

GOD REJOICES WHEN ONE SINNER REPENTS

Luke 15:1-32

Key Verse: 15:31,32

“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 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.’”

In the last passage Jesus compared our God to a man preparing a great banquet for many guests. But when everything was ready, those on the original guest list declined the invitation. So he invited the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. When there was still room, he invited those from the roads and country lanes until his house was full. All kinds of undeserving people were there. But those who declined the invitation with many good excuses were not there. In the end, human backgrounds and conditions were irrelevant; accepting the invitation with a sense of priority was important. Our God wants to fill his kingdom with his people. He invites all peoples of all nations, missing no one. It is most important for each of us to accept his invitation by faith.

Today Jesus tells three parables: the parable of the lost sheep (3-7), the parable of the lost coin (8-10), and the parable of the lost son (11-32). Through these parables Jesus wants us to know the heart of God.

First, the parable of the lost sheep (1-7).

Look at verse 1. “Now the tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were all gathering around to hear him.” What a scene it was! The tax collectors and “sinners” were regarded as outcasts by the religious establishment. Everyone agreed that the tax collectors were sinners, even they themselves. So they were somewhat humble. When they heard the message of repentance, they repented. Through repentance their hearts opened to Jesus’ words. To their surprise they were words of forgiveness, redemption and living hope in the kingdom of God. They put aside everything to listen to Jesus. Their souls absorbed the spiritual life that came through Jesus’ words like thirsty deer lapping cool water from a mountain stream. It was a moment when heaven was touching earth, a moment when God’s love for the lost was being understood and accepted by his wayward children. It was a moment that could change the course of history and advance the kingdom of God on earth as it was in heaven.

However, there were some people there who were not so happy. They were the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. They muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” They began to criticize Jesus for accepting public sinners, sharing the word of God with them and eating with them. Their attitude reveals a basic misunderstanding about the heart of God. In brief, they did not know that God loves sinners. In their ignorance of God, they were very mean and became muttering people. But Jesus did not criticize them. Jesus told them a parable to illustrate the heart of God.

Look at verses 3-4. “Then Jesus told them this parable: ‘Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?’” In UBF we talk a lot about sheep. We are referring to people. But here, when Jesus talks about sheep, he is referring first of all to the animals that have wool and say “baa, baa.” Actually, his main subject is the shepherds who take care of such sheep. It is interesting that Jesus did not say a sheep wandered away. Rather, a shepherd lost one of his sheep. No matter how it happened, it was the shepherd’s responsibility to take care of the sheep. Jacob knew this when he was taking care of Laban’s flocks. So when there was a loss, Jacob bore it out of his own pocket. Shepherds have a strong sense of responsibility as those who have been given a trust to take care of sheep.

Still, there is more to a shepherd and sheep relationship than responsibility. Shepherds and sheep have a personal relationship. In John 10:3 Jesus said, “The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.” To modern Americans, the concept of shepherd and sheep may be somewhat abstract. We can understand this better when we think about people who are attached to their pets. One Bible teacher enthusiastically told his Bible student about missionaries who came to America as “chicken killers.” The Bible teacher was admiring their determination and humility to come as missionaries by any means. But his Bible student began to turn red and after a few minutes left the table. This Bible student had a pet chicken and felt sorry that missionaries were coming from Korea to kill chickens. In the same way, many people are deeply attached to their dogs, cats or birds. So shepherds are attached to sheep. If one sheep is lost, the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine in the open country and goes after the lost sheep until he finds it. Affection and a sense of responsibility compel

a shepherd to search for his sheep until he finds it. He cannot give up after a short time or just forget about it and go eat a sandwich. He searches for his lost sheep until he finds it.

