

Rejoicing over the found

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[0 : 00] Our reading today is from Luke's Gospel and we are reading the whole of chapter 15. Luke's Gospel, chapter 15. Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, This man welcomes sinners and eats with them. Then Jesus told them this parable. Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them.

Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home.

Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, Rejoice with me, I have found my lost sheep. I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?

[1 : 14] And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours together and says, Rejoice with me, I have found my lost coin. In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

Jesus continued, There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, Father, give me my share of the estate.

So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.

He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death.

[2 : 35] I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.

Make me like one of your hired servants. So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.

He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his fingers and sandals on his feet.

Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate.

[3 : 39] Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.

Your brother has come, he replied, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound. The older brother became angry and refused to win.

So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, Look, all these years I have been slaving for you. And never disobeyed your orders. You never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.

But when this son of yours, who has squandered your property, with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him. My son, the father said, You are always with me.

And everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.

[4 : 46] Amen. Okay. Okay. So chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel. Do you have that open in front of you if you can?

This chapter as a whole clearly hangs together as a single section. We've got these three parables, haven't we? Each with something that is lost and that is then found. The sheep, the coin, and then the son.

The three are linked together. So we've read the whole thing, but there is lots packed in to this chapter. So we're going to leave the third parable, the parable of the lost son, until next time.

And when I say this time, I mean in a fortnight because next Sunday, Ian Hamilton is preaching on Philippians chapter 4. So this morning then, we're focusing on the first 10 verses of Luke 15, the twin parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin.

And I want to start this morning by thinking about the lostness of the lost and then to ask what about the 99? Before turning then to the attitude of the shepherd.

[5 : 48] The lostness of the lost, the 99, and the attitude of the shepherd. So first, the lostness of the lost. Both of these parables, the lost sheep and the lost coin, both present a situation where one of the items from the set has been lost.

First the sheep in verse 4, then the coin in verse 8. And the closing verse of each of these two parables makes very clear. These lost items are representative of our allegories for sinners.

They represent lost human beings, people who have wandered far away from God. And as we consider these two lost items, there's a couple of things that I think would be helpful for us to note.

Firstly, when we think about the sheep, the sheep has wandered far, far away from where it should be, hasn't it? The sheep has failed to remain with the rest of the flock.

The sheep has not stayed in the good pasture that was provided for it by the shepherd. There is a place where this sheep should be, and then over there, the place where it actually is.

[6 : 54] And this sheep here, this sheep demonstrates one aspect of what we might call the human predicament, that it wanders on and on and on from one patch of grass to the next, from hour to hour, looking only at what lies immediately ahead.

The sheep is unaware that he is not where he ought to be. And meanwhile, all the time, he strays further and further and further away from the flock and from the fold.

And that is one way in which man is lost. Now a sheep, a sheep we might say, lacks the wit to know any better. The sheep doesn't know which is its own field.

The sheep doesn't know where its home is. It doesn't know the dangers that lurk outside of that safe perimeter. It hasn't the understanding to see that safety and comfort are there within the bounds set by the shepherd.

Now friends, you and I, we have more wit than a sheep, or at least I hope that we do. And yet, yet so many choose to walk to wander away from the good pasture.

[8 : 01] So many think the grass is greener over there. So many think that the fences of God's law are restrictive rather than being a source of safety.

The prophet Isaiah, we all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way. We are architects of our own destruction.

And then secondly, from the coin especially, here we see a representation of our helplessness, of our inability to save ourselves. Now there's a hint in this direction from the sheep that has to be carried home rather than walking itself.

But even more so, the coin. Because the coin will not, under any circumstances, come home itself, will it? It will not find its own way back to safety. The son, in the third parable, he conceivably will find his way home.

Indeed, he does. The sheep certainly conceivably could. But the coin, the coin most definitely cannot. The coin is utterly lifeless.

[9 : 04] Now of course, human beings are not like a coin inanimate. And yet, in a spiritual sense at least, lost humanity is lifeless, incapable of aiding itself.

And so the coin is then an appropriate representation of those who can't see, of those who see God's requirements and recognize that they cannot meet those standards.

That we cannot rise to meet God's expectations. That we do not have it within ourselves to pull us up by the bootstraps and to do what we ought to do. That we can only lie lifeless, dead in our sins

and transgressions.

