

God's Heart for the Lost

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Preacher: Joshua Winters

[0:00] Well, this morning as we look to the Word of God, we get to hear a very well-known parable! Three parables actually, but the third one is one of the most well-known parables that he gave, and we're just going to jump right in here. Let's listen to Jesus. We're in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus, but the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them.

So Jesus is again in the company of the tax collectors and some other people known for their immoral ways. Sinners is the word that Luke chooses to describe them. And like we've heard before, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law did not like Jesus hanging around with the sinners. They criticize and condemn Jesus for it.

Look, he's friendly. He's welcoming them. He's even eating with them like there's nothing wrong with them. Now, there is some biblical basis to choosing carefully who we spend our time with, who our friends are, who we associate with. There's even lots of scriptures we could look at that give us wisdom and guidance about that. And there certainly is a time to maybe make some choices to part company with people. The truth is that whether we like to admit it or not, our friends influence us.

And we tend to become more like those that we keep company with. That's why we often urge our children to choose wisely and carefully who they are friends with. But there's something else happening here between Jesus and the tax collectors. Between Jesus and the sinners. For one, Jesus is not being influenced or corrupted by them. In fact, the opposite has been happening.

They've been listening to Jesus. Some of them have given up their immoral and sinful ways in order to follow Jesus. Levi is the first example of that. Also known as Matthew. He was one of the tax collectors, but he repented and he left everything in order to follow Jesus. And so that's the first thing to know here is that Jesus is not being influenced or corrupted by immoral people. Rather, they are being changed. They are repenting and being restored to God through Jesus. And second, Jesus, by spending time with them, is not in any way endorsing the immoral things that people have been doing. Even while he's with them, he preaches the same message.

He tells them that they need to turn from their sinful ways and come back to God. He tells them that God is eager to forgive them, that he is merciful. And so as much as the Pharisees would like to implicate Jesus, it just doesn't work. Jesus is not guilty by association. Jesus spending time with sinners and even eating with them is not the same as affirming the sinful things that they do.

[3:52] I mean, if we think hard about it, when it comes right down to it, if Jesus was only to spend time with those who are truly righteous, then he wouldn't be having a meal with anybody or spending time with anyone because we've all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. There is no one righteous not even one. The Bible is clear about that. Actually, Jesus is consistent.

He is without sin. He is truly righteous and he is willing to spend time with sinners. He spent time with the self-righteous, hypocritical Pharisees eating in their homes when he was invited and he spent time with the greedy tax collectors in their homes when invited. The reason Jesus has come into the world is to save sinners. Let's listen to Jesus' response to the criticism of the Pharisees. He tells them three parables and we'll just take the first two together starting in verse three.

Then Jesus told them this parable. Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them.

Doesn't he leave the 99 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 neighbors 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 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent.

[5:48] Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?

And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors 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.

Both of these parables really say the same thing, just different analogies. And there are really two things that Jesus emphasizes in both of them.

The first thing that Jesus emphasizes is how the attention and the concern is on what is lost. The shepherd doesn't worry about the 99 sheep that are all accounted for.

His concern is for the one that's lost. The 99 are fine. He has them. They're safe and sound. But the one that's missing consumes his attention and fills his heart.

[7:10] Who here has ever lost anything, maybe while you're away from home, something that was very valuable or important? What was it, Charles?

Oh, okay. Anybody have an example of anything? Maybe wallet? Keys? Different things?

Did you ever have that thought cross your mind as you were searching for it? That you better just keep on searching right now until you find it? Because eventually you have to leave and go home. And if you don't find it now, then it might be lost to you forever.

Whatever. We sort of know that there's this window of opportunity to find what is lost. And if we don't find it, then somebody else might come across it and take it.

Or it might get too dark to see it. Or it might get buried in dirt or grass or leaves or snow. And in those moments, we put everything else on hold, don't we?

[8:20] The last thing that we're concerned with in those moments is all the stuff that we have that isn't lost. The woman with the silver coin is really easy to relate to here.

Back then, one silver coin was worth about a day's wages. Let's translate that into today's money. To keep it simple, let's just use minimum wage, which in Saskatchewan is about 15 bucks an hour.

