

Lost and Found

Luke 15:1-32

Introduction

What Brings You Joy?: You can tell a lot about a person by what brings them **joy** (and what makes them **angry**). These emotions are windows to your soul. You can tell a lot about what you **value** by what you **celebrate** or **complain** about.

- If you need proof, just look at Philly sports. I've seen grown men cry, tears of joy or rage, over whether a 24-year-old millionaire catches a football or bricks a free throw. We cheer, we weep, we boo, and, yes, sometimes climb greased utility poles, not because we accomplished anything, but because someone else did with our city's name on their jersey.

So let me ask you: **what brings you joy?** The answer to that question may say more about your heart than almost anything else.

- In today's passage, we're going to see what brings **joy to the angels in heaven**, what brings **joy to the heart of our heavenly Father**. This passage contains an *invitation* and a *warning*.
- God's joy in saving sinners should be our joy too. If it's not, we may not understand grace at all.

Context: Let me **set the scene:** ¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

- You have essentially **three main characters**:
- **(1) Jesus** (i.e., him), who receives and pursues the lost
- **(2) Sinners** (i.e., tax collectors and sinners), who are drawing near to him
 - Tax collectors were *hated* in ancient Israel (nobody likes to pay taxes). But tax collectors in Israel were also viewed as **corrupt traitors**. They were collecting taxes for the Roman Government (foreign occupiers) from their own countrymen. They were using their insider knowledge of who had money and where they kept it to pay off the evil empire occupying their land. They were using Roman muscle to enforce their extortion. And, they famously, were taking more than they were supposed to take to pad their own pockets! Ancient Rabbis said, despite one of the Top Ten rules being (essentially) 'don't lie,'¹ it was considered ethical and permissible to lie to tax collectors.
 - Calling someone a "tax collector" was synonymous with calling them the worst sinner imaginable. "Tax collectors and prostitutes" (Matt 21:31, 32)..
- **(3) Religious Rule-Keepers** (i.e., Pharisees and the scribes), the self-proclaimed gatekeepers of righteousness in first-century Judaism.

¹ Ex 20:16

- The Pharisees (along with their frequent companions, the scribes and lawyers)² are a frequent and controversial cast of characters in the Gospels.³ They become Jesus' primary **opponents** throughout his earthly ministry⁴ accusing him of breaking biblical commands, undermining religious traditions, and poisoning public opinion out of jealousy for his growing popularity and undeniable authority.
- The problem, in their view, is that Jesus is welcoming (eating with!) the wrong kind of people. People who don't seem to be following the rules, who don't belong in polite religious company.
- Jesus was a magnet for those who were outcasts.
 - It is ironic, sometimes, that the followers of Jesus would be so negligent about reaching the types of people that Jesus reached. Jesus did not wonder what the sinners could do for Him, but what He could do for the sinners.
 - You might think and even *hope* that those who claim to love God would rejoice when others come to Him. But the Pharisees don't. They want to protect their reputation. They feel threatened, as if they're losing something if others can gain access without meeting the same rigorous standards they pride themselves on.
 - They can't fathom a God who throws parties for prodigals. They misunderstand grace. And they act like they're not sinners themselves (e.g., FBC Suffolk youth intern; corrupting our kids, etc.)

One Complaint, Three Stories: The Pharisees do what we do best—**complain**. Jesus is welcoming the wrong kind of people, and they grumble about it. In response, Jesus tells three stories to confront their gracelessness and correct their misunderstanding of his kingdom and love.

- All of Luke 15 functions as a cohesive, escalating unit, three stories that land on one powerful point: **God rejoices in saving the lost, and so should we**. We see the same language throughout.
- Each parable talks about finding something that is lost, and each ends in rejoicing.⁵

#1 A Lost Sheep: ³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the

² Φαρισαῖοι, γραμματεῖς, νομικοί: Lk 5:17, 21; Mk 7:1, 5; Matt 23:2; Ezra 7:6; Lk 11:45-52; Lk 7:30; Matt 22:35

