

# The Religious

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, I want to join James and Derek's welcome to you, and it's very good to be with you today as we are continuing this series on Meet Jesus. This passage of Luke 15 that we heard read is a marvelous reading of God's goodness.

Jesus is telling stories that are meant to bring us into the heart of God and to see his goodness, his grace towards us, welcoming sinners.

There's a gladness in God's heart that we see, and it's a very good way to start a very dreary Sunday morning to be thinking of this great theme of Luke that God takes great pleasure in saving people who are far away from him.

So there's three parables that we hear that Jesus tells to us that reveal this. Together they give a complete picture of God's heart towards all sinners.

And the main character in verses 3 through 7 is a shepherd, and then the main character in the next parable, verses 8 through 10, is a woman with a lamp.

[ 1 : 1 2 ] And then in the last parable, the parable of the prodigal son, is this father who is the main character with this loving heart. And you can't read the New Testament when we're thinking of that first parable without knowing that Jesus is that shepherd.

He's the good shepherd, he says. He's called the chief shepherd and the great shepherd. God revealed through his prophet Ezekiel, and this is in Ezekiel 34, that God one day would be the shepherd of God's people.

Because the shepherds that were supposed to protect the flock and sustain them had actually caused the sheep to scatter. Those were the religious leaders.

And so God said that one day, I myself will search for my sheep and I will seek them out as a shepherd seeks his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered.

So I will seek my sheep and I will rescue them. Does that sound familiar? See, Jesus is illustrating that he is the shepherd that leaves the sheep that are safe and he goes and goes and goes to seek the one that is lost until he finds it.

[ 2 : 3 1 ] And Jesus emphasizes, I don't know if you noticed that here, but he really emphasizes the joy of finding that sheep. It says there that he lays it on his shoulders rejoicing.

It's this intimate picture of closeness and taking great joy in this one sheep that was lost. But his joy goes much further from that one time with his sheep.

It spills over into friends and neighbors of that shepherd. And so he calls them all together. And he tells them to rejoice and to celebrate with him because the one who was lost has been found.

Just last week, I met with someone who shared his testimony of just having come to faith a couple of weeks before. And this was just last week.

Clearly, God had been seeking him in the most unlikely places in his life. And finally, through the ministry of several people here at St. John's, he has come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ.

[ 3 : 41 ] Well, I told many people about this, and I'm telling you now, there will be a baptism in a few weeks. And in all of that, we are celebrating, we are rejoicing that one who is lost is found by the power of God, by the gospel.

And that's true for us. When we seek, when we work with God and seek the lost, we pray, we are persistent in our search with God.

And that can be long and hard. When we think of the people in our lives who don't know the Lord, it can be a very hard journey and persistent. But we also share joy when that person comes to faith.

And this is something that we will help each other with, and we will actually share stories and encouragement in the CCQ that's coming up in a couple of weeks. We need to be strengthened. We need to strengthen one another in that God's work of seeking the lost and knowing that God is after people in our lives to save them.

This is what the picture of the shepherd shows us. But in addition to the joy of that shepherd, Jesus uses this third parable. I'm going to jump to it for a moment here.

[ 4 : 59 ] This joy of the father. And it's a different joy. It's not the joy of seeking, which has just been talked about. It is the joy of welcoming his lost son. And Jesus, again, takes time to describe that joy of welcoming this lost son back home in chapter 15, verse 20.

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him. He felt compassion. Literally, he was moved by compassion. He ran. He embraced him and kissed him.

You know, Jesus spending time in the joy of this father. As with the shepherd, there's this very personal, intimate rejoicing over the dear lost son who has returned.

He also can't keep that joy to himself. He throws a big party, kills the fattened calf. There's dancing and joyful music, a great banquet. And so, again, the joy of God is emphasized in that parable, in the lost being found.

And then the main character of the middle parable is a woman with ten coins. And she loses one. And she lights a lamp, we hear, and sweeps the house and seeks diligently until she finds it.

[ 6 : 19 ] Well, we've seen the son in the first parable. We've seen God the Father in the third parable. And many commentators and preachers have seen that this woman is maybe an illustration of the Holy Spirit or the church in the power of the Holy Spirit with the light of the gospel diligently seeking out the lost.

Well, that might be a little bit too neat, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But either way, Jesus sees her joy and her calling together her friends and neighbors to rejoice with her as a real clear picture of the joy before the angels of God over one sinner who has been lost.