That we must cry to God as the only one who can give life, as the only one who is capable of lifting us up. It is in recognizing our incapacity, in admitting our inability that hope is to be found.

In these parables we see the lostness of the lost. We see how far we stray from God by our own foolish will. And we see our inability to return our need for a saviour from outside.

[10:17] The lostness of the lost. Yet what about the 99? I certainly remember as a boy, as a teenager, I remember being greatly concerned about how these 99 other sheep were going to fare.

These 99 sheep abandoned to their own devices without the benefit of the shepherd watching over them. Now these 99 are not really the concern of the parable. But I'm imagining that I'm not alone in worrying about that and that some of the children or perhaps some of the growing-ups too might share that concern.

So I think it's worth a few minutes of our time to ask what about the 99? I mean this isn't so much of an issue for the nine coins that are left, is it? Probably not much will happen to those coins in a woman's absence.

They can go in their usual safe place or in her pocket or whatever. But the sheep, the sheep are a different story, aren't they? Those 99 sheep are going to scatter to the four winds, aren't they? Doesn't Jesus care about those 99 other sheep in his flock?

And to some extent at least, verse 7 seems to support that conclusion. I tell you in the same way there'll be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who don't need to repent.

[11:33] And it's interesting that exactly that conclusion was made explicit in corrupt, distorted versions of Jesus teaching a few centuries after his death, claiming that he had said to the one sheep, I love you more than the others.

Now you can see how you would get to that conclusion from this parable, but it is not the intention of what Jesus says here. That is a corruption from people who wanted to distort Jesus' own message for their own agenda.

So why don't we hear what provision is made for the 99? Well we don't hear about it because that isn't where the focus lies, because that isn't the point that Jesus is making. We're almost certainly meant to just assume that they're left under the watchful eye of another shepherd.

Jesus' audience know how you deal with needing to go and look for one lost sheep. How do you care for the rest? You just give them to another shepherd to look after for a while. He splits his focus for a little bit.

It's fine. And in any case, if one of those 99 were to go astray in the shepherd's absence, well wouldn't he then go and look for that one sheep just as carefully as he did the first?

[12:40] It's readily apparent, isn't it, the shepherd's care for the sheep. As one commentator notes, what sets this one sheep apart from the others is only the fact that it was the one that was lost.

Not more precious, just in greater need. I think mostly from this parallel, I think we're meant to take away a fresh understanding of Jesus' attitude to the lost. And we're going to come to that in a moment when we think about the attitude of the shepherd.

But if there's an application for you and for me and what we've said about the 99, I think it might be this. Do you remember about six months ago, the middle of 2020, there was a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement?

The organisation most behind the slogan, it has some profoundly troubling policies. Black Lives Matter as an organisation, quite worrying, some quite clearly anti-Christian ideas. But the simple sentiment that Black Lives Matter, well, that is certainly true, isn't it?

Surely that is not subject to debate. And yet some people, some people respond to that by saying all lives matter. All lives matter. Which, of course, is also true.

[13:50] Every life is precious. Every human being is made in the image of God. But as a response to Black Lives Matter, saying all lives matter is pretty insulting, isn't it?

Because what lies behind that slogan, behind saying Black Lives Matter, is that it sure looks in many situations like black lives are held to be less precious.

And so to affirm that Black Lives Matter is just to recognise where the crisis is at any given time. We don't respond, do we, to the person collecting for cancer research?

We don't say all diseases matter. It would be pretty foolish, wouldn't it? We respond to the particular problem situation of the moment. And sometimes, sometimes one particular situation, sometimes one particular cause, one particular person requires special attention.

That's true on an individual level too. Not because the one individual is more precious than another, but because that individual's circumstances are more precarious.

[14:56] Jesus says, the shepherd goes looking for the one sheep that is lost because it is the one that needs help. So why are we more likely to visit somebody when they're in hospital?

Well, because that's when they're more likely to be lonely or because that might be one of our last chances to see them. Or as Christians, seeking to build one another up, seeking to follow the one another's of the New Testament, whether that's as elders and deacons or just as concerned brothers and sisters in the church.

When we seek to fulfil those one another's, don't we turn primarily to those in obvious need of help, to those who are walking a dangerous path and in need of a rebuke, to those who are struggling to find the joy of the Lord and need an encouraging word.

