

Lost and Found **Luke 15:1-24**

We see them often enough on our news reports. We wish they never happened. We're glad when they end successfully. We're sad when they don't. Search and rescue operations.

All sorts of circumstances give rise to such operations.

- Capsized boats at sea.
- Hikers that don't return.
- Rock-fishermen swept into the ocean.
- Bush-walkers falling over cliffs.
- Children that disappear from home.

Humans seem quite good at losing themselves from time to time.

Sometimes it's the person's own stupid fault.

- When will fishermen learn that taking the boat out in gale force winds really isn't a good idea?
- Or when will children learn there's a reason parents tell them not to wander off on their own?

Sometimes it's not the person's fault. Accidents do happen. The weather can surprise us – or overwhelm us. Even careful planning occasionally goes wrong.

Yet, whether the person's at fault or not, the scene we're shown on the news remains the same. Relatives embracing. People glad to be back together. Tears of joy and relief. Plenty of positive raw emotion.

Lost and Found Sheep

That's the sort of stuff we get in these three stories Jesus tells. The first one's about a sheep. Luke 15:3

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'."

That's pretty straightforward, isn't it? Sure, none of us is a first-century Palestinian shepherd – so this sort of stuff isn't in our direct experience – yet, we can still get the general idea fairly easily.

It's a picture of a shepherd settling his sheep for the night. It's not a particularly large flock – and it seems the owner looks after them himself. When he counts them, he comes up one short. So he goes searching. The point is that, given the circumstances – namely, 99 safe sheep and 1 lost sheep – the shepherd pays special attention to the lost sheep. It's not that he totally ignores the 99 safe ones – presumably he gets someone else to watch over them in the meantime – but his focus is on the one in trouble.

It's just like our modern search and rescue operations. When the police get a call about some teenager lost in the bush, they don't go knocking on the door of every house to make sure all the other teenagers are safe at home. It's not that they've got no concern for all those other teenagers. It's not that they don't hope they're all safe and well. It's just that they focus their attention on the teenager who's actually in trouble – the one who needs to be rescued.

When the shepherd finds the sheep, he's happy – perhaps not quite as happy as if it'd been his lost teenager that he'd just found, but happy nonetheless. In fact, he's so happy about it, he shares his joy with others. He has a public celebration.

So, the story focuses on the shepherd – and on two attitudes the shepherd has:

- the attitude of care and concern for the sheep – a concern that leads to him actually searching diligently for the sheep; and
- the attitude of joy and shared celebration when he finds the sheep and brings it home.

Lost and Found Coin

Jesus tells a second story. It's pretty similar. Verse 8:

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 neighbours together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin."

The silver coin here was the Greek drachma. The scholars say it was the equivalent of the Roman denarius.

- In 300BC it would buy a sheep.
- In 65AD it was about a normal day's wages.

That's inflation for you. Some scholars think it may have been the women's dowry. Others think it may be her savings to cushion the family against days when no income came in. It doesn't really matter.

The point is the same two attitudes.

- She's concerned about her loss – so concerned that she conducts a thorough search for the missing

coin; and

- She has great joy and shared celebration when she finds the lost coin.

It's always bothered me that she may have spent more on the celebrations than the value of the actual coin itself. None of my commentaries seem to deal with this issue directly. The closest is Kenneth Bailey who suggests the coin may have had some significant value beyond its monetary worth – something akin to what we today might call sentimental value. While that may bother me – and perhaps you – it doesn't change the point of the parable. And it reminds us that parables are told to make a point – it's not necessary for every last detail of the story to make complete sense to a modern western mind.

And the Moral of the Story is ...

So, why does Jesus tell these two stories? We get three pretty strong hints. The first is in Luke's introduction to this chapter. Verse 1:

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."

Chapter 14 finished with the admonition:

He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Chapter 15 opens with the tax collectors and "sinners" coming to *hear*. They want to know more. They want to listen to Jesus.

But not everyone's like that. There's this other group – the Pharisees and teachers of the law – the community leaders. They, apparently, don't want to hear. They want

to sit in judgment. What's going on here?

The tax collectors and the "sinners" were thought to be outside relationship with God. Their lifestyle and their behaviour disregarded God's law. They'd walked away from God. Thus, according to the law itself, they were cursed. They were candidates for God's judgment.

And so, good people didn't associate with them. Psalm 1
*Blessed is the man
 who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked
 or stand in the way of sinners
 or sit in the seat of mockers.*

Proverbs 1

*My son, if sinners entice you,
 do not give in to them. ...
 my son, do not go along with them,
 do not set foot on their paths;*

Good people didn't have table fellowship with "sinners" – because that implied acceptance of these people and their God-dishonouring ways. Good people didn't associate with "sinners" – because they may be defiled by their uncleanness and be disqualified from God's kingdom.

And yet "good people" are now grumbling about Jesus. They don't seem to have the ears to hear – rather, they've got mouths to grumble. Back in the time of the exodus – after God delivered Israel from their slavery in Egypt and while He guided them to the land He promised them – time and again they grumbled. God wasn't impressed. That grumbling generation failed to enter the land. Now, it seems, we've got this new group grumbling about Jesus and what He's doing. And at the same time, we've got the "sinners" crowding around Jesus, keen to hear more.