³ The Pharisees have **traditionally** been viewed as legalists and hypocrites—emphasizing external conformity to the law while neglecting inner transformation (cf. Matt 23). Patristic and Reformation writers often cast them as archetypes of pride, self-righteousness, and opposition to grace. Some **recent scholarship**, however, has emphasized their concern for ethical living, communal piety, and Torah fidelity within a framework of "covenantal nomism," wherein one enters the covenant by grace and maintains it through obedience (see E. P. Sanders, Jacob Neusner, Amy-Jill Levine, Paul Sloan, etc.). Jesus' critiques, in this view, reflect sharp intra-Jewish polemic, not wholesale rejection. **Historically**, the Pharisees emerged in the second century BCE (likely from Hasidean roots), emphasized oral tradition, resisted Hellenization, and eventually became the foundation for Rabbinic Judaism, which codified Jewish law in the Mishnah (c. 200 CE) and later the Talmud.

⁴ "In the Synoptic Gospels, the Pharisees are the main group of Jews who oppose Jesus throughout his ministry" (E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief*, 63). "The Pharisees are Jesus' principal opponents in the Synoptic tradition, especially in Matthew and Luke, where they consistently resist his authority, teachings, and practices" (Evans, *WBC*, 653). "Luke portrays the Pharisees as recurring figures of opposition, more concerned with tradition and status than with responding to Jesus' message" (Bock, *BECNT*, 1126).

⁵ The language of joy and restoration permeates Luke 15: "lost" (ἀπόλλυμι / ἀπολωλός) appears 6x (vv. 4, 6, 8, 9, 24, 32); "found" (εὕρισκω / εὕρεθῆ) 6x (vv. 5, 6, 9 [x2], 24, 32); "rejoice/joy" (χαίρω / χαρά) 4x (vv. 5, 6, 9, 10) along with related words like "celebrate" (εὐφραίνω) 4x (vv. 23, 24, 29, 32) and "music/dancing" (μουσικῶν / χοροῦ) once (v. 25).

one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

- Not that anyone is truly righteous. Jesus is poking at the self-righteous, those who don't think they need repentance. And that's the danger of self-righteousness: it doesn't make you clean; it just keeps you from admitting you're lost.
- Every person who comes to Christ, regardless of their past, is the catalyst for a **party in heaven** initiated by God himself. When you came to faith, the response wasn't quiet approval but God's divine delight overflowing into a heavenly feast.

#2 A Lost Coin: ⁸ "Or what woman, having ten silver coins, ⁶ if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? ⁹ And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

- We can imagine such joy. Pastor James relayed a story about a seminary administrator who lost the master key to the entire campus. The key's value wasn't in the metal; it was in the risk: \$20,000, the estimated cost to re-key the entire school. After days of searching, just before the locks were scheduled to be changed, the key was found. What relief. What joy. What celebration. Would you be more joyful at finding your lost \$20,000 key or in one person coming to faith in Christ?
- A lost sheep, a lost coin, but what about a lost person? However much we value our stuff, **God values people infinitely more.**
- Do you care more about lost stuff in your life or the lost people in the world?

#3 A Lost Son: These two parables set up the more extended and more poignant parable of a lost son. The famous parable of the "Prodigal Son."

- It's a story of: (1) **Rebellion** (vv. 11-16); (2) **Repentance** (vv. 17-24); and (3) **Resentment** (vv. 25-32) that challenges how we understand grace, how we relate to God, and how we respond to the salvation of others.

1. Rebellion (vv. 11-16) ¹¹ And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

⁶ δραχμὰς A day's wage. This coin likely represents a day's wage. Let's just say \$200. Imagine you lost two crisp \$100 bills. You'd look for them and if you found them, you'd feel a certain way.

Two Sons: There was a man who had two sons.

- As Tim Keller⁷ has beautifully pointed out, this is actually a parable about two brothers. It's a story of a loving Father and *two* lost sons—one lost in rebellion, the other lost in self-righteousness.
 - The Father represents God, the younger son represents sinners (like the tax collectors) who draw near to Jesus, and the older son represents the Pharisees and scribes who are angry that Jesus is extending grace to people they think don't deserve it.

Wish You Were Dead: First, we see the **rebellion** of the younger brother. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.'

