

I Once Was Lost

Introduction

The Text

¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

³ So 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? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ 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.’ ⁷ 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.

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? ⁹ 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.’ ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (Luke 15:1–10)

A Nervous Preacher

- A. In [Luke 15](#), Jesus tells three parables one after the other. Traditionally they’ve been referred to as (1) The Parable of the Lost Sheep; (2) The Parable of the Lost Coin; and (3) The Parable of the Prodigal Son. They all kind of build and elaborate on each other.
1. This morning, as you can tell by what we just read, we are going to focus in on the first two and, though I’ll reference The Parable of the Prodigal Son, we’ll really dive into that one in later weeks.
- B. Now, If I’m honest with you, there are times where I come to a text in Scripture that I’m going to be preaching on and, in my preparations and things, I get a little nervous. Sometimes it’s because a text is difficult, hard-hitting, or confusing, or I’m not quite sure what to do with it.
1. But other times, it’s actually because a text is so good, so powerful, so beautiful, that I fear, no matter what I do with it, I’m never going to do it justice. Whatever I may cobble together in a sermon or two, it would never be good enough for this text, it will never convey the fullness of what’s there.
 - a. Well, I especially felt this kind of nervous when approaching [Luke 15](#) and the three parables here. What we have before us is one of the most well-known, well-loved portions of Scripture. It’s a chapter I’ve been so excited to get to, but now that we’re finally here, I’m thinking, there’s no way I can preach this. It’s too good.
 - i. Nevertheless, by God’s grace, here I am, and I pray I can be of some service to you for the Lord’s honor in all of this.

Deep-Seated Desires

- A. Now, one of the things I found myself wondering as I was reading this chapter is: Why? Why are these verses so popular? Why do we love these parables so much? Why do they capture our hearts the way that they do?
1. As I began to study them in more detail, I believe I stumbled upon the answer. The long and short of it is this: We all love these parables so much because they speak to the things we all so desperately long for. They strike at something deep in us. They push through all the externals and superficial stuff of our lives and go straight for the deep-seated desires of the human heart.
- B. You see, every human being, it seems to me, is desperately longing for what we might flesh out into three things: (1) To be valued; (2) To be pursued; and (3) To be celebrated.
- C. These are the sorts of things we are aiming for in everything we do. All of our activity, we could say—busy as we are, diverse as it is—has these same basic goals: I want to be valued, pursued, and celebrated. Let me show you what I mean:
1. The woman, spending hours at the gym, and hours at the mall, and hours in front of the mirror. When she gets those jeans on, that makeup on, that hair done up just right—underneath it all, isn't this what it's about? "I want a man to notice me and find me valuable, to pursue me, and when he gets me to celebrate, delight in, rejoice over me."
 2. Isn't this what the man is after when he's applying for work? "I've got to show my value—make sure they see my wins, my resume, my portfolio—so that I get that call back and they celebrate what a great new hire they got."
 3. Isn't this what every child longs to feel from their parents? "That they value me, pursue me, celebrate me." My kids just had what they call "Show Week" at the place where their learning gymnastics. And the parents get to come in and watch. And it's amazing, isn't it, without fail, when a kid does something on the bar or the beam or the mat, what's the first thing that they do? They turn and look for their parents. Did you see that? And you give the thumbs up and you smile and they smile back. You see, it's in us. We want someone to notice us and show up for us and celebrate us, take pictures, throw parties, and this sort of thing.
- D. It's no wonder, then, that, when we come to this text and discover a God who, in a surprising display of love and grace, is doing these very things with and for us, it hits somewhere deep, it resonates, it moves us.
- E. So let's dive in and I'll show you what I mean. I'll organize my thoughts under three headings: (1) He Values Me . . . though I've Stolen from Him; (2) He Pursues Me . . . though I've Run from Him; and (3) He Celebrates Me . . . though I've Crucified Him.

The Parables in Context

- A. Before we look at these three things and how they play out in the two parables in our text, we should, by way of introduction and context, look somewhat briefly at the opening verses. In [vv. 1-2](#), we're given the occasion for these parables, we're told what it was that moved Jesus to tell them,

and who He was telling them to. Hence, they are critical to a proper interpretation and understanding of these parables.

