

The Lost

Luke 15:1-10 | March 22, 2020 | Bryce Beale

Most everyone you meet in your life is lost. Jesus said it would be this way: “the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.” On the other hand, he said, “the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”¹

He has said it, and it cannot be otherwise.

But most of us have wondered at one time or another *why* it is this way. God’s power knows no limits—not even our stubborn hearts can stop his entrance in, and we few who do believe are the proof of it. Why doesn’t he break down every door and save the whole world?

The answer, I’m afraid, is hidden from our view. We can see its fringes, but the answer itself is a mystery in the mind of God, concealed within the glory cloud of his infinite wisdom and inscrutable purpose. There is a good, even a perfect, reason that most are lost—we know it is a good reason because it is God’s reason, and his reasons are always good. But the reason itself is a piece of data God has not chosen to give us. So we must trust him.

And though we cannot see the answer itself, we can as I said see the fringes, and these fringes are crucial. We are not told the exact decision that God has made, or the precise reason for that decision in the salvation of souls, but we are everywhere told the way God has made that and all his decisions.

We are mere children who cannot comprehend the higher purposes of our parent, but we can trust that parent and so rest in his decisions and obey him happily, ignorant though we may be.

Our heavenly Father is worthy of our trust in this matter.

How do we know? For one, by looking at the fringe of his ways in our text today in Luke. No, he does not tell us why some are saved and many are not, but he does forever dispel the thought that most perish because he simply doesn’t care.

¹ Matt. 17:13-14 (ESV).

He does care. His wrath abides upon all who do not believe, but it is not a simple wrath. Somehow it is joined with a powerful and pursuing love.

Does God hate the sinner because of his sin, and love the sinner because of himself, all at the same time? Scripture answers, "Yes." Every individual on this earth bears the stamp of God, his very image, and so he does not carelessly cast aside any person.

I can say now, in this mixed audience of those who believe and those who are lost, that God loves you more than any other person in this world has or ever will. No love is comparable.

And if still you struggle to believe this, with all the mysteries of his providence which surround us, then I stand aside and just direct you to our passage in Luke. You see for yourself if this is not exactly what Jesus teaches us today.

LUKE 15:1-10

This chapter, Luke 15, is one of the most loved in all the Bible. It is comprised of three stories which Jesus tells, all of which have the same point—and that point is that God loves sinners.

This morning we are considering the first two of those three—the last, the lost or prodigal son, we will look at next week. But these first two we consider today, the lost sheep and the lost coin, we consider today.

You know that for many chapters in Luke, Jesus has more than anything else been rebuking his enemies, the rulers of the Jews and those Jews who rejected him. In our text today, his rebuke continues against the Pharisees—but more than a rebuke is present here. The very heart of God opens in the parables that Jesus gives us.

We are bad guessers at God's thoughts and opinions, so to have his heart laid here before us is a privilege without parallel. Whatever assumptions we bring with us this morning we must lay aside; Jesus is the final authority on God, for he, the only begotten from the Father, has revealed God to us.

And so we give our attention to two things, in keeping with our text: first, what God does not think about the lost, reflected in the opinion of the Pharisees. The Pharisees are much like our

assumptions about God, and they are wrong. And secondly, we consider what God does think about the lost, by observing the heart of God as Jesus sets it before us.

What God does not think

First then, the text will address the Pharisees' and our own assumptions about how God views the lost world.

See again what leads Jesus to open God's heart for us, the events of verses 1 and 2: "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'"

Right afterward we read, "So he told them this parable." This whole chapter of parables is a response to the attitude of the Pharisees and the way they assume God thinks about lost people. They hold the wrong opinion about God. And they are not alone in their false opinion.

What does their statement say about their misconception of God, in verse 2? "This man receives sinners and eats with them." The statement is true, as verse 1 indicates: Jesus receives tax collectors, men who had partnered with the hated Romans in order to make money off of their kinsman, and sinners, a broader category of people with open, outward, and obvious sins. Probably in this crowd are prostitutes and worthless men, thieves, drunkards, and all the like.

The problem is not with the statement the Pharisees assert, since that is true. The problem is in how they assert it: "the Pharisees and the scribes *grumbled*, saying..."² This is like Luke 7, when Jesus was eating in a Pharisee's house and a prostitute came up to wash his feet. "Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.'"

In both cases the statements are true, but beneath them is an assumption—namely, that God so despises these sinners that we should not even come in contact with them. The Pharisees are like

² Emphasis mine.

