

The Lost Sheep and The Lost Coin

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[0 : 0 0] Well, in our Sunday morning services at the moment we're working through a short study in some of the parables in Luke. We're picking out ten of these and focusing on some of these great stories that Jesus told in order to teach some beautiful and glorious theological truths. Today we come to two of Jesus's most famous parables. We're going to be looking together at the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. These are beautiful parables.

At one level they are so simple. You have the image of a sheep that has wandered off and the image of a coin that's gone missing in your house. And yet at the same time they are so profound and they lead us into a depth of teaching that ultimately will probably never fully be able to grasp. Both of these parables and in fact the parable of the prodigal son which comes in the second half of Luke chapter 15, arise out of the context of the religious leaders complaining that Jesus was mixing with the wrong kind of people. We read that for us at the beginning of the passage. He said that the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to Jesus. The Pharisees and the scribes grumbled saying this man received sinners and eats with them. As a result of that he told them the parables that we're going to study today. There's a huge amount that we could look at and I think I always say this but we are really only going to scratch the surface. But we're going to look at three things, the problem of people, the preciousness of people and the joy of heaven. In many ways at the heart of these two parables, in fact all the parables in this passage is people who are a problem. As you may remember in this section of Luke Jesus is moving towards the end of his ministry and so his public profile would have probably been at its highest and as he travelled through the region and the towns and the villages more and more people were coming to hear him. And included in that crowd were tax collectors and sinners. In other words people who were either perceived as corrupt, the tax collectors who were serving the enemy and collecting money for Rome or those people whose lives were just in a mess, those sinners who weren't reaching the standard of behaviour that the religious authorities expected of people. To those religious leaders, to the Pharisees and the scribes, these people were a problem. If you imagine that you'd had the opportunity to maybe go up to these

Pharisees and scribes you would have seen them and they maybe had a look of distress, maybe a look of kind of horror on their face and if you'd been able to go up to them and ask them, what's wrong? Their answer would have been, these people are here. And as verse 2 tells us, they criticised Jesus because he was mixing with them. These people are a problem. Now Jesus responds to that by telling us that in God's eyes these people are a big problem, but for completely different reasons. For the Pharisees and the scribes, these kind of people are a problem when they come near. For God, these people are a problem when they're far away and lost. And this is one of the many places where we see how different God is from the culture around us today. So often for us today, things are only a problem if they're right in front of us. And that is especially true of people. Our culture reinforces that all the time. Brokenness is pushed to one side and as much as possible we keep things away because problem people are much less of a problem if they're not in our face. And the further away that brokenness can be kept, the less of a problem it is.

For example, imagine tomorrow two homeless men went to a shop and bought a bottle of whiskey each. Imagine they both drank it as quickly as they possibly could. One of them wanders down the Royal Mile and comes to the Scottish Parliament and he gets to the door just as Nicola Sturgeon, our first minister, is about to walk in and he vomits on her.

The other person drinks his bottle of whiskey, wanders back to his housing scheme, stumbles into a wall, hits his head, dies of a brain hemorrhage on the ground. Which one of these would be in the news? For scribes, for Pharisees, for us today, people are a problem when they're in front of us. God is completely different. For him, people are a problem when they're far away. And the parables bring that out so clearly. If you could ask the shepherd what's wrong, he would have said, one of my sheep is missing. If you could ask the woman what's wrong, she would have said, my coin is missing. You ask God what's wrong, he'd say someone's missing. Thomas is missing. Or whatever your name is, you're missing. People are a problem for God, not when they're present, but when they're lost. And we have to ask ourselves, why is that a problem for God? Because if there's one thing that's true of God, it's that he doesn't need us. God alone is God. And he does not depend on anything else. We have absolutely no inherent claim on God's concern or attention. So why is it? How can it be that lost people are a problem for God? Well, I think that maybe the answer to that is that when God made us, he made us to be 100% un-lost. So when God created humanity, he gave us a stunning home. He gave us security and safety. He gave us a meaningful purpose for life. And he gave us a beautiful relationship with himself and with one another. If you look at the descriptions of humanity at the beginning of the Bible in the Garden of Eden, it is a picture of absolute un-lostness. Instead, it's a place of perfect belonging.

[6 : 53] And that's how God made things to be. But sin has ruined that. And you can see that very clearly because the first thing that Adam and Eve did, what was the first thing that they did when they sinned? They tried to run away and hide because they'd lost their sense of belonging. And in its place, sin has brought humanity into a state of lostness.

