

# What gives God joy?

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Date: 03 January 2021

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[ 0 : 00 ] Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, This man receives sinners and eats with them.

So he told them this parable. 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. And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbours, saying to them, Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.

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.

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? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.

[ 1 : 14 ] Just so I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents. Heavenly Father, we praise you that the Lord Jesus is indeed the good shepherd.

And we pray that this morning, as we hear his words, please would he indeed shepherd us and lead us and teach us at the start of this new year.

And we ask it in his name. Amen. Amen. Well, we're starting a new series of talks in Luke 15 this morning. It's a chapter which contains three of Jesus' most famous parables.

The parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. To many of us, I guess they are familiar. And perhaps for some, the temptation might be to think, well, I can just kind of switch off a little bit and relax.

Yes, I know the story. But let me suggest that would be a mistake. Because in reality, these parables, each one of them, all three, they are utterly subversive.

[ 2 : 30 ] Jesus is challenging what nearly everyone throughout history has thought about God, humanity, sin, salvation, the kinds of people God welcomes, and the kinds of people God turns away.

They're parables which reveal God's heart and also our heart. Hence the title of this sermon series, God's Heart and Ours.

And that is the case, whether we are skeptical about the Christian faith, whether we're inquiring into the Christian faith, or whether we are already Jesus' disciples and members of his kingdom.

Now, today we're looking at what gives God joy. Did you notice that it's that note of joy that each parable ends with?

Have a look at verse 7, the parable of the lost sheep. Verse 7, just so I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance.

[ 3 : 39 ] And the parable of the lost coin ends in a very similar way. Verse 10, just so I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

I wonder if you think of God being joyful. You know what makes you joyful. Perhaps an evening with friends when you're allowed to have such things, or a holiday with the family, or a day when you're allowed to do so, or perhaps a thank you letter, or a catch-up over a cup of coffee.

And perhaps you know something of what it means for God to be king, or creator, or eternal, or holy. But joyful?

When was the last time we thought about God being joyful? So then what does bring God joy?

Well, firstly, on the outline, finding the lost, finding the lost.

Hence these two parables about lost things. The first, a lost sheep. Let me read verses 4 to 6 for us.

[ 4 : 57 ] What's 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?

And when he's found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 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.

The head count at the end of the day reveals one animal is absent. So the shepherd leaves the rest in the safety of the open country, away from predators, and goes and searches for the one, and finds it.

He lays it on his shoulders, he skips home rejoicing, and he shares his joy with friends and family and neighbors. The second parable, the parable of the lost coin, verse 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? 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.

[ 6 : 18 ] The coin was probably a drachma about a day's wages. For this woman, it represents 10% of her savings.

She sweeps the house, she searches everywhere until she's found it, and when she does, she throws a party, sharing her joy with friends and neighbors.

I guess we all know that we have the anxiety of losing things and the joy of finding them.

Perhaps the front door key or car key or a particular document or an item of jewelry. There was a lovely story recently in the paper about a woman from Monmouthshire who had accidentally thrown away her engagement ring when she was doing a spring clean.

She was completely distraught when she discovered that as well as throwing away lots of stuff she wanted to throw away, all the accumulated junk of many years, she'd also thrown away her ring.

[ 7 : 23 ] Well, she phoned up the local council, and two council workers from the local recycling center offered to go through the rubbish that had been collected.

And four hours later, having trawled through parts of rubbish, wonderfully her engagement ring was found. Imagine her joy. Well, here in Luke 15, it's a very similar and yet a far greater picture.

I guess we can see, I think, something of that when we consider this parable in this whole section of Luke's gospel. I hope we're in the habit of asking the question when we're reading the Bible, not simply, what does the Bible say, but also asking the question, why does it say it?

Why does Luke put this parable here in chapter 15? He could have, I guess, put it in chapter 8. He could have put it in chapter 19. Why here?

Well, the key to answering that question is to think about the bigger section of Luke, which runs from chapter 13, verse 22, to chapter 17, verse 10.

[ 8 : 38 ] We were looking at how the section began before Christmas. Look back to 13, 22 to 23, and how the question, how the section begins with a question.

