

The Religious

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[0 : 00] So if you would turn to Luke 15, this very famous, lovely, lovely story from Jesus, Luke 15, page 874.

If I see people going to sleep, I'm going to announce that there are other animals to be found. I haven't thought which animals yet, but we'll figure that one out.

Now, it's great for us in our Meeting Jesus series to spend a little time in looking at the different responses people have. And what Jesus is doing in chapter 15 of Luke's gospel is he's taking us into the heart and mind of God himself to help us understand how God thinks and feels about meeting us or rescuing us and bringing us back to himself.

And it's very easy to take this passage out of context. You probably have heard it taken out of context. I've once heard it used as advice for parents who've got children who've gone astray. It's been used to push the idea that God just accepts you as you are. You don't need to change. You don't need to repent. But when you look at the passage, it's speaking about repentance and life and death and a staggering cost of rescue.

[1 : 18] We have fire alarms in our house and they tend to go off in the middle of the night. I don't know why. And it's very helpful, really, because they speak to you in French and English, warning of various catastrophes.

And I took them out of the ceiling for a while and then I thought, well, I should put some new batteries in them. And when I got them out, I realised that someone had put batteries in the wrong way.

And I put them in the right way and they've worked ever since properly. And I think it's a little bit like that with passages of the Bible and particularly this one, that if you put them back into their context, they work well for us.

And the context here is verses 1 and 2, where Jesus is speaking to two very different groups, two different very different responses. He's talking to very bad people and very good people.

He's talking to people who live morally, openly immoral lives and they've made very bad and selfish choices. They're marginalised and discriminated against in that society.

[2 : 30] And on the other side, he's speaking to churchgoers, the religious, who in that culture were outwardly successful and wealthy, churchgoing, moral, upright.

See verse 1? Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes grumbled, saying, this man receives, welcomes, accepts sinners and eats with them. It's so true to life. I mean, tax collectors, they were like, they were bottom feeders. They were collaborators with the Roman government. They ripped off their own people under the guise of a foreign occupying power.

And sinners is not, this just doesn't, in Luke's gospel, it's not every one of us. It's those who've chosen to live flagrant lives, rejecting the moral standards of God and society.

They've dropped out of society. They don't hold solid jobs. They earn money in very self-destructive ways. They've got alternative lifestyles, particularly sexually. And in verse 1, it's the bad people who are drawing near to Jesus.

[3 : 43] Jesus is spending time with them and eating with them because he's come to seek and save the lost. But the other group, the church people, both clergy and lay, Pharisee and scribe, these are believers who've lived moral lives and they've begun to feel that they are genuinely better than other people.

And they just don't understand why Jesus would spend all his time and effort with these people. And so they do what church people have done from time immemorial. They grumble.

They complain. They whisper behind God's back. This is a spiritual plague. It's contagious and it's corrosive. And it's a sign that we've lost touch with God.

That's the context. And you see verse 3. So, because of that context, he told them this parable.

He's speaking to two groups, but he's most pointedly going after the church folk.

And though it looks like there are three parables here, actually there's only one. This singular parable. And that means that we have to hold the stories together. And when you read them, you notice immediately the first two stories are almost exactly the same.

[4 : 56] Somebody loses something. They have a great rescue operation. And they bring it back and there's happiness. But when we come to the third story, we've got two sons and it's different.

And that's the point. So we have to look at the difference. And that tells us where Jesus is going.

There are three realities in this chapter that I want to highlight. One is lostness.

One is the costliness of the rescue. And the third is the joy of the rescue and the homecoming. So firstly, I want to talk about what it is to be lost. This is a theme.

Lostness. And I do this because every religion and every world view looks at the world and says there's something wrong with the world. From far left politics to far right politics, everybody is absolutely certain they know it's wrong with the world.

Fixing it, that's another issue. But Jesus says things are way worse than we think and way better than we think. He says the problem is that we are utterly spiritually lost.

[6 : 02] We're lost from God. We're lost from glory. We're lost from life. We're spiritually lost. And then he comes along three chapters later, four chapters later and says, And as you read the chapter, eight times Jesus uses this word, lost, lost, lost, lost.

And in the Greek, it's a very strong word. It's not the word when I've misplaced my keys. It's not the word for, you know, when your GPS breaks down and you'll find your way back ultimately.

It's the Greek word for smashed, annihilated, destroyed, sometimes by violence. It's used of eternal destruction.

