

Luke 15:1-10
Regaining the Lost

God has many attributes. Some belong to Him alone, like omniscience, omnipotence, and immutability. Others we share with Him, like wisdom, love, and mercy. Some attributes God is particularly known for, such as holiness or justice. Others are more difficult to comprehend, like eternity and infinitude. One attribute, though, for which God is not usually known, is joy.

Yet, the Bible often talks about God's joy. God has been eternally joyful in heaven. Consider,
"Splendor and majesty are before Him,
Strength and joy are in His place" (1 Chronicles 16:27).

As God worked wonderfully on the behalf of His chosen nation, He
"Brought forth His people with joy,
His chosen ones with a joyful shout" (Psalm 105:43)

God rejoiced over them as a young man over his bride,
"For as a young man marries a virgin,
So your sons will marry you;
And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
So your God will rejoice over you" (Isaiah 62:5).

While God often reminded Israel that He would punish them for their disobedience, He also promised that He would joyfully reward them for obeying, "then the Lord your God will prosper you abundantly in all the work of your hand, in the offspring of your body and in the offspring of your cattle and in the produce of your ground, for the Lord will again rejoice over you for good, just as He rejoiced over your fathers" (Deuteronomy 30:9).

Though too frequently frustrating God and requiring Him to exert His wrath, God still rejoiced when His nation repented,

³⁷"Behold, I will gather them out of all the lands to which I have driven them in My anger, in My wrath and in great indignation; and I will bring them back to this place and make them dwell in safety . . .
⁴¹I will rejoice over them to do them good and will faithfully plant them in this land with all My heart and with all My soul" (Jeremiah 32:37, 41).

Over the remnant, Zephaniah said that,
"The Lord your God is in your midst,
A victorious warrior.
He will exult over you with joy,
He will be quiet in His love,
He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy" (Zephaniah 3:17).

God is nothing if not a joyful God. And He rejoices greatly when people are saved. In chapter 15 of his gospel, Luke relates three parables Jesus told expressly to point out the great joy that occurs in heaven

when a person is saved. Two of these parables are brief, and the third is a much longer story. We will look at the two shorter in this passage today.

Context and Method

These stories cannot be understood properly without context. We must remember that Jesus was not speaking in a vacuum; He was addressing specific people in a particular time and place. He had an audience. These were not theoretical propositions or hypothesis for academic study. These were narratives spoken to people who understood both their message and their implications. Much like a political cartoon today, the people to whom Jesus spoke understood what He was saying.

There is a common pattern throughout the stories. In each of the two stories, something valuable was lost. In the first it was a sheep, and in the second a coin. Then there was a search for the lost item. This prompted the ethical question of whether it was right to search. Should the other sheep be left while the shepherd searched? Should the woman have neglected her other tasks while she looked for her coin? Was that the right thing to do? Was it a good use of time and resources? The Pharisees must have loved debating these.

Then there was the implication about the kingdom of God. This was the moral application. This was the reason Jesus told the parables. The comparison with Jesus and His purpose in coming was too obvious to be missed. Like sinners, the lost items (sheep and coin) are unable to save themselves. Like God, there is a seeker Who unrelentingly searches for them until they are found and restored.

As Luke relates the story, as Jesus was teaching, “all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him” (v. 1). It is curious to note that those people (sinners) kept coming to Jesus and not to the Pharisees. The self-righteousness of the Pharisees offered little to the sinful masses. It was impossible to keep all their laws and rituals. There was only frustration and disappointment. The Pharisees had no joy in the salvation of the lost. They had no sense of the heart of God toward sinners.

As Isaiah put it so eloquently,

“Because this people draw near with their words
And honor Me with their lip service,
But they remove their hearts far from Me,
And their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote
Therefore behold, I will once again deal marvelously with this people, wondrously marvelous;
And the wisdom of their wise men will perish,
And the discernment of their discerning men will be concealed” (Isaiah 29:13-14).

Jesus provided hope, not condemnation. He offered fellowship, not exclusion. He promised salvation, not judgment.

As we have come to expect, association with sinners did not meet with the approval of the self-righteous Pharisees who lurked about seeking for a cause by which to accuse Jesus. Tax collectors were extortioners. They were usually mentioned with sinners as if the two were interchangeable. Since the Pharisees refused to associate with such people, they assumed that any rabbi who wanted to be taken

seriously would do the same. Since Jesus particularly chose to mingle with such people, naturally “both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, ‘this man receives sinners and eats with them’” (v. 2).

