

2. Lost and Found

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn to read God's Word together, and you'll find our passage for this evening in Luke, chapter 15. That's page 874 in the Visitor's Bibles, Luke, chapter 15.

Jesus is on a journey to Jerusalem, and many people are following him.

I'll pick up the reading in the last verse of chapter 14. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, this man receives sinners and eats with them.

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 99 in the open country and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?

[1 : 08] 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 found my sheep that was lost.

Just so I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance.

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 found the coin that I had lost. Just so I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

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 the property that is coming to me.

[2 : 12] And he divided his property between them. 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.

And when he'd spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country who sent him into his fields to feed pigs.

And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs had. And no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, how many of my father's hired servants?

I've more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger. I will arise and go to my father and I'll say to him, father, I've sinned against heaven. And before you, I'm no longer worthy to be called your son.

Treat me as one of your hired servants. 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.

[3 : 22] And the son said to him, father, I've sinned against heaven and before you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. 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.

Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.

And he said to him, your brother has come and your father has killed the fattened calf because he received him back safe and sound. But he was angry and refused to go in.

His father came out and had treated him. But he answered his father, look, these many years I've served you and I never disobeyed your command. Yet you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends.

[4 : 29] But when this son of yours came, who's devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him. And he said to him, son, you're 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.

Well, these are the words of God. We're going to urge one another to believe those words as we sing our next hymn. There are two very common ideas that people have about God and themselves.

The first, a bit like this. I'm no worse than anyone else and I'm better than some. One, if God's there, I'll probably be okay with him in the end.

The second, quite the opposite. I am such a mess. My life is a disaster. If God is really there, I know I have no hope whatever of pleasing him.

[5 : 40] On one hand, self-confidence. I'm not too bad, really. On the other hand, despair. I have no hope whatever with God. On this side, indifferent optimism.

On this side, self-loathing. What a mess I'm in. Most of us will be more like one of those than the other. Some of us will tend towards indifferent optimism.

Some of us will tend to despair. The part of the Bible that we're looking at this evening deals with both of those. I'd be very glad if you turn to Luke chapter 15 if you're not there already.

It's one of the best-known stories in the Bible. It's a gripping story of betrayal and family breakdown and reconciliation. It's the kind of story that would be great in the soaps.

It would keep the plot in EastEnders fueled for at least a month or two. And one of the best things about this story is that it takes us right to the very heart of the Christian message.

[6 : 41] So if you want to know what Christianity is all about, you're looking in from the outside this evening. This is such a good place to be. And if you're an old hand and you just need a bit of a reminder of how things really are, well, you couldn't do better than look with me at this passage for the next few minutes.

Because nowhere else in the whole world will you see God described in quite the terms that he's described here.

Before we get to that, I wonder if you noticed that this is not really three parables, Luke chapter 15. It's one parable in three parts.

Just look at that. Verse 3. Jesus told them this parable. What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he's lost one of them, doesn't leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the one that it's lost until he finds it?

Look on to verse 8. What woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one? And he rolls straight on to verse 11. And he said there was a man who had two sons. He moves straight from one to the other to the other with no break whatever.

[7 : 56] And do you notice how their content belongs together? The first is a story about a sheep. I imagine it's a fairly everyday story about a sheep.

I think they get lost all the time, don't they? A man loses it and searches for it and finds it and rejoices over it. But the punchline, interestingly, is not about searching and finding and rejoicing. The punchline, verse 7, is about repenting. Just so I tell you, there'll be more joy in Adnova, one sinner who repents, than ninety-nine persons who need no repentance.

The second story is about a coin. A woman loses it and searches for it and finds it and rejoices over it. But again, the punchline is not about finding.

It's about repenting. Verse 10, just so I tell you, there is joy in heaven before the angels of God over one sinner who repents. The third story is a long story.

[9 : 06] And much of the story is about a young man repenting. He comes to his senses and changes his mind and goes home. But do you notice this time that the punchline is not about repenting, but about the lost being found?

Verse 32. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad. For this your brother was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.

In summary, first one, a lost and found story ending with repentance. A second one, a lost and found story ending with repentance. Third, a repenting story ending with lost and found.

They belong together, don't they? It's really one parable in three movements. And the climax is the third movement.

It's bigger. There's more detail. And that's where the bulk of the action happens. And we'll spend most of our time there. Let me ask some questions of this parable.

[10:08] One, why does Jesus tell it? Well, the answer to that is right there at the start. Verse 1. Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him.

