

## God Loves the Lost

### Luke 14:35B-15:10

John was a young pastor stepping into big shoes. The church that had called him as their new pastor had just lost their founding pastor, who had led the church for several decades before passing away.

With youthful zeal and enthusiasm, John began to preach the gospel and reach out to the community. And God blessed his efforts: people began to come to church and get saved and the little church began to grow again. John was excited about what God was doing in the church, and assumed everyone in the church would share his excitement, so he was completely blindsided when he learned that the church members had called a secret meeting and voted to remove him as their pastor. The reason? They didn't like the type of people who were coming to the church. Many of these new people came out of backgrounds that included drug and alcohol abuse and were a little rough around the edges, even after coming to Christ.

To the old-time members it seemed like all they loved and held dear about their church was being threatened. Their church had always been a nice place where respectable church-goers could come to sing a couple hymns and hear a sermon. They were frightened to see their church being overrun by men and women coming out of sinful lifestyles. In order to preserve the kind of worship climate they held dear they voted the young pastor out.

I know John's story because the church I had just started to pastor was right down the road from his church. He was a broken man who left the ministry, as far as I know never to return. And what happened to the people he had led to the Lord? Many of them started to attend our church. Almost 30 years later, I'm happy to say I'm still friends with several of them on Facebook. By God's grace they're doing well and still walking with Jesus!

### The "wrong people" had ears to hear

The members of that small church would have had a lot in common with the Pharisees and scribes we see in Luke 15. Chapter 14 closes with Jesus' offer, *he who has ears to hear, let him hear*, chapter 15 opens telling us who was taking Jesus up on his offer:

*Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to **hear him**.*

To the Pharisees it was the wrong people had ears to hear Jesus! Tax collectors and sinners. Liars, thieves, prostitutes, adulterers, outcasts...losers. Not the kind of socially connected, religiously respectable type of person that the Pharisees wanted to attract to synagogue. These were the kind of people who would mess up the worship service they held so dear.

So the Pharisees and scribes held their own secret meeting and grumbled to each other, "*This man receives sinners and eats with them.*" Sure Jesus could get a crowd, but it was the wrong kind of crowd. The wrong people had ears to hear what Jesus was saying.

Jesus knows what's going on in their secret meeting, so he tells three parables to reveal the heart of God concerning these outcasts. We only read two because the third is the parable of the Prodigal Son which Aron preached on two weeks ago. But the message of all three parables presses one important question:

how does God see the people the Pharisees and scribes are rejecting? By extension it presses the question: How did God view the rough around the edges people who were coming to that little church down the road and getting saved?

**ILL:** I learned something about car tires this week. On Thursday I took my Toyota to Oil Xpress for an alignment because I had bought two new front tires the week before at a nearby tire store and they hadn't done an alignment. The mechanic called me out to the garage and pointed out that the two new tires were directional tires – meaning they needed to be put on so that they rotated in a certain direction. There's an arrow on directional tires telling which way they need to rotate. I didn't know there was such a thing as directional tires. The problem was the tire store put them on so they were rotating in the wrong direction. The tread is only designed to grip well when they go in the right direction and they would especially be dangerous in snow because instead of pushing snow outward as the tread is designed to do, they would pull snow toward the center, packing the tread with snow. Instead of gripping the road in the snow, they would have anti-grip in the snow.

The way they were put on, I'd only have a good grip on the road when I was driving backwards.

When it comes to the lost – the outcast, the sinner, the ones who bring their mess into the church – what direction should the church be going in? Pulling them in, or pushing them out? What direction does God's heart go in? That's really the question Jesus is answering in these parables.

### **1. God values the lost – and therefore so should the church!**

In each of these three parables, something of value has been lost. A lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son. A shepherd leaves his flock to find the lost sheep, and when he finds it, he hoists it up on his shoulders and carries it home. A woman loses a coin and sweeps her home until she finds the lost coin. A father waits on the porch watching for his lost son to return.

What does the Bible mean when it speaks of the lost? I think these three parables give us a clue: in each of them lost means being separated from the one who values them. The lost sheep is separated from the shepherd. The lost coin is separated from the woman. The prodigal son is separated from the father who loves him.

When we talk about this world being lost, or a soul being lost, what we are really talking about is being separated. God created us to know Him and be with Him and have relationship with Him but sin separated us from our Creator. If you are a Christian, especially if you've been a Christian for a long time, it's important to remember that once that was you. Me. We were once lost.

The Apostle Paul encourages us to never forget we were once lost in Eph. 2:11-12: *remember that at that time you were separate from Christ... without hope and without God in the world.*

That was us once. Separate from Christ. Without hope and without God. Lost. God could have left us in that state. He could have. But even when we were far from God, our souls were of great value to God so He sent Jesus to purchase us back. Jesus died on the cross to redeem us – buy us back to God. Because our souls were of such great value to God. Remembering this helps us to remember that the direction God wants His church to go in is to value the lost and pull them in by sharing the good news of Jesus with them.