- What a question! **When do you get an inheritance?** When someone dies. "To ask for the inheritance while the Father is alive is to wish the Father dead" (Keller). I want your stuff, but not you!⁸ **Is this how you treat God? Do you want his blessings but not him?**

Sinful Rebellion: The younger son converts his inheritance to cash,⁹ travels to another country (moved to New York or Vegas or something), and "wasted"¹⁰ or "squandered"¹¹ his "wealth" or "property"¹² in "loose" or "reckless living".¹³

- **He wasted his father's wealth on foolishness.** He did what he wanted, what he desired, what "felt right." "Sin is saying 'no' to God and doing what I want rather than what he wants."¹⁴
- If I just belong to myself, do what I want to do, and set my limits ("you do you"; "live your truth"), then I'm going to learn real quick that I am not strong or wise enough to save myself or create my own joy.
- The money isn't enough, it *doesn't last*. And even if the money lasts, it *doesn't work* to fill the void in your soul. It's never enough. **Why do we idolize celebrities?** They become **placeholders** for our vision of **the good life**. How many rich and famous celebrities or athletes have to tell us by word or example that money and fame are not enough to satisfy.¹⁵ We're not paying very close attention.
- He ran away from home, to a faraway land, to try and find happiness and joy. Maybe _____ will make me happy. If I finally had _____ then I'd be satisfied. "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love" (Come Thou Fount).

⁷ HT *Prodigal God*

⁸ Property = τῆς οὐσίας or τὸν βίον respectively in v. 12

⁹ συναγαγὼν (consolidating stuff together to prepare for trip (liquidating assets, etc.).

¹⁰ "Prodigious" spending (etymology of "prodigal")

¹¹ διεσκόρπισεν

¹² τὴν οὐσίαν (the same thing he wanted from his father)

¹³ ζῶν ἀσώτως

¹⁴ North Star Catechism

¹⁵ E.g., **Tom Brady**: In 2005, after winning three Superbowls, asked how he felt he said: "There's got to be more than this." I think that's why he keeps coming back and refusing to retire, he can't imagine his identity outside of football. What a shallow identity. **Jim Carrey**: (classics such as Ace Ventura, The Mask, Dumb and Dumber, etc. but my 9yo only knows as Dr. Robotnik from Sonic the Hedgehog): "I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer." **Mike Tyson**: Famous Heavyweight boxer, made over \$400 million in his career but bought things like a \$7 million necklace, lions and tigers, a \$2 million bathtub, and \$4.5 million on cars in less than 3 years. He eventually filed for bankruptcy.

- This is the story of sin. This is our story. Our rebellion may have different details, but the story is the same: it is the story of a wandering heart. He thought he could find joy and satisfaction by **running** and **rebell**ing from the Father.

Situation: ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

- He is so broke that he is feeding pigs (both disgusting and shameful for a Jewish person). He is so hungry that he wants to eat the pig food, *and he can't even have that*. I've been broke before (e.g., a piece of wood in '92 Nissan Sentra). **Sin takes you farther than you want to go, keeps you longer than you want to stay, and costs more than you're willing to pay.**
- This is always where sin leads. Not *poverty per se*, but **despair** (rich or poor). This is a metaphor for where sin takes you. **Separated from his home and his father**. Unable to find what he longed for. With nothing to satisfy his longing.
- **Why do we warn you about sin? Do we love talking about it?** No, we tell you because we love you (e.g., idols, temptations, false hopes, etc.). **"The wages of sin is death"** (Rom 6:23), destruction, separation.¹⁶
 - You were made to be safe at home with your loving father. The farther he gets from the father, the less of himself he retains. In trying to take life into his own hands, he loses the very substance of life.

Rebellion promises freedom but delivers emptiness. In the lowest moment, something begins to shift. He begins to come to his senses. This is where repentance begins.

2. Repentance (vv. 17-24) ¹⁷ "But 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! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" ²⁰ 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. ²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² 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. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

Realization: It is at the worst moment of his life that he came to his senses (he came to himself). Sometimes crises are a **gift** to get your attention (**don't waste your crisis**).¹⁷

- His realization is not yet a full understanding of the gospel, but it is an important first step. What he is doing is not working, and he needs to go home.

¹⁶ The gospel wounds to heal (e.g., surgeon).

¹⁷ But you don't have to "learn the hard way."