13, 22. Jesus went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying towards Jerusalem. And someone said to him, Lord, will those who are saved be few?

Now, it's just worth pausing at that point and saying that there is no more important question that you will face this year than that question.

Far more significant than anything that's going to arrive in your inbox at work tomorrow morning or anything that's going to appear on a social media feed. It is the question, who gets to heaven and who doesn't?

And some may remember Jesus' answer when we looked at this before Christmas. In a sense, few, because, verse 24, the door is narrow.

[ 9 : 44 ] It's narrow, verse 25, because Jesus is the only way into God's kingdom. And the door won't be open forever. It's narrow, verse 28, because there's a hell as well as a heaven.

It's narrow, chapter 14, verse 11, because many won't humble themselves before Jesus. It's narrow because, as we saw in the parable of the great banquets in chapter 14, verses 15 to 24, for many people, other things, other things, are simply more important.

And finally, 14, 25 to 35, it's narrow, because following Jesus is costly. And yet we see in chapter 13, verse 29, that far from being few, there will in fact be many, a great multitude in Jesus' heavenly kingdom, people who will come from north and south and east and west.

And yet they won't be the ones you'd expect. Perhaps it's best summarized in chapter 13, verse 30, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.

You see, what is the danger? It's that as Jesus is rejected, so often by those who we regard as amongst the first, the opinion makers, the media people, the well thought of, the religious, the establishments.

[11:20] And of course, Dulwich is full of exactly those kinds of people. And for many of us, we work with many of those kinds of people or at school with many of those kinds of people.

why we might begin to think that God isn't interested, that he doesn't care for the lost, that evangelism, seeking to make Jesus known, is a waste of time and effort.

After all, if he did care for the lost, then surely more friends, colleagues, neighbors, family members would enter Jesus' kingdom.

Have you ever found yourself thinking that? I know I have. In which case, take this to heart. Finding the lost, seeking the lost, seeing people turn back to God in repentance and faith is what brings God out rejoicing.

in fact, for those of us who do know Jesus and who belong to his kingdom, just think for a moment about how he found you.

[12:33] Perhaps like me, you're not from a Christian family and yet, I think how in God's kindness, one of my best friends at school was a Christian and how my maths teacher at school ran the Christian meeting and therefore when I was invited along to the meeting, it seemed a very obvious thing to go along.

God was looking, he was searching, he was persistent. In the words of John Newton's famous hymn, which we'll sing later on, Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see. Or perhaps you're from a Christian home.

Isn't that God's kindness giving you parents who prayed for you, who read the Bible with you, who perhaps took you to a church where the Bible was taught, again, God's persistence in seeking the lost.

Or perhaps you went on to rebel. You turned your back on God as a teenager or as a student as many do. And yet, here you are today because God went looking for you and brought you back.

[13:54] Others, I guess, will just be inquiring, looking in on the Christian faith. And yet, you are here this morning, either in the building or online.

Just think of all the things you could be doing instead. You could be, I don't know, catching up on some Netflix series or cooking or running or just tucked up at home in the warmth with a good book. Well, perhaps this is why you're here. Because God is searching for you, looking for you to bring him back to yourself.

And we'll see over these next three weeks as we look at the rest of Luke chapter 15 how that is possible. what gives God joy?

Finding the lost. Secondly, just as he promised. Just as God promised.

[14:56] Because the background for the parable of the lost sheep lies in the Old Testament. So, if you've got a Bible, please would you turn to Exodus chapter 34.

Halfway through the Old Testament after Isaiah and Jeremiah before you get to Daniel. Exodus chapter, Ezekiel, sorry, chapter 34.

Here, God's people are in exile under judgment. They are far from home. They are scattered among the nations. I want to read what God says to the prophet Ezekiel in chapter 34 verses 1 to 3. The word of the Lord came to me. Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to them, even to the shepherds, thus says the Lord God, our shepherds of Israel, who have been feeding yourselves, should not shepherds feed the sheep?

You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. And then verse 6, my sheep were scattered.

[16:09] They wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them. Now here the flock are Israel, they are God's people.

The shepherds are the rulers, the leaders, the religious leaders, the kings, who have been busy looking after themselves and neglectful of God's people.

