

Luk15:1-10: Jesus welcomes sinners. Rejoice with him!

Meditations on the parables #4

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Luk15:1-10: The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin

Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

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? 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.’ 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.

“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? 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.”

If Jesus were to make a sudden visit to earth today, where would you expect him to show up? You probably would expect him to visit your church. Let's say the congregation is together and waiting for him. This has been going on for a while and he is still not showing up. Then word comes that he is in the local bar talking to the regulars.

Would you be disappointed, or even enraged?

You probably think Jesus should visit his own church, encouraging everybody and commending the members for what you have done for him. Why would he go to people who have never done anything for him? They never took the time to show up for church. And now suddenly Jesus hangs out with them and not with you?!

Jesus is in a similar situation when he tells the parables of the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the prodigal son. The Jewish leaders reproach him for eating with sinners.

Maybe you think ‘well, eating with them; that’s not so bad, is it?’

For the Jews this had a deeper meaning. Sinners had no regard for the law of God. Tax collectors and prostitutes had made this their living. How could a person committed to God, even a rabbi who teaches others, ever share a meal with them?

The Pharisees distanced themselves from such people. They were very careful in studying God's laws and had made additional laws to prevent themselves from accidentally breaking God's law. There were food laws which determined what you could and could not eat. If you were visiting

people who did not obey the law they would cause you to break the law yourself. You just did not visit them and eat with them.

This is the second time they slung this accusation in Jesus' face. They had done it earlier when he had visited the house of Levi who had repented and began to follow Jesus. Because of this, Luke uses a word which means 'they continued to criticize him'. It went on for a while, because Jesus did not eat with sinners once or twice, but quite regularly.

In these parables Jesus explains the reason. The three parables in this chapter speak about the lost. Sinners return to God and this is reason for great joy.

It was easy for the people then to identify with the parables of the lost coin and the lost sheep. Everybody would be nodding his head at Jesus' question: if you had 100 sheep and you lost one, would you not leave the 99 others and go look for the lost one everywhere? Of course. And they could imagine a woman losing a coin of some value until she found it. What would you do if you lost \$100 and you knew it should be somewhere in your home? Wouldn't you look under the couch, between stacks of mail, even between your old newspapers?

The identification with the first part sets the stage for the second part of both parables. This is the strange part. Sure, you would be happy to find your money back, but would you organize a party and invite your neighbors? That seems a little over the top.

As usual in Jesus' parables, the point of the story is to be found in the surprising element. The owner values and loves his lost item so much that he is filled with gladness when he finds it back.

Jesus tells us here that he is the owner who seeks his lost people and rejoices when he finds them.

This shows God's compassion for sinners. Through the whole Old Testament you hear God's voice calling his people back after they had sinned. His love shines through, even in the books of the prophets. When they rebuke the people for their sins they also bring God's promise to save them and give them peace again.

When Jesus came to earth he brought hope for sinners. In the Sermon on the Mount he convicts every one of us of our sins. When he explains the meaning and extent of God's law you cannot escape the conclusion that you are not the good person you thought you were. Have you never lied, never felt lust for a woman or man you looked at? Did you never hate anybody in the slightest way? Nobody can say this. Acknowledge it: you are a sinner and in need of salvation. When Jesus convicts you of your sins he does not leave you in anguish. He brings the gospel: by dying for your sins he provided the only escape from punishment. He told the people: 'Repent and believe in me as your savior and you will be free from punishment. God will forgive you.'

We are often eager to talk about other people's sins and condemn them for them. This is harsh and merciless. We don't really want to correct them. Their sins give us a better feeling about ourselves, because in contrast with them we don't look so bad.

When Jesus convicts sinners of their sins he is motivated by love. He does not point out their sins in order to make them feel bad, but in order to call them to repentance. This is the only way to receive forgiveness.

Without the call to repentance and the offer of forgiveness there is no gospel, no good news, only harsh condemnation.

The Pharisees only looked down on sinners and considered them outcasts.

Jesus, however, went to the outcasts and preached them the gospel of freedom from sins.