1. Let's look at them again: "¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'"

B. There are really two groups in play here.

1. One is identified as "the tax collectors and sinners" (v. 1).

- a. "Tax collectors", you recall perhaps, were particularly despised by the Jews in the day because, for one thing, they signed up to help the despised Roman nation in their taxation of conquered territories like Israel—they collaborated with their oppressors. But, then, to make it even worse, they added to the oppression. They would demand more than was due from their own countrymen and then keep the excess for themselves.
- b. "Sinners"—These are people whose lifestyle or vocation has them at odds with the law of God and hence puts them outside the bounds of the religious community. The term in many ways is tantamount to the idea of "outsider". They were seen as those outside the covenant community of God's people. That's group one.

2. Group two is composed of "the Pharisees and the scribes" (v. 2).

- a. And here we're simply talking about the religious leaders in Israel at the time, the externally righteous, the ceremonially clean, the people you would think are closest to God.
 - i. And yet, when it comes to how these two groups are responding to Jesus here, the tax collectors and sinners are "all drawing near to hear Him" (v. 1) while the Pharisees and scribes are grumbling: "This man receives sinners and eats with them" (v. 2).

C. The parables that Jesus goes on to share are spoken in response to this grumbling, and directed towards these religious leaders in particular. He's trying to tell them what's really happening as He's sitting around the table with these morally questionable folks and social and religious outcasts.

1. They think that Jesus is simply indulging in corruption and other things along with them. He's saying, "No! I'm trying find that which has been lost. I know that you don't value them. I know that you aren't interested in pursuing them. I know that you don't want to help them find their way back into the family of God and celebrate with them . . . but I do. And I wish you'd join Me and My Father in this mission!"

- a. V. 3: "So He told them this parable . . ." Let's begin to look at these parables in more detail now.

(1) He Values Me . . . though I've Stolen from Him

In the Parables

- A. As we consider these two parables, the first thing that we notice is the way Jesus values us.
1. He communicates this first by talking about the shepherd who notices that one of his sheep has gone missing. He has a fold of 100 sheep, and yet when one wanders off, it doesn't escape him, it really matters to him. He values that sheep.
 2. In the same way, the second parable comes at this idea though this time with the image of a lost silver coin. This woman has ten silver coins (Gk. "drachmas"—it's a coin worth about a day's wage) and she loses one of them. She doesn't just console herself that she still has nine and she'll be just fine. No! That one matters. She notices. She cares. That missing coin is valuable to her.
 - a. And the bottom line here is Jesus is saying: "These tax collectors and sinners are valuable to Me. You, wherever you find yourself today are valuable to Me. I notice you. I miss you when you're gone. You mean something to Me."
- B. I think we all are kind of haunted by this feeling that our lives don't really matter, that in the end no one will really miss us or remember us or notice that we're gone. Have you ever felt that? It's what leads us to do all sorts of silly things to try to prove we are worth something.
1. I know I mentioned this documentary a couple of weeks ago but I've still been thinking about it. It's that documentary entitled Free Solo about the guy who free solo climbed El Capitan in Yosemite. At one point he talks about what drives him to do this crazy stuff. And here's what he says: "[Some] of my mom's favorite sayings are 'presque ne compte pas'—'almost doesn't count'—or 'good enough isn't.' No matter how well I ever do at anything, it's not that good. The bottomless pit of self-loathing. I mean, that's definitely the motivation for some soloing. . . . Look, I don't want to fall off and die . . . but there's a satisfaction to challenging yourself and doing something well. That feeling is heightened when you are for sure facing death. You can't make a mistake. If you're seeking perfection, free soloing is as close as you can get. And it does feel good to feel perfect, for a brief moment."
 - a. Did you hear that? We do all this ridiculous stuff to try to prove to ourselves and others that we are worth something, that we are good enough, that we are valuable. All the while we forget that we are already valuable to God.

Isn't This Me-Centered?

- A. Now, I know for some of us, this idea of God valuing us, celebrating over us, that sort of thing, sounds a bit questionable, a bit me-centered.
1. We've seen how so much of the church has taken the Bible and things and twisted it to make it all about man. And so seeing this distortion on the one side we're prone to

overreact and swing to the opposite side, saying: “No, man is a sinner, a piece of dirt, a worm, nothing more. There’s nothing valuable here. It’s all about God and His glory!”

- a. And, to be sure, we’ll get into some of this, but it’s important to realize that He values you, that He loves you, that you matter to Him, even when you feel like you don’t matter to anyone else on this planet.

B. I want you see I’m not just making this up. Jesus actually says as much all over the place. Let me show you just a few:

1. [Luke 12:6-7](#): “⁶ Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God.⁷ Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.”
2. [Luke 12:22-24](#): “²² Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on.²³ For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.²⁴ Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!”
3. [Matt 12:11:12a](#): “¹¹ Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out?^{12a} Of how much more value is a man than a sheep!”