And the Pharisees and scribes grumbled, saying, This man receives sinners and eats with them. The story is told because of the shocking way in which Jesus is behaving at this point. Two groups of people are involved. On the one hand, a bunch of truly disreputables gathering around to listen to Jesus. On the other hand, a group of decent people who are not at all impressed with this.

Let me say at this point, we need to do a bit of cultural translation. For in our own culture, we love inclusiveness, or think we do.

And we think that it's trendy to be compassionate towards marginalized people. And we think we are. And we look at the Pharisees and scribes, and instantly we think, what dreadful people.

Imagine thinking themselves so superior.

[11:17] Imagine being exclusive like that. How disgraceful of them. But let me say that to think that way is to totally misunderstand this situation. Let me try and bring it up to date a little. Imagine that you belong to your local mosque.

And you see the imam from your local mosque going out to lunch with the leadership of the local British National Party. Would that please you or worry you?

Or again, imagine if the top brass of Friends of the Earth started going out to dinner with the bosses of multinational corporations. Oil, gas, mining, logging, and seem to be becoming best of friends. Would that look like progress or compromise? What do you think? Or imagine if the chair of governors of your local primary school was regularly seen having dinner at the house of a notorious child abuser.

Do you think that would go well with the parents at the school gate? Or less well? You see, for these people, Jesus' behavior is just as outrageous as in any of those examples I've just given.

[12:33] Back then, a tax collector was someone everyone viewed with hate and suspicion. Now, I guess a tax collector is rarely the favorite person in the room. Any tax collectors here?

You see, they never own up in public because they're not the favorite person in the room. But that is just a money thing for us. Israel's history, on the other hand, had been full of problems caused by her unholy alliances with the nations round about.

And being a tax collector in Jesus' day meant getting into bed with the occupying Roman power. It was viewed not just as being anti-nation, but anti-God.

Hated as much as someone who collaborates with the enemy in wartime or betrays their family or callously is unfaithful to their spouse or sells their daughter into prostitution or something disgraceful like that.

That kind of person and Jesus is eating with them. In contrast, the Pharisees would have been viewed as being the good guys.

[13:37] They were serious about God, passionate about the well-being of their nation. Ask any mother of Israel whether she'd like her teenage son to grow up into a Pharisee and a tax collector.

And it is a no-brainer. The Pharisee wins every time. Why does Jesus tell this parable? Because his behavior has been genuinely shocking.

Why is he eating with these people then? Well, the parable explains why. The chapter starts with two groups of people, the good guys and the bad guys.

And it ends very similarly with two groups of people. On the one hand, a good, faithful, upright son, the sort any parent would want. On the other hand, a son who lives a disgraceful and squalid life.

The parable explains why Jesus is doing what he's doing. Why, then, is he eating with tax collectors and sinners? I'm going to answer that in two ways.

[14:42] First, negatively. He is not eating with them because they are nice people to eat with. The youngest son in this parable is not a nice person.

He is not a lovable rogue. This is not your average teenage strop. This is a son who cares so little for his father that he could not wait for him to be dead to get his hands on what would be coming for him.

Now, of course, things like this happen in real life. I worked for a while in hospital medicine and on several occasions came across examples of children who just could not wait to get their hands on

their parents' money and property.

It happens. And let me say, when you see it happen, it is absolutely revolting to witness. That is what's happening here. Give me the money that's coming my way when you're dead, and now I'm off.

In the church in which we've been serving until recently, we had, over the last few years, an enormous baby boom. I mean, babies everywhere. And the thing in church is that as soon as parents can possibly bring their children, they bring them to church because they love them so much, they just can't wait for everyone else to have a look at their squashy, beautiful little faces.

[16:10] And all the women crowd around in flocks and they go, oh, how lovely. And all the blokes go, yeah, yeah, lovely, lovely, isn't it? Imagine one of those bright little lovelies growing up and saying, I'm off.

I want from you your things that will be mine when you're dead. Imagine hearing words like that from the lips of your child.

The grief, the anguish. And not only is this inheritance taken, but taken and spent in a manner that makes the parenting look entirely worthless.

He squandered his wealth. Yes, he was wealthy, well provided for a home. In wild living, it says. He ends up in the pigsty in a foreign country, which for a Jewish audience is a fate worse than death. A more determined and brutal repudiation of the love and lifestyle of a parent could hardly be imagined than this. Oh, when he comes to his senses, his attitude is genuine enough.

[17:23] Look at verse 18. I will arise and go to my father and I'll say to him, father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.