And the main trouble, according to Jesus, you see, is not what we have done to ourselves or to each other so much as what we've done to God. It's not that we haven't lived up to our full potential. It's not so much that we've harmed each other. We've got clutter and bad things in our lives. We are lost from God. We have tried to play God and we've destroyed our relationship with him.

[7 : 17] And unless he takes the initiative with us, we are completely lost forever. And this parable takes us inside the heart of God so that we see lostness from his point of view.

And we feel something of his inner drive to rescue people and then the joy of rescuing them. So the picture of the sheep, I don't know how many of you have sheep, but when sheep get lost, they usually die unless someone rescues them.

They fall down mountains. They become food for some hungry predator. Or even when the shepherd comes to rescue them, they try and fight the shepherd off. They're lost. Lost.

The coin, the coin is not going to suddenly get up and roll back into plain view. It's lost. And the surprise when we come to the third section is that both the boys of this father are lost.

The youngest son in verse 12 does the unthinkable. He says to his father, give me my share of the property now. He's saying, I cannot wait for you to die.

[8 : 21] Dad, drop dead. I want to get my hands on the property what's rightfully mine. He's a greedy boy. He's an entitled boy.

He's got no interest in the father for the father's sake. He just wants the father for what he can get out of him. And as soon as he gets his hands on his cash, he races off to a distant country and he spends his money like there's no tomorrow on wine, women and the full West Coast lifestyle.

Do you like that? Three W's. I didn't even have to ring Jim Packer for those W's. Until the bubble bursts and he runs out of money and he runs out of friends and he finds himself in a pigsty jealous of what the pigs are eating.

He is lost. And this is lost through indulgence and immorality. It's just it's throwing off any thought of God and it's running as far and as fast away from him as you can.

And you use all the gifts that God gives you to run away from him. You're using them without reference to God. It's trying to play God with God's gifts. And it usually comes with a sense of entitlement and not wanting anything to do with God but quite enjoying his gifts.

[9 : 38] Thank you very much. Some years ago I had the privilege of visiting with Victory Outreach in Los Angeles. It's an outreach to drug addicts and drug dealers and prostitutes and pimps by

ex-drug addicts, drug dealers, prostitutes and pimps.

And on the south side of LA. And before you go out on the streets at night, some of the kids who've been rescued give testimonies to the reality of Jesus in their lives.

And there was a black man who looked like he was in his 60s. He was 24. And he told the story of how he got into a life of crime when he was young, living in Mississippi.

He talked about some of his family difficulties and how he got into drugs, how he got into mini crime. And he travelled across to Los Angeles so that he could become a prostitute and earn money for his drug habit.

And he stopped at this point in the story. He had his eyes closed. And he looked up to the ceiling like this. And I can't do a southern accent, I'm afraid. But he said something like, I was lost, he said.

[10:49] And I thought, you were. There's no other word to describe it. He's obviously lost this first son. But the surprise in this story from Jesus is that it's the second son who's just as lost.

When the young son comes home, the father throws a party. And the oldest boy hears the music and the dancing. What's his reaction? My brother's come back.

He's angry. He won't join in. Verse 28. Just have a look down at it, please. He was angry, refused to go in. And his father came out and entreated him.

And he answered his father, look, this is not the way you speak, your father. Look, these many years I have served you. Never disobeyed your command.

You never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours, not my brother, when this son of yours came who has devoured your property with prostitutes, he can hardly get it out, you killed a fattened calf for him.

[11:59] What's interesting about this is that lostness plays out differently for the older son. He will not enter the joy of the father. He feels like any celebration of the younger brother means that he's going to miss out on what he's entitled to.

From the outside, he's a thoroughly good boy. He's trustworthy, hardworking, honest and moral. He cares nothing about his brother and he cares nothing about his father. In fact, he does not love his father for his father's sake, but for what he can get out of him as well.

And the whole relationship between him and his father, he understands in terms of obligation and debt. He doesn't think of himself as a son. He thinks himself as a slave. He says, look, every single rule you've given me I've done.

I've worked so hard. Surely I deserve this party more than this wretched son of yours. I've never done the things that he... You owe me, he's saying to his father.

You know. What's the reward for all the work that I've done? He's full of injury and anger and self-righteousness and Jesus says he's lost.

[13:14] And it's a deadly and devastating picture of the Pharisees and of every one of us who begins to take God's love for granted. We begin to feel entitled to our blessings.