In the Bible, God is compared to a shepherd and people are compared to sheep. King David said, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want" (Ps 23:1). St. Peter said, "For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (1Pe 2:25). Fallen men wander off, following what appeals to their sinful nature until they are lost spiritually. Left alone, they cannot find the way back. But the Lord is our Shepherd. He seeks his lost sheep until he finds them. Jesus said in Luke 19:10, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." Jesus told the Samaritan woman that God is seeking true worshipers (Jn 4:23). It is amazing to know that God is seeking lost people. Most of us came to Jesus because God sought us through his servants. Now we must learn the shepherd heart of God who is seeking the lost on each of our campuses.

Look at verses 5-6. "And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'" The moment the shepherd finds the lost sheep, all his anxiety is gone and his self-rebuking subsides. A sense of relief and thanksgiving flood into his heart. His strength is completely renewed, even though he has not eaten for a long time. He scoops up his little sheep so tenderly and puts him on his shoulders. The sheep is happy. The shepherd is happy. The shepherd's joy overflows to all his friends and neighbors.

Look at verse 7. "I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." The point of Jesus' parable is to explain God's joy in saving one lost sinner. God loves sinners. God seeks sinners, making a great effort. When one person repents, God rejoices greatly. Someone may say, "I am nobody. Why should God care about me?" This kind of thinking is based on unbelief and ignorance of God. God loves each person with absolute love. God rejoices greatly over one sinner who repents.

Second, the parable of the lost coin (8-10).

Jesus enjoyed speaking about God's shepherd heart for the lost. He told another parable. Look at verse 8. "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?" As we have noticed before, Jesus often gives equal time to men and women in his parables. Here the main character is a woman. In Jewish society, women were generally unable to make money. So when they had some, they held it tightly and never let it go. But somehow this woman lost one coin. What did she do? She lit a lamp, swept the house and searched carefully until she found it. Look at verses 9-10. "And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.'" In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Jesus told two parables with the same point: God rejoices over one sinner who repents. We must understand the value of one person to God. Sometimes we think that God doesn't mind losing a person, especially one who seems useless and troublesome. But this is not true. God values each person absolutely. God is not willing that anyone be lost, but wants each person to come to him and be saved. If one person is lost, God does not say, "Well, I still have 6 billion others." He seeks and saves the lost person at the cost of his only Son Jesus Christ. When one lost sinner comes back to him, God's joy overflows. Once Jesus met a woman by the well of Jacob. She was the most despised woman in Samaria because of her immorality. But Jesus passed through Samaria just to talk with her. Jesus was so humble, gracious and truthful that she recognized him as the Messiah. Her sins were forgiven and new life welled up in her soul. Jesus was overjoyed with this one person's repentance. When St. Paul was in prison, he met a seemingly useless man named Onesimus. Paul taught him the word of God. Onesimus repented and became a useful man. St. Paul shared the joy of Christ. Do you want true joy? Teach the Bible to one person until he or she repents.

Third, the parable of the lost son (11-24).

Jesus saved his best parable for last—the parable of the lost son. Jesus really drove home his point through this parable. It may be the most poignant and the most well known of all of Jesus' parables.

Look at verses 11,12. "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them." To be a second son in Jewish society was not easy.

The first son was considered everything in the family and the second son was a “spare,” like Prince William and Prince Harry, who are known as “the heir and a spare.” Maybe the younger son was tired of his older brother’s oppressive persona. Whatever the reason, he decided to break away from his family. When he turned 18, he went to his father demanding his share of the estate. He was thoughtless and selfish. He didn’t mind breaking his father’s heart if only he could be free to live as his own man. His father knew it was a risk. But he gave his younger son his share of the estate. He did not try to control his son with money. He respected his son and recognized his freedom of choice. It was the heart of God who gave man freedom (Gen 2:16).

Look at verse 13. “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.” The younger son probably did not intend to squander his wealth. He may have wanted to start a new dot.com business and become a successful entrepreneur using his share of the estate as his beginning capital. But something happened when he arrived in the distant country. People regarded him as mysterious and treated him well because he looked like a prince and had money. He began to enjoy the attention and respect he received. He was having such a good time. But he woke up one morning to find that his money was all spent.