We have seen such behavior before. Recall that when Jesus called Matthew (a tax collector) to be His disciple, the latter gave a dinner to celebrate his conversion. When “²⁹Levi [Matthew] gave a big reception for Him in his house; and there was a great crowd of tax collectors and other people who were reclining at the table with them. ³⁰The Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling at His disciples, saying, ‘why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?’” (Matthew 5:29-30).

To gather with sinner is one thing; to eat with them quite another. Even the Pharisees were willing to have sinners in their presence if it served a purpose. Remember the man afflicted with dropsy who was invited to the home of the leader of the synagogue to see if Jesus could be lured into doing a work of healing on the Sabbath. But to share a meal in this culture was an act of fellowship. It required a certain level of intimacy. It implied relationship. And this, Pharisees and scribes would never admit to having with sinners.

At this point it is tempting to consider the influence of Matthew. One must only speculate, since the Bible is silent, but I wonder how many of Matthew’s old acquaintances and colleagues were among those many sinners who gather around Jesus from time to time. How many came to that celebratory dinner he offered upon his conversion. How many after that began to follow from curiosity. How many then became genuinely interested. How many then converted and followed Jesus as a disciple. We cannot know, but we can hope, and perhaps hope, as well, to emulate such devotion to evangelism among our former friends.

The Lost Sheep

Jesus began the stories with a rhetorical question “what man among you?” (v. 4). This drew the audience into the story and made them participate in the choices made. Jesus told these stories as an act of compassion. He was still trying and willing to turn the Pharisees from their wicked ways. These parables are meant to be didactic. The context is important. Jesus is rebuking the Pharisees for their contempt of wicked people. It is worth assessing the condition of our own hearts in this area as we begin.

As Jesus tells it, there was a man who “has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them” (v. 4). Would it not make sense that he would “leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?” (v. 4). This was a world of shepherds. The analogy was common in the Old Testament scriptures as an illustration of God’s care and provision for Israel.

“The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1).

“Like a shepherd He will tend His flock,
In His arm He will gather the lambs
And carry them in His bosom;
He will gently lead the nursing ewes” (Isaiah 40:11).

“¹²As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day. ¹³I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them to their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the streams, and in all the inhabited places of the land. ¹⁴I will feed them in a good pasture, and their grazing ground will be on the mountain heights of Israel. There they will lie down on good grazing ground and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest,’ declares the Lord God. ¹⁶I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick” (Ezekiel 34:12-16).

Yet despite the analogy of God as a shepherd, (and the fact that many Old Testament saints had kept flocks) shepherds were not held in high esteem in the culture of the time of Jesus. They were at the bottom of the social ladder. In fact, they were only slightly above the despised tax collectors. This was because shepherds were invariably unskilled and uneducated. Shepherding was among the worst legal occupations because watching sheep was a daily task and, therefore, shepherds were notorious for not keeping the Sabbath. With the endless man-made regulations that had evolved over the years, it was not possible for shepherds to stay ceremonially clean. Not surprisingly, over time, stereotypes developed that such people were dishonest and untrustworthy. So deep was this conviction that shepherds were not permitted to testify in court since it was assumed they would lie.

This particular shepherd had one hundred sheep. It is very unlikely that these were all his; if a person possessed that much livestock, he was wealthy enough to have slaves or to hire someone to watch over his sheep. Perhaps this man had several sheep, and he was watching the combined flocks of the village with other shepherds. That was a common custom of the time. It provided more security and protection and was sensible if there were several people who wanted to pasture their flocks at any one time. So this person was watching a flock of sheep, and some of them were not his.

At some point, the shepherd realized that one of the flock is missing. He must have been a very diligent shepherd to discern that one of one hundred sheep was missing! This was not good news since sheep are notoriously stupid and defenseless. They have neither claws nor teeth (at least not the kind of teeth with which to deter a predator). They are not fast. They are not clever. In fact, a sheep can fall over and die simply because with its low center of gravity and short legs, it cannot regain its footing. It will simply starve to death or die of thirst. A lost sheep is a dangerous situation.