So we live in a world created to be our home, but people feel lost. People feel threatened, lonely, disorientated. Our relationships with one another have broken down because of sin.

And often our weaknesses and our insecurities make other people want to push us away. Our relationship even with ourselves has been damaged. So our own thoughts and our own minds can lead us into a lost state of despair. And above all of that, a relationship with God is broken. Instead of being in a family bond with Him, we are lost. And in the midst of all that, we struggle, stumble, and fail. And for some people, that lostness is very obvious, a bit like these tax collectors and sinners. Their lostness was obvious to everyone they could see. And we can see the same. We can see people who've sold themselves to greed and corruption like the tax collectors had. We can see other people whose lives have spiralled downwards. And it's obvious, even at a glance. But for other people, maybe for most of us, our lostness can be much more hidden. And so on the outside, we might look successful, capable and confident, but inside we can feel so isolated, confused, and overwhelmed.

And all too often, our culture responds to that lostness by wanting to confound it. Our culture wants to keep people who are broken and lost at a distance. We are to keep that brokenness to ourselves. What's the phrase that people use when a problem person comes too close? A problem person, a really problem person, a really difficult person comes too close. What do we say? Get lost. Isn't that true? And once they are away, we'll say, well, that's not my problem anymore. This parable shows that God is completely different. To God, the problem is not when people come near, the problem is when they wander off. We might say that someone far away is not my problem. God says, that is exactly my problem. And so in response to the problem of people, God never says, tell them to get lost. God says, tell them I am coming to find them and bring them home. And in all of that, we need to ask ourselves the question, when it comes to people, is God's problem our problem? In other words, when people are broken, what bothers us more that they're too near or that they're too far away? And if I look at my own heart, I see that so often, what I have a problem with and what God has a problem with are not the same. And I pray that that will be different. And for us as a church, it's a powerful reminder that when people muck up in their lives, our response as a church should never, ever be to push them away. Sometimes that can happen either consciously or subconsciously. People muck up in their lives and their instinctive response is to push them away or at least to keep them at arm's length. God's response is to go after them and to bring them home. And as a church, we must always be the same, always. And the only time we should ever accept someone staying away is when they absolutely refuse to come back. And everything that we tried has been rejected. Our default position is to go after the lost, to bring them in and to protect them. So for God, people are a problem. And that leads us to the second thing, because the reason that people are a problem is because people are precious. That's one of the really striking things about this parable, the value that is placed on the item that's lost.

So to the shepherd, the sheep, the lost sheep is precious to the woman. This lost coin is of great value. That's reinforced by just an interesting phrase that Jesus uses in verse 4 and verse 8. He says, what man of you, what woman of you, as if to say that to not look for the sheep or the coin is unthinkable. It's a no-brainer that these things should be looked after, looked for. That's because these things are precious. And one point that I think these two parables bring out in an even more powerful way than the parable of the prodigal son later in this chapter is this, that the collective value of the many does not compensate for the preciousness of the one that's lost. In other words, in God's eyes, the value of everyone else does not for one second mean that you are any less precious to him. You look at the woman, she's got 10 coins, she's only lost one. You think, well, that doesn't seem too much. And it's even more striking with the man, he's got 99 sheep. It's only 1%, only one that's missing. Surely, surely the rest would make up for the lost, but it's not the case. In fact, it's not even remotely an option to think like that. The value of the many is not an adequate replacement for the preciousness of the one. And verse 7 reinforces that, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance. The 99 cannot substitute for the one. Now I want you to just think about that for a wee moment. That means that in God's eyes, you are irreplaceable. Now we live in a world where people are very quickly replaced. Right now in the UK, the most powerful person in our country, Theresa

[14 : 05] May, is about to be replaced and they are queuing up, as we can see, to take her place. I'd say over the last two years, there's probably not been a single week where Theresa May has not been in the news. After this summer, that's going to change very, very quickly.

But it's not just in high profile positions where people are replaceable. In your job, in your community, in your friendships, even in relationships and family, we live in a culture where people are replaceable. We live in a world that regards you as dispensable, forgettable, replaceable. That's never true with God. And of course, that makes perfect sense because no one knows your preciousness better than God. No one knows your uniqueness better than God. Every single person is unique. We have this uniqueness and God knows that better than anyone. In fact, he's the one who gave it to you. So your DNA, your fingerprint, the pattern of your iris, your freckles, your tastes, your talents, even the numbers of hairs on your head, he knows it all. God knows everything that makes you, you. And that makes you irreplaceable.