So clearly, in all of these parables, we see that God's great purpose is to seek after lost people and save them. The lost can be those who are wandering aimlessly away from God like sheep.

And you may know people like this in your own life. It may be your own story. Or they are spiritually lifeless people in the dark with regard to God, like that coin.

Completely, God does not come into the picture at all. Or they are rebellious people, deliberately disobeying God, disrespecting Him, perhaps in anger, reacting against what they know of God in their life.

[ 7 : 47 ] Spiritual lostness takes different forms. But God, in all of those different forms that people are away from Him, seeks them.

And He puts tremendous value on them. That's very clearly emphasized. You see that in the immense joy in both finding these lost and welcoming them as they repent.

Those are Jesus' own words. And so as we go away from this passage with those parables in our minds, we think, what does this have to do with me on this dark Sunday morning?

Well, our reading started by a strange saying that salt loses its saltiness. And that's worthless. It's thrown away. And then as sinners and tax collectors draw near to Jesus in the next verse, the Pharisees grumble.

And grumbling is a very bad sin in the Bible. I hope you know. They grumble that Jesus receives sinners and eats with them. So in those three parables, Jesus is telling us, the listeners, that we lose our saltiness.

[ 9 : 02 ] We lose God's flavor when we forget what God's heart is, which is to seek and to save the lost. Of all the people in these parables, you know, the shepherd, the woman, the father, all the people that come to the rejoicing celebration, only one does not rejoice.

And of course, that's the son, the older brother, who complained that his dad threw a party when his brother returned. He is a lot like the Pharisees who complained that Jesus was diligently seeking sinners and welcoming them as they repented, eating with them.

They had forgotten God's heart, a seeking heart that is filled with joy when he finds lost people and they repent by embracing God's saving work and welcome.

So in these parables, Jesus calls the Pharisees to repent themselves and to take on God's saltiness. And they can only do that by remembering God's heart towards the lost.

They are meant, those Pharisees, to diligently seek out the sinners that God seeks and to love the repentance that God loves. And there's a strong call for us to be salty as well.

[ 10 : 18 ] We are meant to trust that Jesus is seeking and saving the lost people in our lives who don't know Jesus and his grace yet. We are meant to join him in seeking them by praying for their repentance by being physically present with them, just as Jesus was present with sinners.

By speaking of God's reality and his grace in your own life. That testimony of your own repentance is so very, very powerful. And to look for opportunities to speak up about the good news of Jesus' forgiveness and life.

But I think also we are to remember that God seeks us every day as well. God desires our repentance.

He takes joy in our repentance and makes us salty Christians that way. This reading reminds us of the great joy that God takes in us as we repent and turn to him.

That's the work he's doing in us. That's why in this communion service and everyone that you're in, we say these words. We pray, we do earnestly repent and are heartily sorry for these are misdoings and intend to lead the new life.

[ 11 : 36 ] And then we ask God to forgive us our sins through Jesus Christ and grant that through him we may serve and please him in newness of life.

So what does that repentance look like? It is a 180 degree turn in the direction back to God. It can be very difficult and costly because God's dealing with our pride.

But this passage says there is great joy in heaven over our repentance. And that joy spills into our life. Whenever people encounter Jesus and make the complete U-turn of repentance, joy resulted.

We heard the Samaritan woman a couple weeks ago. She changed from a life of sexual immorality to a life of pure devotion and fidelity to Jesus Christ.

And she called all kinds of people joyfully to do the same thing that she had done as well. And we see this happen to so many people throughout the New Testament. Zacchaeus, a few chapters later, he turns from stealing to quite joyfully giving his wealth away to people who have nothing.

[ 12 : 44 ] And then giving back four times to those that he stole from. As you make your own U-turn to Jesus, God gives you a joy and a flavor of his grace in your own life as well.

He makes you salty in this way. He brings more and more of God's flavor into the people, God's people in your life. I think he gives you a humility towards them as you repent.

He gives you an amazement in God's incredible grace. And I think he gives you a trust that if he can bring about this repentance in my own life, he will do it in the lives of those who are lost around me.

There's tremendous joy in heaven when even one sinner comes to repentance. The power of the Holy Spirit, through that power, may you seek this joy as you seek the lost ones in your life.

Amen.