

## Jason Upchurch - Luke 15 - Rejoice at Repentance

As we celebrate the resurrection of the Lord Jesus this morning, I want to draw our attention to this amazing section in Luke's gospel to 3 parables that Jesus tells. These are rather well-known parables that I think we would do well to be reminded of and I think especially so as we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus.

I think from time to time we need to be reminded that we should want people to come to Jesus. That's the mission, that's the goal: go into all the world and make disciples. We should do that and want to do that and rejoice when someone becomes a disciple.

At the same time, we need to help unbelievers understand that Jesus wants them. He wants people to come and repent and experience forgiveness and eternal life. And we're reminded of that this morning.

And we're also reminded that Jesus doesn't just want people to have a theoretical knowledge about who he is. He doesn't want people who just understand the content of the gospel message. He wants people who believe it, love it and live it.

If you think about investing in the stock market. It's one thing to understand the stock market: buy low, sell high, dollar cost averaging, dividends, IRAs, so on. But it's another thing to actually invest in the stock market. To put your money where your mouth is.

The same is true with Jesus. There's the message of the gospel, but there's also believing the gospel and actually following Jesus. Those are 2 entirely different things. Related, but different.

Many people know the gospel. They know the good news that God the Father, in his love, sent Jesus to die for sinners. We're sinners - by nature and by choice. We violate God's law all the time. And because of that we deserve an eternity of damnation. Eternal conscious punishment forever from a holy God because we've violated his law.

But that same holy God, in love, sent the Son of God, Jesus, into the world. He took on flesh, lived an absolutely sinless life and died as the sinless sacrifice in the place of all those who would believe in him. The righteous Son of God dies in the place of unrighteous sinners.

How do we know that Jesus actually did that? How do we know he was sinless? How do we know he wasn't some crazy guy? How do we know that when he died he was dying in the place of filthy sinners? Because three days later he rose again confirming everything he said and did.

And so the good news - what we usually call the gospel - is that your sins can be forgiven simply by following Jesus.

**Rom. 10:9-10:** If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raise him from the dead you will be saved.

There's actually nothing you have to do to be saved from the wrath of God. You believe, that's it. Turn from your sin and trust in Jesus, love him, follow him. But you actually have to believe and follow.

And our passage this morning is about the difference between a group of people who actually follow Jesus and a group that thinks they follow Jesus. The group that actually follows Jesus is a motley crew of sinners who love Jesus and love his commands. The group of fakers are the religious crowd. They think they love God but they don't. And Jesus exposes that with 3 of the most well known parables in the Bible: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son.

It's a series of 3 parables. A parable is a fictional story. It's a fictional story that usually has just one point. The point of the story often comes at the end of the parable. And usually the story of the parable gives an emotional push. All three of these parables are meant to get a rise out of us emotionally while teaching us truth.

So why does Jesus tell this parable in the first place? **Read 1-3a**

This is important: Jesus tells this parable because two things are happening. First, tax collectors and sinners are coming to him. The message that Jesus is preaching is drawing an unseemly crowd. There are tax collectors coming to follow Jesus. Tax collectors were considered traitors to the Jewish people. They were usually Jewish people who were hired out by Rome to collect taxes on the Jewish people. So the average Jew hated tax collectors because they viewed them as helping Rome rather than helping Israel. Tax collectors were traitors to Israel.

Added to that, tax collectors often charged more than what was required by Rome. They often took advantage of their fellow Jews. Really, they could charge whatever they wanted because if the Jews didn't pay they had the whole force of the Roman government behind them to enforce collection. So not only were they viewed as traitors, very often they were also thieves as well.

Luke also tells us that "sinners" were drawing near to hear Jesus. What does that mean? It's sort of a catchall term for those Jews who didn't keep the law at all. It could be prostitutes, it could be Roman sympathizers, it could be those who simply didn't keep the law.

Why are they coming to Jesus? Because the message that Jesus is preaching appeals to them. And just to be clear, this wasn't a koombaya message of "can't we all just get along and love one another, man." In **Chapter 14** we see that it's a radical message to give up everything in order to enter the Kingdom. It's a message of heartfelt obedience to the commands of God, it's a message of repentance from sin, it's a message that Jesus has to have first priority in all of your life. More than your parents, family, even your own life. It's a message that is so radical that Jesus ends the sermon with "you better count the cost of following me. Don't be like the guy who went to build a tower and got halfway through, ran out of money, and everyone laughed at him. No, you better think long and hard about what it means to follow me."

And these sinners had thought long and hard about it and wanted more. They wanted the grace and mercy and forgiveness that Jesus offered. But they weren't afraid of the radical obedience he was calling them to.

