

LOST AND FOUND

Luke 15:1–32

Key Verse: 15:24

“For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’
And they began to celebrate.”

What are you most interested in? Some are into hobbies. Some love movies, music, sports or video games. Some are so devoted to their family or friends. In churches, many just want to feel comfortable, to have good fellowship or to be able to network. But what was Jesus most interested in? Today’s passage shows us he was most interested in the lost. Finding the lost was his greatest joy. What does it mean for a human being to be “lost” or “found”? How can we get interested in lost people? And why should we? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

Jesus has just challenged the crowds to count the cost in following him (14:25–35). Following him requires full commitment, putting him first, holding nothing back. It’s hard to really live like this. But today’s passage shows what happens when we make such a commitment. We learn the heart of Jesus. What’s in his heart? Read verse 1. “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him.” These people were the social deviants, the outcasts of the time. They seem unlikely to be interested in spiritual things. In terms of religious potential, they were skipped over. But it’s *these* people who aren’t scared off by his challenge to discipleship; instead, they’re intrigued. It says they’re “drawing near.” Why? Luke says “to hear him.” They’re fascinated by what Jesus is saying. He’s speaking truth to their hearts like no one else ever has. Earlier in this Gospel we’ve seen how these sinners had accepted the message of repentance through John the Baptist (3:2–3,12–13; 7:29). Now, they see that Jesus is their shepherd who truly cares for them. Their drawing near to hear him is so beautiful.

But there are some unhappy people. Read verse 2. “And the Pharisees and scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’” In Greek they use a term of contempt for Jesus, calling him “this one.” It’s the same complaint they had when Jesus went to Levi’s house for a meal (5:30). Why are they so infuriated by his fellowship with sinners? These religious experts have a fixed idea that to be holy, we need to separate from sinners. To them, we need to condemn sinners with the harshest terms possible. We need to kick them out. They think Jesus is compromising. Moreover, they’re jealous. They see him as a threat to their positions. They think they’re way better than Jesus, that *they* are supposed to be the religious leaders, not him. Though they’re

grumbling, some of their words are actually beautiful: they say Jesus “receives sinners and eats with them.” In Greek the word “receives” is “welcomes.” It also means “longs for.” Despite how messed up they are, these are the people Jesus has been longing to see. He’s not at all afraid of being contaminated by them. He’s ready to have deep fellowship with them, based on his grace. As he said before: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance” (5:31–32). He has such a heart to help them get out of their slavery to sin and bring them to God. His initiating grace is what gets their repentance and their healing started. In his teaching and fellowship with these sinners Jesus is modeling for all his disciples what grace looks like. He wants us not to hide but open up and learn his heart for the spiritually sick. He wants our church to be a spiritual hospital, full of his grace for the sin-sick.

To help people understand his heart for sinners, Jesus tells three of his most famous parables. Each one is taken from ordinary life: a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son. The scope in each parable decreases, from 100, to ten, to two. But in each case, just one lost one is so valuable. By repeating this truth three times Jesus is suggesting that he’s talking about the very heart of God.

Read verses 3–6. “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 neighbors, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.”’ With this simple story Jesus so eloquently describes God’s heart for a sinful human being. Isaiah wrote: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way...” (Isa53:6a). Our clueless wandering causes so much trouble. But God sees it differently. Because he’s our Shepherd, he’s ready to drop everything to go after that one human being who went off wandering in sin. It’s incredible. God doesn’t hesitate or calculate. He searches persistently until his lost sheep is found.

In this parable Jesus especially highlights the rejoicing in heaven when the lost one is found. Only those who pursue the lost like God does can experience such joy. Jesus then gets to his point. Read verse 7. “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.” What a beautiful hope it is—all heaven rejoicing over one repentant sinner. What’s more, Jesus is challenging our self-righteousness. Who are all these people who don’t need to repent? What he really means is, “They *think* they don’t need to repent.” They’re no source of joy: self-righteous people are burdensome. In contrast, just one repentant person gets all heaven celebrating.

To emphasize God's heart for sinners, Jesus gives a second parable. Read verses 8–9. "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.'" Here Jesus highlights how diligently the woman searches. Why? Because it shows us God's heart to find that one sinful person who's gone astray. Jesus wants his disciples to share his heart to search for even one sinner. Finding even one lost person brings such great joy. Read verse 10. "Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." The angels are rejoicing over even one repentant sinner. In the first two parables, Jesus mentioned a lost sheep and a lost coin, and he mentioned repentance. But neither the sheep nor the coin give us any indication of what that repentance is. Jesus saves this for his last parable. In it he also describes more fully what it means to be lost and what it means to be found.

Read verses 11–12. "And he said, 'There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them." There are some stereotypes here. Many people think younger sons are just spoiled. But in agrarian societies, there was more to it than that. According to God's law, the firstborn son would get double of what the others got (Deut.21:17). So, other sons often felt like second-class citizens. Jesus is describing a timeless issue: a young man who wants to launch out on his own and make his own way. But there was a problem: the young man's father wasn't dead yet. In asking for his share of the property now, in effect he's severing all relations with his father. To the father, it must have felt like a stab in the back. The son seems heartless. But Jesus just says quietly, "And he divided his property between them." Nothing about what the father was thinking or feeling. What's this saying to us? Jesus is showing us how God gives us the freedom to choose to be with him or not. God never forces anyone.