- a. Jesus’ whole ministry, viewed from one angle at least, is an eloquent and irrefutable testimony to how valuable you are to God. Jesus left the glory He had with the Father before the world ever was, took on human flesh, and entered into this fallen world . . . why? Because you are valuable to Him and His Father. Because He loves you. Because He misses you. Because He wants you to be with Him where He is.

C. Now, the question, really underneath all of this is: Why? We’ve seen that He values us, but why? I think that’s where we can get mixed up and stray into some of that me-centered nonsense. Why are you valuable to God? Do you know? What would you say?

1. If we think that we’re valuable to Him because we’re just that awesome—because of what can do for Him or give to Him or anything like this, because He needs us or is somehow incomplete without us—then we’ve missed it, and we’re twisted up.
2. Because when we read the Scriptures, what we come to find out is that, in the end, we have done nothing but take from Him, steal from Him. This is what will come out so poignantly in The Parable of the Prodigal Son. “I don’t want you dad, but I want your stuff. Give it to me, now.” That’s our story. That’s humanity’s story.
 - a. That’s why I say: “**He Values Me . . . though I’ve Stolen from Him.**” This isn’t: He values me . . . because I’m awesome. It’s more like: He values me . . . because He’s awesome! And, even though I’ve stolen from Him, He still loves me.

D. At the end of the day His valuing of me says more about the measure of His love than it does about the measure of my worth. He gets into a relationship with me, and I don’t bring a credit, I bring a debt, I don’t bring assets, I bring liabilities. But He loves me all the same.

1. And still, we have to ask, then: Why?

Made in His Image

- A. Because He made me in His image, because I'm His child. I believe that every single human being is a lost son or daughter of God.
 1. Now, don't misunderstand me. I am not saying here that everyone is saved. God, though He is Father, will still also be Judge. But I am saying that God designed humanity to be in His family.
 - a. That's what being created in His image means. Let me just take a moment and show you this.
- B. In [Gen 1:27](#) we read that "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."
 1. The next time this idea of being in the image of something else shows up is in [Gen 5:3](#), only now it's not talking about God and human beings, it's talking about father and son: "When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth."
 - a. So this image language is, as evidenced by the immediate context, father-son language, parent-child language, familial language.
 - i. This is why Luke, when he's outlining Jesus' genealogy, even goes so far as to call Adam explicitly: "the son of God" ([Luke 3:38](#)).
- C. So to be created in the image of God, then, means that you were created, intended by God to be like a kid to Him, to be a part of His family, to be His child, His son or His daughter. That's why you are valuable to Him! It is not because of what you can do or give but because of who you are, because of who He's created you to be, because He's put His image on you and you are His child, lost or not.
 1. This is why Paul would stand in the midst of the Areopagus there in Athens and declare in [Acts 17:29](#) that "We are all 'God's offspring' [Gk. *genos* = family]."
 - a. He's talking to pagan, unbelieving Gentiles and he says: "You're God's kids! He made you. He loves you. What are you doing running after all these idols? Get back into the family!"
- D. And this is why, brothers and sisters, God values you. This is why He notices when, like a sheep, you've gone missing from the fold, or when like a coin, you've somehow slipped out of His pocket.
 1. And this is why He's going to pursue you so relentlessly.

(2) He Pursues Me . . . though I've Run from Him

In the Parables

- A. And now we come to the second piece these parables really bring out for us. He's pursuing us. No doubt, He's in hot pursuit of some of us in this room right now. You matter to Him. He misses you. He's coming after you.
1. In the first parable we see this in the way the shepherd responds when he realizes one of sheep is missing: He "Leave[s] the ninety-nine in the open country, and go[es] after the one that is lost, until he finds it?" (v. 4).
 - a. "I'm going to scour the countryside, traverse hill and valley—whatever I have to do to get you back in the fold."
 2. And we see the same sort of idea in the second parable: "[W]hat 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? (v. 8).
 - a. We get this sense here that this women is unwilling to let the coin go. She's going to turn over tables and chairs, she's going to lift up couch cushions (God knows what's in there), to find this coin.

Tax Collectors and Sinners?!

