

This Man Receives Sinners

July 21st, 2013

Luke 15:1-10

"¹Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." ³So he told them this parable: ⁴"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? ⁵And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶And 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.' ⁷Just 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 famous as these parables in Luke 15 are, we'll go astray in our understanding if we don't clearly identify the context in which these three parables are set.

Suppose you're watching the evening news one night, and you see a story about a shooting at the Landmark bar and restaurant in Glassboro. The reporter is at the scene, and as you're watching the broadcast, in the background you see me and my wife gathered around the table with some really shady-looking characters, drinking some beers and looking like we're having a pretty good time. What thoughts would come to mind? I'm guessing many of you wouldn't be happy! "You're compromising your faith, you're damaging the reputation of Jesus and His Church, you're conforming to the world, you're selling out, you're condoning their sin, etc."

That gives you maybe a little taste of what the Pharisees and scribes were feeling as they watched the most notoriously wicked, loathsome sinners gather around Jesus to hear Him. And so they begin to grumble amongst themselves: "This man receives sinners and eats with them." One scholar familiar with the culture of that day has put it this way:

"It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of table fellowship for the cultures of the Mediterranean basin in the first century of our era. Mealtimes were far more than occasions for individuals to consume nourishment. Being welcomed at a table for the purpose of eating food with

another person had become a ceremony richly symbolic of friendship, intimacy and unity."

So the charge against Jesus, "This man eats with sinners", is no small matter. This is why Jesus gained the reputation of "a friend of sinners" (7:34). He ate with them! And it was, in the minds of the religious establishment, calling the entire credibility of Jesus' ministry into question. And their grumbling (and what that grumbling revealed about their hearts) provoked Jesus to tell the three parables recorded here in Luke 15. We'll look at the third parable (which is the most famous one) next Sunday, and today we'll look at the first two (which are almost identical in structure and meaning).

What we'll learn today from verses 1-10 is that these parables describe: 1. A diligent pursuit, 2. A joyful celebration, and then, 3. to draw out the application that Jesus wants us to make from these parables.

A Diligent Pursuit

So we have the Pharisees and scribes grumbling, expressing their opposition and hostility towards Jesus for His gracious welcome of sinners, and *so* (v.3) Jesus tells two parables which describe a diligent pursuit for something that has been lost:

"⁴ "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?"

"⁸ "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?"

Now what can we learn about Jesus and His salvation (His receiving of sinners) from these images? One thing we learn from the two parables is that a pursuit is required, because we are lost and can do nothing about our condition of lostness. We need rescue!

This is maybe most evident in the first image, of the lost sheep. That's a very common biblical metaphor for God's people (Psalm 23, Jesus as the Good Shepherd, etc.), but in some ways is a profound spiritual insult. From what I have been able to learn about the world of shepherding (not in the church; on the farm), sheep are stupid animals. They continually lose their direction, the way a cat or dog never does, and even when you find a lost sheep, it rushes to and fro, will not follow you home. So when you find a lost sheep, you need to seize it, throw it to the ground, tie its four legs together, put it over your shoulder, and carry it home. That's the only way to save a lost sheep.

So what does this tell us about ourselves? It tells us exactly what Isaiah 53 tells us, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way..." No exceptions. At the most basic level, this is what it means to be lost. It means to abandon our great shepherd and go our own way, living for ourselves instead of living for Him. And what the parable is making clear (and the lost coin illustrates this too) is that we have no ability to get out of this condition on our own. We are lost, we are dead in our sin and unbelief (Ephesians 2:1-3), and if we are going to get back into the sheepfold of God's favor, love and salvation, it's going to be because of His pursuit of us.

For those of us who have come into the experience of this grace, there is much to celebrate about the diligent pursuit of the good shepherd for us in our condition of lostness, and we treasure how Jesus put us, and all of our sin, on His shoulders and carried us back into His fold by bearing our punishment on the cross.

But for those of you who are not believers, If you're beginning to sense your lostness, if you're seeing that you can't manage life going your own way, if you're finding yourself wanting to escape it and be free, be grateful, because you've not arrived here on your own. That's evidence that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is in pursuit of you.

A Joyful Celebration

Now the second thing to see in these parables is that, upon the successful completion of the pursuit, there is a joyful celebration. At the end of both of these parables, the note that is struck is one of joy (5 times in verses 3-10):

"⁵And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶And 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.'"

"⁹And 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.'"

And Jesus wants to make sure that we understand that what He is depicting in these parables is the joy of heaven at the repentance (turning) of even one sinner back to God:

"⁷Just 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."

"¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.""