So all the riff-raff was coming to Jesus. And the so-called spiritual authorities didn't like that. **Read 1-3a**

They're not wearing their Sunday best. Their shirts aren't tucked in. They're sinners. Ooooh.

The Pharisees and the scribes - the religious leaders - didn't approve. They didn't like that Jesus was eating with these lesser people.

But Jesus wants sinners to come to him. Jesus is fine with the worst possible sinners coming to him. They want forgiveness and he gives it freely. He will show them infinite mercy and kindness and redeem them and change them. We need to be reminded that no one is beyond the gospel.

The guy on Division hunched over on fentanyl that smells like urine? He's not too far gone, you guys.

The drag queen who has had bottom surgery and is utterly repulsive to us? Not too far gone.

The Only Fans prostitute? Your cousin who's a crazy conspiracy theorist? The single mom with 3 kids from 3 dads? Your mother in law who can't stand anything religion. Your child who ran away? No one is too far gone.

And actually, the gospel we preach - the true gospel - should appeal to the worst in society. Not because we're watering it down. Not because we're compromising in any way. But because those are the biggest sinners are those who know they need forgiveness. And they're also those who might think forgiveness is not possible for them. And that's not true.

Jesus loves forgiving the filthiest of sinners. Why? Because it shows just how merciful he is. I had had a buddy who loved restoring old classic cars. He'd take rust buckets and make them cherry. You know what that showed? Just how amazing he was at restoring things. That's Jesus with sinners.

And Christians who have been in the faith a while need to remember Jesus loves an overhaul project. And if your life is a mess, know that's exactly who Jesus loves the most. Because he who has been forgiven much, what? Loves much.

Jesus has a reputation of eating with the worst of sinners, but sinners who have come to him in repentance and for forgiveness.

That tension is what gives rise to these parables. These are really a masterclass in storytelling. There's a sense in which each parable has the same basic point. The point - and main point of my sermon this morning - is we rejoice when someone repents.

That is the proper response to someone coming to faith in Jesus. The Pharisees aren't rejoicing, they are scoffing, Jesus tells 3 parables, and the point of all of them is that the proper response to repentance is rejoicing.

But the beauty of these parables is that they build on each other. Each one is more personal and dramatic than the last. And I'll show you that as we go.

### **1) Parable of the Lost Sheep. Read 3-7**

The first parable is as simple as it is profound. There's a shepherd, he's got a nice little spread of sheep - 100 to be precise. And one goes missing. This is common even among modern day shepherds in Israel. When you've got 100 sheep and you're leading them through rocky mountainous terrain and through valleys you will occasionally leave one behind or one will wander off.

Now realistically, one out of 100 isn't all that much, just 1%. And the life of the sheep is not all that valuable. The sheep is raised to be used. Either used for wool, or for sacrifice, or for bartering or for eating. There's a reason that in ancient times the shepherd was the lowest person in society they had a relatively low level job.

But here the message is simple: if the shepherd loses a sheep, he goes and finds it. When he does he rejoices. And Jesus makes an argument from the lesser to the greater. If a shepherd rejoices over a cheap almost insignificant sheep - how much more joy will there be in heaven when a sinner repents?

The answer: infinitely more. What's the message to the Pharisees? Even shepherds rejoice when they find a lost sheep, God rejoices when a sinner repents and so should they. And so should we.

**Side:** There's a lot of times when we are suspicious about people saying they've had a conversion experience. We're skeptical about someone who said a prayer or walked an aisle. We've all seen people make professions and walk away. Jesus promised that would happen. I get suspicious too.

But here Jesus doesn't say they made a profession or walked an aisle. What does he say the sinner did? Repent. They know the gospel, they know the call to obedience, they know Jesus is now Lord. And their life has been transformed by the good news that they can be forgiven if they repent and believe.

I don't get all that excited about people just claiming to be Christians. I get excited about people being transformed by Jesus. I get excited about repentance and obedience that is the result of someone being saved by God. Because that's what Jesus gets excited about.

So that's the point of the parable. That our response to a repentant sinner should be joy. Hallelujah!

Now, before we move on, I want to break down the mechanics of these parables a little bit. Because they each have similar elements.

A. **Bounty** - there's 100 sheep, 10 silver coins, or 2 sons. These are good things. And as the parables go on, the bounty is more valuable. A sheep, then a silver coin, then a son. The ratio also changes: 1 sheep of 100 is lost. Valuable, but not huge. Then there's 1 coin of 10 lost with the widow - more crucial. Then there 1

son of 2 lost. Half of the man's children. So the thing lost is more valuable and the percentage is larger. The parables get more emotional and more graphic as we go.