But we are not meant to read this story and like him. It's a horrible story. And if we look at the Pharisees and teachers of the law in verse 2 and think what miserable and ungracious people they are, we really haven't grasped how shocking the whole situation is.

Back in chapter 14, Jesus has told the story of a great banquet at the end of things, when God straightens everything out, when his kingdom is fully established.

And how all sorts of people are invited to this banquet and some come and some don't. And there's a wonderful picture of joyous celebration in that story. How wonderful it will be when God's king finally reigns and that reign is there for everyone to see.

And he's told those following him about the cost of following him on the route to that great celebration. It's going to cost everything to follow him. For him it's going to mean death before glory.

[18:38] And at the end of chapter 14, Jesus urges people to hear his words and take them seriously. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

And look who's coming to hear. Those people. The people that will be very last on your list of people to be there at the great banquet at the end in God's kingdom.

The people you'd least expect to listen to God. They're there. And listening. And eating with him. And being accepted. And you can hear them saying, look it cannot be as easy as that.

For people just to come wandering up and listen to Jesus and appear to be receiving a welcome from him. It cannot be as easy as that. Surely people who live squalid, anti-God lives cannot just wander up one day and listen to God's king and end up at the banquet at the end.

Surely that can't be right. And Jesus says, well it will cost them everything. But yes, that's precisely the way it is. The young man in the story, of course, he doesn't come home the same way he went away.

[19:53] He has changed. His motives aren't pure yet though, are they? Verse 17. They're very mixed. 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.

There's a good deal of realism in that, isn't it? And self-interest. But he does recognize that he has no longer has any rights to belong to this family.

I am no longer worthy to be called your son, he says. Jesus says, don't think that these people eating with me are just the same now as they've always been.

But it's not because they're nice people that they're here and listening and being received. Why is Jesus eating with them?

Well, not because they're nice people to eat with. Why then can people like this be in? Well, here's the positive answer. Because of what God is like.

[20 : 56] You see, God is like the father in the story. The father in the story is a picture of God in heaven. Jesus often portrays God as a generous father, the giver of life, of all good things.

And here is a father who has given good things to his two sons and experienced dreadful, undeserved hostility and hurt as a response.

To have your child want your money, but not your company or your life, must be a bitter thing. And yet this son is a picture of how we often relate to God.

We live the life he's given us, enjoy the good things he's provided, and relate to him as we would to a dead person. The father in the story is not naive, not a fool, but he loves his son.

And he is constantly on the look for his return. So much that he spots him a long time before he arrives on the day he happens to come home. And he cannot restrain his joy.

[22 : 05] The son has his speech prepared, but he can hardly get it out because his father is so overjoyed to see him. Now, at one level, of course, this is a story about repentance, about someone coming to their senses and coming back.

But the big issue in this story is not what the son does. It's what the father is like. The big issue in life is not what we do in response to God, but what he is like towards us.

And that's what the sharp end of this story is. See, who is this story told for, do you think? Well, I guess for both sorts of people, really, it may well have been told for tax collectors.

Be reassuring for them, would it not, to hear that God accepts people like them. But I think told mainly for Pharisees. Don't you, verse 2? The Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, This man receives sinners and eats with them.

So he told them this parable. And you can see that in the story itself, because the story ends not with the younger son, but with the older son, precisely where it starts.

[23 : 21] Two things about the older son that we can usefully learn from this parable. Well, first, he does not love what his father loves.

Suppose one of you starts off Jesus in verse 4 with something they can identify with. They love their sheep. They would rejoice when their sheep were found.

Well, says Jesus, just like that, God rejoices when sinners repent. Another one, verse 8. Or suppose a woman loses a coin, and you can imagine they would understand that, because, well, one out of ten coins lost is a big deal.

Just like that, says Jesus, God rejoices when sinners repent. But the real kicker is the third story. There's something that the older brother does not love.

Verse 28. His father is full of joy, but he was angry and refused to go in.

[24 : 27] And in that, he is right out of line with the whole household. Because the father is quite different from that, is he not? Every day, this father wakes up.

The moment he's conscious, he's thinking about his son. Where is he? How is he? During the day, as he works in the fields, from time to time, his eyes stray across the fields to where the road crosses the horizon.

All the time, he has that lost one in mind. All the time, day after day, he is longing to glimpse that figure, that well-known, long-missed figure.

And one day, he looks up, and he sees, could it be him? It is him! And he runs out, and he's bursting with joy. And it really, frankly, doesn't matter what his son says, does it?