Look at verse 14. “After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country and he began to be in need.” This young man did not understand the hardness of the world. He thought he had made many new friends and that people would like him forever. But when a famine overtook the land, the situation changed overnight. In order to survive and feed their own families, people became hardened. When the young man could not pay his hotel bill or his bar tab, no one would help him out. He was thrust into the street with empty pockets and a hungry stomach. Maybe he began to live in a cardboard box on the side of a street. He realized that he had to find a job. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his field to feed pigs. It was humiliating to a Jewish boy. But the most aggravating problem for this young man was not his public humiliation, it was his hungry stomach. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating. Maybe he began to fight with the pigs over the pods. As he rolled around in the mud, he felt he had become a pig.

Verse 17 begins, “When he came to his senses....” This means he had a realization of the truth. His idea of enjoying total human freedom and pleasure did not work. When he followed this illusion, he came to a shameful end, and he was really hungry. Then he began to think of his father. He compared his situation to that of hired men in his father’s house. They had food to spare. The young man realized that his father was a good manager and a kind employer. For the first time, he began to respect his father. He began to realize his father’s love. He began to think that his father was the most wonderful man in the world. A great desire to go back to his father began to grow in his heart.

So he set out to go back to his father’s house. But there was a problem. He had taken his father’s love for granted and had treated their relationship too lightly. In fact, on his part, he had virtually broken his relationship with his father. What could he say now? Look at verses 18b-19. “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.” He reveals genuine repentance. He acknowledged his sin. It was not only against his father, but against heaven—the spiritual order of God’s creation. He made no excuses. He did not assume a “victim mentality.” He admitted his sin and decided to cast himself upon his father’s mercy. He got up and went toward his father’s house. But it was not easy. Perhaps his heart sank as he came nearer his father’s house. He must have hesitated at the thought of passing before hometown people and his father’s servants, not to mention his brother.

Look at verse 20b. “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, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” His father saw him at a distance. This shows that his father was waiting for him every day, looking for his son’s return. The father had undying hope for his son’s return. When he saw his son in the distance, he was filled with compassion for him. He did not remember the pain his son had caused him; the father had no thought of his own suffering. He only felt the pain in his son’s heart—the shame and humiliation, the sorrow and anxiety. The father’s only desire was to alleviate his son’s suffering and restore the relationship with him. He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The father’s show of affection was out of his genuine love. It was given with the express intention of letting his son know that he loved him. The father wanted to melt the doubt and anxiety in his son’s heart and restore their love relationship fully. This is what God has done for sinners. St. Paul, who knew the love of God so well, said in Romans 5:8, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Probably the son was in tears at his father's embrace. He could have kept quiet and received his father's love one-sidedly. But he did not want to take his father's love for granted anymore. He felt compelled to apologize to his father. He must have knelt down as he said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (21). He wanted to say more, but his father interrupted. Look at verse 22. "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.'" The robe covered his beggar's garments and made him look like a prince. The ring was a sign of being an heir. The father accepted his son with trust and clothed him with the honor and privilege of a son. In the same way, God accepts sinners as his own precious children through the grace of his Son Jesus Christ. 1 John 3:1 says, "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"

Fourth, "we" had to celebrate (25-32).

Look at verse 25. The older brother came back from the field. When he found that there was a celebration for his younger brother's return, he became very angry and refused to go in. He was self-righteous and legalistic. He did not know his father's broken heart or his father's joy at the younger son's return. To him, the joyful celebration was a bitter event. The father pleaded with him, "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 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" (31,32). The older son was spiritually blind. He needed to realize his father's love. He needed to understand the suffering of his younger brother. The father said to him, "we" had to celebrate. His father wanted him to rejoice over his younger brother's return. So Jesus wanted the Pharisees to rejoice over the salvation of lost sinners instead of muttering. This is possible when we know the heart of God.

In this passage we learn the heart of God. God rejoices over one sinner who repents. God welcomes repentant sinners with unconditional love and clothes us with glory as his own children. America seems to be the land of prodigal sons and daughters. May God use us to reveal the heart of God to them through one-to-one Bible study.