God knows your potential better than anybody else. So we often talk about looking for potential in people. We want to encourage people. We want to look for talents to see what people might be able to do. Sometimes we get that right. Often we don't. And if I ask myself, can I look at somebody and say that I can recognize every area of potential that that person has? Can I do that? No, I can't. Nobody can do that except God. He knows every ounce of potential you have. That makes you irreplaceable. And that, of course, is why we thrive when we follow his path for our lives. God knows your uniqueness better than anyone. He knows your potential better than anyone. God also knows your fragility better than anyone else.

It's important to remember that preciousness doesn't mean invincibility. More often than not, it's the very opposite. The most precious things in life are often fragile and delicate. So jewelry, technology, works of art, and newborn baby, these things are to be handled with great care. That is so true of humanity. Humanity is incredibly precious, but immensely fragile. And God knows your fragility better than anyone. He knows your blind spots. He knows your pressure points. He knows your insecurities. He knows your vulnerabilities.

But none of these reduce your value to God. In fact, they simply reinforce your preciousness. The man who lost his sheep doesn't think, oh, well, she's a strong wee sheep. I'm sure she'll be fine. He thinks she's precious and she's in danger. I am going to get her. No one knows your preciousness better than God. And that's why no matter how many people might be in this church, there's a gap if you're not here. And this is where we see that the gospel gives us this extraordinary balance. On the one hand, God doesn't need you because only God is God, and he depends on none other. But at the very same time, you are irreplaceable because he's made you, he loves you, and to God, only you are you. In the gospel, the value of the many never replaces the preciousness of the one. Now, I think this is an extraordinarily relevant message for today because I think that this addresses what is possibly the most pressing craving that people in Western culture currently have. What is that? It's the need to feel special. You notice that we live in a culture where people are desperately trying to hold onto their value in the crowd. So in many ways, we've almost moved beyond simple individualism that just says, just give me space to do my own thing. We've progressed onto a kind of, I don't know what you call it, neo-individualism or hyper-individualism that doesn't just want space to be yourself, it actually wants the whole crowd to recognize and affirm our individualism. So there's this desire that everyone's identity and individuality should be cherished and praised by the many. That's why when we have arguments about rights and equality, these arguments ultimately come down to kind of ambiguous absolutes like dignity and humanity. So my self-identity should be valued by the crowd as part of my right to dignity. People want to stand out from the crowd. People want special status. People are fighting for value and recognition in the crowd. Now, all of that is fine if you're tough and loud. But if you're weak and fragile, you don't stand a chance. Our culture is a fight to be recognized as special. That's why we have competing ideologies all around us. And in any culture, it's the strongest and toughest. In any fight, it's the strongest and toughest who wins. In that kind of culture, the weak one among 99 strong doesn't have much hope. And so our culture is desperate to feel special. And the mindset it holds is that the only way to get that is to fight for it. If you do, you'll stand out from the crowd and you'll be special. The gospel is the complete opposite. In our culture, you have to fight for your specialness. In God's eyes, you have already been special forever.

[21 : 00] And you most definitely don't need to fight for it. Specialness is something that the gospel just pours out upon you in utter abundance. And that's evidenced by the pattern that's set out in these parables. In both of them, something's lost, a sheep and a coin. In both, it's the man and the woman who initiate the search and who persist until they find what they're looking for. And behind these two images are two glorious truths, God's initiative and God's persistence. In the gospel, the initiative always lies with God. So we're the ones who are lost, we're the ones who have wondered, we're the ones who have made mistakes, but God is the one who takes action. And if you look through the whole Bible, you will see that one thing that's abundantly true is that God is always the one who takes the first step. It's an amazing reminder that before we ever think about God, he's thinking about us. Before we ever look for God, he's looking for us. Before we ever love God, he has loved us. But not only does God initiate, he also persists. If you look, there's a beautiful phrase at the end of each parable, they keep looking. The shepherd keeps looking until he finds his sheep. The woman searches and sweeps her house until she finds it. So when it comes to looking for you, when does God give up? Never. And if you want proof of that, you only have to look at the cross. That's how far Jesus will go for you. God is a God who initiates and he is a God who persists. And all of this explains why the Gospel is not really a call for people to join something. The Gospel is not a call to join. It's a call to repent. And there's a crucial difference. Joining conveys the idea of entering something new. Repenting means coming back to where you've always belonged. And people, I think, often make the mistake of thinking that becoming a Christian is like joining something. And often joining something new feels quite scary. It's a step into the unknown and it feels pretty unnatural. Whenever I go along to something new, I'm always like, I'm not sure I want to do this. And you feel very reluctant and hesitant. We can think that becoming a Christian is like joining. You're joining something new. And you think this is going to feel awkward and difficult. Do you know that's 100% not what becoming a Christian feels like? What does becoming a Christian feel like? Feels like coming home. These parables remind us that people are incredibly precious. You are incredibly precious. In our culture, you have to fight with the crowd in order to be special. With God, you are already so special that