### **2. God seeks the lost – and so should the church!**

In these two parables there is an active seeking (and an active looking in the third parable). The shepherd doesn't say, "well at least I still have the 99 sheep. That's good enough." He leaves the 99 and goes looking for the lost sheep. The woman doesn't say, "still got nine coins. I'm good with that." She puts the nine coins aside and focuses on looking for the one lost coin. Seeking the lost. That's really how Jesus summed up his ministry in Luke 19:10: *The son of man came to seek and to save the lost!*

**ILL:** I read an article written about the heartache lifeguards feel when they aren't able to save someone from drowning. One lifeguard recounted a time when a group of swimmers got caught in a riptide while he was on duty. One by one he rescued the swimmers until only one young man was left. He was just five feet away and shouting for him to hold on, but the young man was exhausted and sank beneath the waves. The lifeguard said that he'd never forget the resigned sadness on this man's face as he sank beneath the surface. The lifeguard dove again and again but couldn't find him.

Years later he was still haunted by the look of that young man before he went under. He saved all the other swimmers but it was the one he couldn't save that he couldn't forget.

Grace Community Church, this is so important for us to remember. God values and God seeks the lost. We don't want to be a church that grows ingrown, focusing on the 99 rather than the 1, preoccupied with the 9 and neglecting the 1. Don't get me wrong, of course God loves the 99 and the 9. We want to love one another, and God wants us to love one another. This isn't about devaluing those who are already in the sheepfold.

But there can be a tendency for churches to get ingrown, focused on what makes the 99 happy rather than how to reach the 1. Churches start to gear everything towards what will please the 99 rather than what will reach the lost. We start to rotate in the wrong direction, the extreme example being that little church in Center Moriches. The 99 didn't like the lost ones coming in. Their secret vote was a vote to please the 99 by removing the 1. Opposite direction of God's heart.

By the way, I think these parables equally apply not only to those lost because they never knew Jesus but also to those who backslide away from Jesus. The sheep who was once a part of the flock but has wandered away. The Bible says God loves the backslider and I'm glad He does cause I've done my share of backsliding.

Let's always keep before us, let's remind each other, let's provoke one another to the love and good work of sharing our faith with those who don't know Jesus. As a church and as people let's be a safe place for the backslider. Not a place that judges or condemns, a place that welcomes and loves.

There can be a tendency for churches to become "holy huddles" where people coming in with messy lives are looked at as a threat to the worship climate the church has come to hold dear. When this happens we lose sight of the heart of God and we lose sight of the grittiness of the gospel. We lose sight of our mission and our mission ground.

Sottish soldier and pastor George Macleod reminds us of what Jesus came to do and where he came to do it:

*"I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the center of the market place as well as on the steeple of the church; I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on a town garbage heap; At a crossroad of politics so cosmopolitan that they had to write His title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek... And at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse and soldiers gamble. Because that is where He died, and that is what He died about. And that is where Christ's men ought to be, and what church people ought to be about."*  
George MacLeod

God seeks the lost – and so should the church!

### **3. God rejoices when the lost are found – and so should the church!**

Each of these parables also have this in common: there is great joy when the lost is found. This would have been a shock to the Pharisees and scribes because they felt God's joy went in the opposite

direction. They actually had a saying, “*There is joy before God when those who provoke Him perish from the world.*”<sup>1</sup>

Just as my directional tires needed to be put on going the right direction or they’d do the opposite of what they should do, slip instead of grip, nothing is more important than knowing what direction God’s heart goes in when it comes to the lost.

That little church down the road probably felt they were representing God’s heart when they voted the outcasts out of the church. Jesus says just the opposite.

You can tell a lot about a person by what makes them rejoice. If someone rejoices at someone else’s misfortune, it tells us they are a small, malicious person who doesn’t care/love that person. If someone rejoices at someone else’s good fortune, it tells us they care about that person and want what’s best for them.

Jesus intentionally ends all three parables emphasizing the joy that happens in heaven every time one sinner repents and comes to God. The Pharisees rejoiced when sinners were going out. That small church rejoiced when sinners were going out. God rejoices when sinners are coming in. Heaven rejoices when sinners are coming in.

Jesus helps us put the tires of our faith on going in the right direction: God loves the lost – so should we! God seeks the lost – so should we! And God rejoices when the lost are found – and so should we!

Is there someone the Lord is laying on your heart. Not a Christian. Maybe backslider far from God. As we pray, lift them up to your Father in heaven. Ask for opportunities to show you care about them and share the gospel with them.

**Word to those who aren’t Christians:** The message of these parables is that God values you. Jesus came to seek and save you. He died on the cross to make it possible for you to have a relationship with God. God loves you more than you can possibly know. He is eager for you to know Him and believe.

*O for the wonderful love he has promised,  
promised for you and for me!  
Though we have sinned, he has mercy and pardon,  
pardon for you and for me.*

*Come home, come home;  
you who are weary come home;  
earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling,  
calling, O sinner, come home!*<sup>2</sup>

You can start a party in heaven by coming home to Christ today. Will you pray with me?

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<sup>1</sup> Barclay, William. *The Parables of Jesus (The William Barclay Library)* (p. 182). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Softly and Tenderly