- B. **Tragedy** - Each parable has a loss. Losing the sheep, losing the coin, losing the son. There are some people who say what Jesus is describing here is someone who has lost their salvation. They were a Christian, they went the way of the world, and Jesus goes to find them and brings them back. The owners had the thing and lost them, see, so we can lose our salvation and God wants us to come back.

But that's not the point. We know that's not the point because 1, you can't lose your salvation. And 2, because what the parable is talking about is the reality of these unreligious misfits coming to Jesus for the first time. These were sinners who had always been shunned by the Jewish religious community and had come to Jesus loving his message of repentance and forgiveness.

Jesus uses these examples to give us understanding of the heart of God in finding lost sinners. Shepherds love to find their sheep, poor widows love to find their inheritance, fathers love to find their sons.

Jesus is telling these in a particular order on purpose. The son in the last parable is living a life like all the people coming to Jesus. The prodigal son is the fictional version of the tax collectors and sinners who are coming to Jesus. Jesus is trying to help the religious leaders get this. Bounty, tragedy.

- C. **Finding** - One of the repeated refrains in each parable is that the thing lost was found. **Read 6, 9, 24, 32**

Each item lost was found. The sheep, the coin, the son.

By the way, did sheep find itself? No, it was sought out and found. Did the coin find itself? No. The widow diligently found it. Did the Son find himself? This one is tough. Seems like he came to his own senses. Maybe, but even when the father recounts the finding of the son the grammar is not that the son found himself, but that he was found.

The father had been diligently looking for him the whole time just like the widow was looking for the coin and the shepherd looking for the sheep.

- D. **Rejoicing** - Remember I said that almost all parables have basically one point? And that point usually comes at the end? Here's the point. **Read 7**

In each instance there is rejoicing. God rejoices in the repentance of sinners. God loves it when sinners give up their sin, give their own way and come to him in faith.

Alright, so there's bounty, tragedy, finding, rejoicing. Let's look at each parable a little closer. **Read 3-7**

The life of a Bedouin shepherd in Israel is a boring nomadic life. There's not a lot going on. They have basically one job: keep their sheep alive. They have to be fed, they have to be watered, they have to be protected from danger. The job is basically living out in the elements constantly taking care of these animals, and the animals are actually pretty dumb.

You've probably seen the YouTube videos of some shepherd rescuing a sheep out of a ditch only for them to bound off and 2 seconds later land in the exact same ditch. The tag line: My relationship with Jesus.

That's us. We're dumb, we stray, we love foolishness. We are sheep and the Good Shepherd is awesome.

Here's the radical thing about this story. The Jewish community at the time believed that God would accept repentant sinners. We see that all through the OT. We believe that too, of course.

What makes Jesus's parable radical is that it frames God in a completely different light: God the shepherd is **seeking** wayward sheep. It's one thing for wayward people to come to God in repentance. Of course he'd accept them. But it's an entirely different thing for God to go get them.

And here the shepherd figure is God. And he is searching after the lost sheep. And there's a diligence here that I think is worth noting. He leaves the others - they're fine. They're safe they're in the open country. And he goes after the one who is not in the open field. He's in a mountain or a valley or a hard place. God doesn't just save sinners in easy situations. He saves people out of hard situations.

And the shepherd searches until he finds the sheep. He doesn't give up. There is a determination on the part of the shepherd to get his sheep. It's his. He's not losing it. Spurgeon called Jesus the hound of Heaven - he gets the scent and he doesn't let it go until he finds the mark.

Jesus says "I know my sheep. And they know me." Jesus doesn't give up gathering all his sheep together into the flock.

Also, note that this is personal. The shepherd knows the sheep that is lost. The shepherd knows the flock well. No sheep is worthless. If it was me, on a hot day, rugged terrain...does one sheep really matter? I mean...

But here every single sheep matters to God. His sheep aren't just a number. The sheep are valuable and God goes to get the sheep.

Notice the attitude of God once he finds the sheep. **Read 5**

It's not anger. The shepherd doesn't hit the sheep: you dumb animal! Why'd you make me come get you. I might be a little mad I had to go find some stinky sheep on a hot day.

Not God. God rejoices. He found the sheep he set out to look for. He always does. When God goes to get his sheep, he always finds them. And when he finds them he rejoices. Synchairo - to express pleasure over someone else's good fortune. Here's the next part. **Read 6-7**

Not only does God rejoice, what does he call everyone else to do too? Rejoice. See, here's what happens: when someone repents, they rejoice. I remember the freedom and happiness I felt when God saved me. That's right and good.

