

Luke 15:1-10 PM

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[0 : 00] Father God, I pray that the Holy Spirit would open our ears and soften our hearts and sharpen our minds, that we would hear and receive your word tonight.

In Christ's name, amen. Be seated, yeah. Well, if I haven't had a chance to meet you, friends, my name is Jacob Vandiver, and I'm one of the ministers here at St. John's.

And I think that it is weird to be a Christian. And I think that it's weird because as I come to understand the gospel more clearly, I realize more and more that my own natural intuitions, my own natural expectations about who God is are totally off the mark.

It's just weird because it's so not intuitive. So I'm thankful that scripture corrects our bad theology. And that's what our passage is about tonight. Luke chapter 15 is all about this. Jesus here is correcting bad theology. He's correcting misunderstandings about who God is.

[1 : 18] So it'll be helpful if you pull that up, if you don't have it already. Luke chapter 15. It's on page 874 of the Pew Bible.

And so to give us just a little bit of context, because I think that'll be helpful. A few weeks, if you were with us, you may remember that Jesus was at dinner with some Pharisees, and he was calling them out for their religiosity and for their self-righteousness.

And he explained to them that salvation is not something that you can earn. But it's like an invitation to a great banquet. And all that you need to do is accept the invitation.

And then last week, we saw that a massive crowd gathered around Jesus after this party. And he turned and he called them out too. And he said, to get into this banquet, you can't just follow me at a distance.

You have to give your entire life to me. So Jesus obviously never read how to win friends and influence people.

[2 : 27] He's a really bad evangelist. Well, this week, despite Jesus' poor tactics at evangelism, there's a massive crowd around him.

And verse 1 tells us that the crowd was mostly made up of tax collectors and sinners. These were all of the undesirable and detestable people in Jesus' time.

And there's also some religious folk off to the side, scribes and Pharisees. And they see Jesus with this crowd, and they are scandalized.

And so they grumbled, it says. They thought Jesus was irreligious, immoral, and irresponsible. Because as every good religious person knows, the company you keep determines your character. Right? Or so they thought. And so they murmured. They murmured to themselves and to each other. What is going on with this Jesus?

[3 : 37] In chapter 15, is Jesus explaining himself to these religious people? Jesus says, you think that you understand God, religious people.

You think you understand what religion is for. You think you understand salvation. But you're totally off the mark. Now, friends, I have some potentially upsetting news for us.

We are the religious people. Now, that doesn't mean that we're bad people. The scribes and Pharisees weren't bad people. But it does mean that we often get confused about who God is.

So, let's see how Jesus helps us to understand God better in Luke 15. We're going to do this in three steps. Jesus tells us three things that will help us understand who God really is.

First, God wants, Jesus tells us, to find lost people. God wants to find lost people. Number two, God is joyful when he finds lost people.

[4 : 50] And number three, God calls all people to repentance. Okay, let's get into it. Point number one, God wants to find lost people.

I think it's our intuitive sense, at least it is for me, that God is far away. We just sort of take this for granted, I think.

We can't see him, so he must be far away. The other day, my little son Noah, we were just walking back in from playing outside, and he said, Dad, when are we going to get to be with Jesus? I said, well, you know, and I tried to give a good answer. He was like, well, I can't see him. We can't see him. So, we think that he's far away.

And because of this, we think that it's up to us to go and to find him. I think this is true of everyone. Everyone is searching for the divine, as they say, in one way or another.

[6 : 01] This is true for both Christians and so-called atheists, I think. The modern atheist in Vancouver might say, if only I could do enough yoga, or if only I could do enough psychedelic drugs, or if only I could find a fulfilling enough relationship, then I might really get in touch with the divine, the truly transcendent.

But the modern Christian in Vancouver might equally say, if only I could find the right habits, if only I could get my rule of life right, if only I could say the right prayers, or do enough good in the world, then I could really get into touch with God.