So an eight-hour day of work here in Saskatchewan, that's about 120 bucks. But then, of course, there's deductions. So let's just say 100. So this woman's got 10 silver coins, 10 days' wages.

So in our money, she's got \$1,000. She's got 10 \$100 bills. Kevin, if I was to give you 10 \$100 bills and count them out for you after the service, 100, 200, 300, all the way to 1,000, and I gave them to you and I said, this is a gift.

Use it wisely. How would that make you feel? Fairly good. I'd like to try that. So what would you do if you got home and you went to put that \$1,000 in a safe place and you saw that one of those bills was missing?

[10:03] You'd go hunting for it. I hope so. 100 bucks is 100 bucks, right? Wouldn't you look around on the floor and check your coat pocket and retrace your steps and maybe even find your way all the way back here to the church where I gave it to you and look around on the floor.

While you look for that \$100 bill that you misplaced or lost, would you be too worried about the \$900 that's sitting on your dresser at home safe and sound?

No. Of course not. When something's lost, that's where our attention is. That's what weighs on us. It consumes our hearts until we find it.

That's the first thing Jesus emphasizes here. The second thing that Jesus emphasizes here is the joy that's felt when the thing that was lost is found.

What does the shepherd in Jesus' analogy do when he finds the lost sheep? He joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home.

[11:19] And then he's so happy that he calls his friends and his neighbors together and he tells them the news. Rejoice with me. I have found my lost sheep. Most of us aren't sheep farmers, and so this could be a little hard to relate to, but just imagine that you had two dogs and one of them hasn't come home for a few days.

And then a few days later, you find him. Wouldn't you be happy? Wouldn't you be eager to share the good news with friends and family?

Maybe you'd been asking them to pray that you would find the dog. You might even do something special to mark the occasion. There's great joy in finding what is lost in these cases, in the story, and in things in our lives, because what was lost was truly valuable to us.

That sheep, that coin, that wallet, those keys, they're valuable.

Well, at the end of each of these parables, Jesus just straight up gives us the explanation of what he's talking about. He tells us what his point is. Verse 7, And again, in verse 10, In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.
[12:59] So who in heaven rejoices when a sinner repents? Everybody.

Well, everybody is right. But notice how it's worded.

There is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God. Who is rejoicing? God is celebrating. When a sinner repents. When someone who is valuable and precious to him, who has been lost, is found. He rejoices.

These parables aren't about sheep or coins or lost property. They're about lost people. And how God feels about lost people. And it's not that he doesn't care about all those who already belong to him.

[14:05] That's not the point here. But his hearts and his thoughts are very much on those who are lost to him right now. Each one of us is a person made in God's own image.

And we are valuable to him. And that's why Jesus spends time with sinners. Because his heart is for them.

He has come for them. They are precious. They matter to him. He desires that they be found. Jesus now launches into the third parable.

And this one really gets to our hearts. I don't know if I'm going to even make it through this. We'll see. 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.

[15:25] 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 servants have food to spare? And here I am starving to death. I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

I'm 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.

[16:37] The son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I'm 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 finger 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. 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 go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, Look, all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.

[17:52] 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. We had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again.

He was lost and is found. What a parable.

A picture is worth a thousand words and boy does Jesus paint a picture with this parable. It all starts with a son who acts disgracefully and dishonorably towards his dad.

You don't ask your dad for your share of his estate while he's still living.

[18:55] This is utterly rude and shameful. He cares more about the money and what he wants to do with it than his own dad.

And most fathers hearing something like this would just, I think we would just laugh and say, forget it. But in this little story, Jesus says the father actually gives it to him.

He divides his estate between him and this son. And from there we see what this son does with all his dad has just given him.

He goes to a faraway country and he squanders it in wild living. A few other translations use the word reckless living.

And Jesus doesn't list off all his individual sins during this time. But we kind of get the picture.

Squandered and wild living sums it up.

[19:59] He blows it all. It's kind of implied by these two words that he spends it all on himself. He does not deny himself.

He does not exercise self-control. The first words of verse 14 right after this are jolting.

After he had spent everything. All of it is gone. After he had spent everything.

There was a severe famine in that whole country and he began to be in need. This is a good place to use our imagination a little bit and reflect.

A severe famine means that times are really tough and everybody is feeling it. Everybody's spending less. Everybody's looking for more opportunity to work.