And God rejoices: he saved a sheep. But that's not enough. God calls all his people to rejoice.

When I was saved at a Bible camp the guy who led me to faith did so while chapel was happening. And he asked me after we talked if we could stand up after the chapel and tell people I had become a Christian. I said sure. But I'll be honest: I was nervous. What would people do? You know what they did when he said I had been saved? They cheered. I never expected that. But you know what? That's the right response. I rejoiced, God rejoiced, and the people of God are to rejoice.

Do you rejoice when you hear about a lost sheep being saved? You should.

One other note before we move on. What did they rejoice about? Repentance. The gospel we preach - that Jesus died for sinners and rose again for their justification - includes the call to repent from sin. To turn away. That's what we rejoice in. That a sinner has turned from their sin, turned to God in faith and has their sin forgiven.

## **2) Widow. Read 8-10**

This is almost the same parable but it's more emotional. Widows in ancient times were essentially destitute unless they had children to take care of them. There was no social security system or retirement benefits. Your husband and children took care of you. Which, should happen even now.

Here she has just 10 silver coins. Not a lot of money. Each coin is only worth a day's wage. She's got two weeks worth of income to live and she's just lost 10% of it. Now what?

Just like the shepherd searched diligently, she searches diligently. This is all she has to live on. There's a sense of urgency here. If the sheep dies, oh well. But if the widow has no money she dies. So she has to find this coin.

And when she does she rejoices. And just like the shepherd she calls her friends and neighbors to rejoice.

And just like the last parable, the response of all of heaven - God and the angels - it's massive joy for a sinner who is found.

**3) Prodigal.** This one is the most emotional. And Jesus spends the most time on it, developing it and setting the stage. **Read 11-16**

So this younger, foolish son asks for his inheritance. He's basically says "Dad, I wish you were dead so I could have my cash." His dad obliges and the son wastes all the money on sin. That's what prodigal means: wasteful and extravagant. He took this hard earned inheritance and spent it all on parties and prostitutes.

This son is the tax collector and sinner that is coming to Jesus. And I think most everyone here can relate to having someone in our family who refuses to come to Jesus. They are shipwrecking their life. And it tears us up. What happens? **Read 17-24**

This is every father's dream for wayward sons: the son comes to his senses, repents in his heart. He is willing to take any demotion or disowning just so that he can live. And he trusts that his father would be gracious enough to at least receive him as a slave.

Every parent of a wayward child longs for this moment because it's heart wrenching to watch someone you love destroy their lives. And the added sorrow here is that the father's inheritance is destroyed as well.

But the father doesn't care about any of that. And the idea seems to be that father has been looking constantly for his son. Day after day. Because he sees the son from a long way off. He knows his son, recognizes him instantly and instantly has a swell of compassion.

And as the son is in the middle of his prepared speech of repentance - that he is a wretched sinner before God and his father, he's not even worthy to be a son, he'll take any job - in the act of repentance the Father immediately calls for what? Celebration. Bring the royal robes, bring the royal rings, fire up the BBQ it's time to party.

It's the same lesson, but here the son has been brought back to life. He was as good as dead, but now he has experienced resurrection. Not physical, but spiritual resurrection. Just like we celebrate that Jesus rose from the dead physically, so we celebrate when someone rises from the dead spiritually.

And then it goes on. And this aimed right at the religious leaders. **Read 25-32**

The older son represents the Pharisees and the scribes. They've always kept the law - or so they think. They've always done what was asked. But they're mad at the sinners. They can't imagine that God would love them. How can he? They're so nasty.

If you're a father you understand this parable instantly. You're happy when you're kids obey. But there's a joy when they've been wayward and come back. And it is right and good to celebrate.

In fact, the father says something really important at the very end. **Read 32**

It was fitting to celebrate. It's actually more forceful: it was necessary to celebrate. Celebration over repentant sinners is not optional. The Father chose to save them, the Son died to redeem them, the Spirit breathes new life into them just like he did to us.

The parable ends with something of a cliff hanger. The older son is outside the city, out in the field. The party is happening inside. The father goes out to the older son and bids him to come to the celebration. The cliffhanger is that we don't know if the older son comes in.

It is necessary to celebrate when sinners come to repentance. It's not optional. The younger prodigal repented. And there was celebration. But will the older obedient son celebrate? That's the question.

If you're the prodigal, come to the father and celebrate.

If you're the older, obedient son, come to the father and celebrate.

God, the angels, all of heaven celebrate when one sinner repents. It is necessary for us to celebrate as well.

**Pray**