

Lost and Found: The Power of Repentance

Misplacing or losing something can cause a person to become frantic, even irrationally flustered. I can attest to this phenomenon from personal experience... just ask my wife. There is rarely anything more infuriating, than running late for an appointment only to have the car keys seemingly disappear into thin air. In turn, there is nothing more consuming than the search for the missing keys. And, there is nothing more satisfying than finally finding the prized keys. Surely, I am not the only one who can relate to this experience!

Luke 15 is likely one of the most familiar chapters in the author's account of Jesus' life. Previously, Rabbi Jesus had challenged the crowds to listen intently to His teachings (Lk 14:35), and they did! Tax collectors and sinners drew near and Jesus welcomed them with open arms (Lk 15:1). The response of the religious leaders was predictable. They once again questioned Jesus' judgment and grumbled: "This man receives sinners and eats with them" (Lk 15:2). In their thinking, God was not pleased with these unrighteous people - the unclean, unworthy, and unlovable. God had no interest in their plight and neither should Jesus. So Jesus told three stories to defend His actions and to challenge us to share in His quest of seeking the lost (Lk 19:10).

The three stories share a similar structure, but the final one is more detailed and includes a twist that confronts the callous and self-righteous attitude of Jesus' critics. The stories tell of something that is lost, found, and celebrated. In the first story, Jesus tells of a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep in the open country in order to find the one sheep that wandered off into the wilderness (Lk 15:3-7). In the second story, He relates a woman's frantic search for one lost coin (Lk 15:8-10). And finally, Jesus shares the emotional tale of a father who steadfastly awaits the return of his younger son who had left his home in disgrace and his father's heart in pieces (Lk 15:11-32). Both the lost sheep and the lost coin are retrieved by their respective owner and the prodigal son is received by the father following his return home. Each recovery concludes with rejoicing and celebration.

So what do these parables reveal? First, they show that God loves and values lost people. He loves the wayward and rebellious, and makes room for them at His table (Lk 14:23). The Apostle Paul's powerful reminder to the Romans is remarkable: "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8, NASB). Wow! God values the lost, not because they are inherently good, **but because He is good!** The lost have value because the Glorious King's image is pressed upon them (Gen 1:26-27). They have value, because the

Good Shepherd calls them by name and gives His life for them (Jn 10:1-18). They have value, because the Heavenly Father adopts them and makes them His own (Eph 1:5; Rom 8:15). Second, God's recovery of the lost should produce joy and celebration. God's cheerful heart springs forth in the exclamation, "Rejoice with me!" (Lk 15:6, 9). The father, just like the shepherd and the woman, celebrates. He welcomes back the wayward son and rejoices by restoring all the son had previously spurned. Not only does the father provide a lavish party with a delightful feast, but he fits his son with a robe, a ring, and sandals representing acceptance, trust, and freedom, respectively (Lk 15:22-24). The extravagance of the father illustrates heaven's joy "over one sinner who repents" (Lk 15:10). Which leads to a third, and most important, takeaway. **Jesus' three stories communicate a message of repentance** - the need to have a change of thinking that causes a turning from sin and return to God. The sheep, the coin, the prodigal son AND his older brother were all lost. The term *lost* is translated "perish" in John 3:16 and reveals the perilous condition each finds itself in. There is no room for self-righteousness in Jesus' teaching. God seeks both the outright rebel and the hard-hearted sulker (Lk 15:20, 28). He offers His grace freely and beckons us to turn from our rebellion and come home.

The question we are left with is this: Do we share in what God values, loves, and rejoices over - the lost? It is difficult, isn't it? We rarely appreciate and value something until we truly comprehend and grasp that it is lost. We forget that we too were once hopelessly lost, and if not for the gracious pursuit of God, we would still be in that condition. With time, we may even find ourselves in place of the older brother, self-righteously looking down our noses at those who receive what they don't deserve. In his book *Transforming Grace*, Jerry Bridges wrote:

Here is a spiritual principle: We cannot exercise love unless we are experiencing grace. You cannot truly love others unless you are convinced that God's love for you is unconditional, based solely on the merit of Christ, not on your performance. John said, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Our love, either to God or to others, can only be a response to His love for us.

Our love for others, in particular for the lost, is in direct proportion to our understanding of God's love appropriated for us. Personally, I desperately want to see people through the eyes of Jesus and with the grace of God, yet I often find myself cold and callous. That is because, just like me, they are often unlovable and

undeserving of the forgiveness and welcome of God. Yet, He loves them anyway, just as He did me!

May we never forget that while we may have been rescued from our black-sheep or scoundrel-son stage, we are never beyond the necessary repentance of the self-righteous and hard-hearted, sulking older brother. Let us pray for God to keep our hearts mindful of our past condition and tender to the needs of the lost!

John 3:16-18 (ESV) - *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. **For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.** Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”*