He will fight for you. So these parables are showing us the problem of people, the preciousness of people. Lastly and briefly, they show us the joy of heaven. Both parables follow the same pattern. They start off with something that's missing. Then they describe the search and then in both of them, the outcome is the same. Rejoicing. The shepherd, when he comes home, calls together his friends and his neighbors saying to them, Rejoice with me for I found my sheep that was lost. The woman, when she's found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors saying, Rejoice with me for I found the coin that I had lost. And the great concluding point is in verse 10 where Jesus says, Just so I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents. And of course, that is in direct contrast to the grumbling of the religious leaders in verse two. They were horrified that these broken people might have the opportunity to repent and come into God's kingdom. To them, they were just not up to scratch, but to God and to the angels of heaven, the repentance of a broken sinner, the return of a precious lost sheep is a source of utter delight. In fact, verse five describes the shepherd going and finding the sheep and picking up the sheep with joy. So it's not just a joy for God to welcome a sinner back. It's a joy for God to go and carry you home. Now, when I think of that image of the shepherd going and picking up his sheep and coming home rejoicing, the image that comes into my mind, now this is not really the most profound language that I've ever come up with. But the image I have in my mind is of Jesus beaming with joy while he gives you a piggyback. Your return home into God's family is just a brilliant thing for all of heaven. But I want to just ask for the last couple of minutes, what does joy in heaven look like? It's a brilliant phrase. There's more joy before the angels of God. And I think was it verse seven that also mentions joy in heaven. What does joy in heaven look like? Well, in order to answer that question, I want us just to think for a moment about the imagery that the Bible attaches to the word joy. When we think of joy in church, we maybe think of a sort of, you know, a sort of maybe a wee nod of approval and maybe a tiny smile. And maybe we think the same of heaven that is maybe this sort of very formal sort of like, oh yes, I'm pleased.

A kind of quiet sense of pleasure. I don't think that that's really accurate at all. And I think the Bible reinforces that because if you look through the Bible, you'll see that there's certain key actions that are associated with joy. Here are some of them.

Laughing and shouting. Sam 126 tells us that then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy. Clapping. Sam 471, clap your hands all people, shout to God with loud songs of joy, singing. Sam 511, but let all who take refuge in you rejoice, let them sing, ever sing for joy. Jumping. Luke 623, rejoice in that day and leap for joy.

Dancing in Jeremiah 31, 13. Then the young woman, then shall the young woman rejoice in the dance. So when Jesus says that there is joy in heaven over your repentance, he is saying that all of heaven jumps, sings, shouts, laughs, claps and dances with utter delight because you're not lost anymore.

[28 : 44] In other words, the whole of heaven roars with joy for you. Now, do you think that heaven is a quiet place? We tend to think of heaven, we think quiet. No way. Heaven is roaring with joy when people come to know Jesus. And again, this is where we see that the gospel is so different and so much better than what our culture has to offer us. As we've been saying, our culture says you need to stand out from the crowd to be special. And in our culture today, people are really pushing for that special status in the name of equality. People think that equality means standing out from the crowd and being appreciated. Now, that's not equality. That's competing. And only some win.

And in the gospel, your specialness is confirmed not when you stand out from the crowd, but when you come into it. And instead of constantly fighting off competition to stay special, you just join the family and you enjoy being special forever.

Will our culture cheer for you? Maybe for the select few, maybe for a moment, but often the world will quickly turn on the people that they once cheered for. The gospel says that no matter how lost, fragile or broken you are, if you come back to Jesus, heaven will roar with joy.

So if you are a Christian, heaven has roared for you. If you become a Christian, heaven will roar for you. And only Jesus, only with Jesus, are you that special. Let's pray.

Dear God, our Father, we thank you for these parables which are so simple and yet teach us such extraordinary truth about your love and mercy and grace.

[31 : 21] And we just thank you so much for your commitment to us and for the specialness that we find in you.

And we know that we don't deserve that, but we have it because you are such an amazing God. And we just return our thanks to you with all our heart. Amen.