The second and third hints come at the end of each of the stories. Verse 7:

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.

Verse 10:

In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

The application's pretty plain, isn't it? The lost sheep, the lost coin – they represent the "sinners". This is the age when people are lost. What should you do when things are lost? What does God do when people are lost? Two things:

- He goes searching for them. If He's going to rescue them, He's got to go to where they're at. And so Jesus is quite happy to welcome "sinners" and eat with them. If He's going to rescue "sinners", He's got to go to where they're at. They're the focus. He doesn't go knocking on the homes of the people who don't need rescuing. He doesn't check to see that everyone else is safely tucked up in bed. In a time of crisis, you don't focus on the people who don't have the problem – you focus on those who need help.
- And secondly, God rejoices when they're found. It's the great reunion scene the news networks love to show us. The agony of the threatened danger is over. The uncertainty of not knowing the outcome is replaced by relief. There are huge hugs – people don't want to let each other go – as if they may dis-

appear into thin air if the physical contact's broken.
There are tears of joy.
That's God's attitude to lost "sinners".

Now, be careful of turning these two stories around to say something they're not saying. If the one sheep represents the "sinners", you may very well be tempted to ask who the 99 sheep represent – or likewise the nine coins that aren't lost. Are they the Pharisees and teachers of the law? Are they already OK with God and so Jesus doesn't have to mount a search and rescue mission for them?

That would be to treat these two stories as complete allegories – to say everything in the story corresponds to something else in the reality the story represents. These stories aren't like that. Jesus tells them to explain why He associates with tax collectors and "sinners". He's not making any comments here about the status of the Pharisees and teachers of the law – other than to say they're missing God's viewpoint.

Elsewhere, we find out what Jesus thinks of them. Matthew 23:13-14

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

Certainly sounds like they're on the outside. They're just as lost as the tax collectors and "sinners".

Indeed, elsewhere we find out that all humanity fits into the lost category. We're all sinners. We've all wandered away and got ourselves lost – though that makes it sound too nice. That makes it sound like it was all an accident –

like being out in the boat when a whale comes up from below and smashes it in half and needing someone to come and rescue you. Our situation's more deliberate than that. We turned our backs on God and walked away from Him – more like going into the surf when the beach is closed and the lifeguards have told you not to go in.

Lost and Found Son

Yet, despite that, God mounted the rescue mission. The third story – the one we read before – drives that home once again. This time it's a son that's lost. And it's no accident – this son deliberately walks away from his father. He asks for his inheritance and he takes off. He wants his independence from his father. He wants to do his own thing.

Unfortunately, his own thing is not very sensible. He squanders his wealth. It's a picture of tossing his possessions into the wind. He just throws everything up into the air and lets the wind carry it wherever. Nothing drops back down into his hands.

- No forethought.
- No planning.
- No thinking about how he could make this wealth last a lifetime.

Easy come, easy go. He spends it all and has nothing to show for it.

Pretty soon, he's destitute. The story makes that clear.

- He's actually working rather than being served by slaves or spending his inheritance.
- He's feeding pigs – unclean animals for Jews. It shows how desperate for work he is – it's the sort of job Jews wouldn't want.

- He's jealous of the pigs – they're better fed than he is. He wants the meal of unclean animals and can't have it.
- And he's alone. He's in a distant land. His fair-weather friends have deserted him. No one's interested in him.

At this point, he comes to his senses. This is one of the differences between lost sons and lost sheep or lost coins. The nature of human rebellion – of human lostness – is such that it requires a change in the person lost. If your teenage daughter runs away from home, what can you do?

- You can try to find her.
- You can get the police looking for her.
- You can cut off all her sources of money.

You can try to get her to come back home. Perhaps you can force her back – and chain her to her bed and treat her like a prisoner. But, that's not really going to create a home-type atmosphere. In the long run, if she doesn't want to be there, she's only going to run away again the first chance she gets.

This son has a change of attitude – and it goes fairly deep.

- First, he acknowledges he's done the wrong thing. He doesn't try to put the blame anywhere else. He asked for the inheritance. He wasted it. He became destitute. These were his idiotic decisions and he takes responsibility for them.
- Secondly, he knows he has no rights. He's already treated his father dismissively. He's already used up his share of the inheritance. He has no valid claim to be treated as a son and has shown himself unworthy of that position. So he doesn't ask for that. He asks

for the position of a day labourer – as one of those who's at the bottom of the scale.

- Thus, thirdly, he knows he can only ask for mercy. He has nothing but his need. He can only confess his own failure and hope his father will be kind rather than just.

It's a great picture of what's involved in becoming a Christian.