And it's easy when we think this way to grow spiritually cold, and to have a deep sense that we have lost touch with God.

But in these parables, Jesus reveals that, yes, someone has lost something. The man has lost his sheep.

The woman lost her coin. The father lost his son. But these three characters, they represent God.

[7 : 30] God is the one who has lost something. And because these three characters lost something that they valued very much, they were willing to drop everything to go and find them.

Even to an absurd degree. Look, look with me. Verse 4. What man of you, says Jesus, having a hundred sheep, if he lost one of them, does not leave the 99 in the open country and go after the one that is lost?

Now, it seems like Jesus is just appealing to common sense here. Like, of course anyone would do this. But nobody acts this way. Nobody in their right mind would leave 99%, would risk 99% of their livelihood to go after a 1% that they lost.

It's crazy. This is obviously negligence. Or what about the woman who lost a mere one of her 10 coins?

You might have a little note in your Bible that says that each coin in this case was worth about a day's wages. Well, how long do you think she spent looking for the coin?

[8 : 53] My wife and youngest son went out of town earlier this year and I decided that I was going to do some spring cleaning. So I was going to sweep and mop the entire apartment.

And it was going to be great. I was really excited. And I got into it and I thought, I'll probably knock this out in an hour or two. But by the time I finished, I had spent probably six hours just cleaning the floors.

This woman probably wasted a whole day of wages to find a coin that's worth a day's wages. That's an obviously bad investment.

Or what about the father who saw his prodigal son from a long way off? It says that he ran to him a long way.

He embraced him and kissed him. For a dignified father like this man was to run and to embrace and to kiss this disrespectful, degenerate, traitor of his family.

[10 : 10] This was shameful and embarrassing to anybody who saw it. And the word for kiss here is not like a gentle peck on the cheek.

It's covering the boy's face with kisses over and over again. It's gratuitous. And this is very sweet if when you picture it, you think about kissing someone that is easy to love or someone that is adorable.

But for this man to run and kiss his degenerate son this way, well, it's obviously embarrassing. So what's the point? Well, the point is that this neglectful, irresponsible, embarrassing behavior is how God acts towards us.

This is God's enormous, ridiculous, gratuitous grace. Why? Because he wants to come and find you.

It's at the top of his priority list. It's the best way that God can think of spending his time because he wants to have a relationship with you.

[11 : 32] That's point number one. God wants to find lost people. And point number two is that God is joyful when he finds lost people.

And this is the other side of the equation with these lost things. And it may be obvious at this point, but it's totally not intuitive. We are the lost things of God.

And when God finds us, he is overjoyed. This again, friends, I think feels totally backwards. I think it's natural for us to think that if we could track down God, if we could finally get a relationship with him, he probably wouldn't really want to be with us.

We think, I think we think, of God often as someone who's been avoiding us. Maybe you know what this is like. You know that person who avoids eye contact with you or walks away quickly when they see you coming.

I hope this is not just me. And when you finally do corner them to talk to them, they sort of do this deep exhale and they roll their eyes and they talk to you awkwardly until they can finally get away again.

[12 : 55] But Jesus tells us that God is exactly the opposite way with us. Not only does he not avoid you, he is searching for you.

This means that you belong to him. Your rightful place is with God. You are valuable to him and when he finds you, he is overjoyed.

Ten times in chapter 15, ten times, Jesus mentions this rejoicing, this partying that happens when a lost thing is found. And it really is overjoy.

It's a totally disproportionate response. The woman throws a party that cost way more than the coin that she found.

The father uses his family's best stuff to throw a party for an undeserving son who has wasted half of the family's inheritance.

[14 : 00] It is totally beyond what we would think is reasonable. But that's who God is.

He rejoices when even one of his lost children are found. And that includes you and that includes me. That's point number two.

