

**IF MY HEAD WEREN'T TIED ON
Luke 15:1-10**

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Amarillo, Texas
July 19, 2020**

When I was in elementary school, I left jackets, coats, hats, gloves, and trumpets – not to mention school books – from here to Kalamazoo. Every day, when I came home, my mother would note the missing objects. A daily inventory. The interrogation would begin.

“Howie, where is your coat, son?” “Hey, what about those gloves?”

“Well, uh...about those gloves....” My poor mother chased trumpets on school buses, and I was considered the stock boy for the school’s lost and found since I made countless contributions. On more than one occasion, my mother said, in less than a delightful tone, “Son, you would lose your head if it weren’t tied on.” I’ve envisioned what that might look like – a headless body, no eyes, groping around searching for its head. Thank goodness the good Lord tied my head on.

Today we’re going to talk about lost things – a lost sheep and a lost coin.

John F. Kennedy said that there was once a legendary baseball player who never failed to get a hit at bat. He never dropped a ball or missed a grounder. He threw with unerring accuracy. On the base paths, he had the speed and grace of a leopard. In fact, he would have been one of the all-time greats except for one thing: No one was ever able to get him to put down his beer and hotdog and come out of the stadium seats to actually play the game. The grumbler in the stands.

In Luke 15:2, the Pharisees and the Scribes are grumbling at Jesus. “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” That’s what prompted Jesus to tell the parable – the parable of lost things. These parables clarify Jesus’ association with the “sinners” and invite the Pharisees to share in God’s delight over reclaiming those who are lost.

Rather than get into an immediate debate with the cynics and critics, Jesus tells them a story – three stories. And today, we’ll look at two.

In 15:3, Jesus tells a parable. In reality, there are three parables, but the fact that Luke uses a singular noun is telling us that all the parables are really the same parable.

As Jesus preaches the good news, the tax collectors and sinners are drawing near to him. They want to hear this new rabbi. The tax collectors were not the larger tax barons, but those who actually collected the tolls, the tariffs, the imposts, and the customs. They were drawn from the ranks of those who were so desperate that they were willing to engage in a dishonorable profession to survive.

They collected more than their official fees and lived off the dishonest gain of the marginal markup. In fact, John the Baptizer tells them to take no more tax than what was really due. And the Pharisee, in his prayer, lumps tax gatherers together with evildoers, adulterers, and robbers (Luke 18:11).

The Pharisees refer to Jesus in verse 2 as “this one.” Words of contempt. They don’t even call Him by name. “This one” receives sinners and eats with them. Perhaps they were playing off scriptures like Psalm 1, where we read, “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the company of mockers.” But yet Jesus clearly receives sinners. He hosts them.

The Pharisees had worked hard to obtain their status, and they didn’t need anyone like Jesus coming along and erasing the boundaries that kept their holy selves apart from those of ill-repute.

Meal times showed who was in and who was out. Who gets an invitation? But notice, Jesus actually eats with sinners and saints alike.

Knowing their hearts, Jesus tells the Pharisees a parable. He tells them a story about a shepherd who has 100 sheep, and one is lost. Wouldn’t he leave the 99 in the pasture and go after the lost one until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. He calls his friends and neighbors together and declares, “Rejoice with me. I have found my sheep which was lost.” I tell you, in the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance.

Look at the words – rejoice (v. 6), joy (v. 7) over finding that which is lost.

The image of a shepherd and flock is used in the Old Testament to represent God’s care for His people Israel. In fact, there was a rabbinic legend that told of Moses’s call. While Moses was in the wilderness shepherding the sheep of his father-in-law, a young lamb ran away. Moses searched for it and found the lamb at the well where it had stopped for a drink. Moses is reported to have said to the sheep, “I did not know that you ran away because of your thirst. You must be weary.” So Moses took the kid on his shoulders and carried it back. Then God said, “Because you have mercy in leading the flock of a mere man, you will surely tend to my flock, Israel.”

A good shepherd would never let a sheep be lost, saying, “Hey, you win some, you lose some. On average, it’s not bad.” Even with a large flock – 100 sheep – every sheep matters to the shepherd. He has taken his count. He realizes that one is missing. And it matters.