We need to realize that Jesus did not hang out with sinners just because they were rejected.

Like Levi, who became Matthew the evangelist, the sinners Jesus was eating with had realized they had offended God with their sins; when they heard the message of forgiveness they had repented from their sins.

Jesus spoke to them of grace and forgiveness, and he was the embodiment of God's love. In the face of his grace and justice they came to him and surrendered. They confessed their sins and Jesus accepted them. Jesus ate with sinners who were eager to hear him and repented from their sins.

In these parables Jesus makes it clear that he rejoices about such people. We, like the Pharisees, would not easily forget what others have done, even after they have said they are sorry, and repented from their sins. We would not welcome them, but only *tolerate* them in the church because we feel they have not earned the right to be a church member.

Jesus, however, celebrates about them and with them.

The stress is on the joy of the owner after finding his lost possession. God's joy over repentant sinners is the surprise of the gospel. It is extravagant, more than we expect.

Considering that these parables are so short, the word joy is repeated very often. The first parable even stresses it more: "There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."

A stunning one-liner!

What does he mean by 'righteous persons'?

Does Jesus mean self-righteous people who think they have earned their place in heaven? Some have explained it like this, thinking the righteous persons are the Pharisees who *think* they are righteous, but really aren't.

This is unlikely, because in heaven there would be no joy at all about such people.

We must explain the word 'righteous' in the context of Luke's gospel and the rest of the Bible.

The beginning of Luke's gospel shows that there is another group of people. We read about Simeon who was *righteous* and devout. The Holy Spirit was upon him and he was waiting for the savior and rejoiced when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple.

'Righteous' in God's vocabulary does not mean self-righteous and proud. Rather, this is the type of believer God had in mind. The Old Testament speaks of a righteous person like this: someone who has belonged to God's people from birth, trusts in the Lord, and grabs hold of God's promises about the savior. He does not expect his salvation from himself and his works, but expects the savior God has promised.

These righteous believers had been making sacrifices for their sins, as prescribed in the Old Testament, and they believed that the savior would come to fulfill those sacrifices. They did not need to go through the type of conversion someone needs who lives a godless and worldly life,

but they lived with God and repented from their sins on a daily basis. Jesus does not treat them as outsiders; they receive God's favor and live within the sphere of his grace.

Maybe we can begin to understand Jesus' conclusion: "There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."

From the Old Testament we know that God's favor rested on people who believed him, brought sacrifices, and put their hope in the coming savior. But he rejoices even more about sinners who repent from a life of sin.

These words of Jesus are a strong way of saying that God does not give up on sinners but seeks them and rejoices when they return to him.

Isn't this a tremendous encouragement for everyone who is caught in sin and feels he cannot escape? Jesus came to seek the lost. That gives you hope when you have messed up. You don't need to be an exemplary citizen first before you can come to Jesus. He is looking for you in your lost condition.

Maybe you have been disappointed or hurt by church people, when they did not act out of mercy and treated you with contempt because of what you did. Now you have the impression that the church is for the decent, good-looking and well-behaving people.

Then take courage: Jesus gathers the lost in his church. When you repent you belong to his church, too, and you can become a witness of the grace of Christ to others.

These parables teach the church to open its heart and its arms to sinners. Jesus came looking for sinners, talked to them about their sin and gave them his grace. The church is his instrument to spread this gospel of mercy. When the church begins to look like a bunch of decent people who do not like to have sinners around, something is terribly wrong.

These parables were meant for the unbelieving Jewish leaders in the first place. They rejected Jesus' grace for sinners and expected to be rewarded for their services to him. However, they rebelled against the very essence of Jesus' ministry: he came to seek the lost and bring them God's love.

Jesus calls believers to share in his joy about sinners who repent. Only if you see how much of a sinner you yourself are you will begin to understand the love of Christ and stop looking down on others. If you understand and appreciate the love of Christ, the greater will be your openness towards sinners. The church that is full of the love of Christ will itself become his instrument to seek the lost and will experience great joy when they come to Christ.