That picture of a man running out and jumping all over his son with joy. And getting all the good things out for a massive party is a picture painted by Jesus himself of what the Father in heaven is like.

[25 : 45] And what the love of the Father is like for people like us, disgraceful people, who come back to him. Not reproach. Instead, a huge celebration.

Best robe, bright ring, number one cow, all the good stuff. All at once, the picture is of a father who absorbs in himself all the hurt of that broken relationship and doesn't hold it against his son and so is full of joy when he comes back home.

But the older son does not love what his father loves. Second thing about him, he does not really know his father at all.

Look at the resentment in his words. Verse 29. These many years I've served you and I never disobeyed your command.

Yet you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours, might be a son of yours, but he's no brother of mine, came who has devoured your property

with prostitutes.

[27 : 04] You killed the fattened calf. Does he view the father as the father really is? Generous, loving, kind, gentle, forgiving? No, he views his father as a harsh taskmaster who ought to have been pleased with him, but isn't.

There's no sense in his mind, is there, that his father's generosity is something that he's just going to enjoy and celebrate? No. He has to win approval and he doesn't feel he's won it.

And the father says, verse 31, look, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours. What are you thinking of to talk like that? And can't you see it was fitting to celebrate and be glad?

For this brother was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found. This is not a time for anger or resentment or sulking but rejoicing and having a good time.

Question. Who is further away from the father? The son squandering everything in a foreign land? Or the one who lives in the household?

[28 : 25] Well, look at how the chapter goes. Verse 4. One lost sheep. Verse 8. One lost coin.

Verse 11. There was a man who had two sons. This third story about lostness starts with not one but two sons.

The young one, the young one, miles away geographically and emotionally but at least he recognizes who his father is. He knows his father even though he's been rebelling against him.

The older one, well, he lives upstairs but he's miles away. Right on the inside all the time. and actually managed to live with a completely distorted picture of the character of his father all the time.

Let me say there is great encouragement in this passage but also a strong warning. The encouragement is for anyone who tends to despair.

[29 : 38] if a son like this one who's done what this one has done can come right back into the heart of the family and be rejoiced over then anyone can come back.

can't they? And the big issue is not what you do in coming back. It's not how sorry you are and it's not how bad you feel and it's not how pure your motives are either.

The big issue is grasping how generous God is. He's like the father in this story. He really is like the father in this story.

He loves it when people who know they have no right to belong in the family. Rock up at the door and knock on it and say look I don't deserve to be here but can I come in anyway?

Great rejoicing in heaven over that kind of thing says Jesus. The whole of heaven rejoices best robe bright ring number one cow all at once all the good stuff.

[30 : 56] If you know that you have no right to belong don't despair. But there's also a warning here.

It is possible to be really really well behaved and appear to be on the God team. Be so close that you look just like one of the family and not really belong at all.

not love the things God loves misread God's character think of him in a way that is just not him at all.

It will show itself in various ways like the older son. You may view your service of God as a long grind to win approval. You remember only too well all you have done and how hard you've worked and where's the rejoicing?

Like the older son you may well be frustrated when the church household is upset by Jesus having a salvation agenda that stretches to disreputables.

[32 : 05] All these people rushing around being glad over this badly behaved person who's just wandered in through the door and I've been here for years. A quote from somebody at another church a friend who heard these words spoken to him I wish all you new people would go away so we can get back to being normal church.

Like the older brother you might think if only it weren't for these other people around I could have some of the attention here. It might be shown in your valuation of things other than what God loves. You see these Pharisees recognize that it's a good thing to go after a lost sheep and they recognize that it's a good thing to search your house for a lost coin but faced with a disreputable talking to Jesus well they quickly lose patience with that.

Give them the opportunity of a bargain at Curry's or a business deal or a discount in the sales and they'll be up early in the morning in the queue but the possibility of some life waster repenting well I'm not going to get out of bed for that.

Or it might be shown in your attitude to God himself. Do you find yourself resentful with how God has treated you in life? Bitter or angry at things that have not come your way?

[33 : 26] The things you don't think you've had? The things other people have had that you'd love to have had? The things that life has given you or not given you? The fact that there's a great victory celebration at the end which will be to die for and that along the way the whole church family rejoices as people come to the Father just doesn't do it for you.

If that's you look at what this father says to his other lost son. Verse 31 Son you are always with me and all that is mine is yours.

but it was fitting to celebrate and be glad for this your brother was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.

Let's pray together. just a few moments in the silence to respond to what God has said to us this evening.

Amen.