On every plane, the flight attendant counts the passengers and makes note of how many of are on the plane at take off – a head count. I can’t imagine for a moment that if the plane landed with one passenger missing, the flight attendant saying to the captain, “Well, you know, we hit 99 percent today. That’s not bad for our industry.”

To portray one as more important than the 99 highlights the emotions felt over the lost sheep. The value of something becomes heightened when it is lost.

Bishop Roy Nichols tells of a young mother of three who went to see a psychiatrist. As he began in in-depth analysis of her life, he asked which of her children she loved the most. Immediately she said, "I love all of my children the same." He waited a moment. The answer seemed to come too quickly. He probed deeper. "Come now, you love all three children the same?" "Yes, that's right. I love them all exactly the same."

He reacted assertively. "Come off it, woman. It is psychologically impossible for anyone to regard any three human beings exactly the same. If you're not willing to level with me about your feelings, we might as well terminate our session at once."

The young woman broke down and cried. "All right, I do not love all three of my children the same. When one of my children is sick, I love that child more. When one of my children is in pain or lost, I love that child more. When one of my children is wayward – I mean, really bad – I love that child more." Then she concluded, "Except for those exceptions, I do love all three of my children the same."

God is like that shepherd. God is like that mother. He especially loves His lost children and goes to seek those who need a savior. God loves us while we are *yet* sinners, giving us the gift of the Christ.

Stubborn sheep, sometimes, refuse to budge. Though he finds the sheep, the shepherd needs to get it back to the flock. He just throws it over his shoulders – a sheep can weigh about 70 pounds – and he rejoices. Notice, he calls his neighbors, his friends. "Rejoice." Then he tells us that there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.

In a communal society like the first century, in order for joy to be real, it must be shared. In each of these stories, we are to rejoice (or celebrate) because that which is lost has been found.

Do you know the joy of finding that which is lost?

I received a call one Wednesday night at about 10:30. I don't get calls from the youth staff on Wednesday nights at 10:30 to chitchat about the batting averages of the Texas Rangers. It needs to be a serious call at that time. They didn't want to over-alarm me, but they had been looking for C.J., a student at the time, for a couple of hours, but he was nowhere to be found. They were shutting down the church, turning out the lights, locking everything up and going home – just hoping that he had taken a ride with one of his friends and had not informed his parents about his alternative plan.

I tossed and turned in bed, with my phone in my hand – knowing that any moment I would get the call. That Bradley would call me or C.J.'s dad, Earl, would call me – that somebody would call me and report, "We found him. C.J. just decided to go home with a friend." I tried to create a hundred scenarios in my mind by which C.J. was okay. I wrote a hundred good endings to C.J.'s story.

I could not go to sleep until I knew he was okay. I called his mother, two or three times. “Have you heard anything?” “No, pastor, told you I’d call you.”

When I could take it no more, I called the youth staff and said, “I’m headed to the church. I’m going to look to see if he’s somewhere in the building.” They had looked, but I had to satisfy myself. I could only imagine him frightened. Have you ever been in this building – about 300,000 square feet – in total darkness? Shadows loom large. I’ve been here really late at night, in the wee hours of the morning. Too many hallways. Too many doors. Too many radiators rumbling. Too many shadows. It’s not the most comforting place to walk around in the pitch dark.

The youth staff, C.J.’s dad, and I restarted the search for C.J. We walked up and down the hallways, banging on the doors and yelling for C.J., hoping that somewhere, somehow, he was okay.

Bradley came up with the idea to intentionally set off the alarm to awaken C.J., if, perhaps, he had fallen asleep. By the time I was punching the buttons, ready to set off the alarm, I heard C.J.’s dad walking down the hallway saying, “Son, where have you been?” C.J. had been found.

During one of the youth activities, he found a couch in a Sunday School department that was all too comfortable for a tired young man. He’d fallen asleep – a dead sleep – and heard none of the pounding or beating on the doors or calling of his name. Finally, at last, he heard some of the shouting and pounding and was awakened from a dead sleep at about midnight.

After a four hour nap, C. J. was found. I could not sleep a wink that night worrying about C.J. – the lost student. I had to go look.