Jonah of old, sitting on their hilltop, waiting for fire to descend on the sinners of Nineveh.

They have half the picture right, for God does hate sinners and does punish sinners. But they are overlooking the other half of the picture—God loves sinners. He loves them so much that as soon as they repent, he welcomes them. He loves them so much that he is happy to have them at his table, to encourage them toward repentance and life.

Notice that in verse 1 the sinners “were all drawing near to hear him.” These are the fields white for the harvest. These are the sick that the physician has come to heal, the lost he came to find. They are open.

Since God’s hatred for sin and his love for people are both evident throughout the Old Testament, why should these Pharisees embrace only one of these two halves of the story? And the answer must be hidden in their own hearts. In fact, these social lowlifes crowding around the rabbi are a personal inconvenience to the Pharisees. They do not listen to their religious rules; the sinners have been like rebellious children, and the Pharisees are fed up. They make the Pharisees look bad!

And so the Pharisees hate them, with a hatred born in the core of their selfishness. And if the Pharisees hate them then, they assume, God must unconditionally hate them also.

Brothers and sisters, we are and will always be tempted to hate the sinner for our own sake. When the culture bucks both morality and sanity, rejects our Savior, mocks our belief, the temptation immediately arises to hate everyone in the culture who does this. We then have no problem embracing that message which Jonah preached through Nineveh: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” If you turn on the news, you will find commentators and news anchors who hate their enemies, and that is natural enough.

But you are called to something supernatural, more than natural, even to love your enemies, however much you may hate their evils.

Who would be at Jesus’ table today? Members of the LGBT community, owners of adult bookstores and strip clubs, gang members and drug pushers, abortionists. Amazingly, Jesus

probably pointed out the sinners' sins to them more than anyone else in their lives—yet his love must have been so evident, his life so different that they wanted to be at his table. They did not want to eat with the Pharisees.

And who are we more like? Would these sorts of persons ever wish to join us at our table? May it be!

Jesus has strong and hard words for the stubborn and rebellious, so do not misunderstand—he is not a man in soft clothing, and he is not seeker sensitive in his style. He has only one technique to draw in sinners to his table: genuine love. May we have the same with the same results.

What God thinks

This then is the assumption Jesus pushes aside, that God, when he thinks of the sinner, has *only* wrath. That is not true. This is not how God thinks about the lost.

So now we enter into the parables themselves and see, very clearly, just how God does think about sinners. We who love God must align our own attitude toward sinners to his, that is Jesus' point.

So what is God's attitude toward sinners? See it first in the first parable, verses 3 to 7:

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? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 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.' 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.

As he often does, Jesus appeals to the common sense of his listeners. "What man of you"—even you would go out searching for the one lost sheep, if it were your sheep, and would rejoice to find it.

The shepherd in the story leaves ninety-nine good sheep behind, not to be rid of them, but because his interest is especially set on the one that is lost. He cares about the lost sheep.

He cares so much that he makes great effort to find it: he leaves the others, he goes in pursuit, and when he finally does locate the wayward one he throws it on his shoulders.

Then follows a great deal of rejoicing. He rejoices on his way home, he rejoices when he gets home. He calls his friends and neighbors over to celebrate with him. This lost sheep would have been a great loss if it had died and or never been found, but now it is returned safely, and there is joy.

Here is Jesus' conclusion from the parable: "Just so, [in the same way,] 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."

We may wonder if by the ninety-nine sheep Jesus means the Pharisees. He may. If so, he is being ironic in calling them righteous, since they thought themselves so but were not.

The point of the parable however is not in the ninety-nine, but in the one. This one sheep is the "one sinner who repents," Jesus says. This sheep is the prostitute, the pornographer, the murderer. This sheep is hateful and hated, disrespectful to parents, despicable, cruel, and any other unseemly adjective you may imagine.

Yet notice that the shepherd went out searching for the sheep before he found it, while it was still lost. Jesus gathers round his table a large number of sinners, and not all of them have repented. He loves them, while they are yet sinners, so that his kindness might lead them to repentance.

But then this sinner *repents!* And repentance is the only requirement God places on eternal forgiveness through the blood of Jesus. This sheep becomes an heir of God, an inheritor of all the good promises of the kingdom.