God is joyful when he finds lost people. And last point. God calls all people to repentance. And this one can be a bit tricky because I think we have all sorts of wrong ideas about what repentance is. Repentance is turning away from sin and turning toward God. And Jesus tells us that it is necessary.

Look at verses 7 and verse 10. The lost thing that is found is the sinner who repents. Repentance is our necessary response to God graciously coming to find us.

[15 : 16] We have to respond. So we respond with repentance. But the point of repentance is not that we would feel shame.

It's natural for us, I think, to think of repentance like it's shameful groveling at the foot of an oppressive tyrant. I have Christian friends who genuinely won't pray prayers of repentance because they think that it's traumatizing.

or that it's shameful or it's damaging to their spiritual life. But that is a major misunderstanding of what Jesus is telling us.

Jesus is teaching us that when we repent, we are returning to our Father and we are accepting the Father's offer to be his children.

That's what repentance is. we're not repenting to a tyrant. We're not begging forgiveness from an oppressor. We're returning to the one who loves us and we're becoming his children again.

[16 : 39] That's what repentance is. And because of that, repentance is always, always, always, always, met with three things. Dignity, acceptance, and honor.

Look at verse 22. When the prodigal son comes back home, his father meets him and puts his best robe on him.

This is covering the boy's shame. And it clothes him with dignity. The father puts a ring on his hand. This means he accepts him as his son.

The father puts shoes on the boy's feet. This is the father honoring him as a member of his household. This is always the father's response.

no matter how messed up our repentance is. Remember, the prodigal son was not coming home for the right reasons.

[17 : 48] The prodigal son wanted to come home so that he could find a job that didn't involve him serving pigs. He wanted to have food.

He wanted to have a warm bed. He wanted to work off his debt. But the father doesn't even allow him to finish the speech that he's prepared.

The father interrupts him and immediately accepts him as his son. This is what happens when we repent every time.

But there's one more lesson that Jesus is teaching us here. And it's that all people, all people must repent.

This invitation to return to God is extended to every person. For sure, to the prodigal who has run away to a far country.

[18 : 55] But also to the older brother who, even though he's close in proximity, his heart is distant from the father.

Friends, it's easy to see that the prodigal needs to repent. His selfishness is on display for the whole world. But it is a lot harder to see that the older brother needs to repent.

he's not selfish overtly, but he's quietly self-righteous. He rejects the father out of resentment.

So, friends, Jesus is showing us that both selfishness and self-righteousness are both rejections of the father. Self-righteousness, like the older brother has, says to the father, I'll not have your grace, thank you very much, I'll stand on my own merit, I'll earn my way, I'll justify myself, and I'll resent you, father, if you hand out freebies to my good-for-nothing brother.

And this is our temptation, friends. This is the temptation for religious people. And it's just as deadly as the sins of the prodigal.

[20 : 31] This is the reason that Jesus tells this story in Luke 15. It's to wake up the religious folk whose hearts have become hardened toward the father's grace.

And did you notice that the story ends on a cliffhanger? will the older son repent? And that's the question that Jesus leaves with us.

Will we return to our father? Will we love the father for who he really is? Or will we continue in self-righteousness?

this is our temptation. And it's why we need to daily repent. We need to daily return to the father.

To remember the character of our loving father. And to accept his offer over and over again. to be honored and dignified as his children.

[21 : 42] The world, the flesh, and the devil, they all train us to be selfish, self-righteous older brothers. And they reinforce this false picture of God that Jesus is warning us against.

This picture of God I think comes very naturally to us. It's a picture of God where he has a ledger book. And he's keeping track of our rights and our wrongs.

And he says that we need to measure up. But God doesn't say measure up. He says come home.

So brothers and sisters, let's daily be retrained by the gospel.

Let's keep the truth of who God really is in front of our eyes every single day. and as we turn to the God of the gospel every day, we'll be reminded how much he loves us, how much he is willing to drop everything to come and find us, and how he rejoices when he finds us.

Amen. Amen.