepherds for your family. Do you seek after them when they stray? And when you correct them, does it end in a lecture, or in laughter? Homemakers, are you seeking the good of your home? When your little ones are lost, do you light a lamp and start sweeping, searching diligently to bring them back to repentance? And does reconciliation end up with commands to do better next time, or in happy hugs and sugar highs?

Learn from the prodigal father: if you want your children to be quick to repent, don't make your compassion something that needs to be earned. Don't hesitate to offer your embraces and kisses. Turn reconciliation into a celebration!

Prodigals, come to your senses! Learn from the true repentance you see here, and come back to the Father.

Older brothers, (which is all of us), stop grumbling! Realize that in your heart, you are treating God in the same way as the prodigal: "I don't want you, God, I want what you can give me." You don't want grace; you want God to enforce good behavior on others, because you think that He has forced it on you. Is that how do you think about obeying God? Do you resent keeping his rules? Do you feel like a slave? Is serving God a burden? These are older brother attitudes, and if you don't attack them, they will boil over into bitterness and resentment towards God and grumbling against your brother. So repent of your "righteousness"; that is, your *self-righteousness*.

Look, every one of you has been sinned against by someone in this room; probably many times, and probably most often by the people you're sitting next to. But the good news is that Jesus Christ died for sinners, for the lost sheep that wander, and for the resentful sheep that stay home. You have the choice in this moment to resent God for allowing sinners like *them* to come and eat with Him, or you can rejoice along with them that God allows sinners like *you* to eat with Him. In just a moment, we will be sitting down at the Father's feast, and you will pass them the bread and the wine. Do it with joy, not with grumbling! *All of you* are eating with sinners; *none of you* has any grounds for grumbling. So accept one another, just as Christ accepted you.

People of God, this is what Jesus says to you today: "*Rejoice with me. Celebrate with me. Eat with me, for I have found my sons and daughters who were lost.*"

So let us rejoice,

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*