

Lost and Found

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[0 : 00] All right. Well, I wonder if you've ever seen those lost and found signs. A bit like this one. Lost, have you seen my cat?

The only problem is this is the cat. Sometimes the sign is a found sign, like this sticky person who says, if you've lost a stack of \$20 notes wrapped in a rubber band, I found your rubber band. Have you ever lost something before, whether it's your keys or wallet or purse or phone? I'm guessing all of us have at some time or other. And if you have, you search for it, don't you? And when you find it, there is great joy, isn't there? Why? Because it matters to you, doesn't it? Well, this is what Jesus begins teaching the Pharisees about lost sinners in our passage, this well-known passage or parable, that they matter to God.

But to see this, we need to start with the context, which is point one in your outlines and verse one in your Bibles. I'll put the verses on the screen as well. It says, Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus.

[1 : 17] But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them. And so here's the scene. These are the outcasts of Jewish society, tax collectors and sinners.

And they're drawing near to hear Jesus. And instead of rejecting them, Jesus welcomes them, doesn't he? Not just with evening, but with fellowship.

He eats with them, a genuine sign of fellowship, if you like. In other words, he not just welcomes, but literally it is, receives them as one of his disciples who listen and obey his word.

The word here, at the end of verse one there, it can also mean obey. And so that's what they do. They listen and obey. And that's what disciples do, don't they?

We listen and obey Jesus' word, or at least we should do, shouldn't we? But these religious leaders can't believe it. They mutter, or literally grumble to themselves about it.

[2 : 23] How can this teacher and miracle worker associate with such sinners? How can he welcome or receive them as his disciples?

Surely that should only be reserved for people like us. And it's this response that causes Jesus to tell these three parables, beginning with the first two, point to verse three and four.

And so he tells them about the parable of the lost sheep and says, suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the 99 in open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?

Now I should point out, even though that doesn't seem to make sense to us, the way Jesus asks this question expects them to say, yes, that's what we would do. That's normal shepherd practice. Open country apparently is safe from cliffs and getting lost in shrub. But perhaps they wouldn't then rejoice the way they do in verses five to seven.

[3 : 29] When he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders, goes home, then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, rejoice with me. I have found my lost sheep.

And the point of the parable, I tell you that in the same way, there'll be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent.

I should also say that while there are people who are described as righteous in Luke's gospel, not one of them would ever say they never need to repent. Like us, they knew, they still, we all still, sin from time to time.

But, in Jesus' day, who thought they were so righteous they never needed to repent? The Pharisees. Jesus primarily is speaking to them, you see.

And his point is that while they might not value sinners and tax collectors, God does. The lost matter to him.

[4 : 34] For there is searching for them, finding of them, and then rejoicing over them. I mean, you only search for things that have value to you, don't you?

And you only rejoice greatly over things that have great value to you, don't you? And so instead of grumbling, these Pharisees should have been rejoicing that these lost sinners are now found, received, because God values the lost.

They matter to him. The second parable, in verses 8 to 9, we're not going to go through it, but it follows the same pattern and so it makes the same point. Something is lost, then sustained searching, then finding, then rejoicing, which represents rejoicing in heaven over lost sinners who are found.

And so the point is again, lost sinners matter to God. He values them. But why? Well, because he loves them. I've mentioned at the Doncaster morning services before that my daughter has been at me for years to get a dog.

And much to my dismay, meet Toby. He's already on the couch. But he escaped and she lost him just for a moment and so she searched for him and when she found him, there was great rejoicing by her, not me, because Toby matters to her.

[6 : 08] Indeed, Toby is loved by her. Well, lost sinners are not sheep or coins or even puppies.

They are people made in God's image. He loves them deeply. This microphone's going in and out, Philip, so can we just scrap this one altogether?

Excellent. And this love that God has for these lost sinners is what the third parable highlights. It's still directed primarily to the Pharisees.

It still follows a similar pattern but this parable gets personal. And instead of showing the breadth of searching for the lost, it highlights the depth of love towards the lost.

So at point three, verse 11 to 13, I'm not going to read through it because it's a pretty familiar parable and it'll just take a bit too long but verses 11 to 13, we read about the son who commands his father to give him his share of the inheritance now and as you know, inheritance normally only comes when the person passes away and so the son effectively says, Dad, I wish you were dead now.

[7 : 22] It's a pretty big slap in the face, isn't it? And then he walks away from his father as though his father was dead to him to live the world's way instead even though his father gave him life and everything good to enjoy in life.

Of course, the father represents God and this son represents sinners and the problem with sin, it actually makes us spiritually dead to God and it often leads to a mess in life.

That's what we see in verses 14 to 16 where he goes on a wild living spree but ends up basically in a pigsty feeding pigs and wishing he could eat their food.