When one sinner repents, there is, according to our Savior, joy in heaven. The parallel we will see in just a moment in verse 10 calls it "joy before the angels of God." Heaven has its own party over the sinner's coming home. Certainly the angels are glad, since

they are happy with the will of God. But it is that will, that one will of heaven, God's will, which matters more than all others—and it rejoices at the sinner's repentance.

Here the heart of God lays open before us. Ezekiel had agreed with Jesus many years before when he said, "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?"³

God's wrath rightfully falls upon sinners who do not repent—but have you ever wondered why repentance automatically wins one access into heaven? There is no merit we gain from repenting; we do not give God something he needs when we repent. Repentance wins heaven only because God wants us to have heaven. Sin is the only obstacle, and when once repentance has pushed the stubborn thorn of pride out of a heart, healing can begin.

This could never be if God did not genuinely love the sinner. There would be a long record of wrongs which he never would be willing to clear, as we are tempted to do with people who offend us. Yet with God, the moment a sinner turns from sin with brokenness, and fixes his eyes upon Christ, his whole record is cleared.

Even more, see how the shepherd did not wait with the ninety-nine for the one to return on his own. The prodigal son will return on his own, though the father was watching for him. But here, the shepherd takes the initiative.

You can see this even more clearly in the parallel parable of the lost coin, in verses 8 and 9:

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? 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."

See what effort she expends to find this lost coin, this drachma worth just one day's wage. She gets more light on the subject, then sweeps and seeks, not giving up until she finds it.

³ Ezek. 18:23.

We who believe cannot help but say with the Psalmist, “Surely God’s goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives.” These are, as older authors have called them, the hounds of heaven. While we were yet sinners, these hounds hunted us. God’s goodness would not leave us alone; his kindness haunted us day after day, always at our heels.

Do you remember those years when you resisted the hounds of heaven, or tried to shut them out? You, that small sheep, ran further and further until you fell into a pit, almost afraid that God’s goodness might catch you! And finally it did. The shepherd found you, dirty and covered in muck by your own doing. And what did he do?

The answer is in our text, verse 5: “And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.” How this squares with the mysteries of God’s sovereign election of his own, I cannot say. But I find it here quite clearly, so it is true. God knew he would find you, you lost coin, yet when he did, in some manner beyond our comprehension he felt like you feel when you have lost your phone, and then to your immense relief find it again.

God delights to bring us back, to clear our record through the blood of his son, to have us as his own.

This shepherd, and this woman, are pictures of God’s heart toward sinners—toward us! The lost sheep is quite the inconvenience to its master, yet when it is found, where is its master’s wrath? The shepherd does not lash out. The woman does not kick her furniture in anger at this stubborn coin.

The shepherd and the woman rejoice. The same could be said of you that was said of Israel after her waywardness, through the prophet Zephaniah: “The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.”⁴

Conclusion

Now you may have turned on this video just now with a different opinion of God than that which is taught by Jesus in these two parables.

⁴ Zeph. 3:17.

Perhaps you have thought him a cruel taskmaster. Or maybe you have thought him no different from your own harsh father. You thought he was a man like one of his creatures—impatient, temperamental, irritated by your frequent failings, and too proud to forget your offenses against him.

You were wrong. You are wrong. Isn't that wonderful? The devil delights to trick us in this way and make us think our Father cruel, but now is the time to let Christ's light shine into your head and clear out those shadowy lies.

You tell me how far the sheep must wander before the shepherd gives up the chase? Or you tell me how long the woman must look for her coin before she gives it up for lost? Our text says that the shepherd seeks "until he finds it," and that the woman looks "until she finds it."

How far have you wandered from God? How deeply have you failed him even this week? Maybe the circumstances of your life have suggested to you that God is furious with you and wishes to destroy you, not to rescue you. Perhaps you are broken over your sin, but fear God will not accept you back, not this time. You have sinned the sin that breaks the camel's back, and the bridge is burnt.

Lies. I will call those what they are—lies. Here is the truth: God wants you back. For his own sake, for his own sake, I say, he wants you back. You are crafted in his image and no wrong you do can deface that fact. When he sees you, he sees his handiwork.

What, you have gone to him in your troubles and you feel like he has locked the door, and you hear the deadbolt turning shut.⁵ You are mistaken. The deadbolt is turning the other way, unlocking. You have only assumed it was locking.

You sheep, you coins, God's heart is open before you. Here is the message which I must convey to you, a certain word from God that not all of hell can shake.

It is this: "I love you. Come home."

⁵ This illustration is drawn from C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*.