And we begin to complain when things don't go the way we think they should. And we begin to genuinely think that we're better than other people. We constantly... Here's a test. We constantly feel put upon when we're asked to do things.

And we're particularly upset when we see God's blessing go to those who deserve it less than we do. We've just lost touch with God. We live in his house and under his protection.

And maybe you've done that all your life. But the miracle of his grace you take for granted. And sometimes we even in our worst moments become envious of the pigsty. And the Christian life becomes a debt repayment scheme.

It would never occur to you to say to God just off your own bed, I love you father. Unless you've been told to do it. So there is a second form of lostness.

[14:24] And I want to move quickly to the second theme. And that is the costliness of the rescue. You might not be aware. This is a controversial passage. Some commentators think that Jesus has left out something very important.

That there's no atonement. Nobody suffers for the sins in this passage. That they're just welcome back without any consequences. Particularly the prodigal son. I think that's nonsense. Particularly when you think who's telling this story.

This is Jesus Christ. Who tells us in chapter 19 verse 10. That he's specifically come from heaven to seek and to save those who are lost. And he goes to the cross.

And he dies to pay the debts that we owe God. That we could never repay to God. To rescue us as children. As sheep. As precious ones to God. To bring us home. To give us joy. This is unique to Christianity.

You know. Every other religion and worldview has a number of ways toward enlightenment. Or paths that we should seek and practice and work on. Christianity is the only religion in the world where God the Father seeks.

[15:31] And comes after us. Sends his son when we're far off. And covers our shame and our debt by his death. And brings us to joy. It's a radically inclusive gospel.

And it's a radically costly gospel. So sometime if you want. Have a look at how costly it is for the shepherd. Then have a look at how costly it is for the woman. But when we come to the sons. It's even clearer. Because when the first son demands the share of his inheritance. You know what would be expected at that point in the culture? His father should beat him.

His father should punish him. He should have a rail against him. Because by doing this. The son has not only violated the family. He's violated the reputation of the father. And he robs the father twice over.

He robs the father of the property. He impoverishes the whole property. And he robs the father of his reputation. But what does the father do? He allows it. He says nothing.

[16:28] He bears the pain of loss. And what makes the father more amazing. Is that when he's in the pigsty. And the son comes to himself. The speech he gets ready for the father.

Has nothing to do with repentance. It's got nothing to do with the pain he's inflicted on the father. So you just look down at verse 18 and 19 for a moment. And see his speech that he's writing.

He says I'm going to get up. And I'm going to go to my father. Father I've sinned against heaven and before you. Yes we all know that. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. I'm happy to hand it over. But treat me as one of your hired servants.

He wants to do a deal. I'm going to pay the debt back. Treat me as a hired servant. Just take it out of my salary.

So that I maintain some semblance of control. He doesn't really get it. But when he returns verse 20.

[17:25] We learn that every day he'd been away. The father had been out looking. Waiting for him to return. And he knows that if the son comes back through the village.

He's going to be exposed to mocking and shame. Because he has offended the community. But before the boy runs the gauntlet. While he's a long way off. The father goes and kisses him. And puts his arms around him. So that he the father will walk the walk of shame. No recrimination. Because what's important to this father. Is not the money.

It's not the property. It's restoration. And reconciliation. And redemption. And there's a little detail in verse 21. When the son gets to that part of the speech.

Where he's going to offer to pay his father back. The father cuts him off. The son's got no idea what it's going to take to restore this. The father doesn't blame him.

[18:18] Or shame him. He gives him the robe. And then he gives him the ring. Which is the signet ring. Which means opening all the bank accounts to the younger son again. It is sheer gracious forgiveness.

It's unqualified gift. It's like a wife who has a husband who has betrayed her. And he begs her to be forgiven and to be received back.

Where does all her pain go? She has to bear it in herself. Or there will be no forgiveness. She has to decide that she will suffer. And take it into herself.

And if she doesn't. The marriage will become another debt repayment program. And that's what God does through Jesus Christ on the cross. He receives the pain into himself.

And it is just the same with the older brother. While he is having his temper tantrum. Tentrum. That's a new word. Temper tantrum. In verse 28.

[19:18] What does he do? For the second time in one day. He goes out to a son. And he bears the pain. He entreats. And he chooses the path of reconciliation.

He does not go after the eldest son's sense of entitlement. Nor does he have to justify the party. But he calls this older brother. Come in to the celebration. Because I've borne the cost.