Don't we turn to those in greatest need, and rightly so, according to this parable. I remember going as a student, going on placement and seeing the minister, he had a book with a list of the members of the congregation and tally marks next to each one.

How many times have I visited this person this year? I imagine not many tallies in it this year. But some of them then had many marks and others one or even none.

[16:13] And I remember being confused, uncertain, worried even, at the time. And all of us, well maybe we should check why we're not spending time with a particular person, whether our motives are good or somewhat more dubious.

There could be sinful reasons for prioritising one person over another. There are also good reasons. The person who is quietly keeping on, keeping on with God, making progress, they are not necessarily loved any less by the Lord.

Indeed, she is not necessarily loved any less by her fellow believers. But she may be in less need of immediate attention. I think the priority of the one over the 99 gives us license to do the same, to say where is the greatest need?

That is where I will turn my efforts. Okay. The lostness of the lost, the 99, the attitude of the shepherd and the woman with the coins.

The question here is what is God's attitude to lost humanity? What is God's response to that which was lost and is now found? So Jesus in the first parable, the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus here is picking up very familiar imagery, isn't he?

[17:35] Jesus is talking about God as the shepherd of his people. We sung a few minutes ago from Psalm 23, perhaps the best known use of that language of God as the shepherd.

Even more directly applicable to how it's used here in Luke 15 is Ezekiel chapter 34. I imagine it's less familiar to you, but there God condemns those who failed in their duty to shepherd his people Israel.

He condemns the leaders of the people and he declares, this is what the sovereign Lord says. I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he's with them, so will I look after my sheep.

I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on the day of clouds and darkness. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy.

I will shepherd the flock with justice. So a few things we could note from this as this language of the sheep and the shepherd comes much earlier in the history of God's people.

[18:44] Here, the prophecy in Ezekiel, this is about what God himself will do, right? So there right at the start, this is what the sovereign Lord says, I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.

And then here, Luke chapter 15, Jesus is being challenged about his own behavior, isn't he? Jesus is being challenged by the Pharisees and the teachers of the law about his own attitude to sinners and to tax collectors and so on.

And Jesus' response to that challenge is to say that he is behaving in exactly the same way that God said that he himself would behave.

The Pharisees, the Pharisees in their unconcern for those they dismiss as sinners, they mirror the faith of the leaders of Israel in Ezekiel's day. And Jesus, Jesus takes on God's role. Self-consciously, deliberately, knowing what he does, Jesus claims here to do that which God does. Just as when he forgave the sins of the paralyzed man, Jesus makes clear he knows his own identity.

[19 : 50] He knows who he is. He knows that he is God himself. And he doesn't hide it from those he's talking to either. He consciously claims God's role for himself.

He takes the role of the good shepherd, the great shepherd, the chief shepherd, however you want to phrase it. He takes that role for himself. So what's the attitude of the shepherd to the sheep? Well, his task, isn't it, is to preserve them from harm. He isn't content to allow the sheep to stray off. He doesn't do his count, find that he's one short, short, and just kind of shrug his shoulders and move on with his life.

No, no, he doesn't. He doesn't even just sit and bewail his lot. He doesn't just mourn for the lost sheep, neither the shepherd nor the woman with her coins. They don't just despair.

They don't give up. They expend effort. They go and search diligently. In her dimly lit home with few, if any, windows, the woman, she has to spend her resources.

[20 : 50] She has to find the oil and light the lamp in order to go and find the coin. She needs to devote herself to that task. The shepherd goes off into the countryside searching for who knows how long in order to find this one lost sheep.

God's desire is not that any should perish. He is not content that some have strayed far away. He does not just leave the coin lifeless and lost in the corner, unable to help itself.

Friends, he does not desire that you should perish. However far you have strayed from his pasture, he is not content for you to remain far off.

So admit your helplessness. Ask him to find you, to bring you home. He surely, he surely will. Now, which Luke records here in this memorable picture, this parable from Jesus' lips, John records the same idea in a memorable saying in chapter 3.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

[22 : 14] God's desire is not that any should remain lost. And great is his rejoicing when any who were lost are found.

So happy was that shepherd that he called his friends and his neighbours to join him in his rejoicing. And so too the woman who found her coin. Friends, friends, there is rejoicing in heaven. There is rejoicing in the presence of the angels. And I certainly pray rejoicing in Covenant Church when any one sinner repents.