Now, of course, sin may not land us in a literal pigsty but it can lead us to mess in life, can't it? how many families have been ruined by the sin of a member?

Whether an affair that broke a marriage or greed that led to bankruptcy or selfishness that led to a rift. I conducted a funeral service just before Christmas for someone outside our church.

[8 : 33] There was four brothers but the three of them could not contact their fourth to tell him about his father dying because the rift was so great they hadn't been any contact for years.

They had to hire a private investigator to try and track him down. Such was the rift. And certainly sin lands us in a spiritual pigsty when it comes to God.

Remember, Jesus is speaking to Jews and pigs are unclean to Jews, aren't they? And so the point is sin makes us unclean to God.

In fact, this son longed to eat like a pig. It makes us subhuman in fact because it's less than what God wanted for us as humans.

But there is a solution and that's to repent. And that's what we see in verses 17 to 19 where he comes to his senses and then he decides to go back and to confess his sin and plead for forgiveness.

[9 : 40] It's a great picture of repentance. The word repent means to literally change your mind in the original Greek language.

And that's what he does, doesn't he? Changes his mind. Decides to no longer live the world's way, go back to live his father's way and that leads, as I said, to a confession of mouth. I've sinned against you and against heaven and a humble plea for forgiveness to take him back, not as a son but as a servant.

It's humble. It's the kind of picture we Christians also need to keep living out in our own lives too, isn't it? Because we still sin, don't we? And so when we do, we need to come to our senses, change our mind, confess our sin and humbly ask for forgiveness.

The great news is God is full of compassion and will forgive and that's what we see the father doing in verse 20. The son 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 through his arms around him and kissed him. It's a great picture of the father's love, isn't it? At first it seems the father had been searching the horizon for his son because he spots his son while the son was still a long way off and then he runs to him which was not proper for Middle Eastern men at the time.

[11 : 07] Then hugs him and kisses him even before, notice, the son has a chance to confess verbally. That's how ready the father is to forgive.

Why? Well we're told because his heart is filled with compassion. Some time ago I heard a true story about another son who basically did the same thing.

For years he made no contact with his parents. I can't remember what made him change his mind but I do remember he first wrote a letter to see if he could come home and this is what he wrote. He said, Mum, if you will forgive me and let me come home, please put a white handkerchief on the clothesline so I know. You see their backyard where the clothesline was butted up against a train line and so as he kind of rode the train past his backyard, he'd be able to see the white handkerchief on the clothesline and know that his mother would forgive him.

But as he passed by, there was no white handkerchief on the clothesline. Instead, his mum had put every white sheet, curtain, and towel she had and blanketed the clothesline beckoning him home.

[12 : 24] Such was her heart for her son. That's this father's heart and that's our heavenly father's heart, isn't it? It's why Tim Keller calls this parable the prodigal god rather than the prodigal son.

The word prodigal means recklessly extravagant, which describes the son's bad behaviour, but it also describes the father's love, heart, recklessly extravagant, always willing to forgive.

And this father in the story, his extravagant love is further highlighted by what he does next. The son only gets half his confession out in verse 21 before the father interrupts and in verse 22 to 24 basically throws a party for him, saying go and get the fattened calf and kill it.

Let's have a feast and celebrate. Verse 24, why? Well, because this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate.

Notice in verse 24, the father calls him this son of mine. He restores the son's status, not a servant, but back in the family as a son.

[13 : 43] Also notice this is no ordinary celebration. the fattened calf was the best, the kind you'd keep for a biggest occasion like a wedding and yet for God the biggest occasion is when a lost sinner is found.

You see, God loves the lost deeply. His heart is filled with compassion for them such that he's ready and waiting to forgive them and will celebrate over them when they're found.

what a heart our father has. A heart that's different to the brothers who represent the Pharisees, the older brother that is. In verses 25 to 27 he hears about what's happening and then in verse 28 we read, the older brother became angry and refused to go in.

So his father went out and pleaded with him, another sign of love and compassion. Verse 29, but he answered his father, look, all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders, yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.

But when this son of yours, not my brother, this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him.

[14 : 58] You see for this older brother the celebration for such a sinner is over the top, it's inappropriate, in fact it's just downright wrong. And so he becomes angry and basically sings that great Australian anthem, you know, what about me?

It isn't fair, I've had enough now, I want my share. I was really kind of jiggling myself up to try and sing it but I just couldn't get there. Because I can't sing it, you understand. But that's because the older brother hasn't understood grace, has he?

You see, when it comes to the world, we are celebrated by earning it. Whether it's at work or at school or at uni, we have to work hard and earn it to be celebrated by good results or promotions and the like.