- He *recognizes* and *admits* his life is in shambles. His way is not working.
- This isn't antinomianism. God's love isn't permissive. He loves everybody, yes, but you have to let go of your idols. **You can't cling to the pigsty and run to the Father at the same time.** Repentance means releasing what's killing you to receive what will restore you.
- The promise of the faraway land turned out to be a lie. **He traded the love of his father's house for the loneliness of a pigsty.** The servants of his father have it better than he does.
 - Maybe you are lost, far from your heavenly father. The first step in being found is admitting you are lost. *Will you admit you are lost and come home?*

Plan: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. The son realizes what we all must: sin is always, at its root, sin against God (even when it affects others).

- Anytime you sin against another person, you have first rejected God's way, God's truth, and God's image in that person. Horizontal sin always has a vertical dimension.

Lingering Doubt: He thinks he's messed up too much to come home as a **son**; the best he can hope for is to be demoted to a **servant**.

- He still thinks he can't have the love of the Father because he's sinned too much.
- **Too often, the church has done a great job of making grace dirt cheap for the kinds of people Jesus rebuked and unbelievably expensive for the kinds of people he lifted up.**
- The true wonder of the gospel has yet to be fully realized in his heart. He is not too far gone. He hasn't lost his father's love. And you don't work your way back to the Father's love; he runs to you.
- **Too many of us are living like servants when God is calling us to be his sons and daughters.**
- You can always come home (*I want my kids to know this because that is who God is*).

The Father's Love on Full Display: The Father **saw, loved, and ran** to his wayward son. He was watching and waiting. He felt deep compassion. He didn't need to explain all the reasons the son was wrong; he ran to him and hugged him.

- I love this picture of the father, waiting each day for his son to come home. "When love has no evidence, it believes the best. When the evidence is adverse, it hopes for the best. And when hopes are repeatedly disappointed, it courageously waits" (Robertson and Plummer).
- All the pain of those wasted years was erased when the son came home. *For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.'*

This is at the core of the gospel! Nothing you can do can make God love you less. "God shows his love for us" (not when we have it all together) but "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8).

- This is the scandal of the gospel: a Father who runs to us in our sinful condition and picks us off the ground.

- You are not too far gone. You are worth what God says you are worth. A \$20 bill might be wrinkled, dirty, or even dropped in the mud, but it's still worth \$20. Why? Because it's backed by the full authority of the U.S. Treasury. Its value doesn't come from how clean it is or how crisp it looks, but who guarantees its worth.
- Your worth is not defined by your past or your performance; it's defined by the One who made you and redeemed you. What does God say you're worth? The very life of his son! You're worth is guaranteed by the blood of Christ.
- Are you worried that if you admit what you've done and repent, people will judge you? Not God and not anyone who truly knows the grace of God. They will celebrate!
 - The lie of lostness says you are too far gone. Stop eating the world's pig slop and come home!
- The pursuit of pleasure in the far country came up empty, but when he came home, he got what he wanted all along. He went into the far country for a good time. He expected to have fine clothes and jewelry, but instead lost all of it there. When he got back home, the father gave him the best robe, a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. He expected food and a feast on his journey, but ended up eating pig slop. But when he got home, they killed the fatted calf and threw a party. He went to the far country to be free from restraint, and he found disillusionment. When he came back, he found joy, welcome, and restoration.¹⁸

Now we come to the heart of the story. Not everyone was pleased that the younger son had returned. As the celebration begins, another heart is revealed, not in rebellion, but in resentment. The older brother stayed home, but his heart was just as far from the Father.

3. Resentment (vv. 25-32) ²⁵ “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

The Older Brother: The twist, **the younger brother isn't the only one who is lost** (there is more than one way to be lost). The younger brother was lost in rebellion, and the older brother was lost in self-righteousness.

- The accusation he has is not even really against the *younger brother*, but the *father* (this son of yours). Like when Whitney says, “Look what *your* son did.”
- ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.’