[20:59] To meet the rising cost of food. In such times employers find themselves with no shortage of resumes and job applications to sift through.

And in such times employers are looking to trim expenses too. And so there's often more people competing for fewer jobs. If you were an employer would you hire this young man who is known to be reckless and self-indulgent?

A young man who has zero self-control and only cares for himself it seems? But the young man is in need. He has to find a job.

And between the tough times and his lack of character it seems the best he's able to do is a job on a pig farm. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.

As a reminder pigs are strongly detested by the Jews. They're unclean animals. That goes back to the Old Testament law.

[22:15] But even in our culture today, I mean working with pigs is unpleasant. To be honest I haven't done it myself. I've just kind of been by one.

And that was so revolting as it was. I mean they just smell so bad. And they eat anything and they roll around in their own excrement.

They're filthy, disgusting creatures. We could probably think of maybe a few worse jobs today. But this is a parable. And the point is that things have come to the worst for this young man.

He was a son in the family. Now he is a servant of the lowest animals. His job is to serve the pigs. And things are really bad. It says he longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating. But no one gave him anything.

[23:18] So he's starving. The wage that he's making is not enough. And with the rising costs of food. He's not able to get enough in his stomach to stave off the hunger he feels.

And that dull ache of hunger in his belly. Just keeps gnawing at him. To the point that he's starting to think about plunging his hands into the pigs food.

To bring it up to his own mouth. But it would seem that others are watching. And maybe he'd even get in trouble if they saw him doing this.

It almost sounds like he's hoping somebody will notice how desperate he is. And either give him some free food. Or at least give him permission to help himself to some of the pigs food.

But no one gave him anything. Sometimes we need to hit rock bottom. We need to come to the lowest of lows.

[24:25] Before we finally realize where living for ourselves leads to. In one sense. This young man is lower.

Than the pigs. Because his job is to feed them. And fatten them. And this young man even realizes. That even the pigs have it better than he does.

They have food to eat. And yet he's starving. In another sense. This young man has almost become like one of the pigs.

Because if he could. He is almost ready to join with them. And eat their stuff. Sometimes we need to hit rock bottom.

We need to come to the lowest of lows. Before we finally realize where living for ourselves leads to. Why is that?

[25 : 25] In the book of Proverbs. The sinful man. Or the wicked man. Is often called. The fool. There is.

With sin. A madness. Where we continue to do. The same self-destructive things. Over and over. And over again.

There is a lie. That we are held captive to. And we ruin ourselves. In pursuit of empty pleasures. And empty promises.

And so sometimes we need to hit rock bottom. We need to come to the lowest of lows. Before we finally realize.

Where living for ourselves. Leads to. My favorite verse in this whole parable. Is the next one.

[26 : 27] Verse 17. I think about these words more often than anything else in this story. Believe it or not. When he came to his senses. He said.

How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare. And here I am starving to death. I will set out and go back to my father. And say to him.

Father. I've sinned against heaven. And against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants. When he came.

To his senses. These are my favorite words. In this whole story. As I said before.

Sin is like a madness. Within us. A self-destructive madness. And we're living for ourselves. And it's senseless.

[27 : 27] The way we do it. It's foolish. Others around us might even see. How the choices that we're making. Are taking a toll on us. But we won't listen.

To reason. Asaph said it this way. In Psalm 73. About a time in his life. Where he was bitter. And envious.

Of others. He said. I was senseless. And ignorant. I was a brute beast. Before you God. There is a senselessness.

To our sinfulness. There is a senselessness. To our sinfulness. And we've.

When we've been living for ourselves. And giving ourselves to sin. What we need. Is to come to our senses. We need to realize. We're living for our own.

[28 : 24] Selfish. Desires. Has got us. Look at what coming to his senses. In this parable. Includes. First. He has the realization. Of just how good he had it. Back home with dad. Compared to. Where he is now. He realizes.

That even the hired servants. Of his dad. Back home. Had food to spare. They were paid. And treated better. Than he is. Right now.

They weren't starving. And they were just. Hired laborers. They weren't even part of the family. He has this realization.

Of just how good he had it. Back home with dad. But it's more than that. Then come the thoughts. Of returning home. I should go back home. I will sit out.