And what happens? Read verses 13. "Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living." It didn't take long. All that money was burning a hole in his pocket. In Greek, "squandered" means "scattered" or wasted; the word "reckless" literally means he went crazy. Every day was a wild party. It seemed so cool to be able to do the wildest, most outlandish things. And with all that money he suddenly had so many fair weather friends and girlfriends. But he burned through all his inheritance money faster than he'd ever imagined. Then, his big brash party suddenly crashed. Everybody split. It's happened so often; it still does.

Read verse 14. "And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need." The young man never expected this. Now there's a severe famine, he's got nothing saved, and he's desperate. Read verse 15. "So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs." How humiliating! It was the job nobody wanted—filthy and disgusting. But he had no other choice. He'd been a son; now he's a slave, a total nobody. Jesus adds one more detail. Read verse 16. "And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything." The pigs had it better than he did. In this fallen world, human life is cheap, only money matters, and nobody really cares. When we indulge the sinful nature, rejecting responsibility and commitment, there are always consequences. Apostle Paul's words still solemnly warn us: "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption..." (Gal6:7–8a). The worst consequence is that we corrupt ourselves, our very integrity and humanity.

But this is not the end of the son's story. Read verse 17. "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger!'" This reckless young man had been beside himself, but now he "came to himself." How? Through hunger and humiliation. Sometimes, suffering is the best teacher. While he was with the other pig servants, he remembered his father's hired servants, who never went hungry. He began to appreciate how kind and generous his father had been. Suddenly he was inspired. Read verses 18–19. "I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" His words show us the essence of repentance. Repentance begins when we remember the Father's love. Repentance is humbling ourselves to return to our Father God, regardless of what we've done. Repentance involves admitting and confessing our sins. Repentance means realizing our true unworthiness. No entitlement. No blaming. No comparing. No excuses. Coming back to God, just as I am.

When he does, it's not what he expects. Read verse 20. "And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." Evidently the father was waiting every day, watching and hoping for when his son might come home. And one day, far in the distance, he could see him. After a life of near starvation, he was now so skinny, and having been with pigs he was now dirty and wearing nothing but rags. But the father immediately "felt compassion." It's how Jesus immediately reacted when he met a widow whose only son had died (7:13). It's how the Good Samaritan immediately reacted when he found a man robbed, beaten and left for dead (10:33). In Greek, this word literally means to feel pain in one's intestines. It's not about how we think; it's called a visceral reaction. In some

cases it's anger or disgust, but in this case it's great affection and love. This father, so deeply moved, couldn't wait: he ran and embraced and kissed his emaciated, disheveled son. Though this son had hurt him so badly with his decisions and had ruined his own life, the father's love for him had never changed. The phrase "he was still a long way off" is deep. The son had only begun to repent, but to the father, that was enough. It also applies to the tax collectors and sinners drawing near to hear Jesus. They too were still a long way off, with sinful habits and much repentance that needed to happen. But they had started, and that was enough.

The son tried to give his prepared speech (21). But the father interrupted him. Read verses 22–24. "But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate." It was so much more than finding a lost sheep or a lost coin; it was a lost son that had been found. A lost son was found! The words of this father are none other than the voice of God: "For this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." We need to hear these words personally. We need to find ourselves in the Father's love. When we come to him, only by faith, despite all our sin, God calls us his own precious sons and daughters. He even clothes us with the righteousness of his Son.¹ He doesn't condemn or lecture; he's ready to celebrate.

David wrote: "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit...He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him" (Ps103:2–4a,10–13). Compassion for sinners is the very heart of God. Praise our Father God who is so compassionate to forgive and heal and restore us if we would just come to him. Jesus wants his disciples to learn the Father's heart.

And at the end of the parable, someone's not happy. It's the elder son. He'd been working out in the field, and when he came near the house he heard music and dancing and asked what all this meant. When he heard it was the father's celebration for his long lost youngest son, he was angry and refused to go in. It's stunning that the father was so humble he went out and entreated him. Then his elder son even rebuked him for never rewarding him for his many years of service and obedience. To him, this celebration for "this son of yours" who'd devoured the property with prostitutes was so unfair and unjust

¹ Rom.3:22; 4:5; 1Cor.1:30; 2Cor.5:21; Eph.4:24; Php.1:11; 3:9

(25–30). How does the father respond? Read verses 31–32. “And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’” Jesus wants us to be secure in his love. And he wants us to see the sinful people coming to him by faith as our own dear brothers and sisters. He wants us to celebrate with grace.

So, who is lost? It’s the person grumbling about his situation, thinking it’s a trap. It’s the rebellious person pursuing independence, the freedom to enjoy the world. It’s the person living recklessly, making so many bad decisions. It’s the person who’s ruined his life. Most of all, it’s the one who’s gone away from the Father, the person who never fully grasped the Father’s love.

These three parables show us that in every time and place, Jesus is eager “to seek and to save the lost” (19:10). He’s willing to go after the lost sheep until he can carry that sheep home. He’s willing to search for the lost coin until it’s finally found. He’s willing to wait for as long as it takes for that lost son to come home. It’s not an idea or theory; it’s his heart. The point of his discipleship training is to learn his heart for the lost. Are we interested in the lost? Are we reaching out to even one lost person? Are we seeking to make friends with even one non-believer? Are we celebrating when a lost one is just getting started on a journey of repentance?

Read verse 24 again. “For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.” May we experience the Father’s love that changes us from being lost to being found. May we learn the heart of Jesus who was so interested in finding the lost.