¹⁸ HT Keller

- He doesn't want grace, he wants justice. "People give as much grace as they think they need" (Christina Edmondson). **He thinks his good behavior has entitled him to the feast that his brother receives.**
- He doesn't agree with the Father's behavior, decision, or disposition *because* he doesn't understand the Father's love, he doesn't understand grace, and he doesn't understand the gospel.
 - It is free, but it's not cheap. It costs the father forgiveness, an inheritance he won't get back, and the chance of getting hurt again. Your salvation is free and gracious, but it isn't cheap; it costs Jesus his life.
- *He's a lot more like his younger brother than he thinks.* **He wants the father's stuff, not the father.** He's obeying his father to get his stuff, not because he loves him.
 - A lot of us are like this. "[Self-righteous] people obey God to get things [but] gospel people obey God to get God" (Keller). We shouldn't obey God to *make* him love us, but *because* he has already loved us in Jesus Christ.

Misunderstanding Righteousness: Not only does he misunderstand, but he also misjudges his own heart.

- He says he's never disobeyed your command (he's literally breaking the dad's command to celebrate as he's talking). E.g., Joshua with chocolate on his face, saying he didn't get into the chocolate.
- Like the Pharisees, he is a self-righteous hypocrite. He thinks his *surface* behavior makes up for his wicked heart. He thinks he can judge others but avoid his own judgment.¹⁹
- Religious activity is not the same thing as faith in Christ.²⁰
- What are our versions of this? Instagram posts (Bible and coffee); Christian t-shirts; not bad "necessarily" but runs the risk of being for show (if for you). Just read a book and use the info (don't have to post about it). You don't have to brag about it, you can just do it (one thing I love about my dad). If you're not careful, **you'll end up pretending to be spiritual without actually being spiritual** (cheating your way through med school, then having to use the knowledge in the real world).
 - This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me (Is via Matt 15:8). We hardly ever lie more than when we sing in church ("I surrender *all*" or *some*). Stop pretending!
 - **The gospel doesn't aim to fake good behavior; it aims to change your heart so that it conforms to Christ.** We aim for healthy roots, trusting that they will produce healthy fruit. You can decorate the tomb with all the flowers you want, but the inside is still a corpse. The solution to our problem requires real change, from life to death, not a spritz of religious perfume on the corpse of our wickedness.
- The **gospel really can change you** (overcoming persistent sin, producing love, etc.), but it requires a recognition of your sin and a turning to Christ.

¹⁹ E.g., long phylacteries; white-washed tomb; tithe mint and dill but avoid justice.

²⁰ E.g., "Mark Turner show

- The Pharisees, the older brother (and many of us), settle for the easier and less invasive task of decorating our tombs rather than asking God to raise the dead.
- You're not deceiving God, you're deceiving yourself.
- The only thing preventing the Pharisees from salvation is their refusal to turn to Jesus. They are relying on their own righteousness to save them, and it is not enough.
- **The gospel reminds us that we are worse than we imagined, but loved more than we dared hope.**

Conclusion:

Worshippers: All of us are worshippers. All of us are on a hunt for the holy, for a life that can't be reduced to our looks or accomplishments, or other people's opinions. We want something of enduring significance that can't be robbed by time. It can only be found in Jesus.

- One son thought he could find joy through **self-discovery**, only to be left disappointed.
- One son thought he could find joy through **self-righteousness**, only to have missed the mark.

Salvation is not about obeying God to get what I want or rejecting God to do what I want; it's about surrendering to God to find my true security, identity, and belonging in him.

Invitation: It's time to be honest with yourself.

- (1) **Are you the younger brother?** Have you been searching for salvation in self-discovery? Are you rebelling from God? Is it not working? Are you in your own spiritual, emotional pig sty? **Repent and come home to the Father.**
- (2) **Are you the older brother?** Have you been following the rules, but you don't love God? Do you want him to bless you, but you don't want him? **Repent and come home to the Father.** The same grace exists for the rebels and the hypocrites alike.
 - Have you been wandering alone in the empty promises of the world or the false hope of self-righteousness? Come home. Jesus is waiting. **The lights are on.** You'll get a hug, not a lecture.
- (3) Are we a church that cheers when the broken come home or quietly question whether they belong? Do we welcome the repentant with open arms or whisper behind their backs?
 - Let's be a people who never lose sight of our salvation, so we never lose our joy when someone else comes to faith. **God's joy in saving sinners should be our joy too. God rejoices in saving the lost, and so should we.**