- A. And, again, it's all a picture for us of God's pursuit of the tax collector and sinner—of people like you and me, messed up, broken, rebellious. I suppose this is why I say it like I do: "He Pursues Me . . . though I've Run from Him."
1. You see, we can forget in these first two parables that you and I are not just cute, helpless little sheep or precious, shiny silver coins.
 2. And we also might mistakenly think that this idea of God losing us has to do somehow with his own haphazardness, carelessness, or irresponsibility—like God is somehow pictured here as that person who's always misplacing his keys or wallet or whatever.
 - a. No, the issue in our lostness is not that God is haphazard, or careless, or irresponsible but that man is rebellious. Again, the parable of the Prodigal Son will bring this out unmistakably. We are lost because we have left.
- B. But God pursues us anyways. That's the amazing reality of the gospel. But, of course, there's more.

(3) He Celebrates Me . . . though I've Crucified Him

In the Parables

- A. For both of these parables, it seems to me that the emphasis, the most prominent note struck, the thing that everything else is climbing to, is actually this idea of God's joy and His celebrating when He's found what's been lost. It is a window into the heart of our Father that, honestly, almost seems too good to be true.

B. Look back at the first of our parables: “⁴What 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?⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.⁶ 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.’”

1. Now, stop for a moment. I wonder if you’ve had a moment like this with the Lord—where you sense His joy, His pleasure, His rejoicing over you and in you, the way He celebrates His relationship with you? Where you feel like He just picked you up and was carrying you back to safety, singing all the while.

a. When I got saved—when God pursued me and opened my eyes and I finally turned to Him, I experienced. The Good Shepherd had me up over His shoulders at that point. A burden I didn’t even know I was carrying was lifted. A joy I didn’t even think was possible, I was experiencing. Because He was pouring it out.

i. There’s that wonderful text in 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” (Zeph 3:17).

2. And it’s amazing. This text says that He gets so stoked on finding you that it’s simply not enough for just Him to be singing that chorus, He’s got to call in His friends to sing along as well. His joy is so great that it has to be shared. He’s going to call in the neighborhood. Because He found you. What?!

C. And the second parable says virtually the same thing.

Tax Collectors and Sinners?!

A. And again, all this sounds well and fine until we remember who we’re talking about here. Jesus is still talking about tax collectors and sinners—people who have not only stolen from him, run from him, they’ve in the process seriously wounded him.

1. We know, of course, that it is because of sinners like us that Jesus is ultimately crucified.

B. Again, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, as we’ll see in the coming weeks, speaks eloquently on this point. You remember the youngest son comes and asks his father to give him his inheritance early so he can go off and enjoy his life out in the world. Well, one commentator points out that, at this time, as I suppose it still is in ours, a child’s inheritance only came to him upon the father’s death. So for the son to come asking for his inheritance in advance like this, he is saying to his dad, in effect: “I wish you were already dead! Hurry up and croak already old man, so I can get on with enjoying my life. There’s a big world out there and you are keeping me from it.”

1. And we all, brothers and sisters, have said this to God: “I want your stuff, but I don’t want You. I wish you would just die already.” To which God responds: “Okay, I will . . . die for you!”

- a. When He puts His own beloved Son on that cross, He is ripping His own heart out for you and me. He is paying the cost of our ransom. He is incurring the debt we owe to God. He is suffering the penalty due our sin. He is making it possible for you and I to come back into the fold, into the family of God.
- C. I thought here of those precious words from the song we often sing: “As I ran my hell-bound race, indifferent to the cost, you looked upon my helpless state, and led me to the cross, Where I beheld God’s love displayed, you suffered in my place, and bore the wrath reserved for me, now all I know is grace!”

Repentance

- A. But there’s one thing here that Jesus is asking of you, did you catch it? It shows up at the end of each parable. Repentance.
- 1. V. 7: “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.”
 - 2. V. 10: “Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”
- B. It seems to me that this idea of repentance is often misunderstood.
- 1. Sometimes we think of it only as this somber, backlashing sort of thing. It’s sitting in the dirt and feeling bad about yourself.
 - 2. Other times we see it in this legalistic sort of way, where it is turning from this list of bad actions and pledging to do a different set of good actions. It’s moving from immorality to morality or something.
 - 3. But these parable put repentance in its proper and glorious context. Do you want to know what these parables are saying repentance is? Repentance is receiving God’s invitation to enter the party. It’s turning from the domain of death towards that of life. It’s opening the door to the family room of God.
 - a. Does repentance involve sorrow for sin and things? Certainly. But that is only the start of what repentance is. While the tears that fall will be tinged with grief over the great wrongs you have committed against your Father, they will, at the same time, be rounded out with hope and joy as you perceive the great extent to which God has gone to make those wrongs right!.
 - i. He is waiting to rejoice over you in Jesus. What are you waiting for?