[29 : 23] And go back to my father. But. To do that. Would require that I acknowledge. What I did to him. And I'd have to acknowledge.

All the stuff I've done. With dad's money too. And for the first time. In this story. We see him begin to admit.

That he has done wrong. I will set out. And go back to my father. And say to him. Father. I have sinned against.

Heaven. That's God. And against you. This is what true repentance. Looks like. An admission.

An admission. An admission. Of our sin. Not just to the people around us. Who we've wronged. But to God. I've sinned against heaven. I've done wrong against you.

[30 : 20] God. And at this moment. He's just thinking about. What he's going to say. When he gets home. There's more. Verse 19.

He goes on. I'm no longer worthy. To be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants. Though he realizes. That he's unworthy.

He acknowledges. That he's unworthy. Of his father's name. Of being part of the family. Again. And it's like.

For the first time. He sees the despicableness. Of all that he has done. The shame of it. How he took. What belonged to his father.

And just. Wasted it. Shamefully. Shamefully. There's maybe. Some of the family logistics. Part of this too. I mean. He's already received.

[31 : 16] His share of. His father's estate. So in that sense. He can't become. A full son again. Not a true heir. Again. And so.

In his thoughts. Of repentance. He resolves. To plead with his dad. To be hired. As one of the laborers. Think that through.

For a moment. He doesn't expect. To be welcomed. Home. And to retake. His place. At the father's table. He knows.

He's unworthy. Of that. He's not preparing. To go home. And have everything. As it was before.

He's preparing himself.

To live like the other laborers. Of his father do. To get up early. Each day. And to go to. His dad's place. For work. And so this lost son.

[32 : 14] Really has come to his senses. For the first time. He sees his sin. For what it is. Coming to. His senses.

Means having a real change of heart. It means recognizing. His unworthiness. And guilt. And owning it. It means realizing.

That all along. Dad was right. He was the voice of truth. And wisdom. And love. In my life. Have you had.

Your big moment in life. Of coming to your senses. I'm talking about. Your relationship with God.

Have you come to your senses.

We all need to have a moment like this. And truthfully. Even since my. Own big. Moment. Of coming to my senses. And repenting of my sins.

[33 : 26] I've had to have several more. Moments like this. Along the way. Because the madness of sin. And self. Doesn't just. Evaporate. When we start to follow Jesus.

Sometimes we find ourselves. Going down that path. Away from him. Again. And we're in need of another. Moment of coming to our senses. Maybe that's even truer.

To where you find yourself. This morning. Maybe you're a believer. But lately you've been stubborn. And stiff-necked. Towards God. How far away from home.

Do you want to go? How low will God have to bring you? Do you want to find out.

Like this young man. What it's like. At the very bottom. Or do you want to come to your senses.

Now. And go home.

[34 : 24] Before you. Squander more. Another reason. I love these words. When he came to his senses.

Is because those words. Fill my heart. With hope. That yes. People can change. Maybe there's someone you love.

Who has been walking the path. Of this younger son. Away from God. And it's hard. Isn't it? To watch people spiral down.

And self-destruct. By their own choices. But people can have. A real change of heart. We can.

Have that moment. Where we come to our senses. This is what the Pharisees. And the teachers of the law. Need to hear from this. This is why Jesus spends time. With the tax collectors.

[35 : 24] And the sinners. Because they are like lost sons to him. And God hasn't written them off. He desires that they would repent.

And come to their senses. He loves them. And some of them are. Men like Levi. And later on.

We'll see Zacchaeus. And others. Leave their lives of sin. And follow Jesus. God really can change. A person's heart. And even though a fool.

Is bent on folly. And returns to it. Over and over and over again. The cycle can be broken. And we can come to our senses. We've got to keep going.

Or we're not going to make it. To the end of the parable here. So. The son. After coming to his senses. Gets up. He goes back to his home country. To see his father. And these words of verse 20.

[36 : 28] Are precious as well. 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. I think that says it pretty well. Doesn't it? How God feels in his heart.

Towards us. Even though. We have all sinned so much. And blown it big time. He is not cold. He is not distant. He is not angry. And ready to. Give us a verbal smack down. For being such sinful fools. He is filled with compassion. And he runs to us.