Jesus wants us to know that rescuing lost sinners brings joy to God's heart. He takes pleasure in this! There's a heavenly party upon the conversion of every lost sinners, brought back into God's fold. Can you imagine God celebrating? Can you fathom what kind of intensity of joy and delight and pleasure must be in the heart of God when we are told that God rejoices? Reflecting on Zephaniah 3:17, John Piper writes:

"I hear the booming of Niagara Falls mingled with the trickle of a mossy mountain stream. I hear the blast of Mt. St. Helens mingled with a kitten's purr. I hear the power of an East coast hurricane and the barely audible puff of a night snow in the woods. And I hear the unimaginable roar of the sun 865,000 miles thick, one million three hundred thousand times bigger than the earth, and nothing but fire, 1,000,000 degrees centigrade on the

cooler surface of the corona. But I hear this unimaginable roar mingled with the tender, warm crackling of the living room logs on a cozy winter's night." (P.O.G. p. 180)

And this joy is directed towards you: "¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God *over one sinner* who repents." Amazing! David Crowder has a song called "Wonderful King" and one of the lines says, "You fill our hearts with more than we can hold inside and so we sing..." That's a good description of why we worship; I hope that is why you sing: because He's so filled your heart with joy that you can't keep it in!

But has it ever dawned on you God sings over you? When I read Luke 15, and Zephaniah 3, and Jeremiah 32, I hear the voice of God speak (no, sings!) to me, "I love you. I rejoice in you. I have such pleasure in you that I exult over you with loud singing. You fill My heart with more than I can hold inside and so I sing!" How incredible, that a God so great and so rich and so self-sufficient, with His own glory and all the universe at His disposal for pleasure would sing over sinners like you and me!

Christians, can you hear the sounds of heavenly celebration over you? Do you truly believe, and does it thrill you, that because of Jesus' diligent pursuit of you in your lostness, and your union with Jesus through faith, that God Almighty rejoices in you in a way that makes all the other joys and desires and pleasures of every person on the planet look like a dixie cup compared to the Atlantic Ocean? "²³...so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me."

I know I say that often, but I want to regularly remind you (because Satan would love to regularly remind you of the opposite) that God doesn't merely tolerate you. His face towards you is not a perpetual frown. God takes pleasure in sinners (who repent!); He delights to

save sinners, so much that He would deliver up His Beloved Son to the agonies of Calvary, that we might be delivered into the deep embrace of His love.

And that He tells this story having shared table with tax collectors and sinners, the message is clear: any prostitute, any low-life, scum-of-the-earth sinner who is hated and despised, anyone with secret shame or hidden darkness in their past can look at Jesus' dinner guests and confidently say, "If He pursues the tax collector in love, then there is hope for me." There is great hope, provided you know you're lost.

Missionary Application

Now that leads right into the application that I think Jesus wants for us to take away. I dare say that I can enter into the mind of Jesus and say with a pretty firm degree of confidence in this instance what Jesus is wanting us to take away from these parables. These parables are to a certain degree a heart-warming depiction of the missionary heart of God, the passion with which He pursues the lost, and the joy He has in the repentance of the lost. But remember, what prompts Jesus to share these stories is the opposition of the religiously self-righteous (the ninety-nine who don't need repentance, v.7).

Jesus' intent in sharing these parables is not to warm hearts, but to rebuke heartless apathy towards the plight of the lost. This is why Jesus has come: to seek and to save the lost (5:32, 19:10), and He means for His disciples to be engaged in this diligent pursuit of lost sinners with Him: "¹⁰From now on you will be catching men...". It's how this book concludes:

"⁴⁶and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father

upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”” (cf. Acts 1:8)

To renounce everything and carry a cross and come after Jesus (Luke 14) means joining Jesus in His mission to seek and to save the lost: sharing the gospel and our lives with men and women and children who are cut off from Christ, without hope and without peace in this world, with a view towards seeing people passing from darkness to light, from death to life, from the power of Satan to God, from unbelief to belief.

I want to be excited about what excites Jesus, and that's pursuing the lost. Seeing non-Christians meet Jesus is the most wonderful, exhilarating thing in the world to be a part of. It's what you were redeemed to be a part of! In the person of the Spirit, you have been given God's missionary heart to join Him in His mission. That's the invitation to the disciples, and the self-righteous Pharisees and scribes, and that's the invitation to all of us. What a privilege! What a blessing!

Meals are a simple way to do that. Jesus ate with sinners! This is a strategy of mission that all of you can do. You may have a passion to get on a street corner and engage strangers with the message of Jesus, and we see Jesus engage in that way of mission too (woman at the well). But Jesus was known as a friend of sinners because He ate with them. He didn't run projects or establish ministries or put on events. He ate with people. And if you have a passion for Jesus and routinely share meals with unbelievers, you'll be doing mission.

"Our love for outsiders runs deep as it flows from remembering ourselves to be outsiders who have been dearly loved by a lavishly hospitable God." We once were lost; now have been found.

Empowered by His Spirit, we have the privilege of joining Jesus as He seeks and save the lost. Until Jesus comes again, may we never weary of the pursuit, nor callously grumble with the Pharisees over those who are doing it differently than we think they ought to.