- First, a person must acknowledge their own failure. Each of us has rebelled against God. Each of us has failed to treat God as God. I've ignored God. I've put my will ahead of His will. I've squandered His gifts in ungodly living. I've wasted His resources on my own pleasures. I can't blame anyone else. They were my own stupid decisions.
- Secondly, a person must acknowledge they have no rights. Each of us has treated God appallingly. We've thumbed our nose at Him. We've run away from Him. We've cut our relationship with Him. We have no valid claim on Him.
- And so, thirdly, we can only appeal for mercy. If I ask for justice, I'll only get judgment. That's what I deserve. So there's not much point asking for that. The only option open to me is to appeal for mercy – to appeal for something I don't deserve.

The problem today is too many people don't realise they're sitting among the pigs.

This son experiences the magnificent greatness of his father's love. It's extravagant.

- Before he even gets home, his father's all over him. This is the father's heart. He's looking for his lost son. He sees him from a great distance. He runs to

meet him.

- Before he can get his prepared speech out, his father's already welcomed him warmly, throwing his arms around him in a great hug and kissing him.
- Before he can finish his speech, the father's got the servants getting robes and rings and sandals and organising a feast. You get the impression the father doesn't even hear the speech.

Jesus tells this story to explain why He's mixing with tax collectors and "sinners". They're lost. They're the ones who need rescuing. They're the ones God wants to return home. God's waiting for them. God's searching for them. God's longing to welcome them into His kingdom.

As you read through the Bible as a whole, what's the impression you get of God? In my final years of high school, I had an English teacher who thought the Bible had two gods:

- the god of the Old Testament was stern and harsh and always acting in judgment; and
- the god of the New Testament was kind and loving and freely offered forgiveness.

He didn't think much of the god of the Old Testament and was quite happy about the god of the New Testament. He still didn't pay any attention to him in terms of wanting to relate to him, but he was glad that such a god was warm and fuzzy and would accept him no matter what he did.

Since then, I've found that English teacher isn't unique. Others share his view. I think it's wrong. The Bible tells us about one God. The God of the Old Testament is the same God we read about in the New Testament.

- If you read the Old Testament carefully, you can

find plenty of evidence that God is kind and loving and freely offers forgiveness.

- If you read the New Testament carefully, you can find plenty of evidence that God detests sin and will act in judgment against those who persist in sin.

The reality is that God is both pure and loving. He's both just and merciful. He's both Judge and Benefactor. And He doesn't feel there's any inner tension.

Both are true – and we need to remember both – but this story emphasises God's grace and mercy and tender heart and desire to welcome lost people into His kingdom. Max Lucado tells the following story in his book, *No Wonder they Call Him the Saviour*:¹

Longing to leave her poor Brazilian neighbourhood, Christina wanted to see the world. Discontent with a home having only a pallet on the floor, a washbasin, and a wood-burning stove, she dreamed of a better life in the city. One morning she slipped away, breaking her mother's heart

Knowing what life on the streets would be like for her young, attractive daughter, Maria hurriedly packed to go find her. On her way to the bus stop she entered a drugstore to get one last thing. Pictures. She sat in the photograph booth, closed the curtain, and spent all she could on pictures of herself. With her purse full of small black-and-white photos, she boarded the next bus to Rio de Janeiro.

Maria knew Christina had no way of earning money. She also knew that her daughter was too stubborn to give up. When pride meets hunger, a human will do things that were before unthinkable. Knowing this, Maria began her search. Bars, hotels, nightclubs, any

¹ M.Lucado, *Chronicles of the Cross* (Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2004) 129-130.

place with the reputation for street walkers or prostitutes. She went to them all. And at each place she left her picture – taped on a bathroom mirror, tacked to a hotel bulletin board, fastened to a corner phone booth. And on the back of each photo she wrote a note. It wasn't too long before both the money and the pictures ran out, and Maria had to go home. The weary mother wept as the bus began its long journey back to her small village.

It was a few weeks later that young Christina descended the hotel stairs. Her young face was tired. Her brown eyes no longer danced with youth but spoke of pain and fear. Her laughter was broken. Her dream had become a nightmare. A thousand times over she had longed to trade these countless beds for her secure pallet. Yet the little village was, in too many ways, too far away.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, her eyes noticed a familiar face. She looked again, and there on the lobby mirror was a small picture of her mother. Christina's eyes burned and her throat tightened as she walked across the room and removed the small photo. Written on the back was this compelling invitation. "Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come home." She did.

That's what God's like. Whatever you've done, whatever you've become, please come home. That's what Jesus was saying to these tax collectors and "sinners" who gathered around Him. That's what Jesus was saying to these Pharisees and teachers of the law who grumbled against Him.

Our Response

It's what Jesus still says to us today. Perhaps you identify with the tax collectors and "sinners" – with Christina. You know you've ignored God. You've rejected Him and run away from Him. You haven't paid any attention to Him. You know you've offended Him in so many ways. You've messed up your life. You deserve His judgment. Maybe you think you're so rotten you can't even ask for mercy. God says to you: Whatever you've done, whatever you've become, please come home. He longs for your return. He waits to welcome you. Will you come home?

Perhaps you've already come home. God says to you: This is what I'm like. This is what home's like. This is the longing of My heart. I want to see lost people rescued. Will you share my longing? Will you work to rescue people? Will you welcome lost people when they come home?