If you, if you have not yet repented and turned to God or if you look at your life and find that you need to do it again, know that there will be rejoicing in heaven when you do.

Because God isn't indifferent to your response. He greatly desires to save sinners. He expends effort to that end. He sent Jesus into this world for that purpose to bring repentance to those who have wandered far off.

[23 : 17] There could be rejoicing this very day. Rejoicing in heaven. Rejoicing at Covenant Church. But finally, finally, before we finish with these parables, Christians, let me ask you this morning, let me ask you what is your attitude to tax collectors and sinners?

Let me ask you are you following in the footsteps of your master? Come back with me to this introduction to the situation presented in the first two verses, the situation that prompts Jesus to respond with the parables.

The tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them. In this unspecified situation, somewhere on Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, he's observed by the religious elite, observed teaching and eating with the dregs of society, the people who no one else wants anything to do with them, with the lowest of the low.

In fact, there's two problems with these so-called sinners. The first is they're the outcasts of society. The tax collectors, for instance, they're condemned as collaborators with the occupying Roman army.

And doubtless also those who are considered undesirable by virtue of their lack of income. And in other contexts, we see Jesus' attitude to lepers and those considered undesirable by virtue of their ailments.

[24 : 41] These are within the outcasts of society, those classed here as sinners and as tax collectors and so on. They are the outcasts of society.

And then the second issue is that they're sinners. There's a religious problem as well, isn't there? Now, whether they're actually worse sinners than anyone else, we don't really know, but they're certainly seen as such.

Jesus at other times condemns as sinful people who are far more outwardly respectable. Two problems. Outcasts from society judged as sinners.

And the question then for you and me is what is our attitude to the undesirable of our society? Our attitude to sinners. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them.

So would that ever be said of you? Would that be said of Covenant Church? Would anyone looking at your life say, he welcomes sinners and eats with them?

[25 : 45] Someone looking at your life, do they see you valuing those that society does not value? Do they see you making time for the outcasts? Do they see you welcoming to your table those from the highways and the hedges as Jesus challenged us in chapter 14?

Most of us, our most precious commodity is our time, right? And so how do we use our time? Is it the people who have something to offer us?

The sparkling conversationalists? The people who others will be impressed to see us with and so on? With whom do we spend our time? Do you hang around at school with the popular kids hoping to be popular by association?

Or do you spend your time with the unpopular, with those who no one else wants to be with? What about the places that we avoid because the wrong sort of people will be there?

What do we prioritize in how we spend our socializing time? Or for that matter, what about the other issue with these people that Jesus was condemned for spending time with?

[26 : 47] How many of us, how many of us in the church actually spend significant time with those who are sinners, with those who don't know Jesus? And I don't just mean do you have a chat with them about the weather at work, I mean do you actually spend enough time to get to know people?

Do you go to the office Christmas party? I mean in 2019 at least, not so much last month. Or do you just decide well that's not really my thing and turn away from it? Do you spend time socially with your work colleagues even if what they want to do is not how you'd naturally spend your time? do you invest in relationships with people who do not know Jesus? Maybe it would be easier, probably more comfortable if all of our friends had the same worldview as you, if all your friends share your priorities.

But it seems here that that's not following in Jesus' footsteps, is it? Jesus had radically different priorities to his contemporaries in how he spent his time and his energies, who he chose to be his followers, who he chose to teach, who he chose to heal.

So how different are our priorities to the world's priorities? Are we following Jesus' model or the Pharisees model? Spending our energies on those who need our help, on a practical or spiritual level or devoting ourselves only to those who have something to offer in return, on those who will build us up.

[28 : 23] Friends, how are we going to join Jesus? How are we going to join the angels in heaven? How are we going to join them in rejoicing over the sinner who repents if we do not know and love the sinner in the first place?

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, give us your heart of compassion for the lost, we ask. Grant that we might share your willingness to spend time with tax collectors and sinners, with those who have nothing to offer us, with those who are looked down on by the rest of society, because we share your desire that they might come to know you, that they might see their lostness and cry out to the one who can help them, that they might see their need for a saviour, that those who are presently lost may one day be found.

Lord Jesus, we long to share in your rejoicing at the good news of a sinner who repents. So, Jesus, may we share your heart, we ask.

Amen.