God worries about the lost. Like the shepherd who has lost a sheep. Like a father who has lost a son. Like a woman who has lost a coin. God is driven by His passion for the lost.

Do you have a passion for the lost? Do I have a passion for the lost?

He tells another story in verses 8 and 9. God is like a woman who has ten coins. She loses one. She doesn’t say, “Well, I’ve got 90 percent of my life’s savings.” No, she searches and seeks. She is diligent until she finds it. And then, she calls her neighbors and says, “Rejoice with me, I have found my lost coin.”

The coin was a drachma – a Greek coin equated with the Roman denarius. It was the price of a sheep and one-fifth the price of an ox, each coin. She’s not a woman of means. She lives in a one-room peasant hut with small slits for windows; the light of her oil lamp lights the entire house.

Both in verse 7 and in verse 10, the point is scored. Heaven rings with joyous laughter over the lost being found. It happens in heaven in verse 7. The joyous laughter happens before God’s angels in verse 10. These are ways of speaking of God’s own joy. Let me give you the

translation straight – a way Luke would have never written it out of respect for God: God jumps for joy when the lost are found.

God rejoices when sinners repent and respond to the good news. If a shepherd will go to this much effort to recover a sheep, if a woman will go through all this to find a coin, how much more will God exert to recover a lost person? God is not happy until all who are lost is found.

Can you imagine a family, maybe with six kids, sitting down to Sunday lunch. Little Sara, the smallest, isn't there. The head of the family says, "Well, we're not going to worry about Sara. She didn't make it, but, you know, there are seven out of the eight of us here. Mom and I are here, and the five other kids are here. Let's not worry about little Sara. Let's go on with the meal." (David Garland, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 608-619)

No, the mother and father, not knowing where little Sara was, would completely abandon the rest of the family and go searching with all of their soul for Sara. You don't just let Sara go. And somebody doesn't say three months from now, "Well, you know, I remember Sara used to sit here. Wonder whatever happened to her?"

Jesus is saying to the Pharisees, "I seek the lost for God, these sinners – it's not the saints I'm worrying about – and you should seek them, too."

I. The first point of the parable? The Pharisees looked down on sinners, but Jesus looked for them.

Are you looking for any sinners? Those who are lost? Those who, like you, need the grace of God to get a place at the table of rejoicing in God's kingdom?

Once He finds them, he dines with them, receives them, and calls them into the kingdom of God.

There is another thing I want you to see in this parable.

II. God takes the initiative.

Ezekiel himself announced that God would take over the role of a shepherd who would seek the lost sheep and bring back the stray (Ezekiel 34:11-16). These are parables that show Jesus' activity in seeking out the lost and conferring God's grace on them. Jesus is doing nothing less than the action of God, a God who takes the initiative and going after the lost.

If you're lost today, God is looking for you. If you're a sinner today, God has come to save you.

God rejoices, jumps for joy, over finding the lost.

Grace is first. Repentance comes when Christ finds you. Grace comes, and, as a result of grace, you repent. And that which is lost is now found.

There is a third and final thing I want you to see in this passage.

III. All the prejudices of the Pharisees are found in the main characters Jesus introduced.

Shepherds were really not considered a worthy people. They often were suspected of leading their sheep to graze on other people's land. They were always called thieves. They had the image of gypsies. Josephus even tries to explain away why Moses would be a keeper of sheep. And, of course, a woman was considered inferior in the first century.

And Jesus chooses a woman to illustrate what God is doing. He is looking for the lost.

The shepherd is not inferior. The woman is not inferior. They both are like a God who is looking for the lost.

Who are you praying for who is lost? Which lost sheep are you, like the shepherd, going after? Are you diligent in seeking the lost? Are you burdened by those who have not yet fully received the grace of God? Do you understand the magnitude of being lost?

I can't imagine just locking up the church that Wednesday night, going home, going to bed, and saying, "Well, wonder whatever became of C.J.? I don't know, he will probably turn up some day. I'm going on to bed." No, I wouldn't have slept a wink until the moment C.J. was found. How much more burden should I have for the souls of men who are dying – lost and separated from God not for a decade or a century, but for eternity.

God, give us a burden for the lost and give us the joy that causes the angels to jump when those who do not know are found in Your grace. Amen.