See forgiveness is absolutely free. For all of us who are lost. But it is radically costly to God. And the only way that we can be welcomed back.

Is for Jesus to be put out. The only way for us to be reconciled to God. Is for Jesus to be abandoned on the cross. We were lost. The rescue has happened. And now we come to the third and final part. And that is the joy. And there is more space given in this chapter to joy. Than there is to the other two themes. Interesting.

[20 : 20] So when the shepherd finds the sheep. Verse 6. We read. He puts it on his shoulders. Brings it home rejoicing. Calls together his friends and his neighbours. Saying rejoice with me. I found my sheep that was lost.

Just so Jesus says. There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. Than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance. And the word for joy in this verse. Is the word for whooping. Cheering. Singing. Feasting. The agony of Jesus on the cross. Began in the joy of God. In eternity past. And it produces the joy of God. In eternity future. As well as including us in his joy.

And there are all sorts of different kinds of joy. Aren't there? There's natural joy. Eating food. And God gives us pleasure in that. There's moral joy. Of peace and prosperity and satisfaction.

[21 : 21] And there's spiritual joy. The joy of faith. Rejoicing in hope. Spiritual joy is taking joy in God himself. Who is the source of all joy. And it's part of the life of believers.

And there's joy. According to the Apostle Paul. In watching believers grow in discipleship. And there's even joy in suffering. And Jesus is saying here. There is great joy. In bringing sinners to repentance.

When we were in the old church building. In Shaughnessy. I remember years ago. Someone had come and gone for a few years. Came to me one Sunday. Quite indignant.

That we were giving welcome lunches for newcomers. And said. Why don't we have welcome lunches for old timers? That's a good thought. Maybe. Maybe. But it did feel like the older brother a little bit.

Why is Jesus doing this? He's showing us. Why. He's showing these Pharisees. Why he's going out to those who are lost. It's not just for the sake of their rescue.

[22 : 26] Nor just for the sake of their joy. But it's for the sake of the Pharisees joy. And for God's joy. Ultimately. And that if we don't experience that joy.

Then we too find ourselves in the place of the older brother. So you know the woman with the coin. Rejoice with me. She says to her friends. I found the coin that I had lost.

Verse 10. Another time Jesus says. Just so I tell you. There is joy before the angels of God. Over one sinner who repents. The Pharisees deeply resent Jesus' outreach.

And evangelism. And mission. They resent the freedom of his grace toward these outsiders. Because it puts their own approval. Their own earnings at risk.

And when the younger son comes home. And the father kills the fatted calf. He says this. Let us eat and celebrate. My son was dead. And is alive. He was lost. And is found.

[23 : 26] And you know for that younger son. It's only when he really understands. The freedom of his forgiveness. Can he enter into the joy of the father. It's when the father covers him with all these gifts.

And he stops his silly speech. That he gives up the ridiculous idea. Of a debt repayment program. And he realizes that the issue. Wasn't the money or the broken rules of the far country. It's the broken relationship.

It's the broken heart of God. That he cannot heal. And yet here is God. Here is the picture of God the father. Making himself vulnerable again. But it's the joy of the celebration.

That's so upsetting for the older brother. The Pharisees. And we as church people. Can forget the freedom of forgiveness. And like the Pharisees. We think the newcomers.

Or to pay a bit of their debt as well. It's a great story. It's a great passage. And we're either like the younger brother. Or like the older brother. And if you're like the younger brother.

[24 : 23] And you're in a far country. Away from the father's home. Jesus simply says. You come home. Repentance does not mean. You've got to work hard for it.

Repentance means. Turning away from the pigsty. And grasping hold of the fact. That the father has done all. To rescue. And to welcome you back. You're not just broken. You're not just in trouble.

You're lost. And you cannot heal yourself. There in the pigsty. You have to come back to the father. And enter into the joy of the Lord. And if you're an older brother.

You're a good person. It's a bit tricky isn't it. It's hard to see how lost you could be. But it is possible for the older brother's attitudes. To start creeping into our lives.

To begin to think that we do. We do deserve. Some happiness. And respect about what we've done. And I think the place that really shows itself.

[25 : 20] Out of this passage. Is that we become like the Pharisees. Around outreach and mission. True joy. True happiness. Is found only in God.

It's found as our hearts move. Toward the enjoyment of God. For his own sake. Not for what he gives us. And we enjoy ourselves. And we enjoy one another.

For God's own sake as well. Amen.