Since the shepherd was legally, and financially, responsible for the sheep, it made sense that he “go after the one which is lost until he finds it” (v. 4). The remaining sheep could be left with the other shepherds while the shepherd searched. Since the sheep may have been wandering for hours (think of how long it may have taken to notice one missing sheep from a flock of one hundred) the search took some time. Finally, after much searching, “when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing” (v. 5). The sheep was probably exhausted, so he placed the sheep over his shoulders, bound its four feet together around his neck and carried the animal home. Recognizing that an adult male sheep can easily weigh one hundred pounds, and the shepherd had been searching for hours, this required no little effort. Since he took the sheep home and not back to the pasture indicates that it was nightfall. The shepherd had, perhaps, been searching all day and stumbled home at night.

So thankful was he that, when he made it back to the village, he gathered his neighbors together and said “rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!” (v. 6). Quite a celebration it must have been for many in the village, who no doubt had heard about the lost sheep and wondered for both the safety of it and the shepherd in search of it, were waiting for the news.

Having told the story, Jesus concluded, “I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (v. 7). As we have mentioned before, the use of “I tell you” was intentionally emphatic on the part of Jesus. He was driving home the point to the audience. He wanted the Pharisees and scribes to attend to the lesson. He wanted to make certain they did not miss the fact that those who are apathetic to the tragedy of the lost do possess the heart of God. Jesus came “to seek and save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). It was important for those who did not care about that mission to understand where they stood in the eyes of God.

But who were the ninety-nine? Many suggest that they represent the faithful Christian who did not stray from the truth. This line of reasoning, however, has two problems. First, the audience Jesus was addressing was made up of Pharisees, scribes, and others who believed themselves to be righteous enough to merit salvation. They hardly fit the common understanding of faithful Christians. Second, was it sensible that there was more joy in heaven over a Christian who fell away and then repented than there was over a solid, God-fearing believer who served the Lord faithfully their entire life? It cannot be likely. Instead, it seems that the best analogy for the ninety-nine is that these represent self-righteous people. Again, Jesus knows to whom He is speaking. This story is for them. The wording can be explained as “need no repentance” is the equivalent of “think they need no repentance.” Jesus spoke as we do, often informally, and the vocabulary of the text bears out this interpretation.

The Lost Coin

The second story has the same hometown feeling as the first. That is, it was a story to which the audience could relate. Again we have a poor person of little social standing. In this case, a woman. If shepherds were of little account to the Pharisees and scribes, a woman was even less valuable. As a side note, while God is often pictured as a shepherd, He is also pictured in female roles. Think of Psalm 23:5,

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You have anointed my head with oil”

Preparing a meal and anointing a guest with oil was the work of a woman. Also, Jesus spoke of Himself as a mother hen, “How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings” (Luke 13:34). While low social classes and women were seen as insignificant to the Pharisees and scribes, they were not seen in that way by the Savior.

This particular woman “has ten silver coins and loses one coin” (v. 8). The coin was a *drachma* which was equal to about one day’s wage. To a poor woman, ten such coins was a significant savings. In a barter economy like that of the time, actual coinage was rare and even more valuable than today. It may have been her dowry, a special gift from her father in case her husband died. In any case, the woman had lost ten percent of her life savings in a moment.

Jesus did not relate how she lost the coin (neither did he blame the shepherd for negligence). That was not the point. The coin was lost and must be found. Desperate, she would naturally “light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it” (v. 8). That she would light a lamp may indicate that it was night, or that the small hovel in which she lived had no windows. She searched the dirt floor looking until the coin was found. And like the shepherd, when she discovered the lost coin, she gathered her neighbors and announced “rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!” (v. 9).

Again Jesus drove the point home, “in the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (v. 10). His charge against the Pharisees was not to be missed. If it was sensible for a shepherd to search for a sheep or a woman to search for a coin, how could these supposed stewards of God not eagerly search for lost souls. As an aside, I think these stories must have been a great encouragement to the ‘sinners’ who were on the periphery of the conversation. To know that there was a God Who would search for them so diligently must have been a great comfort. No wonder that sinners sought out Jesus.

The theological lessons were clear. The shepherd and the woman represented the Messiah, come to redeem that which was lost. The sheep and coin were sinners unable to save themselves. We are reminded that God’s love is active, not passive. Christ does not pity; He saves. The shepherd did not pout and worry over his lost sheep. The woman did not bewail her lost coin. They both diligently sought and found what was lost.

Christ left heaven, came into a fallen world, and did not rest until He had atoned for our sins,
“Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

“Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2).

Takeaways

Think of it. We can add to the joy of heaven by leading a person to Christ. How will you participate in that today?