That was the case in Ezekiel's day, 700 years or so before the birth of the Lord Jesus. It was equally true in Jesus' day as well. So what is God going to do?

Well, in verse 10, he is going to hold these false shepherds to account. But more than that, he himself, God himself, will come to rescue and shepherd his people.

Have a look at verses 11 and 12. For thus says the Lord God, behold, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out.

[17:17] As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I'll rescue them from all the places where they've been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

Did you catch the repeat of the word I? I, I, I. God say, this is what I will do. It's the repetition of I that you cannot miss throughout this chapter.

Indeed, God says he's going to provide a new shepherd, a new king, a shepherd king to watch over them. Verse 23, and I'll set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them. He shall feed them and be their shepherd. In other words, you see, back in Luke 15, when Jesus tells this parable of the lost sheep, it's not that he's just kind of thinking up some lovely, sentimental picture, nor is it because he's been to the National Art Gallery.

he's seen a kind of Gainsborough and thought, oh, that's a kind of lovely pastoral scene. No, it is because with Ezekiel 34 in view, here is Jesus Christ.

[18:37] He is the shepherd king, God himself come to seek and to save the lost, to bring people back to himself.

Just think about it. It's what we celebrate at all the key Christian festivals of the year. At Christmas, God himself come into our world to seek and to save the lost.

At Easter, Jesus dying on the cross to bring the forgiveness of sins to those who repent. At Pentecost, as the Holy Spirit then equips the church to take the message of salvation out to the end of the earth, to reach and to save the lost.

And therefore, it's no coincidence that back in Luke chapter 15, Luke very carefully observes Jesus' audience. I wonder if you noticed that as the passage was read to us, Luke chapter 15, 1 and 2. Now, the tax collectors and sinners who were all drawing near to hear Jesus, and the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled saying, this man receives sinners and eats with them.

[19:56] You see, it's to them that Jesus then tells these parables. The tax collectors and sinners, those who were obviously far from God, and they knew they were far from God, and everyone else knew they were far from God.

they drew near to hear, while the Pharisees, the scribes, the religious establishments, they grumble at the company that Jesus keeps.

I guess we might say they represent the two kinds of people there are in our world. We tend to divide people, don't we, in all sorts of different groups by ethnicity or gender or background or class or wealth, education, blue-collar, white-collar, the kinds of jobs that people do.

And yet, as God looks at the world, there are only two types, two groups of people that really matter. There are those who look at themselves and assume they'll get to heaven, and there are those who look at themselves and assume they won't get to heaven.

people who are not in the world. They're not in the world. They're not going to be subversive, to challenge what we think.

[21:25] They do that in at least two ways. Here are two implications of what we've looked at so far. Firstly, they show us that God isn't hiding.

And yet, isn't this exactly what people in our culture certainly assume, that God is hiding? Perhaps that's your assumption listening in this morning, that God is the one who is hiding, and we are the ones who are on a search for God.

In which case, Jesus might have told this parable rather differently. The parable of the lost shepherd. There were some sheep, and they realized one day that actually their shepherd had wandered off.

So they got together to try to work out where he was. Perhaps he disappeared altogether. Some were even beginning to suggest that actually the shepherd didn't exist, and there wasn't a shepherd.

Until, that is, one or two rather more enterprising sheep decided they had sent out a search party. And so they went off, to search for the shepherd. And finally, they managed to find him.

[22:40] And they brought him back to the farm, rejoicing, and they held a great party. We found our lost shepherd, they say. Well, it's like if you've ever watched Shaun the Sheep or Wallace and

Gromace or something like that.

It's that kind of feel, isn't it? But it's very far from the parable that the Lord Jesus told. God isn't hiding. completely the reverse of what our culture by nature thinks.

Christianity isn't about our search for God, but his search for us. And therefore, the second way in which this parable is subversive, well, these two parables are subversive, is that they show that as far as Jesus is concerned, we are all lost.

We are far from God, naturally speaking. And that, of course, is an extraordinarily humbling thing to hear. That's why the Bible's teaching about sin is so deeply unpopular, the idea that we're all rebels against God, that we by nature turn away from God, that we all fall short of God's purity, his goodness, that we don't naturally love God or have a desire to please him, that we cannot save ourselves.