But when it comes to God's family, we are celebrated by grace. For we can never do enough to earn our way into his family.

Instead, his deep love for us means he forgives us and welcomes us as an undeserved gift. That's what grace is, undeserved gift. And I wonder if the father's first response to this older brother is to subtly teach him.

[16:12] Because in verse 31 we read, my son, the father said, you are always with me and everything I have is yours. The brother was always with the father, always had access to the father, his support, his help in life, and will inherit everything left of the father's, which was a double portion because he was the eldest.

He had not earned that, had he? You see, even his inheritance too was by grace. But the bigger lesson that the father wanted to teach this brother is that finding lost sinners really matters.

It's such a big deal, it has to be celebrated for it's nothing less than being raised from the dead.

Verse 32, he says, 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. If a lost loved one was raised to life now, you would celebrate, wouldn't you?

Well, so also when the spiritually dead are raised to new spiritual life in Christ, it's such a big deal, it has to be celebrated. We don't know how the older brother responded, probably so that the Pharisees might think about how he and they, whom this brother represents, should respond, which is to have a heart like the Father, like our Heavenly Father.

[17:53] So instead of grumbling at sinners being welcomed by Jesus, they might rejoice at sinners being found by Jesus. Indeed, they might even seek the lost and bring them to hear Jesus' word too.

This was a big application for the Pharisees that Jesus was making and it's the same application for us. You see, you may be here tonight just visiting but not yet a Christian, if that's you, welcome, but do realise that ignoring God, walking away from the Heavenly Father, lands you in a spiritual pigsty, makes you spiritually dead to God.

And so do change your mind, do repent and come near to Jesus, hear his word, that is listen and obey his word that says whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

But for most of us here tonight, I'm guessing we have been found by God. We have heard the word of Jesus and we have believed in him. And so firstly, we're to keep repenting because we keep sinning, don't we?

We're to keep coming to our senses and keep changing our minds about living the world's way and continuing to live God's way. Keep confessing our sins and humbly seeking forgiveness.

[19:20] But again, the big application is secondly, we're to have a heart like the Father's for the lost. A heart that loves them enough to help them hear the word of Jesus, that they might be found by Jesus.

One of our church members has a colleague who knew she was a Christian and so he asked her if she could visit his friend called Tim who was dying of cancer in Knox Hospital.

She didn't know Tim but she went to see him at Knox and share her faith with him. And then she went back again and again and again for 18 months.

Why? She didn't even know Tim. Well, because she had a heart like her heavenly father's for the lost. And in God's kindness, two weeks before last Christmas, Tim became a Christian and there was great rejoicing in heaven.

And just over two weeks ago, Tim passed away and is now in heaven because our church member had a heart like our heavenly father's for the lost. People don't always believe, don't get me wrong, and it might look different for us, but it does mean doing what we can to help them hear the word of Jesus that they might be found by Jesus.

[20:47] Whether that's praying for them or asking others to speak to them, reading the Bible with them or inviting them to hear it here at church.

This is going to be the focus for our year. We do evangelism every year, but after the COVID years, the focus last year was to put first things first.

That's what I encouraged us to do on kick-off last year, both in our own lives and as a church. And now this year, I want the focus to be looking outward, getting our house in order, but looking outward to the lost to do what we can to help them hear the word of Jesus, that they might repent

and believe, be found by Jesus.

And so as a church, this means praying for the lost, which we're going to do every single kingdom growth night. So next Wednesday is our kingdom growth night coming up at 7.30.

Every month we're going to have a segment where we pray for the lost. It also means as a church holding more bring a friend services this year so we can invite the lost to them.

[21 : 55] And as you just saw on the slide, it means joining with the Meet Jesus campaign, the national campaign that's being put on by AFES, the Christian groups at uni. In fact, they even come with tote bags and hats.

See if you recognise one of our members in the photo. More importantly than a tote bag and hat is, we're also going to be handing to you, anyone who wants one, two copies of what they've called Uncover John's Gospel.

There's six passages from John's Gospel which helps people meet Jesus. And so you might catch up for a coffee and this helps you to work through it with someone else.

And it means as a church running training to help you do this. But it all starts with having a heart like our Heavenly Father. because if we don't, we won't even try, will we?

And so do you. Do you have a heart for the lost like our Heavenly Father? It's not always easy, I know. And so when it's hard, can I encourage you to look at the Father's love for you.

[23 : 03] His deep love that gave his only Son to die for you. and let his heart for you help you to love the lost like him.

Let's pray for God's help to do this. Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for these familiar parables.

But help us not to forget the important lesson. indeed help us to put it into practice that is to have a heart like you for the lost.

That we might do what we can as we are able, whether big or small, to help them hear the word of Jesus, that they might be found by Jesus.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.