He embraces us. Is that your conception of God? A father who runs towards sinful sons.

[37 : 29] And daughters. With tears in his eyes. And arms open wide. The son makes his well rehearsed confession.

Father. I have sinned against heaven. And against you. I am no longer worthy. To be called your son. And it seems the apology is accepted. The father doesn't say a word.

About any. Of what the son has done. He shows that he is ready. To forgive him fully. Instantly. Because the next thing out of his mouth. Is orders for the servant.

To go get the robe. And the ring. And sandals for his feet. And kill that fattened calf. We are having a feast. The father begins treating him.

As a son. Immediately. He is fully forgiven. Let's have a feast.

[38 : 34] And celebrate. For this son of mine was dead. And is alive again. He was lost. And is found. So they began to celebrate. This is the heart of God.

Towards sinners. Like you and me. He loves us dearly. He is filled with compassion. And his heart doesn't rest. While we are lost to him. His heart rejoices.

Far beyond what we can imagine. When even one of us. Comes to our senses. And comes home. Again. Let me ask you that question.

In your relationship with God. Have you come to your senses? Have you come home? And if not. What are you waiting for? There's nothing but rock bottom. Ahead of you. Until you do. The parable keeps going.

[39 : 40] It feels like it could end here. And it should end here. But it keeps going. The rest is about the older brother. And when the older brother.

Hears of what's happened. That his father has welcomed the youngest son back into. The family. And has killed the fattened calf for him. We hear his response is anger.

And he refuses to go into the banquet. And so the father goes out to plead with him. Come in. Join in the celebration. And the oldest.

The older son's words are telling. He sees himself as never having done anything wrong. I've never disobeyed your orders. He sees himself as having slaved for his father.

And he sees his father as stingy. And withholding. You never even gave me a young goat. So I could celebrate with my friends. He goes even further.

[40 : 44] And he names the sins of the younger brother. We don't know if word came that he heard. What the younger brother had been doing. When this son of yours. Who has squandered your property.

With prostitutes comes home. You kill the fattened calf for him. Jesus is speaking very powerfully. To the Pharisees with these words.

Like this older brother. They are self-righteous. They see themselves as having lived perfectly. In comparison. To the sinners.

You can hear the disdain. And the disgust. In the older brother's words. Towards his. Younger brother. Who has come home. He. He doesn't deserve to be welcomed back. He doesn't deserve the fattened calf.

And it's true. He doesn't. But it's also self-righteous. And proud. There's no compassion. There's no love.

[41 : 46] In the Pharisees. In the hearts. In the hearts. In the hearts. In the hearts of the teachers. Of the law. And yet I love how the father. Pleads with them as well. To come.

As I said before. We have all sinned. Some in very obvious. And dramatic ways. Others like the Pharisees. In the religious hypocrisy. And self-righteous sort of ways.

But God's love goes out the same. To both. He invites both. To his table. Maybe you're here. And you identify more with the older brother.

Than the younger brother. Maybe you never had a time. Of squandering everything. And running away from God. That you can remember. And have been a pretty good person.

Especially compared to others. Do you see the older brother. In yourself. These words of Jesus.

[42:53] Are precious. They speak of God's great compassion. And love for us. They tell us that we are on his heart. Until we are found.

They tell us that he is eager. To forgive us of all of our sins. And they tell us that even though. We are unworthy. God is willing.

To welcome us back into relationship with him. Back into the family. Not just as hired help. But as beloved sons. And daughters. This is the gospel.

This is the good news. Of God. And as we gather in our homes today. And tomorrow. To give thanks to God. This Thanksgiving. May this truth.

Of God's love for us. His lavish love. Be the first thing that we give thanks for. Father. Let's kill the fattened turkey. Or whatever.

[43:51] You like to eat. And celebrate. Because though we were lost. We have been found. Let's pray. Lord Jesus.

Thank you for your. Grace and mercy. Father. Thank you that. You are willing. To put everything we have done. In the past. Aside. You accomplish that.

Through your son. And his death. He bled for us. And it's as though we have a clean slate. Before you. Lord.

We think of. Especially around this time of year. Those in our lives. We love. Who. Haven't come to their senses yet. Please work in their hearts.

Help them to see their need for you. And bring them home. Pray this in your name. Amen.