And yet, as a society, we insist in believing in the essential goodness of humanity. It's what our children are all taught in schools, despite being surrounded by abundant evidence.

[ 24 : 18 ] To the contrary, God isn't hiding. We are lost. So what gives God joy?

Well, finding the lost, just as he promised. What do you say? Who needs to hear this? Who needs to hear this?

Well, have a look again at how these two parables finish in verses 7 and 10. Let me read them one more time. Just so I tell you, there'll be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance.

And verse 10, just so I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

Do you see how the Lord Jesus addresses the two categories of people that we see in verses 1 and 2?

You see, it's not that there are sinners who need to repent, repent, and then those who aren't sinners who don't need to repent at all.

[ 25 : 32 ] No, that's not the two categories of people Jesus has in mind. Rather, it's those who realize they're sinners who need to repent, and those who don't realize they're sinners, and so don't repent.

repent. So who needs to hear this? Well, firstly, you need to hear this if you're far away from God and you know it.

If you're far away from God and you know it. Isn't it glorious here to see God's extraordinary heart for the lost, his rejoicing over the one, yes, even the one.

God is in the business of finding lost people and bringing them back to himself. Perhaps you think about yourself, perhaps you wonder, would God have me?

Perhaps you've been brought up to think of God as aloof and cold, or perhaps as only interested in the well to do and the religious, or perhaps you just think Christianity is about rules and regulations and for those who keep them.

[ 26 : 47 ] Well, think again. These parables in Luke 15 show us the extraordinary goodness and kindness and grace of God.

Do come back for the next three talks in the series where we'll see precisely what it looks like to repent, and we'll also see the warm welcome that God gives to those who do turn back to him in repentance.

There really is no greater discovery you could make in 2021. But secondly, you need to hear this if you are far from God and you don't know it.

If you're far from God and you don't know it. I was brought up in a fairly respectable and successful family. I think I believe God existed, although I didn't have a clue what he was like.

I assumed he was perfectly happy getting on with his life and that he was happy if I just got on with my life. And while I wasn't particularly religious, I wasn't irreligious either.

[ 27 : 54 ] And yet I can still remember exactly where I was sitting, the chair I was sitting on, the room I was sitting in, the first time I heard that I was a sinner and that Jesus was calling me to repent and to turn to him for forgiveness.

It had simply never occurred to me that God could look at a respectable person and see someone who was lost and far away.

Now, that is the point at which we have a choice. You can either take offense, as the Pharisees and the scribes of Jesus' day took offense, and sadly, as so many people do today, or you can take action as the Lord Jesus calls us to take action.

Again, I'd love you to join us for these next three talks as Jesus shows us what it looks like to take action and to turn back to him, or do join the Christianity Explore course that Rupert mentioned earlier and more details of that and how to sign up for that on the church website.

Third, we need to hear this if we're Jesus' disciples. We need to hear this if we are Jesus' disciples. Because it begs the question, doesn't it, do we share God's heart?

[ 29 : 21 ] Do we share God's passion for reaching the lost? Or are we content with belonging to a church with a reputation for seeking the lost and for looking for the lost, but yet without really sharing that passion for ourselves?

Perhaps our real joy, the thing that really gets us going, is elsewhere, our career or our family or holidays or lifestyle or whatever it is.

It also means, of course, doesn't it, that we need to hear this as a church. We're a church certainly with a reputation for seeking the lost, but are we any more than that?

Are we wholehearted in searching for the lost? Not counting the cost as it's so easy to do, but instead rejoicing in the task.

As one commentator put it, nothing ought to give such pleasure as the conversion of souls. It makes angels rejoice in heaven and ought to make Christians rejoice on earth.

[ 30 : 35 ] Let me lead us in prayer. Let's pray together. just so I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for this window on heaven. We thank you for the joy over one individual who repents and who turns back to the Lord Jesus who receives the forgiveness of sins and is welcomed.

We thank you, our Father, for the privilege of looking at Luke chapter 15 over these four weeks at the beginning of the year together. And we pray, please, that we might hear these words of Jesus and take them to heart for ourselves, us, but also not just for ourselves, but collectively as a local church.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.